Commentary

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In “Is Animal Pain Conscious?,” Joseph Lynch sustains the thesis that animals feel pain and aptly counters the contentions of Carruthers and Harrison that they do not. Since I am in broad agreement with Prof. Lynch’s clearly argued paper, I will confine myself to some comments on the positions of Carruthers and Harrison, and a small modification to Prof. Lynch’s argument.

Joseph Lynch rightly attacks the uses of the terms “conscious” and “unconscious” (or “non-conscious” in Carruthers’ case) by both Cartesian authors, and it is to this area of the controversy that I wish to turn. Lynch notes, for example, that “Carruthers’ account [demands that]... conscious states must be available for thought, every conscious state requires higher-order intentional mentality. And Carruthers takes it as axiomatic that animals could neither have beliefs or thoughts about their experience.” Lynch then goes on to claim—again, correctly, I believe—that “[t]heir [Carruthers’ and Harrison’s] arguments depend largely upon moving from the conceivability of some unconscious pain to the claim that animal pain in general must be unconscious. But the mere possibility that we can account for some pain as a type of unconscious perception is not sufficient to establish that animal pain is most plausibly interpreted in this way.” Lynch’s strategy is to show that Harrison and Carruthers are wrong by pointing out that the arguments in favor of the notion that animals do experience pain are, collectively and cumulatively quite strong, even if none of them is as strong individually as we might like.

While agreeing with Prof. Lynch, my contention is that he is a bit too ready to accept the rather odd use of terminology in which Carruthers and Harrison indulge, and that it might make for a stronger argument to clarify the terminology and make appropriate distinctions. This Lynch does do to some extent; I would push this further. The use of the term “unconscious” (or, again, “non-conscious”) in many of the ways utilized by the Cartesian authors trades on an equivocation between a sort of Freudian sense of the term (as in the sort of notion that one unconsciously hates one’s sibling when one cannot articulate it), and a more full-blooded sense of the term which has the implication that one is unconscious only when one is asleep, in a coma or suffering from a head injury. The difficulty with the Cartesian arguments is that they trade on these uses of the term, and do so rather shamelessly. Lynch notes this when he states that “…Carruthers confuses being conscious of something with paying attention to something of which one is already conscious.” Again, I would push this line of argument further, since it is clear that the uses of the terms “conscious” and “unconscious” are crucial to Carruthers’ and Harrison’s arguments. One cannot be said to be driving “unconsciously.” An unconscious individual cannot drive. Since driving does not, presumably, often evoke the sorts of trauma-generated conflicts of which the Freudians speak, it makes little sense to think that there are (in most cases) unconscious defense mechanisms that prevent one’s paying attention to the freeway exit when one is driving. Although the English language perhaps lacks a vocabulary adequate to a full description of these activities, much of routine driving is best captured, I argue, by expressions such as “semi-conscious” or “not fully aware.” Thus I substantiate Lynch’s claim that the Cartesians are misusing these terms; I simply want also to assert that this constitutes a rather grave level of misuse and is, in fact, an instance of an informal fallacy.

Oddly enough, as Lynch also notes, there is some sense actually attachable to the notion of “unconscious pain.” I would flesh out this assertion by suggesting that the best take on this would probably be something along the lines of the autonomic responses in which the nervous system engages when a patient is anesthetized for surgery, and so forth. Thus the headache example, as constructed, is clearly not an “unconscious headache.” When one is distracted from one’s headache, one cannot be said to be unconscious, nor can the headache ever completely disappear from one’s level of awareness. All of this bolsters Lynch’s contention that “...it is normally difficult to account for pain behavior in the absence of the experience of pain.”
Most importantly, perhaps, I agree with Lynch on the use of the notion of "second-order state" as an index of consciousness, and again I feel that, if anything, Prof. Lynch has been too generous to his opponents. There seems to be a profound speciesism involved in this talk of higher-order states, since it is clear that the capacity for what we normally count as such states is indeed related to the capacity for language. Part of what has made the claims about the great apes' linguistic abilities controversial to some is the notion that an ape such as Koko could pun or engage in activities that require a generalization over signs rather than an attempt to link a sign to a signified. (Penny Patterson of Stanford has reported that Koko has the ability to engage in a number of meta-linguistic activities.) Lynch acknowledges this when he says that "Carruthers shares a widely held philosophical opinion that the capacity to think is dependent upon the capacity to use language." The strongest counter to the notion that consciousness must be defined in terms of the capacity for second-order thought in some way that we would ordinarily call biconditional comes from our observations of the behavior of infants and very small children. Here few adult humans would deny the attribution of consciousness, even though it is clear, because of the lack of language use, that it makes little sense to attribute sophisticated levels of intentionality. Thus the same kinds of considerations that cause concern for the thirteen-month-old should cause concern for our dog, even though neither, ex hypothesi, holds second-order beliefs about the noxious phenomena. Lynch asserts something similar when he ends his paper by noting that "...the writhing and screams of a one-year-old child, or a lamb..." could only be ignored by philosophers.

Carruthers and Harrison both make rather extreme claims. Of the alleged non-conscious experience of pain, Carruthers notes, "It feels like nothing." He also claims, as Lynch notes, that "...conscious experiences are those which are available to conscious thinkings." Harrison actually goes so far as to say that "Properly programmed, such a machine [a robot] would manifest its own pain behavior." 3

In general, then, I support Prof. Lynch in both of his major lines of counterargument, while contending that each line can be bolstered and each major strand made to do more damage. The blatant misuse of terms having to do with mental states by both of the Cartesian authors constitutes a deliberate instance of equivocation—the misuse of the terms is obvious, whether one takes them to be used in the colloquial, ordinary-language sense, or in some more recondite and technical sense. The contention, following along with the assertions made by some in philosophy of mind, that a conscious state must be the object of some second-order intentional state if it is to count as conscious, could only have been made by the language-intoxicated and runs counter to our everyday experience of life, not only with respect to nonhumans but with respect to small humans as well. Animals, young humans and those who lack language should indeed be objects of our moral concern. Another level of concern should be expressed for those who abuse terminology.

Notes

2 Ibid., p. 264.
3 Harrison, "Do Animals Feel Pain?" p. 27.