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# Can a Thought's Whole Subject-Matter Be Itself? The Case of Pain

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## Abstract

Even if it cannot be found elsewhere, it does at least appear that logical infallibility, or incorrigibility, can be found in the belief that one is, or is not, in pain, as well as in the Cogito. But how could the existence of a (true) belief and the existence of the fact believed be the same existence? An answer is proposed. Sometimes a belief can *be* a desire.

## Résumé

La croyance que l'on est (ou pas) dans un état de douleur est singulière en ceci qu'elle semble pouvoir être qualifiée d'infailibilité ou d'incorrigibilité logique, de même que le *cogito*. Mais comment se peut-il que l'existence d'une croyance (vraie) et l'existence du fait qui est l'objet de cette croyance puissent constituer la même existence ? Je propose ici une réponse à cette question. Parfois, une croyance peut *être* un désir.

**Keywords:** pain; knowledge; belief; the Cogito; desire

For Descartes, Locke, Berkeley, and Hume, there could be no problem when it came to the awareness of pain. They all took it for granted that of necessity a mind is always, at the time, infallibly informed regarding whatever “ideas” come its way — or whatever “perceptions,” in Hume’s phraseology. As Hume put it: “Since all actions and sensations of the mind are known to us by consciousness, they must necessarily appear in every particular what they are, and be what they appear” (Hume, 1978, p. 190).<sup>1</sup> (The use of “since” here seems to imply an argument or explanation; but what that might be is hard to guess.) When what was in question was the mind’s current sensations, there was simply no place in these four thinkers’ philosophies for the occurrence of any sensations in the mind that were not fully conscious.

<sup>1</sup> Contrast John Hawthorne: “Insofar as the fact of someone’s believing P guarantees a verifying state of affairs, let us call it ‘doxastically guaranteed’” (Hawthorne, 2002, p. 250). A proposition logically guaranteed by the existence of *somebody* (or even somebody in particular) actually believing it, is a case of one-way entailment only. That is still a long way from the existence of belief and the existence of the fact believed ever being the very same existence.

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Philosophical followers of Wittgenstein and Sartre aside,<sup>2</sup> people today speak freely of “subliminal perceptions,” and, as far as dispositional states go, at any rate, we mostly have no difficulty with the conception of mental life that is not conscious. Surely our grandmothers — and perhaps, too, the grandmothers of the philosophers named — were in no doubt that it is only too possible, for instance, to fall in love without realizing it, or to fall out of love without realizing it.

Is pain a counter-example? Is it an example of how, in a certain sort of case, the existence of true belief and the existence of the fact believed are not really two different existences, of which each *could* occur without the other? It is not hard, perhaps, to admit the Cogito fact as such an example: *our* thought of that occurrence long ago is certainly something different from *it*, and yet Descartes’ thought of it right at the time was not. But could “subliminal pain” be something conceptually impossible?

In 1948, C. D. Hawkes and Nicholas Gotten reported to the American Neurological Association on 10 dying patients treated for intractable pain by pre-frontal lobotomy operations:

When questioned [after the operation] they all indicated that they realized some pain was present when they thought about it, but expressed indifference to it. (Hawkes & Gotten, 1948, p. 209)

Anaesthesiologist Henry K. Beecher reported on U.S. soldiers wounded at the World War II Battle of Anzio in Italy:

A very high percentage of the wounded soldiers, although in good general condition, entirely denied pain from their extensive wounds or had so little they did not want any medication to relieve it. (Beecher, 1959, p. 165)

“These men,” Beecher notes, “were clear mentally, and not in shock; they had not had narcotics recently and none at all in many cases” (Beecher, 1959, p. 164). But patients like that, he says, “*complain as vigorously as normal men at an inept venipuncture; so there is no total pain block*” (Beecher, 1959, p. 166).

Psychologist Ronald Melzack and neurologist K. L. Casey comment that this

is interpreted by specificity theorists ... to mean that their joy at having escaped alive from the battlefield blocked only their reaction to pain, but not pain sensation itself. If this is the case, then pain sensation is not painful, ... Rather than face the paradox of nonpainful pain ..., it seems more reasonable to say simply that these men felt no pain after their extensive injuries, that the input was blocked or modulated by cognitive activities before it could evoke the motivational-affective processes that are an integral part of the total pain experience. (Melzack & Casey, 1968, p. 425)

<sup>2</sup> During the 1930s especially, there were pupils of Wittgenstein and others who made a point of taking issue with the claims of Freudianism concerning the Unconscious. Their thought was that human experience is inseparable from the verbal expression of it. As for Sartre, he often maintained, in opposition to Freud, that self-deception is impossible (though attempted self-deception is universal).

