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## **Conceptions of reality and the experience of pain**

### **Comment on “Facing the experience of pain: A neuropsychological perspective” by Fabbro and Crescentini**

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A core of neurobiological mechanisms is implicated in different forms of pain. Fabbro and Crescentini (2014) show that this fact is significant both on the scientific level and on the philosophical level. Their main philosophical claim is that the existence of a neural circuit devoted to the experience of time suggests that time might not be real. An upshot would be that the objects which populate the world of our experience might not be real either, and hence the attachment to them and the mechanisms of pain for the separation from them that were developed through evolution would be misplaced. By contrast, in their view, we inhabit a Heraclitean or Buddhist world of processes: indeed, by inhibiting our time-circuits, mindful meditation releases us from perceiving reality as a world of objects and thereby relieves us from pain. Fabbro and Crescentini remark on a limitation of attempts to employ mindful meditation as a pain killer in clinical contexts: a long time of meditation practice is needed for a subject to be able to alleviate pain through that method.

The philosophical implications of Fabbro and Crescentini’s essay are far reaching, and can be further developed. In the western philosophical tradition following Heraclitus, philosophers (e.g. Plato and Aristotle) tried to reconcile his view that reality is a flux with the recognition that, even assuming that there are only processes, processes still have individuality and give rise to consistent unities. We can still make sense of this thought: pain evolved since the processes which we call animals are structures within whatever happens to constitute the flux underlying them. Such structures developed attachments and pain, and it is these structures which we humans are practically concerned about. The point was taken over in subsequent traditions, such as both anti- or non-Christian Platonists, like Plotinus (Armstrong 2013), and Christian thinkers, like Augustin (Samek 1981, Teske 1995), the great difference among them notwithstanding. They recognized a ground of reality which only properly speaking exists, and distinguished it from other levels of reality – e.g., the objects of our experience –, which exist only in so far as they are based on that ground. Time – in their view – exists only at dependent levels of reality, e.g. in the reality of our experience (Turetzky 1998). Hence, the existence of the objects of our experience is ambivalent: it cannot be completely denied, but it is not ultimately real. In their view, we must live in the world of our experience, but we should not develop attachment to it. On the practical level, this meant learning to accept and endure sufferance and pain: this approach to life was prominent in the western world, both pre-

and post-Christian (Kuuttila 2004). How these philosophical approaches affected the perception and the bearing of pain in the West? Historians have recently started to address this issue (Cohen 2010, Dormandy 2006, Moscovici 2012, Thernstrom 2010). Such studies present a wide range of attitudes and approaches towards reality and correlated experiences of pain. The ensuing picture can open empirical questions which could further articulate our understanding of the physiology of pain, and, thereby, suggest approaches which could overcome the limitations of mindful meditation in clinical contexts.

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