

# Pain and embodiment

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## *A very small dose of neuroscience*

Irene Tracey and Jonathon Brooks: 'From nociception to pain perception: imaging the spinal and supraspinal pathways' *J. Anat* (2005) **207**, 19-33

Contains a quick outline of immunohistochemistry, histology, genetics and imaging.

Especially important are:

- (a) the notion of a pain matrix in place of a fixed circuit model of pain
- (b) The role of the descending analgesic system.

## *Phenomenal judgments*

The special **epistemic** features of our judgments concerning how things feel to us (phenomenal judgments) play a prominent role in arguments concerning the **metaphysical** status of experience.

For philosophers of mind, the sincere judgment that I am in pain is widely held to be either incorrigible or as having a very high degree of certainty.

## *The intuitive view: Pain is painful*

From Saul Kripke, *Naming and Necessity*

“Can any case of essence be more obvious than the fact that *being a pain* is a necessary property of each pain?” (146)

“To be in the same epistemic situation that would obtain if one had a pain *is* to have a pain; to be in the same epistemic situation that would obtain in the absence of pain *is* not to have a pain” (152)

“Pain is not picked out by one of its accidental properties; rather it is picked out by the property of being pain itself, by its immediate phenomenological quality. Thus pain, unlike heat, is not only rigidly designated by ‘pain’ but the reference of the designator is determined by an essential property of the referent.” (152-3)

*“Don’t be so sure about that,” say the scientifically inclined philosophers “we’ve been wrong about our intuitions in the past: Consider the Freaky and Marginal Cases”*

- "Ingestion of morphine (or other opiates), lesions to the medial thalamus, and prefrontal lobotomies all result in *sensations of pain without a sense of suffering* and without producing characteristic pain behaviors (wincing moaning, complaining, etc.). In these cases, *patients can localize their pains but are not upset by the fact that they are in pain*. We can also get reverse effects, to a degree. *Fentanyl causes one to react in pain yet inhibits our discriminatory abilities for the pain*. Lesion studies and studies using hemispherectomies show that even with cortex completely missing, we can still have a pain sensation; we simply lack fine localization and intensity discrimination. *Patients with Parkinson’s disease and Huntington’s chorea often have pain sensations but are unable to indicate exactly where they feel the pains.*" (Valerie Hardcastle *The Myth of Pain* p. 104)

*I’m in pain, but it doesn’t hurt.*

*It hurts, but I’m not sure where.*

## *How realistic is the Kripkean intuition?*

Valerie Hardcastle: Pain is a complicated and multilayered phenomenon, Kripke, has oversimplified pain unrealistically.

Kripke: The complications of diagnosis, pain behavior and the like are irrelevant to my point concerning the intrinsic features of pain sensations.

Prefrontal Lobotomy Guy: But, I'm in pain and it doesn't hurt.

Kripke: If it's not painful, you're not in pain

Parkinson's Disease Patient: It hurts, but I'm not sure where, sometimes I'm not sure it's even my pain.

Kripke: Yes, you're in pain, you can know it without knowing the embodied location of the pain. The key is the sensation, in order for the sensation to be a pain, it must be painful. Quite simply, you know that it's a pain by its painfulness.

*Intuitions at work:*

*The inference from the epistemic specialness of pain sensations to the claim that experiences have a special kind of existence*

Many philosophers are convinced of the ontological peculiarity of phenomenal experience because of what they take to be the impossibility of **necessary a posteriori identity statements** linking minds and bodies.

Kripke provided the crucial argument in the late 1960s. (1980, 148-155)  
His argument derives from two major components.

- (1) SPECIAL EPISTEMIC FEATURES OF QUALITATIVE EXPERIENCE
- (2) CONCEIVABILITY OF DISEMBODIED QUALIA

The argument takes the following form:

GIVEN

- (a) our special epistemic access to qualia,
- (b) their conceivable separability from the body,
- and
- (c) the necessity of identity,

THEN

pain cannot be identical to a physical state.

