Michael Tye on Pain and Representational Content

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Michael Tye argues for two crucial theses:

(1) that experiences of pain have representational content (essentially);
(2) that the representational content can be specified in terms of something like damage in parts of the body. (Different types of pain are connected with different types of damage.)

I reject both of these theses. In my view experiences of pain carry nonconceptual content, but do not represent essentially. Rather they are apt to represent when the subject attends to them. The experiences carry nonconceptual content not only about tissue damage, but about many other qualities as well, including dispositional qualities.

I appreciate that such a view needs argument which is not appropriate here. However, I think that there are independent reasons to think that Tye's theses are problematical. It is difficult to see how these theses are consistent both with what we know about pains, and other perceptual experiences, and with the package of claims that are central to Tye's treatment of pain, and more generally of perceptual experiences, whereby phenomenal character is explained in terms of representational content [as presented in Tye (2000)]

1. Tye on Content and Phenomenal Character

Tye's two theses have to be understood as embedded in a wider framework which contains the following crucial claims:

1. Experiences of pain have phenomenal character: there is something it is like to have the experience.
2A. Experiences of pain carry representational content (essentially).
2B. The representational content of the experience is nonconceptual content that satisfies certain other constraints. This content is specified in terms of concepts that the subject of the experience need not have.
2C. What makes the nonconceptual content representational content is the fact that the experience has intrinsic features of such a type that they stand in the right kind of causal relations to the properties that are specified in the nonconceptual content.
2D. Experiences of pain, like all perceptual experiences carry all sorts of nonconceptual content about a variety of different qualities. (The reason for this is that nonconceptual content, in the sense of informational content, is defined in terms of causal relations between the state and other qualities. In general, any perceived quality will be causally related to a whole host of other qualities, especially dispositional qualities.)

3. The phenomenal character of pains (and typical perceptual experiences) is to be explained in terms of the representational content, i.e., nonconceptual content of the right type, carried by the experience.
4. The experience of pain is something that one undergoes, and is something that does not involve or require the application of concepts. It is moreover, something that one can undergo without being aware that one is undergoing it. Even if this situation is rare, it happens often enough, as Tye and Dretske and others point out. There is thus a clear distinction between two kinds of state:

- the experience of having a pain, say in the fight leg;
- being aware that one is having a pain.

5. My awareness of the phenomenal character of pain (and other experiences) comes about through introspecting my experience. Such a process of introspection takes as input, the experiences of pain, a nonconceptual state, and has as output a conceptual state: awareness that I have an experience with a certain phenomenal character.

With respect to this last thesis, the claim is not that the subject's awareness is of the form "I have an experience with such and such phenomenal character". It is rather of the form: "I have a pulsating pain in my right leg". "I have a sharp pain behind my right eye." Nevertheless, what Tye says the subject is aware of when s/he introspects is the phenomenal character _ even if s/he does not think of it as phenomenal character. However, if it is phenomenal character that the subject is aware of, it is nonconceptual content. But how can that be since the output is expressed in terms of conceptual content. The nonconceptual content is specified, by the theorist, in terms of concepts that the subject need not possess, but if so, they cannot be specific to the content of the output of the process of introspection.

A closely related point is this. Tye says that the process of introspection is one that enables the subject to become aware of what it is like to be in pain (or to have other relevant perceptual experiences). But I cannot see that his theory allows him to explain how this can be. The process of introspection has as input, the experience with its nonconceptual content, but the output is a state of awareness-that: I become aware that I am in pain. But this is not to know what it is like to be in pain. It is to know something else: what it is to be a subject who is aware that s/he is in pain.

It is true that Tye gives an account of phenomenal qualities, in Tye (2000), that is meant to show how we have knowledge of the phenomenal qualities, but it does not seem to me that he is any more successful. "In being cognitively aware of our own phenomenal states", he writes, " we subsume those states under phenomenal concepts". These concepts are simple.

