THEORIA 2
BIBLID 0351–2274 : (2010) : 53 : p. 53-61

UDK 159.016.1:165 ; 159.9.01:165.321
Originalni naučni rad
Original Scientific Paper

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THE REVISABILITY OF COMMONSENSE PSYCHOLOGY

SUMMARY: *Various views of the mind/body problem adopt one of the two general strategies towards explaining phenomena: one approach is to take into account the intuitions found in common sense, and the second is to go against those intuitions. The first type of theory attempts to ground views of particular phenomena on our common sense. Eliminative Materialism (EM) is not such an approach. EM urges that commonsense psychology is false and should be replaced by neuroscience. Eliminativism has often been challenged. Some have attacked the premise that commonsense psychology is a theory; others have attacked the claim that it is a false theory, which can be replaced. I plan to countenance the argument that commonsense psychology is an empirical theory that can be replaced, which will, surprisingly, lead me to an argument against eliminativism. My view is that commonsense psychology cannot be eliminated because there are no commonsense theories.*

KEY WORDS: *Folk Psychology, commonsense, eliminative materialism, revisability, neuroscience*

Various views of the mind/body problem adopt one of the two general strategies towards explaining phenomena: one approach is to take into account the intuitions found in common sense, and the second is to go against those intuitions. The first type of theory attempts to ground views of particular phenomena on our common sense. Thus, we get theories which attempt to preserve the entities of our commonsense psychology but they change, to some extent, what we used to believe about the nature of those entities.

Eliminative Materialism (EM) is not such an approach. The eliminativist theory of the mind/body problem falls under the second general category of theories. This second type of theory does not attempt to capture the intuitions about phenomena under investigation. Such views in general, and eliminativism in particular, begin by claiming that our intuitions are faulty. EM urges that the scientific explanations of the mind are the only real option for the explanation of phenomena associated with human psychology.

Eliminativism has often been challenged. Some have attacked the premise that commonsense psychology is a theory;[1] others have attacked the claim that it is a false theory, which can be replaced.[2] I plan to countenance the argument that commonsense psychology is an empirical theory that can be replaced, which will, surprisingly, lead me to an argument against eliminativism. My view is that commonsense psychology cannot be eliminated because there are no commonsense theories.

Possible Criteria for the Distinction between Commonsense and Scientific Psychology

Although, eliminativists and others partaking in the debate about commonsense tend to have a list of claims that they brand as commonsense, they seldom provide reasons for their classifications. Churchland has a battery of claims that he cites as constitutive of FP.[3] For example, commonsense psychology is attributed with the view that propositional attitudes and their sentence-like structure are the brain's primary mode of operation. If that claim is then empirically disputed, it should be concluded that FP is wrong about the way the brain works.[4]

FP is also said to be committed to the view that propositional attitudes are causally efficacious. "The explanatory power of folk psychology depends on beliefs, desires and other propositional attitudes being the "springs of action.""[5] Bermudez cites another key tenant of FP, regarding the idea that "… (W)e act on objects in virtue of how they appear to us…" (Bermudez, 54). Again, empirical

1 Searle John R. *The Rediscovery of the Mind*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, especially. p. 58-63; ch. 8. Gordon, R., (1986). Folk Psychology as Simulation, *Mind and Language* 1, 158-171; reprinted in Davies, M. and Stone T., eds., 1995, *Folk Psychology: The Theory of Mind Debate.* Oxford: Blackwell Publishers. Dennett, Daniel (1987). *The Intentional Stance.* Cambridge, Mass.: Bradford. Books, p. 54.

2 See both Fodor, J. (1975). *The Language of Thought.* New York: Thomas Crowell, and Carruthers, P. (1996). *Language, Thought and Consciousness.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

3 Churchland, P.M. *1981.* Eliminative Materialism and the Propositional Attitudes, *Journal of Philosophy,* 67-90.

4 Some evidence against "sentence-crunching" as the primary mode of storage and operation in the brain is given by Churchland, Patricia S. (1986). *Neurophilosophy.* Cambridge, Mass: MIT press,. See also, Churchland, Paul. (2005). Functionalism at Forty: A Critical Retrospective, *Journal of Philosophy,* Jan., especially section III.

5 Jose Luis Bermudez (2006). Arguing for Eliminativism in *Paul Churchland*, ed. Brian L. Keeley, Cambridge University Press.

evidence against these purported commonsense claims is seen as evidence against commonsense psychology.[6]

With the task of marking core commitments of FP in mind, let us assume that the boundaries of FP can be determined by the frequency of usage in particular contexts. According to Lewis, we could draw the boundaries of FP thusly: collect all the platitudes that people use and assume other people to use in situations which require interpretation of human behavior.[7] In the end, we will have a body of claims that are commonly used and inevitably a lot of them would refer to propositional attitudes and other mental states. The collected body of claims will yield a functional definition of mental terms by specifying their functional role. Based on the collected platitudes, one may extrapolate a view that has some of the attributes that are often cited by commentators.[8]

In order for mental terms to count as commonsense they should be mostly used in everyday life by laymen. The frequency rule relies not on the claims, but on the context in which they are uttered. Determining the right context, then, requires an additional criterion as to who is a scientist and who a layperson. There would be a bevy of options as to where to draw the line, most of which would entail drawing arbitrary distinctions. Consider, for example, cases where people without scientific degrees make scientific discoveries. Further still, including facts about people and what they do, into judgments about whether a theory or a belief is commonsense seems unsatisfactory. We would still need an answer to the following question: why is the commitment to propositional states being the "spring of action" commonsense, and the commitment to the view that sensations reduce to brain activity scientific?

