

The Harms Of Expectation And Memory

When the pain is unignorable, it seems like it's been there forever and will never go away. The prisoner imagines freedom to be more wonderful than it is. This reasoning gives me some relief, if only because I enjoy a paradox. For others, I concede, the comfort may be cold. Seen from another angle, the elusiveness of absent pain adds insult to injury. Not only does pain feel bad but it gives a false sense of how joyful respite would be. Either way, we gain from understanding what pain does, even if what's gained is simply the truth. If anything of value has come from my experience with chronic pain, it's a presumptive compassion for everyone else. Concern for one's own suffering is more akin to concern for others than it seems. Understanding this requires a brief excursion into moral theory, the part of philosophy that aims to formulate standards of right and wrong. By contrast, it's not generally okay to make one person suffer in order to save someone else from harm. The separateness of persons makes the difference. A similar thought applies when the suffering of many is at stake. Is there a number at which you should save the many, not the one? Consider the pain of the syphilitic Alphonse Daudet. That's what it was like the other night. The coarse rope bound tight round the torso, the spear prodding at the ribs. If we could relieve his pain or a thousand minor headaches, I am sure we should save Daudet. But what about a million headaches, or a billion, or a trillion? Philosophers impressed by the separateness of persons deny that the balance tips. The relief of minor pain for many, no matter the number, cannot offset the agony of one, since the pains afflict distinct and separate people. That is why it makes sense to pour money into treatments for rare but agonizing illnesses instead of slightly better headache meds. Small gains for many don't outweigh great harms endured by few. Things seem different when separate people are not involved. But we can't extend this logic to a case with disparate people, ignoring their separateness from one another. If I could save one person from three hours of agony or two thousand from a week of minor pain, it would be wrong to save the many. So, at least, I used to believe, before living with chronic pain for eighteen years. I haven't changed my mind about that hypothetical surgery or decided we should sacrifice Daudet. I'd prefer three hours of agony to chronic pelvic pain, but I wouldn't cure a mass of headaches at the cost of Daudet's torment. What I've come to doubt is the analogy between the two. The experience of chronic pain is not like the experience of numerous atomized episodes of pain, differing from the pains of many people only in that they occupy the consciousness of one. The temporality of pain transforms its character. By the time I realize it has vanished from the radar of attention, it has been quiet for a while. I will never be physically at ease. With chronic suffering a painless past is all but forgotten. While knowing intellectually that we were once not in pain we have lost the bodily memory of how this felt. It's this confinement I would trade for a brutal surgery. What makes it worse is the expectation of pain and the loss of any sense of life without it. This is where the analogy between lasting pain for one and minor pain for many falls apart. It neglects the harms of expectation and memory. They are less different than they seem. There are two lessons here for us. If you can treat persistent pain as a series of isolated episodes, you can take away some of its power. I don't believe I will get better, he said, and nor does my doctor Charcot. The second lesson is that there is less to the separateness of persons than might appear. A lot has been made of the unshareability of pain, which divides us from one another. In fact, pain is no more

shareable across the passage of time. But you can't piss, either, for your past or future self. Pain is lonely not just because it separates us from others but because it separates us from ourselves. Still, we can share what we experience, to some degree, by writing or talking about it. Compassion for ourselves is not the same as compassion for other people, but these sentiments are not as different as they seem. Suffering can be a source of solidarity. To remind us of this, Boyer writes, is at least one counterpurpose of literature. This is why I tried to write down pain's leaky democracies, the shared vistas of the terribly felt. Philosophy needn't forget these facts, about the possibility and pain of compassion for others. It needn't contrast itself with literature or shroud the vistas of the terribly felt. Finding the words to delineate physical suffering, or the experience of disability, is a philosophical task, not something separate from thinking how to feel. It is at once a form of reflection and an act of empathy. I am grateful for Daudet's honesty, which makes me feel less alone. And while exploring one's own suffering can be narcissistic, it needn't be. Painful hours spent at Julia's bedside. Fury at finding myself such a wreck, and too weak to nurse her. But my ability to feel sympathy and tenderness for others is still well alive, as is my capacity for emotional suffering. And I'm glad of that, despite the terrible pains that returned today. I am glad that compassion persists in pain, which can help us to see through our separateness from others, as we see through our separation from our past and future selves. It's a wider social problem, a hardship we all face to some degree. I had arrived too early and the doors were locked.