> "They are also, in part, direct, recognitional concepts. For it is part of their characteristic functional role, qua phenomenal concepts, that they enable us to discriminate phenomenal qualities and states directly on the basis of introspection. In having the phenomenal concept, pain for example, I have a simple way of classifying pain that enables me to recognise it via introspection without the use of any associated reference-fixing intermediaries. [p.28]

Introspection of the phenomenal character of pain causally triggers in one the application of the concept of pain (under normal functioning of the introspective mechanism). Thereby via the operation of a reliable process, I know that I am in pain. But once again what I become aware of is that I am in pain. I am said to be able to classify the states that I am in, and to distinguish it from other states. that is, I can tell without inference, that my state is of a certain type, but this is not the same as to know what it is like to be the subject of the experience.

2. Tye on Pain and Representational Content

In the light of these comments, let us look more closely at the details of Tye's treatment of pain. If pains are representations, what do they represent, Tye asks? The obvious answer is "pain". "After all, if I feel a pain in my leg and I attend to what I am feeling, I attend to a quality that seems to be tokened in my leg, a quality that I strongly dislike." (p. 3) This view may present something of a problem since pains are commonly thought of as experiences but the answer to that, Tye holds, is to recognise that the term "pain" does double duty, once as a name for an experience, and once as the name for a certain quality or type "insofar as that quality is experientially represented". A pain in the leg represents that a certain quality is tokened in the leg. This answer raises the further question of which quality it is that is represented. Tye's proposal is that the quality is probably a certain kind of tissue damage, though apparently this would need to be determined by scientific research. (It is plausible, however, that a twinge of pain represents a mild brief case of damage, and throbbing pain, a rapidly pulsing disorder.)

'Pain', in one important use, he says here, names a certain quality "insofar as that quality is experientially represented". This may suggest that we can distinguish between the quality _ tissue damage _ and the same quality as it is *experientially represented*, and accordingly that the subject is aware of the tissue damage, not as tissue damage but "as it is represented as being". But I cannot see that Tye can help himself to such a distinction. All it can mean for a quality to be "experientially represented" is for the quality to be part of the nonconceptual content carried by the experience, albeit suitably poised, etc. Accordingly, if Tye's theory is right, the tissue damage will be part of the nonconceptual representational content, and it will be part of the specification of how the pain is "experientially represented".

Against what I have written, Tye goes on to explain how it is that pains are experienced as unpleasant. On the face of it, this would seem to be an admission that Tye agrees with the sort of theory I have just described as in conflict with his. It would seem not:

> To experience tissue damage as bad is to undergo an experience which represents that damage as bad. Accordingly, in my view the affective dimension of pain is part of the representational content of pain as the sensory dimension is. [p. 13.]

He reiterates that the representational content of pain, as noted earlier, is nonconceptual.

> Admittedly, my talk above of the unpleasantness of pain, of its experienced badness may sound cognitive. But I do not intend that it be understood in this way. It seems to me that the most plausible view is that we are hard-wired to experience pain as bad for us from an extremely early age.

Tye then goes on to describe the experiences of an infant with chocolate:

> The child's gustatory experience represents a certain taste and the child explains that taste as good. The taste is experienced as good by the child in that the child undergoes an overall experience which represents the presence of the taste in the mouth and represents it as good. Intuitively, this is not a cognitive experience. It does not require concepts. [p. 14]

The point he seems to be making, with this example as well as the example of orgasm, is that these experiences are experiences of something as good or bad but they are not cognitive responses _ on the ground that they are not conceptual responses. "One is hard-wired by nature to experience things that way".

There are a number of problems here. First of all, I cannot see why we cannot be hard-wired to make conceptual responses, especially if the concepts are of the practical-concept variety, as described by John Campbell (1994), pp. 41-47, nor why all cognitive responses need be conceptual. There is a more important point, however. It seems that Tye is presupposing an account of representational content which goes against his avowed thesis. For him, representational content is a species of nonconceptual content, where each type of content is defined in terms of causal relations between the content carrying state and the state that is represented:

> Experience represents various features by causally correlating with, or tracking, those features under certain optimal conditions [Tye (2000) p. 64].

