

Eliminative materialism: objections¹

This handout follows the handout on 'Eliminative materialism'. You should read that handout first.

Eliminative materialism (also known as eliminativism) argues that future scientific developments, especially in neuroscience, will show that the way we think and talk about the mind is fundamentally flawed, at least in some very important respects. At least some of our mental concepts are so mistaken that they refer to things that neuroscience will show don't exist. Central to our normal understanding of the mind are phenomenal properties and Intentionality. Paul and Patricia Churchland argue that neuroscience will revolutionise our understanding of each so that we may question whether they exist at all as we think of them now. As neuroscience proceeds, it will show that at least some of our central psychological concepts don't refer to anything - nothing exists that corresponds to some mental terms, e.g. 'belief', 'desire' or 'pain' or even 'Intentionality' and 'consciousness'.

OUR CERTAINTY ABOUT THE EXISTENCE OF OUR MENTAL STATES TAKES PRIORITY OVER OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

We can object that eliminativism is simply very counter-intuitive. What could be more certain - indeed, what could be more immediately and directly obvious - than that we have thoughts, desires, emotions, beliefs and so on? Descartes took 'I think' to be his first certainty, and for good reason. Nothing, it seems, could be more certain to me than the fact that I have mental states. So no argument could be strong enough to justify giving up such a belief.

But appeals to what is obvious are problematic in the history of ideas. For instance, isn't it just obvious that the sun moves round the Earth? Just look. And yet it is false. Descartes took it as obvious that there can be no thoughts without a thinker, so he was certain that he was a thinking substance. And yet there are good reasons to believe that there are no substances whose essence it is to think, and many philosophers have argued, along with Buddhists, that there is no 'self'. Similarly, my 'mental states' may not be what they appear to be.

More significantly, the objection misunderstands the Churchlands' claim. They do not deny the existence of psychological phenomena as such. They accept that the phenomena that we conceptualise as 'thinking' occur or again that we experience pain; they deny that folk psychology is the correct theory of their nature. Thinking is not defined by Intentionality as folk psychology understands it, and pain is not a matter of qualia. Instead, they claim that neuroscience will provide the correct

¹ This handout is based on material from Lacewing, M. (2017) *Philosophy for A Level: Metaphysics of God and Metaphysics of Mind* (London: Routledge), Ch. 3, pp. 223, 232-6

account of what these are. As a result, there will be a revolution in our mental concepts. But we won't cease to feel pain just because we understand what it is in neurophysiological terms. While this revolution is difficult to predict, Paul Churchland argues that explanation will have no place for concepts like 'Intentionality', and whether we understand 'consciousness' as we do now is also something we may doubt.

All we can be 'certain' of is the existence of the phenomena we want to explain. But, the Churchlands argue, appealing to beliefs and desires, Intentionality and consciousness, is not appealing to the phenomena, but to a particular explanation or understanding of them. These concepts are all part of a theory, folk psychology, and we should reject these concepts if the theory that replaces folk psychology has no place for them. We can't reject unorthodox new ideas just because they are unorthodox.

FOLK PSYCHOLOGY HAS GOOD PREDICTIVE AND EXPLANATORY POWER (AND SO IS THE BEST HYPOTHESIS)

Paul Churchland criticises folk psychology for its explanatory failures concerning mental illness, sleep, learning, etc. But we can object that this is unfair. Folk psychology is not intended to be a theory of these aspects of mental life, so it is no criticism that it does not explain them. It is only meant to explain human behaviour; or even more specifically, human action. Here, it is incredibly successful. If I know what you want and what you believe, I can predict whether you'll study hard for your exams. If someone asks me why you went to the cinema last night, I will answer by talking about your love of films and so on. By contrast, neuroscience is almost useless at predicting whether you'll study hard for your exams or explaining why you went to the cinema last night.

Furthermore, folk psychology is the basis of developments in psychology that have extended its predictive and explanatory power. For instance, ideas about unconscious beliefs and desires have become part of folk psychology. The Greeks used an idea of fixed and unchanging 'character', whereas now we tend to appeal more to the situation someone finds themselves in. The importance of situation is a finding in recent empirical psychology, and there are many such findings and theories that use folk psychological concepts and ideas. To eliminate the concepts of beliefs, desires, and other Intentional mental states would do away with much scientific psychology as well as folk psychology.

