

A Critique of 'Mad Pain and Martian Pain'
with Postmodernist Perspectives

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I. Introduction

If one entity enjoys an activity, and another despises it, can you still say the activity makes individuals happy? Perhaps you might split the two entities due to their differing concepts of happiness, or redefine “happiness” as the effect of that specific activity, or just label one as the exception. This subject area of defining mental states with respect to specific populations is explored in David Kellogg Lewis’ philosophical article “Mad Pain and Martian Pain.” Lewis comments on how a complete theory of the mind must be able to accommodate two hypothetical situations: a madman not reacting to ‘pain’ like other humans do, and a Martian that experiences ‘pain’ yet through different physical mechanisms. Importantly, Lewis utilizes the vague definition of ‘pain’ by exploring a potential solution framing mental states as filling intermediary roles that cause effects, where these state-role-effect paradigms are unique to each appropriate ‘population.’ While there are many elements of Lewis’ points that are strong, for the purposes of this paper I find it a disservice to simply further corroborate his claims as is. Thus, in this paper, I will explore brief thought experiments that reveal shortcomings and contradictions of Lewis’ model—primarily where I believe his workarounds are insufficient for more robust test cases. I then propose trading Lewis’s framework of organizing mental states and populations for a more postmodernist, unorganized, and individually-defined approach for organizing the definition of mental states.

II. The Madman and Martian, and the Two Theories

Lewis first posits a hypothetical situation with two entities whose experiences of pain generate problems for both the functionalist and identity theory conceptions of the mind. First, there is a Madman who, by Lewis’s words, “feels pain, just as we do,” but rather than moving to stem the cause of pain, he becomes intently motivated to perform mathematics, snap his fingers, and cross his legs. Secondly, there is a Martian, whose “hydraulic mind contains nothing like our neurons,” and this mental plumbing works in such a way that pinching his skin causes cavities in his feet to inflate—which causes a pain similar to ours, in that he is motivated to stop the source of pinching.

The idea of such characters is first defended by Lewis as *viable* to exist. For the madman, the specifics of how he reacts to pain are much less important than the fact that he reacts differently than most humans, and same goes for the Martian in terms of how exactly his internal plumbing is designed; they are simply *different* from philosophy’s long standing focus on the human mind and brain states.

Lewis suggests that these scenarios are not easily accommodated by existing theories of the mind; for instance, identity theory fails to account for the different mental state that leads to the Martian’s pain (if we assert that the label ‘pain’ is proper to begin with!), and functionalism becomes conflicted due to the claimed ‘same mental state’ (also debatable) in the madman *not leading to the same effect*.

III. Lewis’s Solution: State-Roles, Exceptions, and Populations

The workaround Lewis describes is the conception of a “role” that has the effect visible to functionalist thinking. Mental states fill these “roles,” and if that role is filled, a predictable effect is created. It is assumed that this role does not contribute another entire degree of freedom regarding how the mind might work; it is only added one-to-

one with the functionalist theory this concept subscribes to by adding this intermediary between mental states and what they “do,” as per functionalist thinking.

For Lewis, this addresses the concept of the madman. Humans have a hypothetical “role” that, when fulfilled, causes us to experience pain. However, in the madman, the disconnect occurs where the madman has a mental state that normally results in pain for the rest of humankind (and thus why the mental state is called pain, by functionalism), but it happens to not occur for the madman. Lewis argues that this “allowing for exceptional members of a population” solves the problem of pain with functionalist theory due to its ability for it to be regularly applied to a larger population, only that the madman is an exception. Lewis says it is acceptable to say that the madman is in pain because it *typically* fills the “role” that causes pain for the other members of the madman’s population.

The concept of populations, for Lewis, also allows for different populations to exist —the Martians. Lewis argues it is acceptable to say that the Martian is in pain as his population’s mental state for pain is precisely the inflation of the foot cavities, which fills the ‘role’ of causing pain. It is different from the ‘mental states’ of humans, but under this framework, it is acceptable for the Martian population.