## *A Quick Pass Over the Two Relevant Parts of the Argument*

### **(a) SPECIAL EPISTEMIC PROPERTIES OF QUALITATIVE EXPERIENCE**

- According to Kripke, we have **access** to the essence of qualitative experience in phenomenal judgment
  - This special epistemic relationship to pain is such that **we know one property which the qualitative experience can't do without.** *The painfulness of pain*
  - Pain is such that my phenomenal judgment *that I am in pain*, can't be wrong.

### **(b) CONCEIVABILITY**

- Philosophers claim to be able to imagine the existence of a qualitative state existing apart from any accompanying physical state.
  - We claim, for instance, to be able to imagine a being without physical properties suffering or enjoying some qualitative state.
- **Given our special epistemic access to qualia and their conceivable separability from the body, pain cannot be identical to a physical state.**

*Why is Kripke so sure that there cannot be necessary a posteriori identity statements linking qualitative and physical states?*

“scientific identification of the usual sort as in the case of heat, the morning star or hydrogen hydroxide is not analogous to the situation in the case of pain or any other qualitative state.” (1980, 150)

In cases where we discover necessary a posteriori identities scientifically, for example, where we discover that:

(a) lightning = massive electrical discharge

or

(b) water = H<sub>2</sub>O

our discovery depends on our prior ignorance of the relevant essential properties of lightning or water. If we had already known the relevant essential properties by simply reflecting on the nature of lightning or water from the armchair, then neither (a) nor (b) would be a posteriori truths

Unlike water or lightning, according to Kripke, pain is a kind whose essence has always been available to us. This access to pain is available to us by virtue of what pain is.

# *The move from epistemic to metaphysical considerations*

Our ability to grasp the essential properties of pain lays the foundation for the conclusion that it is impossible for qualitative states to be (necessarily) identical with states of the body.

The next step is to raise the possibility of these states not being identical with states of the body

If they're possibly not identical then they're not necessarily identical.

If they're not necessarily identical, they're not identical.

*Problems with the first part of the argument: Do I really know my own pains?*

If we don't know our own pains in the way Kripke assumes, then the argument for their special ontological status fails.

In spite of what Kripke calls the *intuitive view* (1980, 155) there are reasons to believe that epistemic subjects don't have special phenomenological or epistemic access to the essence of all qualitative states?

Intuitively, the kind of epistemic transparency that Kripke seems to assume for pain doesn't hold for qualitative states of all kinds.

- For example, must I really know when I make the transition from embarrassment to humiliation?
- Is my reaction to the abusive bureaucrat anger, frustration, humiliation, boredom, a sense of powerlessness... In such cases is it really appropriate to say that I know what I'm feeling?

## *Is pain really so simple? Are judgments about pain?*

Presumably, philosophers look to pain because it's an especially vivid example of qualitative experience and because it seems to avoid the cognitive or social complications of terms like 'embarrassment', 'humiliation', 'pride', 'anger' and the like

However, even if we allow that there exists an isolated qualitative experience with its own essential and intrinsic properties, our judgments concerning pain are inevitably complicated by factors extrinsic to the qualitative experience 'itself'

Timothy Williamson points out that one does not necessarily know one's pains perfectly in all cases.

- He claims that I need not always know that I am in pain when I am in pain. For example, an overabundance of self-pity will lead me to judge my itch to be a pain and an insufficient level of self-pity will lead me to judge my pain an itch.

- Consider, the case of a relatively mild pain, like the pain of being tattooed, the pain of muscle fatigue or the pain of a blister from exercise. Pains of this kind depend, in large part, on one's attitude towards them and on one's attention. Is it the case then that the painfulness of one's pain *depends* on attention etc.?
- Kripke would deny that the relevant essential property of pain (its painfulness) has any such relational features.
  - These factors might influence whether or not the pain sensation exists, but the intrinsic features of the sensation are what they are independently of how or whether the sensation appears.

*Kripke will repeat his general position, responding that if it's felt as an itch then it's an itch, if it's felt as a pain then it's a pain*

Maybe the Kripkean is right that freaky, vague or marginal cases don't matter

- Maybe (softening Kripke's position a bit) the metaphysician can use her acquaintance with the essence of pain on some occasion to argue for the special ontological status of pain without needing to provide reliable reports at all times or to be fully justified with respect to her phenomenal judgments on all occasions.