What this shows is that we don't have good reasons to think that folk psychological concepts, and especially the concept of Intentionality, will be eliminated as neuroscience develops. We can accept the Churchlands' insistence that we should only retain concepts that are part of the most powerful explanatory theory, but argue that folk psychology is and will continue to be part of such a theory. The hypothesis that we have Intentional mental states remains the best hypothesis for explaining human behaviour, and won't be replaced in favour of a neuroscientific theory that eliminates Intentionality.

Eliminativism could reply that these objections are not very strong. First, we need to know how human action or behaviour relates to the rest of mental life. To have

very different sorts of theories - folk psychology, neuroscience - explaining different aspects of the mind is unsatisfactory. Second, the developments in folk psychology are relatively superficial. Our folk psychological explanations of behaviour are still far less powerful than the kinds of explanations we find elsewhere in the sciences. The only way to address this problem is to look to neuroscience. Finally, the challenge of explaining how physical states and processes can have Intentionality remains.

THE ARTICULATION OF ELIMINATIVE MATERIALISM AS A THEORY IS SELF-REFUTING

The Churchlands claim that folk psychology and our commonsense mental concepts comprise an empirical theory. This is why we can think about proving that it is false and eliminating its concepts in light of scientific progress. But there is good reason to suppose that they misunderstand folk psychology. We can argue for this indirectly, focusing again just on the case of beliefs and their Intentional content.

Eliminativism presents arguments, which are expressions of beliefs and rely on beliefs about what words mean and how reasoning works, in order to change our beliefs about folk psychology. Yet, if we turn Paul Churchland's prediction into a solid claim, eliminativism claims that there are no beliefs. But if that is true, what does eliminativism express and what is it trying to change? If there are no beliefs, including no beliefs about meaning, no beliefs linked by reasoning, then arguments for eliminativism are meaningless. An argument for eliminativism refutes itself - it concludes that there are no beliefs but it must presuppose that there are beliefs.

Eliminativists reply that this objection begs the question. It presupposes that the correct theory of meaning and reasoning is the one that folk psychology gives (in terms of Intentionality). Compare the nineteenth-century argument between people who thought that to be alive required some special energy, a 'vital force', and those who said there was no such force. The vitalists could argue that if what their opponents said was true, they would all be dead! Yet now we know there is no special 'vital force', that life arises from ordinary chemical reactions. Life just is certain processes, not some special property that living things have in addition to these processes. Eliminativism simply claims that we need a new theory of what it means to assert a claim or argument. What meaning is may turn out to be certain neurological processes.

But we can press the objection. Eliminativism predicts that Intentional content will be eliminated. The very ideas of meaning, or 'making sense', of 'true' v. 'false' belief, or 'reasoning' itself, are to be rejected, as they all rest on Intentional content. Claims and arguments are all 'about' something. This idea can't be eliminated in favour of some alternative. The analogy with vitalism fails. Anti-vitalists accepted that they needed to be alive to make their claims, but offered an alternative account of what 'life' is. Eliminativists claim that they do not need Intentional content to make their claims. Without having some alternative account of meaning which doesn't use Intentional content, this is what is inconceivable. We cannot conceive that folk psychology is false, because that very idea, 'folk psychology is false', presupposes the folk psychological concept of Intentional

content. At least until we have another, better theory of meaning, the assertion that eliminativism is true undermines itself.

On this view, folk psychology - or at least, the central concept of Intentionality - turns out not to be an empirical theory (which might or might not be wrong), but a condition of intelligibility, a condition for thinking, reasoning, and making claims at all. So we can't eliminate it. That means that Intentional mental states and properties must exist. They are therefore either reducible or irreducible to neuroscience. If Paul Churchland is right that we cannot reduce Intentional content to neuroscience, this isn't an objection to Intentional content. It is an argument in favour of the irreducibility of mental properties.