

## *More pain or less?*

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Some recent discoveries by Daniel Kahneman and his colleagues raise an interesting question for ethics (see Kahneman 1994). Here is a brief description of one of Kahneman's psychological experiments (Kahneman et al. 1993). Each subject was asked to undergo two painful episodes. One was to hold one of her hands for a minute in water at 14° C, which is cold enough to hurt. After a minute the subject took her hand out of the water. The other episode was to hold her hand for a minute in water at 14° C and then keep it there for another half minute, while the water was slowly warmed to 15° C. This is still cold enough to be painful, but noticeably less painful. Some subjects suffered the shorter episode first; others the longer one.

Afterwards, the subjects were asked to say which of the two episodes of pain was worse. Generally they said the shorter one. To test the firmness of their judgements, they were told they would undergo a third painful episode. They were told it would be a repeat of one of the two I described, and given a choice of which it should be. They generally chose the longer episode.

There is a simple formula that predicts people's judgements in this experiment and in many other situations. Kahneman calls it the 'peak and end rule'. Painful episodes are evaluated on the basis of how bad the pain is at its worst and how bad it is at the end. The duration of the pain counts for almost nothing. Consequently, an episode with more pain than another can easily be judged less bad. In the experiment, the longer episode is judged less bad because it ends less badly. Notice that the pain in this episode actually *dominates* the pain in the shorter one, in a particular sense. For the first minute the two episodes are exactly the same, with all the same pain, and then the longer episode has a further painful half minute. Nevertheless, it is judged less bad.

The ethical question is whether to follow people's judgements about the episodes when acting on their behalf. When a surgeon has completed a painful procedure, should she stop causing pain immediately, or should she perhaps continue the pain for a while, in order to tail it off? If she does the latter, so the end of the episode is less painful, the patient will judge the whole thing less bad. Yet it causes more pain. So which ought the surgeon to do?

Kahneman cannot bring himself to recommend causing unnecessary pain for the sake of tailing the pain off, despite the patients' judgements.

Nor can I. I think the reasons why this is intuitively the wrong recommendation are interesting.

For contrast, consider a nice episode, such as listening to music. Kahneman has found the peak-and-end formula works for people's evaluations of nice episodes too: they are valued by their best bit and how good they are at the end. So a short concert that finishes soon after the best piece will be judged better than a longer concert that has pleasant but less exciting music at the end. In nice cases, I think we would be more inclined to follow people's own judgements in deciding what to do. If a person likes to have the experience come to an end while it is at its best, I think we would agree that is what she should have.

But we are intuitively less inclined to follow people's judgements about painful episodes. Why? I suggest pain is different because it is a bad thing *in itself*. It does not matter who experiences it, or where it comes in a life, or where in the course of a painful episode. Pain is bad; it should not happen. There should be as little pain as possible in the world, however it is distributed across people and across time. Nice things are different. The value of enjoyment, for instance, is that it is nice for the person who is having it. Consequently, we value it *through* the valuation the person herself makes of it. So if the person would rather do without a particular bit of enjoyment, perhaps because it slightly spoils the ending of an episode, we will not think she should have it nonetheless.

The same intuitive difference surfaces when we think about the moral value of bringing a new person into the world. Suppose a couple could have a child, and they are wondering whether they ought to or not. Suppose first that their child, if they had one, would lead a life full of pain. Nearly everyone would agree they have a moral duty not to have this child. But in the opposite case where the child would have plenty of fun in her life, many people think the couple have no moral duty to have the child. So they think there is an asymmetry: there is no duty to have a child who would have a good life, but there is a duty not to have a child who would have a painful life. (This asymmetry is described in Narveson 1967.)

One explanation of this intuitive asymmetry is the same as before. Pain is just bad, and the less of it the better. Having a child who will suffer pain brings more pain into the world, and we ought not to do that. On the other hand, we do not particularly value fun for its own sake, just to have more of it around. We want people to have fun, and we confine this thought to people who already exist. So we see no value in creating people in order for them to have fun.

I do not insist that this intuitive asymmetry between pain and pleasure can be coherently worked out. Indeed, the evidence is that it cannot. (See

the discussion in Parfit 1984: 391 ff.) But I think it underlies Kahneman's and my intuitive response to the ethical question raised by Kahneman's research.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> I am grateful to Douglas MacLean for an encouraging conversation we had about this paper, while walking in the Garden Quarter of New Orleans. MacLean tells me that my conclusions represent a male point of view.

## *No help for the coherentist*

PETER KLEIN & TED A. WARFIELD

In 'What price coherence?' (1994) we argued that coherentism about epistemic justification is incompatible with the existence of an intimate connection between epistemic justification and truth. Trenton Merricks has replied, claiming that our argument 'depends upon evaluating the truth conduciveness of a theory of justification at the system level – justification is truth conducive only if, according to [Klein and Warfield], the more justified a set or system of beliefs is, the more likely it is that the *set* or *system* contains no false beliefs' (Merricks 1995: 306). Merricks goes on to claim that truth conduciveness should be evaluated at the level of particular beliefs, not at the level of systems of belief. He concludes that while we have shown that adding to the coherence of a set of beliefs often reduces the likelihood that the set contains only true members, this does not imply that coherence is not truth conducive when truth conductivity is evaluated at the level of individual beliefs.