I knew what the essence of pain is and can run my argument for conceivability based on my acquaintance

*Problems with the first part of the argument run deeper. Kripke cannot rely on his memory of the essence of pain.*

But, as Tim Williamson notes, there appear to be transitional moments in one's experience of pain, where it not exactly clear whether one is in pain.

Even when one might think that one is in pain, perhaps there are occasions where it would be more accurate to call it something else (for example, boredom, despair or irritation)

- The challenge here involves the possibility (in the interstitial or vague cases) of misidentifying pains as something else.
- If there are cases where we can have experiences which are pains but which do not present their essence (painfulness) to us, then Kripke's argument is in trouble.

# *Hunger and Thirst*

Consider the popular claim that we sometimes confuse the symptoms of dehydration for hunger. Am I confused or mistaken if I say: “I thought I was hungry, but I was actually just thirsty”? If the view of pain we’re discussing applies to the various qualitative experience that count as sub-varieties of pain, then it is not possible to misidentify my feeling. It is not possible to be mistaken about my judgment that I am in pain and it is likewise difficult to know what it would mean to say that I felt hunger without actually being hungry.

- Given how common this confusion of hunger and thirst are thought to be, the Kripkean will probably be ready to sacrifice these cases, admitting that the correct identification of such feelings is partly dependent on its relationship to the kinds of things that would bring relief. But this additional feature of the sub-varieties of pain should be distinguished from the painfulness of hunger and thirst insofar as they are pains.

## *Trouble for the first part of Kripke's argument*

The Kripkean position on epistemic access to pain depends on denying the possibility of misidentification.

If misidentification is possible, then pain does not present its essence to us in the way that Kripke needs to assume.

In order to exclude possible cases of misidentification, Kripke must strip qualitative experience of its relational properties.

Notice that relative to what we might have thought we knew about our experiences, the resolution that we have with respect to identifying our feelings is severely reduced (we're headed for an increasingly anemic account of qualia)

*Assume, for now that Part 1 works... Problems with the second part of the argument: How can I guarantee that these conceivable qualia are identical to the contents of my current phenomenal judgments?*

- Assuming that qualia can be conceived as being separate from the body, the Kripkean must still show that conceivably separable qualia are identical to the contents of phenomenal judgment.
  - Such that the actual phenomenal judgment that I am in pain would be made true by **the fact that I'm suffering a token of actual pain** and the **fact that I'm suffering a token of disembodied pain**
- One line of argument that might occur to us:
  - In order to justify the claim that her qualitative experiences are of the same kind as the qualitative experiences she imagines as being separable, the dualist should be able to show which individuating properties they share in common. One might ask that the essential property of pain must be picked out in both instances.
- The advocate of separable qualia **must show why these imagined disembodied things are relevantly the same as the ordinary contents of phenomenal judgments.**

## *Doubting Dualism*

- We might doubt the conceivability of a disembodied counterpart of my qualia
  - **We might challenge the truthfulness of counterfactuals featuring my qualia in which it's claimed that they're disembodied**
  - **We might be ready to admit that some qualia might be disembodied, while doubting that mine could be.**
    - **There might be angelic qualia, but I don't know what those are like...**
- At this point let's not worry about whether I have good reasons for my doubts. Let's just recognize that I'm doubting and that I'm asking for a reason to believe what I take to be the dualist's extraordinary metaphysical claim.

## *A possible conversation with Kripke:*

**Doubter:** I'm asking for a reason to believe what I take to be an extraordinary metaphysical claim on the part of the dualist.

**Kripke:** It's not a question of needing a reason to believe in dualism. You accept that "the mind could exist without the body [...]" right? (144)

**Doubter:** Well... I'm prepared to admit only that I'm not in a position to deny that possibility at this moment, but that's not what I'm asking for.

**Kripke:** No, it's quite simple actually, if you accept that possibility, then you're going to have to accept that mental and physical states are not identical. "the one response which I regard as plainly inadmissible is the response which cheerfully accepts [or doesn't deny] the Cartesian premise while denying the Cartesian conclusion... A philosopher who wishes to refute the Cartesian conclusion must refute the Cartesian premise, and the latter task is not trivial." (145)

**Doubter:** Let's say I don't have the resources to allow me to deny the possibility of disembodied minds. Maybe I'm like my pre-chemical ancestors who wouldn't have had the resources to counter the denial that gold is the element with atomic weight 79. Should they have agreed that while since (from their epistemic perspective) gold is possibly not 79, that being 79 is not a necessary property of gold?

