

**The Basic Dilemma of the Artist**

**By Sam Vaknin**

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The psychophysical problem is long standing and, probably, intractable.

We have a corporeal body. It is a physical entity, subject to all the laws of physics. Yet, we experience ourselves, our internal lives, external events in a manner which provokes us to postulate the existence of a corresponding, non-physical ontos, entity. This corresponding entity ostensibly incorporates a dimension of our being which, in principle, can never be tackled with the instruments and the formal logic of science.

A compromise was proposed long ago: the soul is nothing but our self awareness or the way that we experience ourselves. But this is a flawed solution. It is flawed because it assumes that the human experience is uniform, unequivocal and identical. It might well be so - but there is no methodologically rigorous way of proving it. We have no way to objectively ascertain that all of us experience pain in the same manner or that pain that we experience is the same in all of us. This is even when the causes of the sensation are carefully controlled and monitored.

A scientist might say that it is only a matter of time before we find the exact part of the brain which is responsible for the specific pain in our gedankenexperiment. Moreover, will add our gedankenscientist, in due course, science will even be able to demonstrate a monovalent relationship between a pattern of brain activity in situ and the aforementioned pain. In other words, the scientific claim is that the patterns of brain activity ARE the pain itself.

Such an argument is, prima facie, inadmissible. The fact that two events coincide (even if they do so forever) does not make them identical. The serial occurrence of two events does not make one of them the cause and the other the effect, as is well known. Similarly, the contemporaneous occurrence of two events only means that they are correlated. A correlate is not an alter ego. It is not an aspect of the same event. The brain activity is what appears WHEN pain happens - it by no means follows that it IS the pain itself.

A stronger argument would crystallize if it was convincingly and repeatedly demonstrated that playing back these patterns of brain activity induces the same pain. Even in such a case, we would be talking about cause and effect rather than identity of pain and its correlate in the brain.

The gap is even bigger when we try to apply natural languages to the description of emotions and sensations. This seems close to impossible. How can one even half accurately communicate one's anguish, love, fear, or desire? We are prisoners in the universe of our emotions, never to emerge and the weapons of language are useless. Each one of us develops his or her own, idiosyncratic, unique emotional language. It is not a jargon, or a dialect because it cannot be translated or communicated. No dictionary can ever be constructed to bridge this lingual gap. In principle, experience is incommunicable. People - in the very far future - may be able to harbour the same emotions, chemically or otherwise induced in them. One brain could directly take over another and make it feel the same. Yet, even then these experiences will not be communicable and we will have no way available to us to compare and decide whether there was an identity of sensations or of emotions.

Still, when we say "sadness", we all seem to understand what we are talking about. In the remotest and furthest reaches of the earth people share this feeling of being sad. The feeling might be evoked by disparate circumstances - yet, we all seem to share some basic element of "being sad". So, what is this element?

We have already said that we are confined to using idiosyncratic emotional languages and that no dictionary is possible between them.

Now we will postulate the existence of a meta language. This is a language common to all humans, indeed, it seems to be the language of being human. Emotions are but phrases in this language. This language must exist - otherwise all communication between humans would have ceased to exist. It would appear that the relationship between this universal language and the idiosyncratic, individualistic languages is a relation of correlation. Pain is correlated to brain activity, on the one hand - and to this universal language, on the other. We would, therefore, tend to parsimoniously assume that the two correlates are but one and the same. In other words, it may well be that the brain activity which "goes together" is but the physical manifestation of the meta-lingual element "PAIN". We feel pain and this is our experience, unique, incommunicable, expressed solely in our idiosyncratic language.

We know that we are feeling pain and we communicate it to others. As we do so, we use the meta, universal language. The very use (or even the thought of using) this language provokes the brain activity which is so closely correlated with pain.

It is important to clarify that the universal language could well be a physical one. Possibly, even genetic. Nature might have endowed us with this universal language to improve our chances to survive. The communication of emotions is of an unparalleled evolutionary importance and a species devoid of the ability to communicate the existence of pain - would perish. Pain is our guardian against the perils of our surroundings.

To summarize: we manage our inter-human emotional communication using a universal language which is either physical or, at least, has strong physical correlates.

The function of bridging the gap between an idiosyncratic language (his or her own) and a more universal one was relegated to a group of special individuals called artists.

