

Pains are nociceptors? Comments on (Owesen 2022)

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Abstract

In (Owesen 2022), Owesen purportedly argues that pains are activations of nociceptors. In these comments I show that much of what Owesen says is consistent with pains being nociceptors themselves.

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Keywords: Pain; Nociceptors; Bodily Theory; Experiential Theory; Phantom Pain.

In section 4 of (Owesen 2022), Owesen argues that his theory – which is true only if “a pain is a proximal activation of nociceptors that causes an experience of pain” – is more plausible than an experiential theory – a theory which is true only if pains are experiences or intentional mental states.

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But if the arguments in section 4 really do show Owesen’s theory to be more plausible than an experiential theory, then there is an alternative theory which, like Owesen’s, entails α – δ , and for which there are analogous arguments which show it to be more plausible than an experiential theory.

α

Pains are in parts of people other than the brain.

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β

Referred pains are in parts of people other than the brain.

γ

For someone to have a pain in a part of them it is necessary that they be in pain.

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δ

For someone to have a pain in a part of them it is necessary that some of their nociceptors activate.

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The theory Owesen puts forward and clarifies in section 3 may be summarised as follows:

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A pain is a proximal activation of nociceptors causing an experience of pain. Activations of nociceptors are located where the nociceptors are located. Sometimes the reason why someone’s nociceptors activate has less (or nothing) to do with there being a noxious stimulus and more to do with them having neural disorders. Phantom limb pains are activations of nociceptors of damaged nerves. Referred pains are in parts of people other than the brain but they are not where they would be reported to be.

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The alternative theory, which I think Owesen could accept, is as follows (I have highlighted the differences):

50 **A pain is a nociceptor (or group of nociceptors) the activation of which is causing someone¹ to be in pain through nociception.²** Sometimes the reason why someone's nociceptors activate has less (or nothing) to do with there being a noxious stimulus and more to do with them having neural disorders. **Phantom limb pains are nociceptors of damaged nerves.** Referred pains are in parts of people other than the brain but they are not where they would be reported to be.

55 Regarding the arguments Owesen himself offers in section 5 (*not* the arguments he criticises), his theory is only relevant insofar as it entails or suggests:

60 ϵ
that noone can have a pain in a part of them which someone else has in a part of *them* without there being a part common to both people (Owesen 2022: section 5.1, 14–15);

65 ζ
that someone who is not in pain does not have a pain in a part of them (Owesen 2022: section 5.1, 16);

70 η
that phantom limb pains are in parts of people other than the brain (Owesen 2022: section 5.2).

Both Owesen's theory and the alternative theory suggest, if not entail, ϵ . The alternative theory, like Owesen's theory, entails γ ; γ entails ζ ; so the alternative theory entails ζ . The alternative theory, like Owesen's theory, entails η . So if Owesen were to accept the alternative theory, instead of his own, he could still argue just as he does in section 5.

References

75 Owesen, Erlend Winderen Finke (2022). "The Bodily Theory of Pain". *Review of Philosophy and Psychology*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13164-022-00646-w> [Last accessed 2022.11.10]. 1–19.

80 Smith, Ewan St. John & Lewin, Gary R. (2009). "Nociceptors: a phylogenetic view". *Journal of Comparative Physiology A*. 195. 1089–1106.

1 I speak only of pains in people, but given that mammals and non-mammals have nociceptors (Smith & Lewin 2009), it might be possible to give a definition of pains *simpliciter*.

2 Alternatively: a pain is a nociceptor (or group of nociceptors) which, by activating, is causing someone to be in pain through nociception.