**Kripke:** You've missed the point completely. Our epistemic access to pain is not like our knowledge of gold. When our ancestors claimed to be imagining gold as having an atomic weight other than 79, they were mistaken in thinking that they were imagining gold at all. No such mistake is possible in the case of pain.

*Is Kripke's response enough to dispel all worries concerning my epistemic access to disembodied qualia.*

As we have seen, if I claim to have conceived of a pain existing apart from any kind of physical embodiment, I am claiming that the content of my phenomenal judgment with respect to embodied experience could be replaced with the disembodied qualia and that it would still come out true

But can I be so sure that I would have the same epistemic access to possible pains as I do to the actual pain?

Am I really asking whether there's a transworld identity problem for qualia?

Kripke argues that these questions result from (what he regards as) standard, boring old confusions with respect to transworld identity. Once we recognize that possible worlds are stipulated via **rigid designators** and **descriptive conditions**, such puzzles dissolve...

*But can stipulation really work here?*

My judgment that the embodied and disembodied qualia are identical takes place in the actual world.

In order for me to conceive of a disembodied qualitative experience, it looks like I'm claiming that there is some possible world in which I'm disembodied and have access to the essence of pain. The essential property of disembodied pain is identical with one I would have had access to if I were embodied (which I am!).

We could have concerns about rigidly designating disembodied John, if my material origin is the basis for *my* being rigidly designable.

We could be worried about the possibility that the descriptive conditions we used in stipulating the ghostly world are incompatible with the thing rigidly designated.

*Worries about the possibility that the descriptive conditions we used in stipulating the ghostly world are incompatible with the thing rigidly designated.*

For example (according to Kripke) we can't stipulate a world in which Nixon does not have the biological parents he had in the actual world.

I can't stipulate a world in which this regular polyhedron has seven sides instead of six or eight. (Bricker 1992)

Kripke would say that the transworld identity problem for qualia is not a live one problem, since on his view, the possible world in question is **stipulated** from our current position and using rigid designators (It doesn't matter that these are usually fixed by reference to the material origins of the objects in question)

On this view, we have such an intimate grasp of the essence of pain that we could quickly detect any conceptual conflicts we might run into when fixing the descriptive conditions that serve as the joint basis of the stipulated world.

# *Stipulated pains*

I stipulate that *this* pain is in *that* ghostly world.

In order for my stipulation to work:

(1) *I must know what I'm talking about.*

My identification of the pain in this world has to be correct.

Even if there are circumstances where I could *possibly* be wrong, these don't immediately rule out the fact that I know what pain is.

(2) *I must know something about the realm of the possible.*

My stipulation should be for a world in which it can genuinely hold

No contradictions, no conceptual impossibilities, no structurally unnatural possibilities

(3) *I must know something about the way that pain is painful.*

It has to be the case that pain is painful in a way which has nothing to do with any facts about me which could vary across worlds.

If I were in that stipulated world, this pain would be painful in the same way that it is in the actual world, even if facts about me were different. The essential property of pain that I know (it's painfulness) has to be intrinsic to the pain and not extrinsic/relational in any way. While some essential properties may be characterized relationally/extrinsically, pain can't be like that.

*According to Kripke one stipulates a possible world via Rigid designation + Descriptive conditions (44)*

‘Pain’ rigidly designates

AND

We’re right about its reference according to Kripke because: “the reference of the designator is determined by an essential property of the referent.” (152-3)

Let’s allow (for the purposes of the argument) that concerns about the necessary and sufficient conditions for transworld identification (TWI) of pain are irrelevant (42-45)

On Kripke’s view, possible Nixons are picked out via rigid designation which operates via our causal relation to Nixon in the actual world. Similarly, pain is picked out via our actual experience of painfulness.

*Brief Interlude... What does it mean to detach the properties of the agent in the actual world from the experience of painfulness.*

Would my rigid designation of the kind *pain* still track pain, if pain were not attached to me in some way at some point?