The lobotomized patients said that they did notice their pain when they thought about it, but even then they were indifferent to it. The “specificity theorists” of pain neurology said that the wounded soldiers were all in pain, but that not all of them realized that. Melzack and Casey, though, will not hear of such things. After all, it is not necessarily amiss for scientists sometimes, on conceptual grounds, to overrule — or to “reinterpret” — what people spontaneously say. Ordinary language can be inconsistent; it can be confused. And Melzack and Casey do have a point about the absurdity of “nonpainful pain.” It would not be difficult to rule the possibility of “subliminal pain” out by a linguistic stipulation to the effect that nothing of which the mind is not at the time aware can *count* as “pain.”<sup>3</sup> And what we can stipulatively accomplish by design, natural language can accomplish — or can have already accomplished — through *its* processes.<sup>4</sup>

Even when consistent and unconfused, the semantics of ordinary-language expressions can be “multi-stranded” and rather lacking in boundary-precision. The question here is not what the exact meaning of the English word “pain” is, but whether it is ever possible for the word to stand for something whose presence and whose absence alike are infallibly known by the mind affected. For the “naive” concept of a “set,” it turns out “there is no room in logical space,” for example — a fact known since the work of Bertrand Russell over a century ago.<sup>5</sup> Could a parallel surprise be in store for us when it comes to *pain*?

Certainly, the easiest way to ensure the logical infallibility of a belief that one is *not* in pain would be by way of stipulating that to be in “pain” is to be in some state *S* and know that. But couldn’t one fail to also know *that* — the fact that one was in state *S* and knew that? Or know that fact, but fail to know that one knows it? The mind’s awareness of something *need* not guarantee any awareness of that awareness, it would seem, and, if no “pain” experience has occurred without an awareness of it, then that of which the awareness is an awareness is not a “pain” experience without an awareness also of *that* awareness. And so on. Nothing in a finite being’s mental life can be of more than finite complexity; and so, are we not presented here with an impossible infinite regress?

<sup>3</sup> David M. Rosenthal writes, “People sometimes favour a leg while walking without being in any way aware of the associated mild pain until somebody asks what’s wrong” (Rosenthal, 2011, p. 435, footnote 8). But language-users wedded to the usage disallowing non-conscious *pain* can insist that the automatic leg-favouring successfully prevents any actual “pain” from occurring until attention is expressly drawn to the favoured leg.

<sup>4</sup> Here we do have a matter for verbal legislation, through the folk processes of natural language if not through explicit convention. Is the ruling to be that patients who *say* they experience “pain” that isn’t at all unpleasant are misusing language here, as what they are experiencing (assuming their reports were honest) cannot rightly be called “pain,” not being aversive (perhaps it is a sensation phenomenologically just like a real pain except for that)? Or are their words to be taken at face value, as those who speak here of “pain asymbolia” would prefer? The present purpose is to argue that there is nothing to preclude a natural-language rule along the former lines. The issue, though, taken up in what follows, is whether, given that linguistic ruling, a belief in the presence of pain could for its part logically guarantee the actual presence of pain.

<sup>5</sup> Using the commonsense concept of a “set,” unmodified, Russell’s Paradox constructs *the set of all non-self-containing sets*, which is both provably self-containing and provably non-self-containing. (If it contains itself, it has to be non-self-containing; if it doesn’t contain itself, it has to be self-containing.)

However, if the term “awareness” means something dispositional, or else means whatever non-dispositional reality it is in the mind that gives rise to the disposition(s) in question, then this is not going to be a problem. For a single “base” reality can give rise to any number of distinct dispositional facts — facts about what *would* happen if certain things were to take place. It is unproblematically the case that, as you read these words, you are aware that you are reading them, and aware as well of that awareness, and also aware of *that* awareness — and so on. And so, nothing stands in the way of language itself ruling out the possibility of any “pain” which the mind is unaware of.<sup>6</sup>

That, then, would give us *half* of logical infallibility. It *can* be impossible to be in pain without being aware of it. But can it be impossible also to *believe* that you are in pain without actually being in any pain? Conceivably some of Beecher’s pain-denying wounded *could* be persuaded by medical experts that their neurological state was such that they “really were in pain” in spite of appearances to the contrary; and conceivably those experts could be simply lying about the patients’ neurological states. But even if this were not just a case of employing “scientific” flim-flam so as to get lay people to accept a misuse of language, it would not be a significant counter-example in the present context. Surely the prime candidate here for logical infallibility is *immediate*, that is, *unreasoned*, belief that one is currently in pain.