What matters, he further explains, is not actual causal history but the causal correlations that *would obtain*, were optimal or normal conditions operative. Tye qualifies this later by adding a clause:

> For state S to represent feature F not only must S causally covary with F under optimal conditions but it must also be the case that if there is some other feature G such that were F fail to covary with G, the causal covarial link between S and F under optimal conditions would still hold but that between S and G would be broken. (p. 139-40)

Given this account of representational content, it is hard to see how Tye can claim that the affective dimension of pain and pleasure can be part of the representational content.

There is, it seems to me, an alternative way of thinking about representational content which can be thought of as nonconceptual. There are two different ways, that is to say, in which there might be representational content that is nonconceptual. One is the sense presupposed by Tye and similar to that of information content, as described by Dretske. Here the nonconceptual content is

defined in terms of those features which the experience is causally correlated with. With this sense, the representational content is nonconceptual content which satisfies certain other conditions.

The second sense is that, according to which, the *representing* is nonconceptual. That is to say, the state represents in a nonconceptual way. In this second sense, "nonconceptual content" is short for "nonconceptual *component or ingredient* of content". E. J. Lowe suggests something along these lines when he says, for example, that he takes perceptual sensations to "constitute a wholly non-conceptual component of perceptual experience". E.J.Lowe (1996), p.101. A similar idea is expressed in Moreland Perkins (1983), p. 5 and in Barry Maund (2003), pp. 149-164. Perhaps the strongest account of this sense has been provided by Jay Rosenberg (1986) pp.72-88.

Rosenberg has written of how a person's perceptual awareness that is constitutive of a perceptual experience can contain various elements, one of which is a nonconceptual representation. He begins his discussion with a case in which a man, Bruno, in perceiving a bush, mistakes it for a bear. Bruno sees a bush but does not see it as a bush. Instead he sees it as a bear, i.e. he takes it to be a bear. The bush is the occasion of Bruno's experience but the concept of "a bush" does not enter the perceptual experience or awareness. As Rosenberg goes on to argue, however, there is more to the bush's being the occasion of Bruno's perceptual awareness than is captured by the observation that it is the cause of his perceptual experience. We are pressed towards the conclusion that somehow the bush needs to be "present in" that awareness and to be, along with the concept *bear*, an actual "part" or "constituent" of that awareness. Yet if we accept that, there is now an apparent contradiction: the bush is an element of the awareness and yet the concept "bush" is no part of it.

> The only way to render these claims consistent is evidently to endorse a certain "Cartesian superstition" (as it has been called): that there is an element of perceptual experience which is *both* representationally significant *and* non-conceptual or non-propositional in form; in short, that the bush which is the occasion of Bruno's perceptual awareness is so by virtue of being *non-conceptually represented* in that experience. [Rosenberg (1986), p.76]

This is the conclusion that Rosenberg is prepared to endorse. The account that he goes on to develop is one in which perceptual awareness of the bush is a state containing an internal counterpart to the bush. Both the bush and the bear are represented in that awareness. A bear is the content of Bruno's awareness by virtue of being conceptually represented in that awareness; the bush is its occasion by virtue of being nonconceptually represented in that awareness.

There are two important features of this way of thinking of nonconceptual representing. One is that it deals with content, thought of in a Fregan way, as having to do with mode of presentation (representation). The second is that the representational content, at least in the case of perception, obtains at the personal level, and has to do with the use the perceiver can make of the perceptual experiences. Visual experiences, for example, only represent insofar as the perceiver has the capacity to use them. There is a variety of ways in which the perceiver can use the visual experiences: one is to have thoughts about them. Another is to use them to have thoughts about physical objects. A more usual way is to use them to guide one in one's behaviour, behaviour which is targeted onto objects in the environment. In addition, at least on my way of thinking, visual

experiences contain representations with phenomenal qualities and we attribute the qualities of the representation to the objects that we target our actions on: the objects we reach for, grasp, approach, move towards etc.

My reason for drawing attention to this alternative view, which of course requires a lot of support, is not to criticise Tye, but to indicate that there is an alternative way of thinking of nonconceptual representations, and to suggest that it is more faithful to the phenomenology of pain-experiences and other perceptual experiences.

References:

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