



Eliminative Materialism

Do beliefs even exist?

Eliminative Materialism

- Eliminative materialism says that concepts from “folk psychology”, e.g. beliefs and desires, should be *eliminated*.
- Other eliminated concepts include the celestial spheres, phlogiston, the life force, the ether, demon possessions, etc.
- Will science ultimately conclude that beliefs, like demon possessions, don't exist?

Why eliminate folk psychology?

- Folk psychology is a failure. We don't understand sleep, learning, intelligence, memory.
- The theory is stagnant. No progress in over 2,000 years.
- FP is especially hopeless at understanding damaged brains (mental illness).
- All other folk theories turned out to be radically false (nature of fire, life, ...)

Is eliminativism about beliefs *incoherent*, or self defeating?

“Say, Paul, do you believe that eliminative materialism is correct?”

“Yes, as a matter of fact I do.”

“Aha! So beliefs *do* exist!!”

A self-defeating claim

“Science tells us that there is no such thing as human knowledge.”



Churchland's Response

“The hole in this argument is the premise concerning the conditions necessary for a statement to be meaningful. It begs the question. If eliminative materialism is true, then meaningfulness must have some different source.”

(p. 328)

The full argument

1. We eliminative materialists (EMs) go around saying things like “folk psychology is a radically false theory and should be discarded”.
2. Eliminative materialism (EM) is true.
3. A sentence is meaningful only when it expresses a proposition, or belief-content.

4. There are no beliefs, or propositions (from 2)
5. Sentences expressing EM have no meaning (3 and 4)
6. When we EMs try to convince others to accept EM, our words have no meaning, and are just noise. (from 1, 5)

- In response, Churchland says that *sentences can be meaningful without expressing beliefs*.
- But it's hard to see what this notion might be replaced with. At the very least, Churchland has a lot of work to do here, redoing all of *logic* as well as psychology.
- (N.B. Logic studies *propositions*, which are belief-contents.)

- Churchland says that similar arguments could be made to show that eliminativism about the other discarded notions, such as the life force, are also incoherent.
- Are the cases similar?

“My learned friend has stated that there is no such thing as a vital spirit. But this statement is incoherent. For if it is true, then my friend does not have a vital spirit and must therefore be *dead*. But if he is dead, then his statement is just a string of noises, devoid of meaning or truth ...”

(Churchland p. 328)

- Vitalism doesn't seem necessary to our understanding of what thought, truth, etc. are. But the concept of *belief* does seem essential.
- If there are no beliefs, then there are no states of affairs, no truth, etc. Yet the whole idea of science is to construct models that accurately correspond to reality (i.e. are true). Can science end up eliminating the concept of truth itself?
- Dualists will no doubt listen to Churchland with glee, saying that materialism leads, in the end, to irrationality.

Self-defeating views

- In philosophy there are a surprising number of views that turn out to be self-defeating, or “self-referentially incoherent”.
- At least, this criticism is made against them.

Locke on perceptual scepticism

“...I think nobody can, in earnest, be so sceptical as to be uncertain of the existence of those things which he sees and feels. At least, he that can doubt so far (whatever he may have with his own thoughts), will never have any controversy with me; since he can never be sure I say anything contrary to his own opinion...”

- Ha! Nice one, J.L.

In other words ...

Sceptic: “Hey John, I don’t agree with your claim that our senses provide us with knowledge.”

JL: “How do you know I said that?”

Sceptic: “I just heard you, loud and clear!”

JL: “Aha! You learned it from your *senses!*”

Another example ...

Professor: All interpretations of a text are equally valid.
The “author’s intention” is a myth.

Student: Ah, very amusing, professor. I love the sarcasm,
the way that you mock the view, while appearing to
support it.

Professor: No, no. You misunderstood me. I was being
serious!

Student: Hilarious! Keep the sarcasm going! (Etc.)

The Verifiability Criterion of Meaning

- The verifiability criterion of meaning says that, in order to be meaningful, a statement must be empirically verifiable. There must be experimental conditions under which the statement can be shown to be true.
(E.g. “God is love” is meaningless.)
- **Karl Popper:** the criterion *itself* is not empirically verifiable, and hence is meaningless by its own lights.

Classical Foundationalism

- Classical foundationalism says that, in order for a belief to count as knowledge, it must be either (i) self evident, or (ii) logically derivable from self evident beliefs.
- **Alvin Plantinga:** Classical foundationalism *itself* isn't self evident. Nor can it be derived from such self evident beliefs ...