

## Can a case be made for Eliminativism?

By Andrew Peasgood

A central issue within Philosophy of Mind is how to explain and account for 'mental states': that is, states that seem to be distinct from our physical, bodily states. Whilst the Dualist will hold that mental states are of a separate nature from physical states (whether the differences be in substance or property), Physicalists claim that mental states are not independent of physical states, instead being linked through 'identity' or by being realised by them. These physicalist positions are *reductionist*. The Eliminativist/Eliminative Materialist, however, takes the physicalist position to an extreme (indeed sharing with the dualist a belief in the irreducibility of mental states), by arguing that there are in fact *no* mental states, indeed, no 'mind'. On this basis, therefore, these concepts should be *eliminated* from our ontology.

Prominent advocates of this radical position are Paul M. Churchland and Patricia S. Churchland. In 'Eliminative Materialism and the Propositional Attitudes' (1981), Paul Churchland maintains that science will eventually make available explanations for all that is commonly attributed to mental states. As a result, 'reason explanations' of action, built around intentional thought, will be replaced by 'nomological explanations'. The branches of science that will provide the explanations are those linking neurology and physiology, the development of which Patricia Churchland describes and anticipates in works such as 'Neurophilosophy' (1986). In this future, reference to unpleasant 'feelings' will be replaced by scientific descriptions of physical states, and "the correct description of human nature will ... make no reference to what we think, feel, hope, fear or believe, but instead only to physiological structures, neuronal firing patterns, chemical secretions and the like" (Feser, 2005).

*"She said, 'Paul, don't speak to me, my serotonin levels have hit rock bottom, my brain is awash in glucocorticoids, my blood vessels are full of adrenaline, and if it weren't for my endogenous opiates I'd have driven the car into a tree on the way home.'"*

*(Paul and Patricia Churchland, quoted in 'Two Heads' by Larissa MacFarquhar, 2014 (1))*

Paul Churchland's 1981 paper identifies emotions and qualia ('raw feels' - mental states that concern feelings such as of pain, or a sense of say the 'blue-ness' of an object) as "the principal stumbling blocks for the materialist program" but he casually dismisses them as "barriers (that are) dissolving", citing previous work by Feyerabend and Rorty. His dismissive attitude ("The warmth of the summer air does not *feel* like the mean kinetic energy of millions of tiny molecules, but that is what it is." (2)) is shared by others. For example, in 'Quining Qualia' (1988), Daniel Dennett describes the concepts of qualia to be "vague and equivocal", invented to counter functionalism. Dennett's conclusion is that qualia are "... features of my visual *state*, perhaps, but not of my visual *experience*. They are not *phenomenal* properties."

Churchland's primary targets are instead the propositional attitudes - our inner states, our modes of thought - to which are attributed a role in causing human behaviour. These are, it is claimed, no more than theoretical constructs: seemingly clear and true, but which instead are the products of a persuasive and pervasive, but erroneous, 'Folk Psychology'. Folk Psychology (*hereafter*, 'FP') is the collection of those common-sense generalisations about the mind which most people accept and, correspondingly, expect others to accept. As Paul Churchland describes, FP is an empirical theory explaining and predicting the behaviour of others. In this regard its (apparent) success makes it useful. But, says Churchland, it is not as successful as many think. It is not always correct in predicting behaviour. It fails to adequately explain mental illness, sleep and dreaming, memory, and learning. It does not cohere with other sciences. And as an area of scientific enquiry, it has, he claims, been developmentally "stagnant" for many years. Indeed, he places it alongside other areas of belief where progress has caused an abandonment of formerly held theories: demons, crystal spheres, phlogiston and much of ancient cosmology are examples.

