

Global intentionalism and bodily sensations

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We turn now to a class of examples directed specifically at global rather than local intentionalism: examples of states which have a phenomenal character but seem to lack a content altogether. Attention here focuses on bodily sensations — like pains, itches, and orgasms — which, while not perceptual experiences, clearly have an associated phenomenal character. Despite this, to many it seems obvious that pains, itches, and orgasms lack a content — it seems obvious that these states fail to represent the world as being any way at all. If this view is correct, then global intentionalism is false.

1 What could the content of a bodily sensation be?

Global intentionalism as such is not wedded to any particular view about what the contents of perceptual experiences are. But because many people have a hard time getting their mind around the idea that pains could have contents, it might be worth canvassing some things people have said about the contents of bodily sensations:

a feeling of pain in my toe: that there is some disorder/injury/bodily damage in my toe.

...that there is a mental particular, a pain, present to me.

orgasm: that there is an orgasm.

...“that something very pleasing is happening down there. One also experiences the pleasingness alternately increasing and diminishing in its intensity.”
(Tye)

2 The case against intentionalism about bodily sensations

2.1 *The ‘tell me what the content is!’ argument*

The principal argument against intentionalism about bodily sensations seems to be based on the view that the sorts of content-assignments sketched above are implausible. Thus Block:

“The representationist should put up or shut up. The burden of proof is on them to say what the representational content of experiences such as orgasm and pain are.”

The problem, Block thinks, is that the results when one tries to do this are not very promising:

“Is the experience of orgasm completely captured by a representational content that there is an orgasm? Orgasm is phenomenally impressive and there is nothing very impressive about the representational content that there is an orgasm. I just expressed it and you just understood it, and nothing phenomenally impressive happened (at least not on my end). I can have an experience whose content is that my partner is having an orgasm without my experience being phenomenally impressive. In response to my raising this issue ... Tye ... says that the representational content of orgasm “in part, is that something very pleasing is happening down there. One also experiences the pleasingness alternately increasing and diminishing in its intensity.” But once again, I can have an experience whose representational content is that my partner is having a very pleasing experience down there that changes in intensity, and although that may be pleasurable for me, it is not pleasurable in the phenomenally impressive way that that graces my own orgasms. I vastly prefer my own orgasms to those of others, and this preference is based on a major league phenomenal difference. The location of “down there” differs slightly between my perception of your orgasms and my own orgasms, but how can the representationist explain why a small difference in represented location should matter so much? Of course, which subject the orgasm is ascribed to is itself a representational matter. But is that the difference between my having the experience and my perceiving yours? Is the difference just that my experience ascribes the pleasure to you rather than to me (or to part of me)? Representational content can go awry in the heat of the moment. What if in a heated state in which cognitive function is greatly reduced, I mistakenly ascribe your orgasm to me or mine to you? Would this difference in ascription really constitute the difference between the presence or absence of the phenomenally impressive quality?”

As Block notes, it is implausible to require that the intentionalist come up with a sentence or two which would fully capture the content of the relevant sensation — that would be impossible with vision, too.

How is Block’s objection best understood? To what standard is he holding the intentionalist’s theory about the content of bodily sensations?

One objection is expressed in the following quote:

“Orgasm is phenomenally impressive and there is nothing very impressive about the representational content that there is an orgasm. I just expressed it and you just understood it, and nothing phenomenally impressive happened (at least not on my end).”

This argument is clearly directed at intermodal rather than intramodal versions of global intentionalism: the idea is that we can entertain the same content in belief as in the relevant sensation, but with a difference (a certain lack of impressiveness) in phenomenal character. How should an intermodal intentionalist respond?

But the argument seems as though it is intended also as an argument against intramodal intentionalisms. Is the idea that if intentionalism is true, then a small difference in content can't correspond to a big difference in phenomenology? Why should that be so? And why is the difference between self-attribution of a property and attribution of it to someone else a small difference?

On the one hand, it is hard not to sympathize with Block's thought that there is something very unnatural about the intentionalist treatment of these cases. On the other hand, it is not obvious what exactly the argument here is.

2.2 No unperceived pains

It seems that pain is an experience of something — namely, a pain. But ordinarily the things perceived in perceptual experience can exist unperceived. However, this seems not to be true of pains; if there is tissue damage but no corresponding sensation, there is no pain. This indicates that — unlike ordinary perceptual experience — there is no separation between the experience and what the experience of. And this in turn calls into question the intentionalist's assimilation of pain to contentful sense experience.

This puts pressure on the idea that when one is feeling a pain, what is represented is a pain in one's foot, and puts some pressure on the representationalist to say that what is represented is something which, like tissue damage, can exist unsensed.

(Similar problems arise with itches, where it is very natural to say that, if one is representing anything, one is representing an itch.)

3 The locatedness of pains

The main argument *for* assigning contents to bodily sensations is their 'locatedness.' Pains are felt as being located somewhere, as are itches, orgasms, etc. It is true that the intentionalist has a natural explanation of this fact: if bodily sensations are representations of things happening in one's body, then it would be natural for the objects of those sensations to seem to be somewhere — just as the objects of visual experience seem to be somewhere.

Can the opponent of contents for bodily sensations offer any explanation of this fact?