Isn't my being embodied during the reference fixing relevant here? Surely, for instance, the fact that Nixon had parents is important for fixing the rigid designator which would allow us to attempt (and fail?) to conceive of a Nixon born without parents. Isn't there some analogy here to qualia

Not for Kripke.

In fact, the argument already assumes that our reference fixing experiences of pain are not characterized by any properties which are extrinsically related to the body or other non-qualitative features of the actual world.

The dualist relies on the alleged possibility of the disembodied nature of pain to prove (at the end of the day) that the subject of experience is possibly disembodied.

However, the purification of reference-fixing (the elimination of all physical properties) is a prerequisite for the argument to work. In order for this purification to be complete, the subject has to be disembodied.

This sure seems like a case of begging the question.

## *Possible Pains: Stipulated pains in Hell*

- Pain #27 is the experience that I have when my three-year old stands on my ingrown toenail. Under ordinary circumstances, it's a pretty serious pain.
- Consider how pain #27 could be felt as a sweet relief from another pain, say the pain that will be inflicted on me in Hell.
- If the devil decides to give me a break from his usual treatment and bumps me down to pain #27, would it be felt as a pleasure?
  - If so, then pain is not intrinsically painful. Pains are painful relatively. Their painfulness is determined extrinsically, by for example the past history of pain etc.
- Notice that by stipulation #27 is the same sensation that I have rigidly designated as #27 in the actual world.
- In some possible world #27 is not a pain!

## *Expanding the argument: How did we get to Hell and why does #27 feel good there.*

We rigidly designate pain with the word 'pain', but we could have called it 'ouchashi' or '#27'

Now consider the pain I have in my toe in the actual world. Kripke argues that I know the essence of this feeling (its painfulness). I will name this sensation #27

Compare the following.

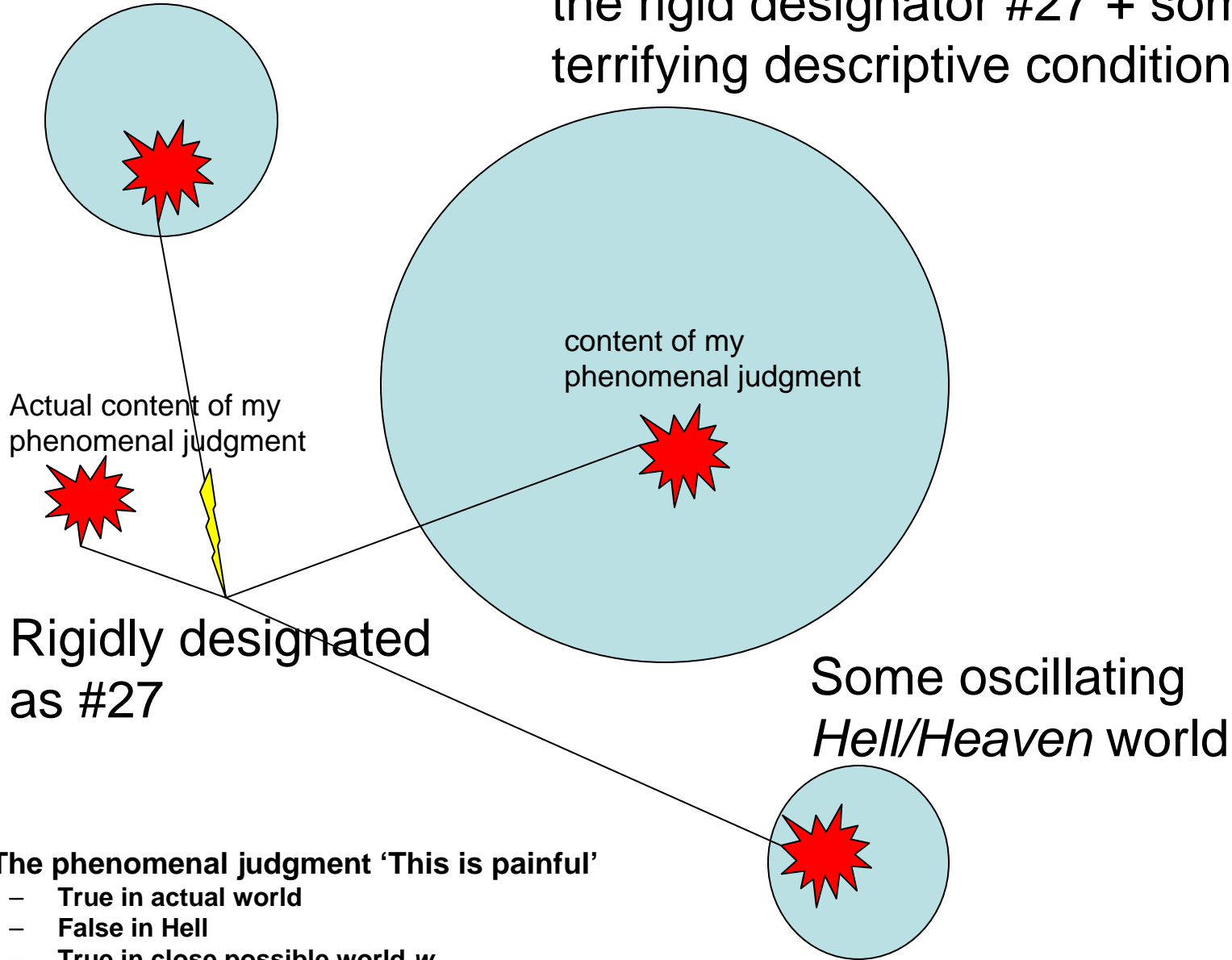
- If I'm in pain, I know I'm in pain – by virtue of its painfulness
- If I'm in #27, I know I'm in #27 – by virtue of its painfulness (not in cases where I'm in Hell)
- If I'm in #27, I know I'm in #27 – by virtue of its #27ness