Churchland rejects FP because it relies not only upon empirical observation of others, but also upon introspective experience. Churchland is not alone in thinking that this reliance is misguided. Wilfred Sellars, in works such as 'Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind' (1956), had earlier suggested that our conception of mentality is derived not from direct and privileged access to how our inner minds work, but instead from a theoretical framework inherited from culture: "Concepts pertaining to such inner episodes as thoughts are primarily and essentially inter-subjective". Within the sphere of psychology, Nisbett & Wilson (1977) concluded that introspection may not be a discovery of personal mental states, but in fact be an imposition of popular theories (about what mental states a person in one's situation ought to have). To Churchland these shortcomings have been ignored, however, and, he maintains, the explanations offered through FP have developed into a set of 'common-sense' laws, which are now held as a "body of lore". "The presumption in FP's favour is spurious, born of innocence and tunnel vision", says Churchland (1981), who insists that we must overcome the "conceptual inertia" that prevents us from abandoning notions of mind and mentality.

Behind this inertia may lie incredulity at the extreme nature of the Eliminativists' thesis, perhaps also nervousness of the implications. For Eliminativism brings with it the spectre of determinism. If attitudes including freedom, choice, praise and blame are removed from our world, then human agency is denied. Indeed, suggests Fodor (1987), "If common-sense psychology were to collapse, that would be beyond comparison, the greatest intellectual catastrophe in the history of our species." (3) But of course displeasure at undesirable consequences is hardly grounds for rejection. How then might the case for Eliminativism be more rigorously disputed?

One counter-argument is that the idea refutes itself. The Eliminativist case relies upon a belief (in the ability and direction of science to provide adequate explanation), yet belief, as a propositional attitude, has been denied existence. The Eliminativist might reply by saying that although belief as a mental state is denied, there is a physical state that corresponds to what, in the terminology of FP, is belief: but we do not yet have the knowledge and, therefore, the appropriate alternative language with which to describe it. Furthermore, it is only the current theorising about Eliminativism that is vulnerable to the criticism of reliance upon belief: the world posited by Eliminativism requires no 'belief' within it in order to function. This attack on coherency does not, therefore, present a serious objection.

An alternative line of attack is to undermine the significance of Folk Psychology, which is at the crux of the Eliminativist case. If FP, with its identification of mental states as the basis of our belief-desire attitudes, can be *defended* as a valid theory; or, conversely, if FP can be *denied* as true (by showing how our belief-desire attitudes exist independently of an embracing FP); then the Eliminativist argument will need to be strengthened.

If these challenges cannot be substantiated, then the Eliminativist can assert their claim, that (going further than the reductionist physicalists), the mind is not (merely) an aspect of behaviour, it does not exist; that consciousness *is* physical, not just *explained* by physical processes. We have masked our lack of understanding of how the body works by positing 'beliefs' and 'desires', as things which are independent of our physical nature; and science is revealing more and more about how mental states can be satisfactorily explained in physical terms.

When this future of comprehensive scientific understanding arrives, we will, as Patricia Churchland suggests, routinely describe our brain and body chemical levels rather than exclaim 'I have a pain'. But in so doing, will we really have eliminated mental states, or will we have merely changed vocabulary? What, other than a mental sensation, would prompt a person to declare 'my c-fibres are firing'? How does one know what physical state one is in without *experiencing* something?

Crucially, the Churchlands acknowledge that the truth of Eliminativism can only be confirmed by a "*completed* neuroscience" (my italics). They accept that present scientific knowledge is insufficient to provide

a full physicalist account of behaviour explained through neural states and causal laws. The case for Eliminativism is an ambitious and highly speculative one, and, therefore, supporting it an act of faith: to place trust in the ability of science to progress adequately, and eventually confirm these conjectures. Paul Churchland rejects Folk Psychology, and all it entails, as being no more than “an explanatory hypothesis”: we are entitled to consider Eliminativism similarly.

### Notes

- 1 Churchland quotation from ‘*Two Minds*’ by Larissa MacFarquhar, New Yorker magazine, 21 July 2014 (<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2007/02/12/two-heads>)
- 2 Churchland quotation from ‘*Matter and Consciousness*’, (1988), MIT Press; quoted in Goetz & Taliaferro (2011)
- 3 Fodor quotation from ‘*Psychosemantics*’ (1987), MIT Press: quoted in Ramsey (2019)

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