An easy way of stipulatively ruling out any possibility of having an immediate sense of being in *pain* without in fact experiencing any, would be to define being in “pain” as *being in some state S* or *having an immediate impression of being in state S* or *having an immediate impression of having an immediate impression of being in state S* or ... — but that would sacrifice the logical infallibility of an unreasoned belief that one *isn’t* in pain.

Eric Schwitzgebel writes:

What about pain, a favorite example for optimists about introspection? Could we be infallible, or at least largely dependable, in reporting ongoing pain experiences? ... It *is* hard, seemingly, to go too badly wrong in introspecting really vivid, canonical pains .... And the case of pain is not always as clear as sometimes supposed. ... There’s confusion between mild pains and itches or tingles. There’s the football player who sincerely denies he’s hurt. There’s the difficulty we sometimes feel in locating pains precisely or in describing their character. I see no reason to dismiss, out of hand, the possibility of genuine introspective error in these cases. Psychosomatic pain too: Normally, we think of psychosomatic pains as genuine *pains*, but is it possible that some, instead, involve sincere belief in a pain that doesn’t actually exist? (Schwitzgebel, 2008, pp. 259–260; cf. Haybron, 2007, p. 406)

By contrast, the claim here will be that the use of a word like “pain” in natural language is sufficiently indeterminate, covering as it does a spread of related senses, that in some of those senses it *is* logically impossible to be in error “immediately” as to whether you are in pain, because the thought that you are in pain and the pain are

<sup>6</sup> Timothy Williamson disagrees. But see the Appendix.

really the same thing. The problem taken up is the problem of how it is possible for a thought (other than a thought like Descartes' Cogito thought) to have for its whole subject-matter: itself. (Without any Liar Paradox resulting.<sup>7</sup>)

What is *pain*? It is an *immediately aversive* sensation "referred" to a spot in the subject's body (including, of course, as we know, body parts now missing: "phantom limbs"). The pain sensation has in each case its own phenomenological character — "crushing," "burning," "tearing," etc. — in addition to features such as intensity, spread, and intermittance. But, as Melzack and Casey say, in effect, without *aversiveness* it is not what we call "pain." There must be in the mind a desire (or a suppressed tendency to desire) that conditions be different from what they are at the spot in the body where the pain is felt. And with that aversiveness, the sensation is *painful*, whatever else it is phenomenologically.

Is not a "desire" for any result a (defeasible, that is, outweighable) disposition — or whatever mental reality gives rise to such a disposition — to try, should it be possible and necessary, to bring that result about? In other words, something mental which expresses itself, should such be known to be possible and necessary, in *means-taking* action. However, a belief that one desires something, no matter how ill founded, *can* readily give rise likewise to means-taking action aimed at securing it (overridably, of course, should a contrary-tending desire be strong enough). Hence, such a belief can *be* a "desire," in the standard sense of the word. And so, to have an "immediate" sense that you are in pain somewhere can amount to being in pain there. This can be the other half of the sought-for logical infallibility semantics (the pain/apparent-pain equivalence). Though a belief *can* sometimes be a desire, it is still true that to believe something to be so is not to desire it to be so. In the present case, it is to desire something else: what is here believed is that a desire exists; what is desired is not that supposed desire, but rather its object, relief from an aversive sensation (thus rendering the belief correct).

But how *could* having an (unreasoned) opinion that one was in some desire-state ever amount to *being* in that state? Don't folk psychology and philosophical theory tell us alike that our desires and our beliefs comprise, as it were, two blades of the "scissors-action" which produces purposive behaviour — one "blade" giving us our goals, the other giving us our estimate of pertinent opportunities and obstacles? According to this model, all voluntary behaviour is the result, jointly, of such an ensemble of motivations (of various different strengths) and an ensemble of beliefs (held with various degrees of confidence) — with distinct psychological roles being played by the desires, on the one hand, and the beliefs, on the other hand. Metaphor aside, though, why *couldn't* the same mental state ever play (part of) both roles?

