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PAINS AND STRONG COGNITIVISM

Strong Cognitivism in psychology and philosophy is roughly the position that all and only cognitive states and processes (propositional attitudes) are psychological. In philosophy, Strong Cognitivism is an essential feature of the regnant philosophy of mind, Computer Functionalism (Dennett, 1978). The exact characterization of a cognitive state or process is a matter of controversy (Dretske, 1981). But the issue does not have to be settled here. Suffice it to say, beliefs and desires are paradigm cognitive states; pains -- where 'pains' is understood to refer to immediate felt qualities which are independent of any propositional content or representational role -- are paradigm noncognitive states.

It is sometimes said (e.g., Block, 1978) that pains are a threat to Computer Functionalism; that they are noncognitive and hence incompatible with Strong Cognitivism.

But the conclusion that pains are incompatible with Strong Cognitivism, when drawn from the premiss that pains are noncognitive is a nonsequitur. Pains are incompatible with Strong Cognitivism only if they are also psychological. If pains are not psychological -- if having a pain is not being in a psychological state -- then that pains are noncognitive does not threaten Strong Cognitivism or Computer Functionalism. To bring this out, compare noticing a pain with seeing a tree. Strong Cognitivism is not required to account for trees. It may need to account for tree-perception. But it doesn't need to explain what a tree is. That is the business of some nonpsychology, because trees are nonpsychological sorts of things.

Now if the same point is true of pain, which is to say, if pains are not psychological, then Strong Cognitivism -- and Computer Functionalism -- does not

have to account for pain. It may need to explain some of the causes and effects of pain, such as, e.g., the desire to be free of pain. But it does not have to characterize what pain is. That is not the business of psychology.

We wish to argue that pain is not psychological. In fact, we believe that pain is self-evidently nonpsychological. To bring this out, consider the phenomenology of pain. When people are in pain it is always some part of the body that "hurts". People speak of feeling or noticing pains in necks, toes, heads, and so forth. "There is a burning sensation in my lower back." "My throat is sore!" "I have a prickly feeling behind my left knee." Further, pain is often spoken of as moving or spreading from one bodily location to another. "The pain starts in my hip and radiates down the side of my leg." A natural or manifest interpretation of such locutions is that pain occurs in the body, not in the "mind." Those who deny that the throbbing pain I feel in my big toe is actually in my toe deny that things are as they evidently appear. They say, "You do not have a pain in your toe. You have a toe-pain. What you call 'a pain in your toe' is actually a state of mind." However it should be noted that this sort of response is unnatural, and arrived at only by reflection. Unaided, or unprejudiced, by ideologies people are inclined to say that pains are in their bodies and not in their "minds". Why say otherwise?

One hurdle to the thesis that pains are not psychological is the phenomenon of phantom limb pain; the idea being that phantom limb pains show that people can be mistaken about where pains are and that thus the phenomenology of pain should not be trusted. Pains are in minds, not bodies.

To infer from phantom limb pains that pains are in minds rather than bodies is to accuse victims of phantom limb pain not merely of error but gross error. It is to say that they are mistaken not only in thinking of pain as in their limbs, but in thinking of pain as in their bodies. It would be more reasonable, we believe, to accuse victims of phantom limb pain of mere error; of thinking of pain as in a certain

place in their body (the absent limb) when in fact it is in another place in their body, and not in their "mind". As such, the lesson of phantom limb pains is not that pains are psychological. It is that people can bodily mislocate their pains.

Consider the following analogy. Boaters sometimes report that oars are bent when submerged in water. To infer from such illusions that the oars are not only not bent but not in water is to accuse the boaters of gross error. In contrast, to infer only that the oars are not bent is to accuse the boaters of mere error. Which hypothesis is more reasonable? The hypothesis of mere error, of course: the oars though in water are not bent. By analogy: the pain though in the body is not in the phantom limb.


Another hurdle is the privacy of pain: the idea being that pain is private and that whatever is thus private is psychological.

We contend that pain is not private; that some of the psychological states associated with pain might be private, but that pain itself is not a private sort of thing. As an immediate felt quality, pain is a universal, capable of multiple instantiations or instances. I can know how your pain feels, because I may have had the same feeling, the same pain, yesterday. And again, even if certain psychological states associated with pain are private, this would not make pain private. Suppose I am thinking of Moscow. My thought might be private; but Moscow is not. Analogously, suppose I perceive a sharp, stabbing pain in my left knee. My perception might be private; but the pain is not.

We don't deny that certain psychological states associated with pain are or can be private. We don't deny that the issue of the privacy of pain is complicated by the possible privacy of the states associated with pain. We simply deny that pain is private; and thus that pain is psychological because it is private.

The final hurdle to the thesis that pain is not psychological is the notion that pain is cognitive state-dependent; that someone cannot be in pain without, e.g.,

believing it. This fact -- the cognitive state-dependency of pain -- is often thought to make pain psychological. But it doesn't. Coins, e.g., are cognitive state-dependent but not psychological. Something isn't a coin unless, e.g., people believe that it is legal tender. And it is of course possible to deepen the analogy between pains and coins if we assume that pains are bodily: standing in relation to a cognitive state (e.g., the belief that it is legal tender) may be necessary for a certain piece of metal to be a coin, just as standing in relation to a cognitive state (e.g., the desire to be free of it) may be necessary for a certain bodily state to be a pain. About the only thing that cognitive state dependence proves is that pains are had only by creatures with cognitive states, and this isn't enough to show that pains are psychological.

One last point. Some anti-functionalists believe that Strong Cognitivism can be trumped by imagining a creature fully endowed with cognitive states (including such states as the belief that his toe hurts, etc.) but absent pain. What this is supposed to prove -- philosophers will recognize the point as the Absent Qualia Objection to functionalism -- is that pain is not a cognitive state and that functionalism is therefore incomplete as an account of the psychological. But what this means to us is that advocates of the Objection are guilty of a logical error. If it's possible for a fully endowed cognizer to be absent pain, why should this show that functionalism is defeated. It needs to be shown in addition that pain is psychological. And it's not. The metaphysical commitments of Strong Cognitivism -- as well as of Computer Functionalism -- are not threatened by pain. 

Nor is the issue simply one of metaphysics. Tons of research monies have been spent in the search for a psychological conception of pain. Cognitive science is party to this practice. It is of course possible that cognitive science will tell us a lot about certain causes and effects of pain. On the other hand, if we are right that pain is not psychological, the project of a psychological characterization

of pain is doomed to failure.

NOTE

The single authorial voice is sometimes used as a stylistic device in this paper, and does not reflect anything substantive about its composition; neither does the order of authorship, which is simply alphabetical.

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