

But Plants Feel Pain...

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“But you eat plants, and they feel pain.” How many times have we each heard that one? And how many times have we dismissed it as a joke? But, since it is a ‘fact’ that meat-eaters do like to raise as if it were some kind of justification for their diet, we are forced to consider it, and to answer it. So here goes...

Just the Facts.

I do not doubt that there are some people who claim that plants feel pain. You can always find someone who believes almost anything. But does the person claiming to you that plants feel pain choose to believe everything they are told, no matter how outlandish or lacking in evidence it may be? I rather doubt it. And if not, why this particular ‘fact’?

That said, there is an amount of scientific research which does suggest that plants react to various stimuli. And not just to the obvious ones such as sun and rain, but also to sound, to music, and to touch. However, there is a great difference between reacting to stimuli and feeling pain. After all, a thermostat strip reacts to heat by bending. Does that mean it feels pain? No. Similarly, then, the fact that a plant reacts to stimuli is not itself evidence that it can feel pain.

How Things Feel.

So much for evidence. But of course, absence of evidence is not evidence of absence. And simply because reaction to stimuli is not itself evidence of pain, this does not necessarily mean that pain is not being felt. So let us turn to things we know can feel pain, and see whether they share anything in common with plants: namely ourselves. I feel pain. I know this, because, well, I can feel it. I feel, therefore I hurt. From this starting point it is natural to assume that since I can feel pain, then you, having pretty much the same physical body and reacting in pretty much the same way to the same stimuli that causes me pain, also feel pain. The fact that you can tell me so helps, too. Of course, you could be lying, and it could be just a coincidence that you look as if you are in pain when something that I know causes me pain occurs to you. But it seems unlikely.

Given this assumption that all humans feel pain, we can look at what happens in our bodies when we feel the sensation. And this leads to a mechanical understanding of what happens at the same time we feel pain, a series of events which it seems safe to assume do actually cause the sensation of pain. Namely, and simply put, that our nerves are

stimulated, which fact is relayed through our body to the brain, where the stimulus is identified, activating the appropriate part of the brain to do its chemical thing and cause us what we label pain. Of course, it could be a coincidence that all this is happening at the same time, and have nothing to do with the pain being felt. But it seems unlikely.

So, then, onwards in our assumptions. If we feel pain because of the design of our body, coming complete as it does with sensory detectors, nerves to relay the sensation to our brain, and the wherewithal for the brain to cause the sensation of pain, then it stands to reason that other creatures with this same apparatus, and who also react to pain in similar ways to us (crying out and seeking to avoid the source of pain), also feel it. Animals, from apes to alligators, from dogs to dung beetles, all have bodies capable of feeling pain, all react in an identifiable manner to pain, and so all, it seems reasonable to assume, feel pain. Of course, perhaps they do not. Perhaps they have the ability to feel pain but don't, the whole network of nerves being there just to fill in a few gaps in the body. But it seems unlikely.

So can we then extend this series of assumptions to infer that plants feel pain? Well, no, I do not think that we can. They do not have nerves, they do not have a brain, and they do not appear to react to pain in identifiable ways, neither crying out or seeking to avoid the source of pain. Of course, perhaps they do feel pain anyway. Perhaps they have some other way of feeling it that we do not understand, and some other way of expressing themselves. But it seems unlikely.

Why we Feel Pain.

Finally, I think that it is worth considering why, evolutionarily-speaking, we feel pain in the first place. Unlikely as it seems at times, it is for our own good. Pain is a response to a negative environment, a way of telling us that something is wrong, and of forcing us to go do something about it. It is a survival trait. And why is it a survival trait? Precisely *because* we can go do something about it. If our hand hurts when we leave it on a hot stove, we can remove our hand. If the wind is freezing, we can seek shelter.

Plants, however, cannot do this. If they are harmed, they cannot do anything about it. So, again evolutionarily-speaking, there is no reason for them to have developed the ability to feel pain. Of course, we can see in species today traits that have developed because they were once useful but are no longer so. But since neither plants or the ancestors of plants have ever had the ability to direct their own movement in anything like the short term required to benefit from the sensing of pain, they cannot then be said to have the ability to feel pain now because it was once beneficial. (Indeed, far from being beneficial were a plant to feel pain when cut or eaten or when bits dropped off it, should it be able to do so, and react, then this would surely be catastrophic for it. For many plants reproduce by being picked, cut, or eaten.)

So there is no evolutionary reason for plants to feel pain, and, if one happens to believe in God rather than evolution, one could ask what kind of God would possibly inflict that kind of suffering on plants, who can't even be blamed for making use of that pesky free will and so only having themselves to blame?

Are we Certain?

Whichever way you look at it, then, it seems unlikely that plants can feel pain. All of which being said, one cannot, of course, know this for certain, any more than we can know for certain that the sun will rise tomorrow just because it has done so every day so far. But it seems vanishingly unlikely that they do so. And even if it does transpire that plants can feel pain after all, well, before meat-eaters get too excited about the fact, they should consider that the meat they are eating, before it was meat, itself ate plants to survive (or possibly ate something that ate something that ate plants to survive). The figure seems to vary according to the source, but roughly-speaking, it appears that the animal a meat-eater eats to gain sustenance has itself consumed about seven times more plants than a vegan eats to gain a similar amount of sustenance. Given which, well, it is still better to eat plants than animals.