

The relation between thought and the brain is roughly of the same order as that between bile and the liver or urine and the bladder.

—CARL VOGT



Thought Experiment

Lewis's Pained Madman

There might be a strange man who sometimes feels pain, just as we do, but whose pain differs greatly from ours in its causes and effects. Our pain is typically caused by cuts, burns, pressure, and the like; his is caused by moderate exercise on an empty stomach. Our pain is generally distracting; his turns his mind to mathematics, facilitating concentration on that but distracting him from anything else. Intense pain has no tendency whatever to cause him to groan or writhe, but does cause him to cross his legs and snap his fingers. He is not in the least motivated to prevent pain or to get rid of it. In short, he feels pain, but his pain doesn't at all occupy the typical causal role of pain. He would doubtless seem to us to be some form of madman, and that is what I shall call him, though of course the sort of madness I have imagined may bear little resemblance to the real thing.⁵³

Lewis's madman is in pain, but his pain has a very different function than ours. Instead of distracting him and making him groan and writhe, it turns his mind to mathematics and makes him cross his legs and snap his fingers. Such a person is decidedly odd, but not inconceivable. The poor fellow may simply be wired wrong. If there can be such a person, however, functionalism is mistaken because being in a mental state doesn't depend on being in a particular functional state. The causes and effects of the madman's pain are totally different from ours. Yet he may nevertheless experience pain in the same way we do.

Lewis's argument goes something like this:

1. If functionalism were true, it would be impossible for someone to be in pain and function differently than we do when we are in pain.
2. But, as Lewis's pained madman shows, it's not impossible for someone to be in pain and function differently than we do.
3. So functionalism is false; being in a certain functional state is not a necessary condition for being in a mental state.

To be in pain, you do not have to be in any particular functional state. What makes something a pain is what it feels like, not what it makes you do. Because functionalism suggests otherwise, it's mistaken.

Just as Lewis shows that being in a specific functional state is not necessary for being in a mental state, Ned Block tries to show that it's not sufficient. According to functionalism, there's nothing more to having a mind than running the right kind of program. What the program is running on—whether it be neurons, silicon chips, or people—is irrelevant. Computer scientist Joseph Weizenbaum once demonstrated that a computer could be made out of sticks, stones, and toilet paper. Functionalism would have us believe that if those sticks, stones, and toilet paper were running the right kind of program, it would have a mind. Block disagrees. To prove his point, he imagines a computer made of people.