

Julia Tanner, “Why I Won’t Hurt Your Felines”

Aim: “Cruelty to your cat is wrong because it wrongs your cat directly” (101)

Q: Do cats really feel pain?

“Cats’ *behavior* indicates that they feel pain” (102)

“We know that humans feel pain and that they behave in these ways when they are in pain.” (102)

-A robot might exhibit pain-behavior. Would that mean the robot feels pain?

“The physiological similarities between cats and humans also suggest cats can feel pain.” (102)

-This amounts to something like a mind-brain identity theory. This isn’t a good theory, though. There are some important differences between cat brains and human brains, after all.

Notice that Tanner doesn’t really need to prove that cats can feel pain—she doesn’t even need to resort to this ‘burden of proof’ nonsense that she concludes with. It’s enough to show that cats *might* feel pain—and this is hard to deny. We seem to have moral obligations to avoid doing actions which we have reason to believe may cause pain—don’t we?

Q: What is cruelty?

“There are four ways you might be cruel to your cat, you may be actively or passively sadistic, or you may be actively or passively indifferent.” (103)

I don’t think that these are the distinctions she really means to draw.

“Active indifferent” cruelty:

1. Intentionally getting a single cat that will live exclusively in a small apartment.
 - a. “Although she doesn’t want the cat to suffer, she just doesn’t care if he or she does; what she cares about is having a cute plaything.” (103)
 - i. Isn’t this *obviously* an inadequate characterization of the agent’s motives? It seems more to the point to say that she *does* care about the cat’s suffering, but that she cares *more* about her own interests. She is *not* indifferent—so why should we think that this is the ‘epitome of active indifferent cruelty’ (103)?
2. Blinding kittens to study the effects of blindness on humans.

- a. “Active because they (the scientists) deliberately blind the kittens; their goal is what they care about, the kitten an unfortunate casualty.” (104)
 - i. Doesn’t the fact that they would even think to consider this an *unfortunate* casualty show that they are *not* indifferent to the kittens’ suffering?
- 3. Euthanizing your cat “for their own benefit, and not for the cat’s” (104).
 - a. This is certainly a tricky case (and one we’ll investigate closely later in the course), but her characterization of the agent’s mental states again seems way off: “They do not care about the cat; they are prepared to sacrifice the cat to their convenience.” (104)

“Passive indifferent cruelty”

- 1. Not feeding the neighbor’s cat when you have promised to do so
 - a. Again, is this really *indifference*, or are we instead talking about *insufficient* regard for the cat’s suffering?

“Active sadistic cruelty”

- 1. Kicking cats for fun—“Sadistic because they enjoy it”

“Passive sadistic cruelty”

- 1. Letting a cat eat rat poison by the trash bin, and taking pleasure in watching.

It seems that Tanner is drawing distinctions between acts of commission and omission (the active/passive part of her view), and between sadistic and non-sadistic acts. But this still leaves the question open: What do all of these acts have in common that makes them cruel? *What is cruelty?*

Q: Why is cruelty to cats wrong?

One possibility (Rawls/Kant): Because it makes us more likely to be cruel to humans.

Why? “Humans are rational and cat’s aren’t”.

Kant says that harming animals is an “indirect” violation of duties. We have no direct duties to animals, but if we are cruel to them, we will become “hard in our dealings” with humans.

Why might Kant say this? Tanner dismisses his view out of hand—should she?

Rawls (on her view, a contractarian) says that we can't owe anything at all to cats, because we can't enter into agreements with cats. We have moral obligations because of implicit agreements that we all have with one another.

Wait a second, then—it now looks like Rawls doesn't really think the problem is with the prospect of harming humans. He provides metaethical reasons for thinking that we can't possibly have obligations to cats.

Tanner's view: It's wrong *because it harms cats*.

1. This is the common view
 - a. The data she provides to support this is, oddly, all drawn from surveys of 11-15 year olds. Aren't they *wrong* about lots of things?
2. There is little reason to think that, on the whole, harming cats directly causes subsequent harms to persons
 - a. "It's more likely that those who are cruel to cats are already cruel people; cruel people who are cruel to cats and would be cruel to humans if they could get away with it as easily. Those who are cruel to cats don't become cruel during the act." (107)
 - i. Perhaps not, but so what? This isn't the view you're arguing against. Kant merely needs to show that cat cruelty is a common step toward realizing latent psychological tendencies toward human cruelty.
3. Kant's view can't explain why it's not wrong to kick rocks
 - a. Sure it can! See (i) above.
 - b. "Those who are actively cruel to cats enjoy the response they get; they enjoy causing pain."
4. The view has a hard time explaining why we can't be cruel to "marginal humans".
 - a. It's intuitively wrong to do so—but they aren't fully rational.
 - b. Can't Kant just make the same move as above? We can't hurt kids because it psychologically makes us more likely to harm others in the future.

Q: What about necessary cruelty?

"This isn't cruelty at all, if you neither take pleasure in your cat's terror nor are indifferent to it." (109)

But this *totally* undermines the majority of her cases of "active indifferent cruelty" from above. As long as the euthanizer (for example) cares *a little* about his cat's suffering.

“To assess whether an action is cruel is to assess a person’s character, it doesn’t assess the action performed...In assessing how we treat cats we should do more. We should assess the acts (and omissions) themselves without reference to the character of the individual performing them. (110)

Here she makes a plausible claim. When we’re trying to get at the moral status of animal cruelty (and, perhaps, of other animal uses like meat-eating), it’s the *suffering itself*, and not necessarily the *cruelty* of the act, that should concern us.