In the absence of any argument to the contrary, it appears that it need not be only with the Cogito that we can see an example of believing the occurrence of which

<sup>7</sup> Suppose line 6 on page 203 of some treatise consists of just the following sentence: "What is printed on line 6 of page 203 of this treatise is not a true statement." So, seemingly, if what is printed on that line is other than true, then what it says is true; and, if it is true, then what it says is other than true. (This is just one version of the Liar Paradox.) Especially in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, "formalist" analytic philosophy accordingly sought to avoid the Paradox by requiring any discourse to be governed by a logical grammar precluding it from making any reference to itself.

logically ensures the belief's truth because the existence of the believing and the existence of the fact believed are really not two different existences.

**Competing interests.** The author declares none.

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## Appendix

I wrote that “nothing stands in the way of language itself ruling out the possibility of any ‘pain’ which the mind is unaware of.” But in *Knowledge and Its Limits*, Timothy Williamson (2002) formulates an argument against this — even allowing that being in pain does necessitate believing one is in pain — an argument which Williamson advances, denying expressly that it is simply the exploitation of a sorites sophism.<sup>8</sup> Given that (1) it is necessarily always the case that one is either in pain or not in pain, and (2) that there necessarily are borderline cases where one can fail to know whether one is in pain or is not in pain, Williamson (2002, pp. 96–98, 106) concludes, in effect, that one’s being in pain cannot entail knowing one is in pain.

Contrariwise, “is in pain” is vague in such a way that, for any borderline state of feeling, when one is in it, one is “in pain” in *some* sharpened senses of “in pain” and not “in pain” in *some* sharpened senses of “in pain.” (Sharpened senses do not have to be completely precise.) Hence, there is no logical barrier to a ruling that, for *any* sufficiently sharpened sense of “in pain,” only cases where one *knows* one is “in pain” will count as cases of *being* “in pain.” Knowing a given truth need not entail possessing sufficient vocabulary to state that truth. (Premise 2 here would be defensible, perhaps, with “can be unable to say” substituted for “can fail to know.”)

To something like this reasoning Williamson (2002, pp. 104–105) objects<sup>9</sup> that to count as *knowledge* the reliability of the basis of one’s belief must at least somewhat exceed the minimum degree of confidence

<sup>8</sup> From the commonsense premise, e.g., that removing a single grain isn’t going to bring a *heap* of sand’s existence to an end, the Sorites Paradox deduces that removing grains one by one will not bring it an end. Just how many grains are required to make up a *heap*? It is impossible to give a *precise* answer, whether because there isn’t one that would be exactly correct, or because of our human cognitive limitations. Williamson plumps for the second of these alternatives.

<sup>9</sup> As mentioned in the previous note, Williamson has the view on what is called “vagueness” that it is apt to result from a *cognitive* failure to tell where exactly the demarcation lies between, say, *pain* and *no pain*, and not really from an indeterminacy in the facts or in our conceptions and words. However, Williamson’s case with regard to the issue here does not depend on that. In his rebuttal of an account like the one defended here, he is willing to accept for the sake of argument that the inability to pin down the precise demarcation is indeed, remedially, a matter of people’s conceptions and discourse.

that suffices for mere *belief*; and so, with only just that much confidence, just *that* reliably based, you would not *know*; hence, one could *be* in any state of consciousness (only just in it) and even *believe* oneself to be in it, without *knowing* one was in it.

But *must* that degree of a thought's reliability requisite for *knowledge* exceed the degree of confidence needed to turn a mere suspicion into a *belief*? Arguably, the actual use of these expressions is less than sufficiently determinate to guarantee the needed premise for Williamson's case.

It is true that people do say things like "In the light of present evidence, there are sufficient grounds for believing that such-and-such is caused by so-and-so, but the causation of such-and-such by so-and-so is not yet something which is *known*." However, arguably the point they are making in saying this is that there are not yet sufficient grounds for *saying* the causation of such-and-such by so-and-so is something which is known. For "It is known that ..." entails "It is true that ..." and, indeed, "..." If you state that ..., you in effect *give your word* that .... You open yourself to being found at fault epistemically in the event that your basis for giving your word that ... isn't strong enough.

(To claim something to be *known* commits the speaker to having a *reliable* basis for believing it but not necessarily to considering the basis of *every* knower's belief to be similarly reliable. "The signs of what was going to ensue fell short of being altogether certain, but they were good enough for several of those paying attention to know in advance — even though not to know for sure — that it would in a short time begin happening." "It was known that ..." commits the speaker to "It is sufficiently certain that ..." but not to "It was sufficiently certain that ....")