

Inflecting Pain

Hildur Kalman & Naomi Scheman

Abstract

Starting from the connection and tension between the expression and the acknowledgement of pain, we explore the interpersonal space between the two: how it is that pain's expression and acknowledgement are always inflected by the space between the one in pain and the other, and how, in turn, pain's expression and acknowledgement inflect that space. To inflect, grammatically, is to mark words - by gender, number, tense, mood, &c.- indicating a constitutive difference: our words are always inflected somehow or other. In this sense, the expression or suppression of pain, its being acknowledged or ignored, marks interpersonal space and is marked by it. Through some examples, we raise questions about what we learn about interpersonal space - when that space inflects and is inflected by pain. We are especially interested in the absence of expression and/or acknowledgement, in the ignoring of pain and the constraints on acknowledgement. Examples that will be discussed are:

Ignoring pain, love-making, and intimate space: We want to think about minor, incidental (non-eroticized) pain - that typically carries with it a determination not to express the pain, in order to avoid the distraction of its being acknowledged-the disruption of the space of intimacy.

Inflicting pain, professional caring, and professional space: Again, we focus on the (relatively) mundane and morally unproblematic-the pain inflicted, e.g., by a doctor's cleaning a wound or by a physiotherapist initiating motion in an injured limb. The interpersonal space is one of professional engagement, and both pain's expression and its acknowledgement are and should be contextualized by expectations of appropriate care.

Witnessing pain, face-to-face: Either professionally or by chance, one may become a witness to the newly bereaved. A risk here is an acknowledgement that collapses the interpersonal space where the pain calls for presence at a distance, respecting the aura of emptiness.

Key Words:

Pain, emotion, expression, acknowledgement, interpersonal space, metaphysically private, meaning-making.

1. Introduction

Pain is, of course, interesting in its own right, but it is also, we want to suggest, a useful site at which to explore an issue currently engaging many gender theorists, namely, what is regarded as a problematic marginalizing of the body and the bodily in social constructivist theorizing. Social constructionist positions regarding sex and gender - along with race, sexual identity, and disability - take such identities to be a matter of the meaning, the social significance, of particular sorts of bodies; but it can seem that, as the theorizing proceeds, the bodies in question evaporate, leaving only their meanings, as the Cheshire cat disappears, leaving only its smile. This (typically inadvertent) disembodiment of both identity and experience is an ironic consequence for theorists who argued against Cartesian dualism's separation of mind from body. Ironic, but not entirely surprising: part of why feminists decried dualism was its near-universal privileging of mind over matter, which nearly universally relegated women (along with those stigmatized by race, class, sexual identity, or disability) to the side of the bodily. The grip of dualism is, however, sufficiently strong that, in undermining our confinement to the material, we too often fell into (or were perceived as having fallen into) idealism. We want to suggest that as long as we hold onto the picture of two realms, one of matter, one of mind, we will find it hard to articulate a conception of gender (or of other aspects of identity) that does justice to both.

The theoretical excitement of the sex/gender distinction, which put sex on the side of the biological and gender on the side of the social/cultural has largely sputtered out. (Formulated in English, it posed translational dilemmas for theorists in most other languages - something that ought to have given us pause....) Part of the problem with the distinction is that it occluded both the ways in which physical embodiment is socially mediated and also the ways in which social and cultural meanings are embodied. In other words, it led us into, rather than away from, the grip of dualism.

We want to suggest that one way to loosen the grip of dualism is to situate both the minding of matter and the mattering of minds in the space of the social. That space - the space between us - is the site of meaning: it is where meaning happens, including the meaning of our identities - it is *ours*, neither yours nor mine. Social space is like what used to be thought of as the ether - the stuff that had to be between two bodies that affected each other, so as not to have to allow for action at a distance. Think of sound: it really does not move through empty space: there needs to be a medium to carry the waves. Social space is like that medium, and, like sound, everything that

passes through it shapes and is shaped by it. And like sound, what flows in the space between us is neither purely physical nor purely mental.

Thinking about pain, we want to suggest, is a useful way of trying to make sense of interpersonal space and to break the grip of dualism, in part because of its obvious claims to both mentality and physicality. Pain's claim to physicality rests most obviously on its tie to bodily damage - to wounds and injuries. Its claims to mentality are equally obvious - it is, in fact, philosophers' favorite example of the inscrutably inner, the realm of presumptively private subjective experience. In arguing against metaphysical privacy - the inside of my mind that only I can directly know - Wittgenstein discusses pain, arguing for a conceptual connection between the experience and the expression.¹ He expects to be misunderstood here, as though he could mark no difference between real and feigned pain, between the genuine and the counterfeit expression, a difference he insists he has no intention of undermining. Rather, it is through expressing our own pain and having it acknowledged and learning to acknowledge the pain of others that we learn what pain is, which includes learning how to fake it.² Expression marks the middle ground: an expression of pain is linked inwardly to the experiencing and outwardly to its acknowledgement.

