

Pain and Attention: Preface

In this paper I will discuss the nature of pain. Not referring to “The Pain Machine” directly but it is obvious that the ideas that I forward are influenced heavily by it. To a large extent I agree with the ideas that it presents. This paper is my own approach of the subject. I choose to outline a series of thoughts on this that differ from that article in emphasis more than in kind. I have been encouraged to take a more “fictive” view of this discussion. The multiple referents to science fiction and the thinking “outside of the box” have influenced the tenor of this document. I attach a *personality* to the mental elements discussed not to be preposterous, but assigning *personality* to parts of *personality* seems more natural than forced.

As finite creatures we survive only because we can, with some accuracy, infer causality and make decisions based on these inferences. From infancy we learn the different responses elicited from taking the breast and rolling off of the lap. My own infant daughter had a remarkable range of behaviors based on this random sampling of reality in several short months. On another level, my friend’s German shepherd was harassed in its puppyhood by neighborhood boys that would ring the doorbell at length and tease him at the door. Now, as any good Pavlovian dog might, he anticipates this when he hears the doorbell and is enraged by the bell. I interpret this as the “time gadget” that our brains have existing in this linear world constricted by our beginning and our end. In the middle we are left with only one thing: attention.

Since the concept of time and attention is key to this discussion, I mention that we do not exist in a “now” at all, because of the time delay between our data gathering and our interpreting. This, however, seems irrelevant to the argument as a whole. I see the difference between living in the “now” and existing fractions of a second in the past, as being the difference between sitting in the driver’s seat or sitting in the back seat while steering the car.

Attention, as used in this paper, is not limited to the image of a distracted schoolboy glancing out the window. I do not mean *attention span* as a point of poor mental discipline, although attention span is part of the larger quotient. A person has a finite amount of time given them. If a person has lofty goals or none whatsoever they are still given a finite amount of attention. Perhaps it should be stated, “time divided by attention = Life. Our ability to concentrate is not simply a mental trick, or indicator of intelligence but is tangent upon a myriad of things beyond this such as time of day, month, year, life; health, rest, happiness, and so on. *Concentration* is the ability that we can bring to bear on *attention*. But the amount of concentration we can exert at any given time fluctuates wildly. If one is a disciplined mystic he may well be trained to concentrate beyond some of these outside distracters while experiencing anything from discomfort to agony; not noticing appetite, emotion nor physical inclination. This is clearly the exception, but even in this circumstance there is a limited amount of attention available.

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It seems that the “society of mind” is neither social nor civil. The various camps within the mind are ill-natured neighbors at best and warring factions at worst. The different interests that exist in the mind are all competing to make it to the top of the heap. I cannot frame this in terms of biologic imperative. I will instead refer to the communities within the mind as themselves driven by mini-egos who want “attention” and to receive “attention.” Being “on your mind” is what drives the whole lot. (For some reason the unconscious workings, such as heartbeat and breathing signals, all very meritorious, are not so eager to get into the fray.) Each of these camps has strategies to capture that finite part of your mind, which will be referred to here as consciousness. Whether we believe in it or not, these groups within the mind do.

With this simplistic model as a template for the remainder of the argument, I will discuss the appetite gadget, the emotion gadgets, and the pain gadget. The first two I mention in passing to give a framework for pain. These seem the logical candidates for the most imperialistic of the mind’s camps. Their individual evolutions seem self-evident. The hunger urge, the sex urge, and the other appetites all increase their dominance when not getting their way. To say we “feel hungry” is to say nothing except that the appetite group is having a coup. This thing that causes mental distress is indefinable except that we don’t like it. What it *feels like* is unimportant. It is sufficient to its task. After a period of time, whether attended to or not, the feeling of hunger is not as pronounced. This gadget seems content to have made its case and then to leave it to memory to follow up.

I put anger, and grief, and most of the balance of emotions in their own community. They seldom compete for time at the top. If sadness is getting the attention that he wants, then joy is content to stay home. Likewise if we are grieving there are often fits of laughter preceding or following great weeping. This seems an act of community more than competition. I contest that grief or heartbreak or ennui is not “pain.” The word “pain,” as I mentioned in class, does not seem to apply so well across these lines.

Pain seems the most adept at getting *attention*. He serves no other purpose than getting it. He is also the great teacher. Pleasure and enjoyment both pale by comparison. When one first walks up to a stove he does not know that heat is potentially damaging. Why should he? The opposite is true when on Mother’s lap. The infant walks up to the stove and then gives full attention and full learning ability over to pain’s lesson. If this is a stomachache from eating rotten food or the sensation of having your hair pulled when taking your sister’s doll it is a lesson. (Perhaps the pains of childbirth could have evolved as competitors to the pleasure of sex; both teaching their discrete lessons?)

If the pain is minimal then the amount of attention that is given over to it is in proportion. If the pain is great then with few exceptions the attention given is great as well. In either case pain wants attention. It causes great disquiet within the whole of the communities until some action is taken on its behalf. To say we “feel” it is, once again, not that useful. It is enough that the mind is given over to it. That combination of firings or communication overrides all of the other competitors for attention for good reason. Whatever the message or method it uses it creates great distress through all of its neighbors. To them this onslaught is very real. That part that they believe in, called the *consciousness*, believes in the part called pain. (As do we.) We are aware of this consciousness as the greatest distracter (or attractor) and have given it many labels. We think that it is *what it is*. We are so tied to this sensory definition that we cannot define it as less than something that we feel. It is “feeling” that causes us to see pain as just one more mental activity. The individuals who have a retarded ability to feel hurt when experiencing pain are few and far between for good reason: they do not learn its important if not tyrannical lessons.

With that said, I will conclude with the observation that agony is pain gone awry. Suffering seems an unnatural state to which we have not properly adapted. Hunger is wiser. Extended pain serves no purpose if there is no remedy for it. Yet we are not equipped adequately to deal with this. On an evolutionary level I attribute it to the same reasons we begin to break down after procreating: it is no longer that important what happens to us. After suffering some horrible disfigurement, evolution has no reason to think that we would survive, suffering or not. It seems like nature’s equivalent to leaving the iron plugged in after selling the house. It may burn down, but who cares?