

In pain

PAUL NOORDHOF

When I feel a pain in my leg, how should we understand the ‘in’ in ‘in the leg’? Michael Tye has suggested in a number of places that the Representationalist has a neat explanation of what the ‘in’ means (Tye 1995b: 226–28 or 331–32; Tye 1995c: 111–16; Tye 1996: 296–97). Peter Carruthers has agreed (Carruthers 2000, ch. 5). Tye’s Representationalist holds pains are states which represent damage to, or disorder in, the body. When pain represents damage in the leg, then the ‘in’ is simply that of spatial location. Pains representing disorder in phantom limbs, and cases of referred pain, merely involve misrepresentation of spatial location. The merit of Tye’s proposal, as he sees it, is that no special sense of ‘in’ needs to be introduced. I shall argue that Tye is wrong. I have sympathy with the Representationalist position in general, although I would not develop it in the way that Tye suggests. However, I am concerned that we are clear about what supports the position and what does not. Tye’s point offers no support at all.¹

Tye invites us to consider the following invalid argument taken from Ned Block.

- (1) The pain is in my fingertip.
- (2) The fingertip is in my mouth.

Therefore,

- (3) The pain is in my mouth.

Block notes that the argument is valid if the ‘in’ is taken to be that of spatial location. However, he claims that the argument is not valid when the statements are understood in their ordinary sense. So the ‘in’ must be used in a different systematic way for the location of pains (Block 1983: 517). Tye claims that this is not so. The ‘in’ is just that of spatial location. The inference is invalid because pain creates an intensional context. He compares the argument above with the following.

- (4) I want to be in City Hall.
- (5) City Hall is in the ghetto.

¹ Tye has also run arguments appealing to the intentionality of representational states for what-it’s-like contexts (Tye 1995a: 125–26). I think that they have been answered successfully by Daniel Stoljar (Stoljar 1996: 281–83).

Therefore,

- (6) I want to be in the ghetto. (Tye 1995b: 226–28 or 331–32; Tye 1995c: 111)

There is no special sense of ‘in’ which needs to be introduced to explain why the argument is invalid. It is just that ‘want’ creates an intensional context.

In the case of the City Hall, the following is true.

There is a location in the ghetto such that I want to be there.

What is false is that I want to be in that location in the ghetto conceived as such. So, likewise, Tye will have to say

There is a location in my mouth such that I feel pain (or given his preferred usage: bodily disorder) there.

However, our problem seems to be reintroduced. There is a sense in which this statement seems false. It is, of course, true that there is also a sense of ‘in my mouth’ in which the statement is correct. Pain represents a bodily disorder in my finger and my finger is in my mouth. However, if I were to feel a pain in the mouth and there was no state of bodily disorder in the nerves relating to the mouth but there was a state of bodily disorder in my finger, my pain would not represent something true.

The point is underlined by considering the following argument.

(7) I believe that City Hall is in Central Square.

(8) Central Square is in the ghetto.

Therefore,

(9) I believe that City Hall is in the ghetto.

Although (9) doesn’t follow from (7) and (8), the proposition I would believe, if (9) were true, is true. This contrasts with what is represented in (3). Hence, Tye is wrong to suppose that adopting a Representationalist approach to pain allows us to take the ‘in’ in ‘in pain’ to be simply that of spatial location. Indeed, what Block’s nice observation reveals is that when we experience a pain in the finger – as I would prefer to put it – the Representationalist should say that the experience is veridical only if the cause of this experience is a disordered state of the finger. Even if I am sucking my finger, that is quite distinct from a disordered state of the mouth.

Fortunately, contrary to what Block and Tye fear, Block’s observation does not reveal that there is a special sense of ‘in’ only appropriate for bodily sensations. The following argument seems to display precisely the same invalidity as the original argument.

(10) There is a hole in my shoe.

(11) The shoe is in the box.

Therefore,

(12) There is a hole in the box.

There are many similar examples.² What they reveal is that there is a sense of ‘in’ which is used to describe a state of an object. Perhaps that is what I was describing when I said I had a pain in my leg.

*University of Nottingham
Nottingham NG7 2RD, UK
paul.noordhof@nottingham.ac.uk*

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