Pain is naturally expressive, it is in its nature to be expressed, but the form of that expression is shaped by its context - just like it is natural to eat, but the way one eats or fasts is shaped by context, and we thus turn to the pairing of expression and acknowledgement - expression in the first person, the self, and the acknowledgement in the second person, that is the other. We think of this in spatial terms: with the expression of pain being met by acknowledgement. The acknowledgement traverses the space between the self and the other - and that space is not empty - what is in that space can/should change the kind of acknowledgement there is. Acknowledgement is naturally responsive - just as pain cries out for expression, witnessing pain cries out for acknowledgement.

So - starting from the connection and tension between the expression and the acknowledgement of pain, we aim to explore the interpersonal space between the two: how it is that pain's expression and acknowledgement are always inflected by the space between the one in pain and the other, and how, in turn, pain's expression and acknowledgement inflect that space. Inflection has two meanings:

- the first connects to the way words change their forms, that is: To inflect, grammatically, is to mark words - by gender, number, tense, mood, &c. -

- the second meaning refers to the tonal differences in one's voice. There is no such thing as a voice without a tone or a word without a form. Hence inflection is a constitutive difference - a difference that cannot be subtracted out.

In this sense, the expression or suppression of pain, its being acknowledged or ignored, marks interpersonal space and is marked by it. The original naturalness of pain's expression is always inflected by what goes on in the interpersonal space. Through a series of examples, we raise questions about what we learn about interpersonal space - the space between the self and the other - when that space inflects, and is inflected by pain. We are especially interested in the absence of expression and/or acknowledgement, in the ignoring of pain and the constraints on acknowledgement.

2. Pain and/in intimate space

To begin with we have chosen an example of pain and intimate space; that of ignoring pain when love-making, and how this is inflected by and inflects intimate space: We are here thinking about minor, incidental (non-eroticized) pain - the pain, for example, from being awkwardly positioned or from pressure on a minor bruise. The one feeling the pain might well choose to (try to) ignore it, a choice that typically carries with it a determination not to express the pain, in order to avoid the distraction of its being acknowledged - the disruption of the space of intimacy. If the pain is expressed it threatens to break the mood of love-making. If it is expressed, and acknowledged, this acknowledgement breaks the mood, and if the pain is ignored, the other is being callous - which inflects and disrupts the space of intimacy and nearness. For oneself to ignore the pain is, of course, quite another thing - but the question is: at what point does the ignoring of one's own pain turn into self-estrangement? If you never let on how you feel it is more than possible that the habit of this creates a distance from your own feelings and further: the interpersonal space of intimacy is changed to be more distanced as it is inflected by the ignoring of one's own pain. But we also want to point out that there are times when not letting a minor discomfort get in the way of love-making is what makes intimate space possible.... But where the irony is that the intimacy may get shrouded from the failure to disclose one's feeling. There is no clear line here: a little shrouding now and then may make for intimacy in the interpersonal space, but if it becomes habitual real intimacy gets shrouded. This is of course an example where gendered expectations and habituation would matter to who heeds and who ignores their own pain, as such choices - to not express pain or discomfort - are not made in a social void.³ Just like fake orgasms such choices are more likely to be made by women striving to "lay the table" for the interpersonal encounter.⁴

3. Pain and/in professional space

Next we have chosen an example representing the inflection of pain in a context of professional caring and where interpersonal space is inflected

by its being a professional's encounter with a patient - that is: a professional space. This is also a space where a pain can be inflicted. Again, we want to focus on the (relatively) mundane and morally unproblematic - the pain inflicted, for example, by a doctor's cleaning a wound or by a physiotherapist initiating motion in an injured limb. While it is certainly appropriate for the one inflicting the pain to acknowledge it in some fashion, such acknowledgement needs to be quite different from what would be expected under other circumstances: typically, for example, it should not call for stopping doing whatever is causing the pain. The interpersonal space is one of professional engagement, and both pain's expression and its acknowledgement are and should be contextualized by expectations of appropriate care.

