

Philsoc Student Essay Prize – Trinity 2013: First Prize

Can a case be made for Eliminativism?

by Chris Lyons

Eliminativism is a materialist position within the philosophy of mind which holds that the common sense understanding of the mind, or folk psychology (hereafter, 'FP'), is false, and that commonly acknowledged mental states, such as belief and desire (known as propositional attitudes) and subjective experiences such as pain (known as qualia), do not exist, and that the explanations for behaviour and experience that these concepts provide will eventually be replaced by a more highly developed neuroscience. It is the thesis of this essay that the elimination of propositional attitudes is premature, and that that of qualia is implausible.

Eliminativists argue that FP, as it applies to propositional attitudes, is in fact an informal, though fully empirical, theory of behaviour. It is possible, therefore, that it is false and that its ontology is an illusion, and, given its inadequacies, this (in their opinion) is how it should be regarded. The inadequacies fall into three categories. First, there are many mental phenomena to which FP can contribute no understanding, such as mental illness, dreams, memory and learning. Second, its long-term growth has not been good, inasmuch as it has hardly changed in the past three millennia. Thirdly, it has poor coherence with other established and well integrated theories, such as evolutionary theory, biology and neuroscience. For all these reasons, propositional attitudes, such as belief and desire, and by implication truth and meaning, could be considered candidates for elimination and replacement, in the way that phlogiston, witches and the spirits of alchemy were replaced as explanatory categories in past centuries. It could be, as Churchland says, that the "introspective certainty that one's mind is the seat of beliefs and desires [is] as badly misplaced as the classical man's visual certainty that the star-flecked sphere of the heavens turns daily" (Churchland, 1981). There is obviously much at stake here, but there is also uncertainty as to whether the replacement explanations of neuroscience will in fact be forthcoming.

A number of criticisms have been made of the argument to eliminate propositional attitudes. It is claimed that people know with such certainty that they have minds that elimination is absurd (Lycan), to which eliminativists retort that people have been certain – and wrong – about so many things in the past - the flatness of the earth, for instance - that this sort of intuition cannot be relied upon (Churchland 1981). Lycan replied, that to counter the strength of such intuitions the arguments for elimination need to be very much stronger than they actually are (Lycan). Another argument is that, as eliminativists clearly believe in their theory, they cannot at the same time deny the concept of belief (Boghossian 1990). Churchland has responded to this by arguing that the reductio used in the argument is itself incoherent (Churchland 1981).

None of these criticisms is fatal for eliminativism, but the idea is both counter-intuitive and alarming. So much so, in fact, that Fodor claimed that "if commonsense psychology were to collapse, that would be, beyond comparison, the greatest intellectual catastrophe in the history of our species ..." (Fodor 1987). It therefore behoves us to proceed with caution, and, as elimination is conditional upon neuroscience's finding replacement explanations for behaviour and experience, we should at least have reasonable confidence of this happening before embracing eliminativism. At the present time, however, there are such conceptual difficulties in the way of progress in neuroscience that it cannot be taken for granted that it will be able to provide the replacement explanations anticipated by eliminativists. To give just one example, if neuroscience were ever able to give a full description of the brain, it would be a description of its entire one hundred billion neurons expressed in the physical language of action potentials and electrolyte and neurotransmitter concentrations. To translate this into the sentential language of psychology is something

that may, but may well not, be possible, and the extent to which it may not be possible is the extent to which we cannot eliminate the propositional attitudes.

Whilst Churchland would eliminate propositional attitudes, he takes a reductionist stance towards qualia. Dennett, on the other hand, takes the opposite position and would eliminate qualia (Dennett 1978). He claims, for instance, that our common-sense understanding of pain being 'intrinsically awful' is flawed, as demonstrated by the dissociative experience induced by morphine-like drugs. Whilst this may be so, it would still be absurd to say that pain does not exist, and most thinkers would still agree with Nagel in considering that the elimination of qualia is not only implausible, but incomprehensible (Nagel 1974).

In conclusion, the current state of neuroscience isn't such that it can be taken for granted that replacement theories for propositional attitudes will be found, and, as such, their elimination would be premature. The elimination of qualia, on the other hand, is unimaginable.

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