

Philosophy 1320: Theories of the Mind, Stern College - Yeshiva University, Spring 2007
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Lecture Notes, April 23

I. Problems with folk psychology: Churchland's second task

We saw last week that Churchland defends two claims.

The first claim is that folk psychology, as the identity theorist understands it, is a legitimate scientific theory, liable to falsification like any other scientific theory.

Churchland's first claim is essentially that identity theory is a good hypothesis, and should be tested to see if it is true.

We looked at her defense of this claim, which I called theory theory, in response to a constellation of functionalist arguments for the autonomy of folk psychology from physical science.

The autonomy of folk psychology is supported by multiple realizability.

If mental states can be instantiated by different physical structures, then they are independent of any particular physical structures.

If folk psychology is autonomous from science, especially neuroscience, then it will not be falsifiable by empirical science.

Churchland makes the problem of correlating brain states with mental states seem more tractable by introducing different levels of neuro-physiological organization.

She argues that mental states are only multiply realizable at the most basic levels of physical structure.

But, all mental states will be instantiated in relevantly similar ways at higher levels of organization.

There could be correlations of mental states with brain states, not at the level of individual cells, but at appropriate levels of neuro-functional organization, p 363.

Still, even if considerations of various neuro-functional levels solves the problems for some mental states, what if there are no correlations for other mental states?

Churchland argues that in fact many of our mental states do not have neurophysiological correlates.

Churchland's second claim, then, is that folk psychology is false.

If Churchland is right, then identity theory, which proposes that the folk psychologist's mental states are reducible to brain states, is also false.

Churchland is setting up folk psychology in order to knock it down.

Where folk psychology does not reduce neatly to neuroscience, the functionalist was willing to defend the autonomy of mental states.

Another possibility, though, is to hold onto the brain states, and deny the legitimacy of the mental.

If we can not find brain states which correlate with our mental states, we can deny that there are mental states.

We can thus take the theory of folk psychology to be a false theory.

And we can replace theories of belief with theories of something else that does correlate with our brain states.

“[I]t may eventually be said that there is no neurophysiology of individual beliefs; there is only a neurophysiology of information fermenphorylation (to take a made-up name) (363).”

That is, if there is a conflict between mental states and brain states, we can deny their identity, or we can get rid of the mental states.

If folk-psychological concepts were scientifically defensible, then the burden would be heavy on the neuroscientist who wished to eliminate mental states.

But, there are problems with folk psychology.

Churchland cites Stephen Stich, who argues that belief ascription is context-relative.

What we think about other people's beliefs, and our own, depends on a variety of considerations.

If what I believe is not available to introspection, then there is a serious problem about mental states.

Simple examples of the context-relativity of belief ascriptions involve our projecting our beliefs or feelings on others.

We ascribe beliefs or feelings to others, though, by imagining how we would feel.

Such ascriptions can be nearly flawless, as in the case of a piano falling on one's foot.

In other cases, we have little experience on the basis of which to imagine.

For many of us, fortunately, we have little idea how we would feel on the death of a child, for example.

Such problems of limited experience are inevitable, but can be at least theoretically mitigated by imagining that we have more experience.

In some possible cases, belief ascriptions are truly puzzling.

Imagining travelling to Twin Earth, where everything is just as it is on Earth, except that water is not H₂O, but has a completely different chemical composition, XYZ.

Your twin believes that she is drinking a glass of water.

But, water is H₂O.

So, she is wrong.

Similarly, imagine some one who believes that she has arthritis in her thigh.

In fact, arthritis is an affliction of the joints, and so can not affect a thigh.

But, she says that she has arthritis in her thigh.

We can imagine extending the definition of arthritis to cover similar pains in thighs.

Whether your friend has a false belief about arthritis, or a true belief about tharthritis, depends on decisions made by the doctors and scientists to whom we defer judgments about the natures of diseases.

