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Eliminating Eliminative Materialism

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Abstract

Eliminative materialism is a bold position in philosophy of mind: proponents of it hold that folk psychology is a primitive theory of human behavior, and like most primitive theories, it is, unfortunately, false. The alarming implications of this are that mental states don't actually exist—humans don't actually *believe* anything. In this paper I try to show that several central claims of eliminative materialism (specifically Paul Churchland's version) are mistaken and, further, that it is, in fact, false. I first argue that folk psychology is not a theory, and that a proper understanding of the nature of basic beliefs, non-basic beliefs, and theories makes this clear; next, I claim that the eliminative materialist response to the charge of incoherence is inadequate as it misunderstands what mental states are; finally, I offer an argument for the falsity of eliminative materialism on common sense grounds, while undercutting objections to the argument by way of scientific anti-realism.

Introduction

Eliminative materialism (EM) is, perhaps, the most surprising contemporary position in philosophy of mind. Whereas, for example, identity theorists and functionalists hold that we will be able to reduce mental states to brain states or functions, EM proponents do not think a successful reduction will occur. According to EM, mental states are posited entities which constitute a theory—so-called “folk psychology”—and folk psychology represents one of humanities most primitive theories. Unfortunately, like all other primitive theories, folk psychology is greatly mistaken, and soon enough we will see that it is “an outright misrepresentation of those inner states and activities” (p. 74).¹ This will be made clear once we have a more developed neuroscience: a mature neuroscience will explain human behavior without reference to mental states. Furthermore, the needed one-to-one correlation of mental states to brain states will not be found, so a reduction of folk psychology isn't going to be possible. Finally, since

¹ *Matter and Consciousness*, Third Edition, The MIT Press, Paul Churchland, 2013. All page references will be to this work unless noted otherwise.

folk psychology will not be included in a complete neuroscience and cannot be reduced to neural activity, this entails that it will be *eliminated*. It's easy to see that these calls for folk psychology's elimination are ultimately predicated on its status as a theory, so it is to this issue we turn to first.

Is Folk Psychology a Theory?

Are mental states theoretical entities? EM proponents seem to think so. They say that our folk psychology reveals generalizations which we hold to be true: "Persons tend to feel pain at points of recent bodily damage. Persons denied fluids for some time tend to feel thirst. Persons in pain tend to want to relieve that pain." (p. 98), and these generalizations, says Churchland, together make a *theory*. From this it's argued that folk psychology is one of our most primitive theories, and—like all other primitive theories—it is therefore probably false; it is long overdue for a revision or, more likely, an outright elimination.

Despite Churchland's proposal to the contrary, it seems to me that the idea that folk psychology is a theory is obviously false. The reason we ascribe mental states to other individuals and to ourselves is *not* (in the vast majority of cases) an attempt to provide a good explanation for the behavior we observe being exhibited. To make this clearer, I'll first explain the difference between *basic* and *non-basic* beliefs, and then I will try to give an account of what a *theory* is.

A basic belief (roughly) is a belief I have which isn't inferred from argument or reason—it's just something I find myself believing. Some examples of basic beliefs² would be one's belief in the external world or in other minds. A non-basic belief, conversely, is (roughly) one which is inferred from argument or reason. Some examples of non-basic beliefs would be one's belief in the origin of humanity or in relativity theory. What is a theory? A theory (very roughly) is an explanation which is constructed in order to account for a set of data which often serves as a basis for predictions. For example, a set of data including the fossil record, the age of the earth, the age of the universe, our genetic history, and various species of animals (among many other things) is what led to the construction of evolutionary theory. The making of this theory consisted of an awareness of the data in question, and of a *conscious* reasoning process that evolution best explained the data. It seems clear in this case that one's belief in evolutionary theory, then, is *non-basic*: it's inferred. Furthermore, it seems that *any* theory which one constructs will be held in the non-basic way: the very

² Which, of course, are subject relative. For example, it's possible that I hold a belief B in the basic way and Jones holds B in the non-basic way. So when I speak of a belief being held in either the basic or non-basic way, I'm making the generalization that most people hold that belief in the basic (or non-basic) way.

concept of *constructing* a theory (through inference or reasoning of any sort) implies a conscious process. But then any theoretical belief will be held in the non-basic way,³ and, conversely, any belief held in the basic way will *not* be a theory.