Acknowledgement can mean a lot of things - acknowledgement in circumstances such as cleaning the wound might be said to encompass that one ignores the pain to a certain extent - where one's acknowledgement is not one of being a participant in the experience of that pain, but rather that of an engaged beholder.

Paediatricians and veterinarians in such circumstances are faced with an especially difficult task, because to fill the interpersonal space in the right way requires the right cooperation between both parties. An adult may become complicit - and give acceptance - and so the space is filled with a shared understanding of the regrettable necessity of this pain. With small children or animals such verbal communication and agreement, where both compassion and regret can be expressed - and subsequently shared - is hardly the case.

4. Witnessing pain: face-to-face

Sometimes pain is not a presence but an absence - the pain of loss, of bereavement - and either professionally or by chance, one may become a witness to the newly bereaved. Much as nature abhors a vacuum, witnessing such grief can prompt a rush to fill the void, to comfort, to reassure. But understanding the nature of that particular interpersonal space - the space between the newly bereaved and everyone else - ought often, in certain cultural contexts, to lead one not to fill but to respect it. It is not simply empty - it is filled with emptiness. In an account on the radio, a woman who serves as a chaplain for the U.S. National Park Service, described part of her job which is to deliver terrible news: someone's family member has, for example, drowned or fallen to their death in the park; or to be present as people deal with terrible uncertainty: a family member has, perhaps, vanished while on a hike. She spoke movingly about how she had to learn to respond, in particular about blocking what might feel like the natural acknowledgement of their pain, acknowledgement that can collapse the interpersonal space. What she learned was that, for most of the people she

encountered, entering too fully into the pain of bereavement can impinge on the space of bereftness, crowding out the sudden, horrible void. In the cultural context in which she works, acknowledgement of the pain of bereavement calls for presence at a distance, respecting the aura of emptiness, not attempting to fill it. Her presence, silent, not touching, keeps the grief from engulfing the world, even as it holds the world at a distance. Her experience is that after some time, the newly bereaved person will say something (that is, use language as communication) or reach out to be touched or held, allowing acknowledgement of the pain, beginning to give both the grief and the griever a place in the social world. Until such a sign, the role of the witness is to guard the perimeter of the space of bereavement: helping to ensure that the world will not rush in, nor will it be obliterated.

5. Witnessing pain: at a distance

In cases of widespread and distant pain (in cases, for example, of natural disasters, famine, or genocide), the space between the sufferers and the witnesses is not just the space between two people, even as inflected by social role. The distance is typically not only physical, but also social, cultural, and economic; and witnesses may well be caught up forms of complicity they may not even be aware of. The distance is, thus, inflected in ways it is not in the power of the two individuals to change; and acknowledgement is always multiply mediated, determining the significance of any response almost independently of the intention behind it. (It is rather like the game of “telephone”, where one person whispers something to the person next to them, who passes it on in a whisper, until the message comes full circle and is spoken aloud, with the difference that the changing meanings are typically neither random nor benign.) In the absence of reliable public institutions that can, for example, provide for justice rather than charity, distant witnesses can be left with no clear alternative to scopophilic fascination, sentimental anguish, or turning away, ignoring the pain. The widely lamented prevalence of “compassion fatigue” comes not from experiencing too many occasions on which to do the right thing, but rather from frustration at the seeming impossibility of doing anything that feels remotely “right.” Charity, in particular - often the best we can do as individuals in the face of distant pain - becomes, however it is intended, an expression of pitying condescension - it flows from above to below, deepening the channels that contour the social space between donors and recipients. On the side of the sufferers, the meaning of their suffering is similarly shaped by the form in which the response is transmitted: they become, for example, helpless victims of impersonal forces, rather than agents of struggle against wrongful oppression. The visibility of their pain is bought at the cost of the shrouding of their agency.

6. Interpersonal space and the (in)expressability of the pain as being part of the pain

Our finding it difficult or impossible to successfully communicate pain verbally is often taken to support claims of the utter privacy of such emotions. Elaine Scarry e.g. writes about the inexpressibility of pain, and how this inexpressibility can trap the sufferer in an inaccessible space.⁵ When Wittgenstein denies the possibility of essentially incommunicable experience - of metaphysical privacy - , he can seem to be denying this phenomenon. Sue Campbell argues for another way to theoretically approach this matter - to account for our often not having words to name our feelings without characterizing them as metaphysically private.⁶ Even though feelings may well be difficult to communicate, their expressiveness does not hinge on their being nameable. She discusses the various resources we have - in stories, poems, music - for expressing what we cannot give a name to. In line with this Minae Inahara argues that pain may well be resistant to ready communication - one can, as Scarry describes, feel trapped and alone in one's pain. But, she argues, this inability to describe is not just an inability to describe *to others*: in such cases, one is equally unable to describe the pain to oneself: one lacks the words. Inahara turns to Kristeva's account of the semiotic realm (vs the symbolic realm of words) to suggest how, in particular through art, one can find ways of expressing one's pain - to oneself and to others, that do not require naming and categorizing it.⁷