The moral of the Twin Earth and arthritis examples is that what we believe depends only partly on anything accessible to introspection.

It also depends on social, or other external, factors.

The importance of context on belief ascription is so important that we can ascribe conflicting beliefs in the same circumstances.

Folk psychology thus fails on its own terms, even before we are worried about the identification of mental states with brain states.

[The Twin Earth example comes from Hillary Putnam; the arthritis example comes from Tyler Burge. These examples are used to support externalism in the philosophy of language, the view that meaning is partly constituted by external (non-introspective) factors.]

For another problem with folk psychology, recall the argument that logical-rational explanations seemed incompatible with causal explanations.

Churchland had argued that these two domains were not inconsistent.

But, she concedes that there will be some conflicts between true causal explanations and commonsense explanations in terms of the propositional attitudes.

To smooth out these conflicts, we will adjust our folk theory, rather than our neuroscience, p 364. Remember that Churchland had argued for the compatibility of cognitive science with neuroscience on the basis of an analogy with a calculator. But, the analogy is not perfect, since we design the circuitry of the calculator in order to effect particular representations. In contrast, we do not design our brains in order to effect particular folk-psychological representations.

But, what happens to beliefs, desire, sensations, etc?
Some of them will be brought into a mature neuroscience.
The Antipodeans spoke a lot like us, when they wanted to do so.
But, many terms of folk psychology will be lost.
When the materialist failed to yield qualia, we worried that the theory was missing something.
Churchland thinks that that kind of criticism may be misplaced.
New and better theories often leave some phenomena behind, p 365.

Churchland's criticisms of folk psychology seem most directly applicable to propositional attitudes.
What about qualia?
Recall that the functionalist had difficulty accommodating qualia.
The eliminative materialist seems to have difficulty eliminating them.
In the next, and last, section of the course, we will look closely at our conscious states, especially our sensations, both from philosophers who defend the reality of qualia and from one who, consistent with eliminative materialism, wants to eliminate them.

II. Qualia and the hard problem of consciousness

The problem of consciousness is mainly a problem for physicalism, whether of the identity theory or eliminative materialism.
Also, most functionalists and behaviorists are/were physicalists as well.
The question is whether any purely physicalistic theory of the mind could in principle explain all of our experience.
We have seen some of the problem about consciousness in Searle's paper.
Searle focused on whether machines could have intentions.
Searle was concerned that any account of the mind take into account its physical basis.
Jackson and Nagel worry whether even this physical basis would be sufficient.
Our conscious experience is essentially first-person.
But, a physical theory is essentially third-person.
Nagel's worry is that the third-person perspective will be in principle insufficient for describing all the facts, p 394.
In lieu of physicalism, Jackson argues for epiphenomenalism.
He starts by considering three arguments for the falsity of physicalism, based on the reality of qualia.

Consider physical theories of ordinary objects.
When we explain physical phenomena, like the falling of an object to the earth, we ignore the color of the object.
At most, we reduce it to reflections of light.
But, as Descartes argued and Berkeley emphasized, light waves are not colors, sound waves are not

sounds.

On the one hand, we have what is often called the phenomenological (or, better, phenomenal) character of our experience.

On the other hand, we have objective physical properties.

With Locke, we say that sounds and colors (and all the conscious phenomenal characteristics) are just the secondary properties, their effects on us.

Only the primary qualities, the real qualities, matter to physical theory.

In the case of qualia, though, recourse to the primary/secondary distinction will not help.

For, the sounds and colors are exactly what we need to explain about consciousness.

Dennett describes qualia as the ineffable, intrinsic, private and immediately apprehensible results of purification, p 411.

We purify by isolating qualia from their causes: both my brain state and the object impinging on my senses.

We locate our qualia purely behind Locke's veil of ideas.

The problem of accommodating qualia within a physical theory has become known as the hard problem of consciousness.

The easy problem involves describing the physical, neural bases of conscious experience.