So then, to find out whether or not folk psychology is truly a theory, all we need to do is find out whether it is held in the basic way or the non-basic way: if the former then it isn't a theory, if the latter then it could be one.⁴ It seems to me that belief in mental states is clearly of the basic sort: I've never reasoned with myself "I just pulled my hand back from the stove, there's a red mark on my hand, and I'm screaming therefore the best explanation is probably that I'm in pain", or "That person just pulled their hand back from the stove, there's a red mark on their hand, and they're screaming therefore the best explanation is probably that they are in pain". Instead, I just find myself in pain and believing that I'm in pain, or, in the case of the latter example, that another person is in pain: I hold these beliefs in the basic way. To suggest otherwise is absurd: it's clearly incorrect to say that I ascribe mental states to myself to explain my behavior.⁵

Another example: my belief that I believe the number of stars in the universe is either even or odd is basic. In this case, my belief that I believe something (about the number of stars) doesn't cause any behavior, so what exactly is this "theoretical entity" being posited to explain? There's no data to explain here—no one will see my behavior and then offer up the hypothesis that I believe that I have a belief about the number of stars. So then my belief is not held for explanatory reasons. But if my belief isn't held in order to account for a set of data, then it isn't a theory; it's hard to take seriously the suggestion that something which doesn't purport to explain data is a theory. It seems clear, then, that beliefs about folk psychology are of the basic sort—I don't come to hold beliefs about mental states by way of inference⁶—but then folk psychology is not a theory.

³ One might object that some people believe in various theories or theoretical entities in the basic way, I will address that claim below.

⁴ I say "could be one" because I'm not convinced that all non-basic beliefs are theories. That said, nothing important hinges on whether or not all non-basic beliefs are theories.

⁵ Especially taking into account that to ascribe mental states to something entails having a mental state. I argue something similar to this in the next section.

⁶ Here one might object that there are clear cases in which we have non-basic beliefs about folk psychology and hence they are held in a theoretical manner. I fully grant that there are some cases in which our beliefs about the mental states of others is non-basic. For example, I might be puzzled as to why Sally sells seashells at the seashore as that is the worst possible location for a seashell business. I then infer that she, for some odd reason, holds the belief that it is actually a good location for a seashell business, and hence my belief in her having a certain mental state (in this case a belief about a good location for a seashell business) is non-basic and one might argue a theory. Fine and well. What I claim is that the vast majority of our beliefs (nothing hinges on whether or not it is a "vast majority" or even just "some") about the mental states of others and ourselves are basic and hence not a theory. Furthermore, it seems equally obvious that, though

The EM proponent has (at least) two possible objections she can raise here: (1) some theories are believed in the basic way (e.g. most laypeople believe that quarks exist and do so in the basic way) and (2) folk psychology originated from our primordial ancestors as a theory, and this theory was passed down and eventually became engrained in humans and now is held in basic way. Unfortunately, I don't have the space for a full treatment to these objections here, but I will offer a short response to each.

For starters, I'm very skeptical about (1): it seems to me highly implausible to suppose that laypersons believe that quarks (or any other theoretical entities) exist in the basic way. For the sake of argument, however, I will grant that this is possible. This concession is unproblematic as even if some theories are believed in the basic way, there is still a key difference between them and folk psychological beliefs. For example, in the case of quarks (or any theory or theoretical entity allegedly believed in the basic way), we come to know about them by way of testimony—other persons have to tell us that they exist.⁷ This is not so with mental states: no one has to tell me that I have beliefs or pains in order for me to know about them. I'm immediately aware of such phenomena. Nor does anyone have to tell me that other people have beliefs or pains. Again, this is something I grasp immediately. But then there is a clear difference between folk psychological beliefs and theories which are believed in the basic way: one is immediately aware of the former, but only becomes aware of the latter by way of testimony. So for those who claim that some theories are held in the basic manner, the argument can be revised to the following: any basic belief one comes to hold by way of immediate awareness is not a theory. Hence folk psychology is not a theory.⁸ As for (2), the EM proponent is arguing that our primordial ancestors originally posited folk psychology to explain behavior, and that there is a causal chain in which the theory was passed down from generation to generation until we finally inherited it. Eventually, they hold, folk psychology just became embedded in our brains and we now believe it in the basic way. This story seems to me to be hugely implausible. Moreover, if our primordial ancestors were to survive and thrive, then they would need to come hold beliefs about themselves and their environment (taken to include other organisms) very quickly: there would be no time to infer that "That tiger is probably going to eat me because it's hungry" or "That neanderthal is probably going to kill me because she is mad". In light of this, our objector needs to give us some very good reasons for

my belief about Sally's belief about a good business location is non-basic, that my belief that Sally has mental states at all is basic.

