

Review of Klein, Colin. *What the Body Commands*, The MIT Press:
Cambridge, MA, 2015, pp. xiv + 210, USD40 (hardback).

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For final version of this review in *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 2017,
go to: <http://www.tandfonline.com/eprint/FwIAYgMuXIT4Mzc98nMH/full>.

In various papers, Colin Klein has argued that pain experiences are commands. This monograph goes well beyond the papers, re-shaping Klein's 'imperativist' view, setting it within a general account of 'homeostatic sensations', presenting new arguments, and criticising alternatives. Original, empirically informed, clear, and often persuasive, it is a lovely book.

Suppose a sprain leaves you with a pain in your ankle. For many theorists, this consists in your having an experience that represents, truly or falsely, that something is the case, e.g. that your ankle is damaged. For his part, Klein agrees that your pain is intentional, but not that it is truth-apt. For he thinks your pain is a command—addressed to you by your body—to protect your ankle, specifically to keep it from bearing weight [ch. 5]. Moreover, your pain's being a command turns not on the involvement of a special attitude, but on the pain's content itself having an imperative rather than indicative mood (see chs. 5 and 8; also Martínez [2011]). And it is in terms of such content, he thinks, that pain's phenomenology and motivational power should be explained [chs. 1 and 6]. This is an account not of pain's unpleasantness, notice, but of pain per se. (Contemporary theorists distinguish the two, accepting that non-unpleasant pains are not only possible, but actual. Klein, more clearly here than in earlier work, agrees.) But, while pain per se is Klein's focus, pain's unpleasantness (or, as Klein also puts it, its painfulness, hurting, feeling bad, or causing suffering) is not entirely neglected. In his final chapter, Klein suggests—tentatively—that it too should be understood in terms of commands: your pain's being painful consists in your commanding yourself not to have it [186-7]. So, overall, Klein tends towards a double imperativism: both your pain and its unpleasantness consist in commands, the former issued by your body for you to protect a body part, the latter issued by you for you not to have the pain.

Klein's picture is original. While many explain painfulness in terms of pain-directed states, they typically invoke not commands, but desires (for the pain to stop). And those who explain it in terms of

commands typically invoke commands to stop some bodily disturbance rather than the pain itself (Martínez [2011]). Turning from painfulness to pain, moreover, two points are striking. First, among the many who explain pain per se in terms of intentional content, Klein is alone (I take it) in denying that pains are truth-apt. There are other imperativists, but they either invoke imperative content to explain pain's unpleasantness, not pain per se, or take the contents of pains to be imperative-indicative compounds (Martínez [2011] and Hall [2008]). Second, among the many who take unpleasant pains to be intrinsically motivational, Klein is alone (I take it) in claiming that what makes pains motivational is not just their unpleasantness, but their being pains. Again, he thinks that even non-unpleasant, neutral pains, thanks to their imperative contents, motivate. Mild pains that prompt postural adjustments are for him a case in point: often non-unpleasant, yet motivational even so.

Now, it is controversial whether contents have moods at all. But even granting for argument's sake that they do, and that pains have such contents, why think with Klein that their contents are imperative, and that they are not even in part truth-apt? Klein's argument centres on what he takes to be pain's primary role [ch. 3]. This role can be puzzling, for pain isn't as tightly correlated with damage as one might think: pain often precedes, or outlasts, or occurs entirely without damage; and serious damage can occur long before or entirely without pain. Yet pain is adaptive: those incapable of pain die young. What's crucial, for Klein, is why they do so: not because of 'dramatic acute injuries', but because of 'the combined weight of repeated, trivial, but unhealed' damage and strains [29–30]. What they apparently lack is pain's power to motivate behaviour that enables post-damage recuperation (e.g. staying off a broken angle). This is what Klein takes to be pain's role. And he argues that what illuminates the capacity of pains to play it is their being commands—in particular, commands to protect body parts—not their being truth-apt, informational states. For commands, he claims, tell us what to do and motivate us to do it, whereas informational states don't. This is why it is better to command than to inform when moving furniture with someone ('Drop your end!') and why fire alarms are designed to motivate not to illuminate. And it is why Klein thinks pains are commands, for what is needed in the circumstances for which we evolved the capacity to feel pain is motivation, not information [chs. 1-3].

On Klein's picture, pain is just one of many similarly understood 'homeostatic sensations' [ch. 2]. Hunger, thirst, itch, and the felt urge to breathe or to urinate or even to smoke are all sensations that motivate

behaviour to ‘maintain a parameter within an acceptable range’ [14]. And they do so distinctively. Unlike reflexes, they are flexible, allowing deliberation. Unlike desires, their flexibility is limited to ‘when ... and how (out of a relatively small range of actions)’ the ‘homeostatic demand is satisfied’, thus excluding ‘whether you act or what (in a broader sense) you do’ [17]. What explains this motivational profile, Klein argues, is that they too are commands—to eat, drink, scratch and so on [17–25].