Theirs is the job to experience (mostly emotions), to mould it into a the grammar, syntax and vocabulary of a universal language in order to communicate the echo of their idiosyncratic language. They are forever mediating between us and their experience. Rightly so, the quality of an artist is measured by his ability to loyally represent his unique language to us. The smaller the distance between the original experience (the emotion of the artist) and its external representation - the more prominent the artist.

We declare artistic success when the universally communicable representation succeeds at recreating the original emotion (felt by the artist) with us. It is very much like those science fiction contraptions which allow for the decomposition of the astronaut's body in one spot - and its recreation, atom for atom in another (teleportation).

Even if the artist fails to do so but succeeds in calling forth any kind of emotional response in his viewers/readers/listeners, he is deemed successful.

Every artist has a reference group, his audience. They could be alive or dead (for instance, he could measure himself against past artists). They could be few or many, but they must exist for art, in its fullest sense, to exist. Modern theories of art speak about the audience as an integral and defining part of the artistic creation and even of the artefact itself.

But this, precisely, is the source of the dilemma of the artist:

Who is to determine who is a good, qualitative artist and who is not?

Put differently, who is to measure the distance between the original experience and its representation?

After all, if the original experience is an element of an idiosyncratic, non-communicable, language - we have no access to any information regarding it and, therefore, we are in no position to judge it. Only the artist has access to it and only he can decide how far is his representation from his original experience. Art criticism is impossible.

Granted, his reference group (his audience, however limited, whether among the living, or among the dead) has access to that meta language, that universal dictionary available to all humans. But this is already a long way towards the representation (the work of art). No one in the audience has access to the original experience and their capacity to pass judgement is, therefore, in great doubt.

On the other hand, only the reference group, only the audience can aptly judge the representation for what it is. The artist is too emotionally involved. True, the cold, objective facts concerning the work of art are available to both artist and reference group - but the audience is in a privileged status, its bias is less pronounced.

Normally, the reference group will use the meta language embedded in us as humans, some empathy, some vague comparisons of emotions to try and grasp the emotional foundation laid by the artist. But this is very much like substituting verbal intercourse for the real thing. Talking about emotions - let alone making assumptions about what the artist may have felt that we also, maybe, share - is a far cry from what really transpired

in the artist's mind.

We are faced with a dichotomy:

The epistemological elements in the artistic process belong exclusively and incommunicably to the artist.

The ontological aspects of the artistic process belong largely to the group of reference but they have no access to the epistemological domain.

And the work of art can be judged only by comparing the epistemological to the ontological.

Nor the artist, neither his group of reference can do it. This mission is nigh impossible.

Thus, an artist must make a decision early on in his career:

Should he remain loyal and close to his emotional experiences and studies and forgo the warmth and comfort of being reassured and directed from the outside, through the reactions of the reference group, or should he consider the views, criticism and advice of the reference group in his artistic creation - and, most probably, have to compromise the quality and the intensity of his original emotion in order to be more communicative.

I wish to thank my brother, Sharon Vaknin, a gifted painter and illustrator, for raising these issues.

#### ADDENDUM - Art as Self-Mutilation

The internalized anger of Jesus - leading to his suicidal pattern of behaviour - pertained to all of Mankind. His sacrifice "benefited" humanity as a whole. A self-mutilator, in comparison, appears to be "selfish".

His anger is autistic, self-contained, self-referential and, therefore, "meaningless" as far as we are concerned. His catharsis is a private language.

But what people fail to understand is that art itself is an act of self mutilation, the etching of ephemeral pain into a lasting medium, the ultimate private language.

They also ignore, at their peril, the fact that only a very thin line separates self-mutilation - whether altruistic (Jesus) or "egoistic" - and the mutilation of others (serial killers, Hitler).

About inverted saints:

<http://samvak.tripod.com/hitler.html>

About serial killers:

<http://samvak.tripod.com/serialkillers.html>

Sam Vaknin is the author of Malignant Self Love - Narcissism Revisited and After the Rain - How the West Lost the East. He is a columnist for Central Europe Review, United Press International (UPI) and eBookWeb and the editor of mental health and Central East Europe categories in The Open Directory and Suite101.Web  
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**CD Baby and Vision Music USA Form Strategic Partnership To Help Independent Musicians**

**By Keith "MuzikMan" Hannaleck**

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