⁷Whether this "telling" occurs via personal testimony or a textbook or whatever is insignificant.

⁸There's much more to say about this, but for spacial reasons I must stop here. However, I would also like to point out that upon reflection one becomes aware that quarks are posited for theoretical reasons, whereas this is not so for mental states.

thinking that this history of folk psychology actually happened. As it stands, I see no reason at all to suppose this is so.⁹

We've seen in this section the difference between basic and non-basic beliefs, and that a theory is of the non-basic sort. The implications of this are that once it's conceded that folk psychological beliefs are of the (immediate) basic sort, then it's also been conceded that folk psychology is not a theory. We've also considered and found wanting two possible objections the EM proponent might raise. In conclusion, to say that our basic beliefs are also theoretical beliefs is absurd; as Bas van Fraassen puts it: "[T]o speak seriously of unconsciously inferred hypotheses, postulating a subconscious addicted to inference to the best explanation, is to engage in pseudo-science, unscientific armchair psychology." (p. 182).¹⁰

The Coherence Problem

One common objection to EM is that it is incoherent—if EM is true then to assert that it is true is to assert something meaningless and lacking of truth value. Churchland anticipates and summarizes the objection:

The bald statement of [EM] is that...mental states do not really exist. But that very statement is meaningful...only if it is the expression of a certain belief, and intention to communicate, and a knowledge of the language in which it is expressed. But if the statement is true, then no such mental states exist, and the 'statement' is therefore a meaningless string of marks or noises, and thus cannot be true (p. 83)¹¹

Churchland replies to this objection by saying that if EM is true then it just shows that meaningfulness¹² is derived from a different source than mental states. He offers a counterexample: "My learned friend has stated that there is no such thing as 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" (pp. 83-4).¹³ So, just as we learned that life is not due to vital spirits, we will one day learn that meaning is not due to mental states.

⁹ Again, there's much more to be said about this, but I do not have the space to do so here. I also am indebted here to Robert Doede's article "The Body Comes All the Way Up," *International Philosophical Quarterly*, 1994 pages 215-227.

¹⁰ *The Empirical Stance*, Yale University Press, 2002

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Presumably it's *original* meaning that's being discussed. Hereafter I will be using "meaning" to mean "original meaning".

¹³ The same argument and response are presented in his paper "Eliminative Materialism and the Propositional Attitudes."

Churchland seems to misstate what the objection *should* be, but even as he phrases it he still doesn't provide an adequate response. When people refer to *mental states* they are referring to *meaningful states*; a mental state and a meaningful state are one and the same (we might even say that a mental state is a rigid designator for meaningfulness). There is no such thing as a meaningful state that isn't a mental state. Take, for example, the sentence "chocolate milk is better than regular milk". If there were no mental states then the sentence would have no meaning. The squiggles themselves are meaningless; they only acquire meaning if a mind gives it to them, and if a mind does that then it's a *mental state*. When I read the sentence "Chocolate milk is better than regular milk", I'm seeing the black squiggles and ascribing them meaning. To say that the sentence "chocolate milk is better than regular milk" can have meaning from a source that isn't a mental state is absurd: symbols are meaningless unless a mind ascribes them meaning¹⁴—but, again, to ascribe meaning to something *is* to have a mental state. But then mental states are a *necessary* condition for meaning. If that's true, though, then to eliminate mental states *is* to eliminate meaning. Hence Churchland's response does not circumvent the problem. So if EM is true, contra Churchland, the statement would be rendered meaningless. This, however, doesn't refute EM as Churchland seems to imply through his imagined objector. Rather, this shows that if EM is true then nothing has any meaning at all (though, for most of us this is as good as being refuted).