Now, three phenomena might seem beyond Klein’s reach. First, pains don’t just move us but give us reasons to act. Klein agrees but thinks he can accommodate this. Invoking Hobbes, Hart, and Raz, he argues that you stand to your body as a citizen stands to the state, in particular that you accept your body as a ‘practical authority’, hence treat its commands as themselves reasons to obey [72–81].

A second threat comes from pain asymbolics, who—as a result of neural damage—claim to feel pain when given noxious stimuli, yet appear—and say they are—neither bothered nor motivated by it. But Klein takes this case actually to vindicate his account [chs. 11–12]. For asymbolics are both pain- and more generally threat-indifferent. They withdraw neither from stimuli that are actually causing pain nor from things merely jabbed towards them threateningly. And the best unifying explanation of this, Klein argues, is that their brain damage has eliminated their capacity to care about their bodily integrity. For, on the one hand, this produces a general threat-indifference; and on the other, it undermines their acceptance of their bodies’ authority, leaving them unmoved by their body’s pain-commands [143, 156]. So asymbolic pains are motivational, Klein insists, but—lacking care—asymbolics are not for being motivated [82, 154].

Finally, isn’t imperative content insufficient to capture pains’ varying intensities, felt locations, and their burning, aching, and stinging? No, Klein replies [chs. 7–8]. He explains intensity in terms of a command’s urgency, conceived as a feature of its content, in particular as a ranking within the sets of ‘satisfaction worlds’ on which imperative contents are modelled [chs. 5 and 8]. As for your pain’s being felt in your hand, this consists in its being your hand that you’re commanded to protect, which in turn depends on its being your hand to which your pain directs your attention and care [§7.2]. And the difference between that pain being sharp and a dull ache is the difference between it being a command to withdraw your hand quickly and a command to treat your hand gingerly.

But worries remain. Consider first Klein’s account of pain’s motivational power. Suppose a pain motivates you to jump out of a scalding shower. It is really plausible to think with Klein that this behaviour is aimed at recuperation rather than defence? Moreover, is pain per se (contrast its unpleasantness) really motivational at all? Again, do non-unpleasant pains really motivate? Klein cites mild pains and the pains of the lobotomised as cases in point. But arguably mild pains are unpleasant, just mildly, and when the lobotomised talk of their chronic pains not bothering them, this seems to reflect the absence not of pain’s unpleasantness, but of anxiety, anger, and other emotions that such unpleasant pains typically evoke downstream. (This distinction is sometimes lost in Klein’s discussion.) As for pain’s reason-giving force, how informative is it to explain the difference between those who are and those who aren’t moved by their pains in terms of those who do and those who don’t accept their bodies’ authority? Not very if acceptance simply means being disposed to obey your body’s commands. Yet if it means something more demanding, perhaps taking your body’s commands to be reasons, there is a risk the account will fail to make sense of the motivational power of infant or animal pain.

Turning to pain’s unpleasantness, can Klein explain why asymbolics’ pains are not unpleasant? For him, the question becomes: why don’t asymbolics self-address commands to stop their pains? Klein seems tempted to reply that they don’t do so because their pains don’t motivate them. For it is pain’s irksome motivational power that, he thinks, partly explains why normal subjects issue anti-pain commands. But only partly, notice. Klein also thinks the propensity to self-address anti-pain commands is explained by natural selection and associations between pains and negative emotions [186–9]. So, again, why don’t asymbolics self-address such commands? Moreover, if pain’s intrusive motivational power is even part of what explains our issuing unpleasantness-constituting commands, shouldn’t all felt urges be unpleasant? Yet they aren’t. Arguably the urge to stop running when you see a cliff edge is affectively neutral, and some other urges are pleasurable. (Klein’s final chapter would be clearer on these matters if it didn’t so tightly intertwine questions about what constitutes, explains, and is bad about pain’s unpleasantness.)

Returning to pain’s felt location, if this is determined as the focus of a subject’s care, and if Klein is right that asymbolics don’t care, their pains should lack felt location, but there is no evidence of this. And, since

hunger motivates us to eat, hence to attend to our mouths, mustn't Klein say (falsely) that hunger is felt in the mouth? As for burning versus stinging pains, surely capturing such distinctions in terms of subtle differences among the actions that pains command requires pains to specify such actions in exceedingly fine-grained ways. But do they? Wouldn't that preclude just the deliberation about how to obey them that Klein insists they allow? And wouldn't it limit their useful capacity to interact with exceedingly diverse instrumental beliefs to produce equally diverse behaviours?

To be clear, these worries cast no doubt on the value of Klein's book. They rather reflect how rich and provocative it is. Monographs about pain are few and far between, and it is a delight that the first in such a long time should be so good. It will influence the debate for years to come.

References

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