IV. Loose Definition of “Exceptions” and “Population”

Lewis’s solution appears to accommodate the two situations appropriately. However, in this paper, I express dissatisfaction with both scenarios. Namely, with the Madman, still claiming that the Madman is in pain, just that his scenario is *an exception*, seems untrue to the original concept of functionalism since the “effect” is still inapplicable with the madman if pain is conceived as resulting in the desire to end the source of pain, writhing, etc.

Furthermore, the definition of populations is extremely vague. Imagine a universe with an immense number of life forms of near-infinite variation. Every degree of freedom is utilized in terms of how physical states are organized, how physical states translate to mental states, and how mental states are expressed. Every infinitesimal difference and combination from one individual to another, and from one group to another, is expressed. Where would one draw the lines of “a population”? Worse still, how would you define any individual as an “exception” from whatever “population” you selected? Lewis’s thinking makes headway into a non human-centric approach, but unfortunately arrives at a rather inflexible framework that is only successful due to the small space-

V. Foolish Labels, and More Madmen

Perhaps most telling of complications that could rise from Lewis’s determination of exceptions and populations is the line where he states, “we do not deny the possibility of mad pain, provided there is not too much of it.” He goes on to describe how variations between populations allow for the Martian’s pain as well. Again, these ‘exceptions’ and ‘populations’ seem quite suspicious to me, for humans have a tendency to place reality into fictional buckets; whereupon closer investigation, resulting conflicts between connected attributes and logical models begin to collapse. I believe that is the case here, and Lewis’s argument only holds up through this very small thought experiment, as well as the declaration of “exceptions” for the madman.

Then let us investigate a more robust thought experiment, and develop an according framework. What if, precisely with what Lewis shies away from, more madmen who perform similar to our original madman began to appear? Lewis attempts to avoid this labelling this as a population by supposing this scenario is unavailable. He states this because he desires for the problem to be “as hard as possible,” yet, this scenario in the scope of our universe of highly varying life is precisely what disables Lewis’s model. For instance, what if there was another branch in our universe where we had another group of perfectly alike madmen, except they also focus on juggling as well as mathematics, where the original is averse to juggling? Lewis’s definitions of not only exceptions but also populations break down due to this granularity. It may be better to not draw a line at all if they will never make sense—and if you need to draw an infinite amount of lines, they too become meaningless.

VI. Removing labels and de-categorizing populations

I propose that Lewis’s ideas of categories and populations be avoided for the unnecessary contradictions they introduce. This is because logic strictly attributed to these groups result in contradictions once the definition of categories and populations becomes vague, which is something Lewis missed. This holds because any select life form from our Varying Universe thought experiment is equally feasible as the convenient three distinct populations Lewis chose. As a result, this variance means it is also pointless to attempt to define “pain” similarly among species—just as populations were arbitrarily created among “similar enough” entities appreciated by an individual, “pain” should be conceived in a similar manner. Furthermore, I believe this variance will only work if the groupings and definition of “pain” is treated as personally defined for any observer. In one case among many others, the functionalist interpretation could work fine by defining pain to be a mental state that results in the individual writhing, seeking for the experience to end, and similar effects. By this logic we can claim with functionalism that the Martian and average human are in pain, but the madman is not, and he need not be. Again, this could change for any individual’s perspective.

VIII. Conclusion

Overall, I believe that Lewis’ delineation of categories and exceptions are only successful in his small case study; this framework should be dropped altogether due to the contradictions they yield. Concepts and labels such as “pain” should be knowingly used as an intrinsically vague, personally-defined term as specified by the speaker; otherwise, the conflicts created are a result of arbitrary requirements projected onto reality by humans. This concept moves away from Lewis’s definition towards a more unorganized, individualistic, and postmodernist approach, where mental states are best defined and communicated through any framework an individual speaker designs.

References

Lewis, David. 1983. "Mad Pain and Martian Pain", in *Philosophical Papers*, Vol. I. Oxford University Press, pp. 122-130.