A Refutation of Eliminative Materialism

We can formulate the argument though, in such a way that it does refute EM. Instead of speaking of my "believing something", I will speak of my "thinking something to be true" (which is what a belief is) in an attempt to illustrate more explicitly the falsity (and absurdity) of EM:

- (1) If EM is correct, then I don't think anything to be true
- (2) I think at least one thing to be true
- (3) Therefore, EM is false

I don't see how any of the premises could possibly be contested. (1) is embraced by EM as they maintain that mental states don't exist, and I can't think of anything more obvious than (2). Hence EM is false. But those who embrace EM will, no doubt, contest (2). The very fact that I need to provide a defense of (2) indicates that we are in dark times in philosophy of the mind: to deny (2) is to defend insanity in the guise of philosophy. If any non-philosopher spewed such nonsense they would be thrown in an asylum. That said, I will briefly (and reluctantly) offer support for (2): I think that it's

¹⁴ If no minds existed then the letters on this paper wouldn't mean anything. Once a mind sees certain squiggles it has (roughly) a meaningful experience, and this experience of (original) meaningfulness is what we call a mental state.

true that I exist. I am currently thinking to myself that it is true that I exist and that this (my existence) enables me to think about the prospects of EM—I'm directly aware of all of this. But if this is true then so is (3); if I think that it's true that I exist then EM is false. No doubt the EM proponent claims that I don't actually think it's true that I exist, but this is absurd. I *know* that I think this. The EM proponent objects that once we have a complete neuroscience of the brain that there will be no room for my thinking it to be true that I exist: my thinking that I exist will not be reducible to neural activity (or whatever)¹⁵. Suppose I grant them this point, does it then follow that I don't actually think it's true that I exist? Not at all. The very most that follows from this—from the fact that my thinking it to be true that I exist isn't reducible to neural activity—is that *my thinking it to be true that I exist isn't reducible to neural activity*. Nothing more. But this obviously doesn't entail that I don't think it's true that I exist. What reasons do we have for supposing that if something is irreducible that it doesn't exist? To just assert that irreducibility entails non-existence is question-begging. Granted, the EM proponent might claim that her neuroscientific theory has better explanatory power than my folk psychological theory, but we've seen that folk psychology isn't, in fact, a theory, so this charge is bankrupt. But suppose we admit this objection for the sake of argument, what follows? Again, not much. All that follows from the fact that my thinking it to be true that I exist lacks explanatory power is that *my thinking it to be true that I exist lacks explanatory power*. Nothing more. Why should we think that explanatory impotence necessarily entails non-existence? I see no reason to suppose this is so. But perhaps she wishes to argue that if something lacks explanatory power that it's not very useful (at least most of the time). I wholeheartedly grant her this point, but that's entirely different than saying that something isn't true or doesn't exist. Usefulness doesn't necessarily entail existence, and explanatory impotence (or lack of usefulness) doesn't necessarily entail non-existence. It's hard to see how something so obvious has been overlooked by EM proponents. If the EM proponent is to persist in her objection, then she needs to show that (a) folk psychology—despite appearances to the contrary—is a theory and (b) irreducibility and (comparative) explanatory impotence necessarily entails non-existence. The prospects of a forthcoming explanation are dubious, but if EM is correct—if I don't actually believe anything to be true or have pains—I would like to know it: it would greatly affect my lifestyle if I were to find out that I never actually experience pain. In conclusion, there is no reason whatsoever to reject (2) and hence (3) follows; I think it's true that I exist, therefore EM is false.

¹⁵ What's interesting is that EM and dualism seem to be in agreement about neuroscience: both positions hold that we will never be able to reduce mental states to neuroscientific terms. But the romance is short-lived as EM then goes the route of eliminating mental states and dualism the route of rejecting materialism.

Conclusion and Reflections

In this paper I've argued that, contra EM, folk psychology is *not* a theory; that the EM response to the charge of incoherence misses the mark; and, finally, I gave an argument for the falsity of EM. The first point seems to me to be completely obvious: how could someone possibly make the mistake of comparing our belief in mental states with our belief in, for example, evolutionary theory? What's more baffling is their commitment to EM despite the dilemma I presented: either EM is true or I think it's true that I exist. Presented with those two options, how could anyone possibly affirm the former? John Searle says that if one is tempted to embrace functionalism that they don't need refutation, they need help.¹⁶ I'm convinced that we could replace "functionalism" with "eliminative materialism" and the sentence would still hold true.

¹⁶ *The Rediscovery of the Mind*, The MIT Press, 1992.