Now let's consider the following:

- Pain is painful – is this informative?
- This pain is painful – not so clear
- This experience is painful – clearly informative.

Some "close"  
world  $w$

*Hell*: A possible world given by  
the rigid designator #27 + some  
terrifying descriptive conditions



- The phenomenal judgment 'This is painful'
  - True in actual world
  - False in Hell
  - True in close possible world  $w$
  - True/False in Heaven/Hell oscillating world

## *Possible Responses*

- Maybe my happy state in hell is due to a meta-level experience concerning the sensation.
  - does it really feel good, or does it continue to feel bad and I simply have an additional good feeling concerning the bad feeling. If I am happy about the situation, then presumably the good feeling overrides the bad one. I'm no longer suffering a pain, but #27 is still a pain.
    - The trouble here, from Kripke's perspective is that #27 is not presenting its essential painfulness to me when I'm in Hell.
- This painfulness is pleasant because at least it's significantly better than my usual state.
  - Are we able to have more than one sensation of "opposite" types at a time. Or more precisely can we simultaneously form true but contradictory phenomenal judgments. If I were having #27 and having it felt by me as bad while also having the good feeling resulting from the relief.
    - If there is a resolution here, it doesn't come from apriori reflection on the nature of pain.

- The phenomenal judgment ‘#27 is painful’ is
  - True in actual world
  - False in Hell
  - True in close possible world  $w$
  - True/False in Heaven/Hell oscillating world

If we can conceive some variation between truth value of the phenomenal judgment in the set of worlds under consideration then the most we can say is that this pain is painful when it's painful

- Not very illuminating and certainly not evidence of the essential nature of pain.

Notice that the conceivability of a pleasant #27 in hell is based on our experience of hedonic adaptation in the actual world.

Kripke's claim that we know the essence of pain to be painfulness *in* the experience of pain fails if our argument rests on our experience of any one token of pain.

Do I know the essence of pain sensations?

Not of this pain (pain #27)

Not of that pain (pain #5)

Not of that pain...etc.

By contrast, if our access to pain's essence is not via the experience of particular pain sensations, but purely via reflection on the kind *pain*, then can I say more than the uninformative "pain is painful" which as we have seen, looks as uninformative as "#27 is #27 ish"?

Do we know the essence of a token of pain to be its painfulness? No

Do we know the essence of the type *pain*?

Is there any way to get at the type apart from our access to the tokens?

If not, then only in the most trivial and uninformative sense do we really know that pain is painful.