

Philosophy 1320: Theories of the Mind, Stern College - Yeshiva University, Spring 2007
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Lecture Notes, April 16

I. Functionalism, and its deficiencies

Before the break, we were discussing functionalism.

Putnam's functionalism claims that minds are probabilistic automata, essentially Turing machines with probabilistic transitions among the states of our machine tables.

The functionalist avoids the problems of multiple realizability that plagued the identity theorist/type physicalist.

According to functionalism, mental states are defined by their causal connections with input, output, and other mental states, and not according to their physical realizations.

Thus, the same mental state may be realized, or instantiated, by different physical states.

We looked at several problems with functionalism all arising from considerations of qualia.

The problem of inverted qualia was the hypothesis that two people could have different sensations, and yet be in the same functional mental state.

The problem of absent qualia was the hypothesis that people could share functional states even though one of them has no qualia, is a zombie.

Searle's problem, from consideration of the Chinese Room, was that the functionalist defines mental states on the basis of their syntactic properties (the mind is the software of the brain) but that any theory of the mind should account for our grasp of semantic properties.

Another worry about functionalism, due to Fodor and Block, concerns dispositional states, and simultaneous occurrent states.

An occurrent state is one that can happen at a particular time.

So, if I am seeing a blue shirt, I am having an occurrent sensation.

The functionalist identifies this sensation with its causal relations with other color sensations.

If there is a state of the program which corresponds to the seeing of blue, then the instantiation of the program can be said to be in that state.

If I see a tiger in the room, I would have an occurrent fear.

Again, the program can represent that occurrent fear.

But, if I am just afraid of lions, that is a dispositional state.

Similarly, it seems pretty clear that you believe that $1476+1=1477$.

You believed that, even before I mentioned it.

But, you weren't thinking about it.

It was just a disposition.

Functionalism has a good explanation of the causal relations among sequential mental states, as the causal relations among the steps in the machine table/program.

But, how is the functionalist supposed to represent simultaneous, but distinct mental states?

I might at the same time, see the tiger in the room, fear the tiger, be excited about the tiger, etc.

These are distinct mental states, but there is only one state of the program at any one time.

The functionalist thus lacks an explanation of the interactions among simultaneous mental states.

To accommodate dispositions and simultaneous occurrent states, the functionalist can appeal to the fact that the machine table has the potential to be in a particular state.

The occurrent state can be identified with the particular state of the machine instantiating the program.

The dispositional state can be identified with a broader swath of the machine table.

But, what corresponds to the disposition is the whole machine table, not a particular state of it.

Thus, our dispositional states will be any states that the program can be in, which correlates with anything that we can possibly think.

But, it is possible for us to think all sort of things that we do not believe.

It is possible for the program to be in lots of states that do not correspond to actual beliefs.

We could pick out some of the states as corresponding to our beliefs.

But then, we can not say that two organisms are in the same mental state if and only if they have the same states of their tables.

This seems like giving up on functionalism.

II. The end of functionalism

Type-identity statements (what it is to be a thing of a certain type) must be made with reference to the appropriate regularities.

Type-identity of elementary particles will be made in terms of charge, because, presumably, charge is an element of the basic physical laws.

Type-identity of species will be made in terms of genetic constitution.

Type-identity of water will be made in terms of molecular constitution.

Similarly, it seems that type-identity of mental states must be made in terms of psychological laws.

Recall that Fodor criticized the identity theorist for lacking a relational account of mental states.

The identity theorist sorted mental states in terms of brain states, which led to difficulties of multiple realizability.

Behaviorists also had problems sorting mental states, since they did so according to observable criteria, which do not do justice to the internal states.

The Cartesian sorts mental states in the right way, according to psychological regularities which hold among our mental states.

But, since we lack third-person access to the dualist's mental states, the Cartesian lacks key elements of a scientifically legitimate theory: verifiability, replicability, etc.

Functionalists seem to have an advantage over these other positions, because they sort mental states according to their causal roles.

Still, functionalism has deficiencies.

We have been considering attempts to define the mind by looking for acceptable type-identity statements in which one side corresponds to our ordinary psychological states.

These ordinary states are sometimes called the terms of folk psychology - the way in which ordinary folk talk about their mental states.

The behaviorist sought type-identities in terms of observable behavior.

The identity theorist sought them in terms of brain states.

The functionalist sought them in terms of functional states of a probabilistic automaton.

But, given the successive failures of each program, perhaps a new approach is appropriate.

That is, anyway, the moral that the eliminative materialist takes.