We would argue that experiences of the tension between the obviously felt realness of pain and the simultaneous difficulty of articulating, explaining and communicating that pain, are what drive us towards the mistaken conclusion that pain, and other feelings and emotions, are metaphysically private. And further, we see the difficulties of communicating pain as pointing toward the need for a responsive other in order for us to be able to express and/or communicate pain - and where the space between us is the site of meaning. Pain that cannot find expression in social space will be confused and incoherent even to the sufferer herself. The features provided by interpersonal space are what make for the ability or inability to express and communicate feelings such as pain. This does not merely add up to interpersonal space being a medium for communication. Rather, we would claim that the very (in)expressability is part of the pain itself - as a defining feature. So, if we focus on such feelings that may prove difficult to communicate, what can interpersonal space provide? First of all a responsive other, for whatever means by which one tries to communicate it - by analogy, by metaphor, in pictures, by setting it in a frame, a context, a tale, in which the pain may be diminished or enlarged. Interpersonal space's ability to mediate varies, as communication rests on the availability of shared

representations, stories, etc, that may serve the traversing and meaning-making of pain in interpersonal space.

One may, of course, be in pain when one is alone, or may choose to block the expression of pain when one is with others. But the possibility and practice of expression - and its counterpart, acknowledgement - give shape even to pain that we suffer alone or in silence.⁸ Even the sort of isolation that Scarry writes about requires another - the isolation is an extreme inflection of interpersonal space: it is the fact that the other is there, uncomprehending, that frames the isolation. So too when we intentionally withhold an expression of pain, not wanting the other's acknowledgement, for whatever reason, the withholding is something we actively do, and the space between us is shaped by it.

7. Conclusion

Attending to the social space between pain and its acknowledgement can help us see how the meaning of pain, even the pain itself, inflects that space and is inflected by it. In particular, it can help wean us from the idea that there is such a thing as "the pain itself," uninflected, pre-social, in the body - or the mind - of the one in pain.

Notes

- ¹ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*. Translated by G.E.M. Anscombe, third edition of English text with index, Blackwell Publishers, Oxford, 1967 [1953], § 244-246.
- ² Cf. Naomi Scheman, 'Forms of Life: Mapping the Rough Ground' in *Cambridge Companion to Wittgenstein*, H. Sluga and D. Stern (eds.), Cambridge University Press, 1996.
- ³ Cf. Hildur Kalman, 'Njutning eller fejk – en filosofisk betraktelse' ('Pleasure or fake – a philosophical reflection'), in *Fejkad Orgasm (Fake Orgasm)*. S. Alakoski and A. Mogensen (eds), Ordfront förlag, Stockholm, 2008, p. 51 ff.
- ⁴ Eva Elmerstig, Barbro Wijma, and Carina Berterö. 'Why do young women continue to have sexual intercourse despite pain?', in *Journal of Adolescent Health*, volume 43, Issue 4, October 2008, pp. 357-363.
- ⁵ Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain : The Making and Unmaking of the World*. Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1985.
- ⁶ Sue Campbell, *Interpreting the Personal: Expression and the Formation of Feelings*. Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 1997.
- ⁷ Minae Inahara, 'The Voice of Pain: The Semiotic and Embodied Subjectivity' (paper presented at the conference "Dimensions of Pain" arranged by The Nordic Network *Gender, Body, and Health*, Helsinki, Finland, September 17-18, 2009).
- ⁸ Cf. Naomi Scheman, 'Forms of Life: Mapping the Rough Ground' in *Cambridge Companion to Wittgenstein*, H. Sluga and D. Stern (eds.), Cambridge University Press, 1996, p.399 ff.

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Hildur Kalman is an Associate Professor in Philosophy of Science, and works as Senior lecturer at the Department of Social Work, and as coordinator of the National Graduate School for Gender Studies at the Umeå Centre for Gender Studies at Umeå University, Sweden.

Naomi Scheman is Professor of Philosophy and of Gender, Women's, & Sexuality Studies at the Philosophy Department, University of Minnesota, and Guest professor at the Umeå Centre for Gender Studies at Umeå University, Sweden.