If all we do to draw out the boundaries of commonsense is collect the most frequently used platitudes, the body of claims will change as our everyday usage of psychology changes. If in turn science begins to permeate our everyday language, what consitutes neuroscience now could become commonsense in the future. For example, as layperson increasingly begin using scientific terminology to explain behavior or to explain their own mental states, the scientific terminology will become part of everyday platitudes about human psychology. Collecting platitudes would not be the right way, then, of distinguishing commonsense beliefs from all

6 For evidence against the listed claims see Bermudez (2006), 52-63.

7 Lewis, D. (1972). Psychophysical and Theoretical Identifications, *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, 50 (3), 207-15.

8 There is a distinction between two types of functionalism about mental states based on the type of claims that enter into the functional definition. See Ned Block (1991). Troubles with Functionalism in *The Nature of Mind*, ed. David Rosenthal, p. 214. My aim is not to pick a view which sides with either on of those. Rather my aim is to show that there is no distinction between the two, in terms of one collecting common sense claims and the other scientific. The two kinds of functionalism aim to define the terms of two different empirical theories.

other beliefs because frequency of usage does not delineate commonsense from science.

Unrevisability as a Criterion of Distinction

Given that I have argued in the previous section that we do not have good guides as to the nature of commonsense, I will attempt to capture some intuitions about commonsense, especially those that give commonsense special epistemic status. Commonsense beliefs are true. It would be strange to claim a false commonsense belief. Commonsense beliefs are permanently true because; it would seem odd to claim that something is commonsense if it could be false. Commonsense beliefs are pretheoretical; one does not need to endorse a theory in order to have commonsense beliefs. They are immediate because they do not require any prior knowledge. They are recalcitrant because they cannot be corrected or rebuked. My view is, then, that a belief is commonsense if and only if it is unrevisable. It follows from this claim that if something is revisable, it is not commonsense; furthermore all revisable theories are not commonsense theories.

Let us consider if there are any unrevisable beliefs. A belief can be unrevisable either by being necessarily true in virtue of being analytic or it can be unrevisable by being noninferentially true. Analytic beliefs are such that they are true in virtue of their meaning and as such they cannot be revised. It is thought that the statement 'Bachelors are unmarried men' is analytically true because no empirical evidence can dispute this claim, since the statement is true by definition. Assuming the possibility of analytic statements, one could fix the definition and ultimately the properties of certain entities a priori. For example, one could cite some of the following statements as analytically true:

1. Mental states are states that are conscious.
2. Mental states have phenomenal properties.
3. Mental states are causally efficacious.
4. Mental states are incorrigible.

Statements 1-4 are such that they could be said to be a priori true about mental states and that they cite features of mental states that are true by definition about those states. They are a priori true because they do not seem to be formed based on empirical discovery; rather they form our understanding of what a mental state is.

One can see that if commonsense psychology is comprised of such claims, it could limit scientific psychology to the explanation of those core tenants. It is in this sense that one could understand the plight of the eliminativist. If the statements 1-4 are false, but are taken to entail categories that limit the field of discovery for an empirical psychology, then FP truly could be in the way of scientific discovery.

Other kinds of permanently true beliefs are beliefs that are noninferentially true. Beliefs of this kind are not necessary in the same sense as analytic beliefs, but they are permanently true because their truth does not need justification from other beliefs. The truth of noninferential beliefs is self-evident. Noninferential beliefs can support a type of 'direct' knowing by which one could individuate one object from another without having to endorse a theory or a conceptual framework. We see objects the way we see them as a result of merely noticing what is there. The special status of commonsense has its source partly in this idea that there are beliefs that are known prior to any theory. It follows from the status of these beliefs as pretheoretical that they cannot be revised by theory.

Direct knowing also supports the special status of the commonsense about the mind. In the case of mental states we speak of direct introspection or noninferential individuation of mental states. One can report the presence of a sensation or thought and the report would count as veridical because of direct introspection. Again, as in the case of individuating physical objects, one individuates mental states without endorsing any theory. A young child as well as an adult can individuate sensations without any prior learning of a conceptual framework.

Assuming a world where epistemology can support different modes of truth and direct knowing. We can conclude that there may be some beliefs that are true across theories and prior to any theory. We can then restrict the domain of commonsense to only those types of beliefs. On the other side we will be left with inferential beliefs that are a result of endorsing a theory, those types can be revised as the theory changes and their truth is only contingent. The distinction between commonsense and science comes down to revisability.

But now let us consider the arguments against the two constitutive features of commonsense. In a seminal article, "Two Dogma's of Empiricism,"[9] Quine proposes a few ways of establishing a definition of analytic statements, and concludes that they all fail to avoid circularity. He concludes that without a noncircular definition of analyticity, we cannot draw a distinction between analytic and synthetic statements and that all true statements are true in the same way: synthetically. Statements 1-4 listed above are not analytic but are statements that can be evaluated empirically, as part of a theory. Thus, our understanding of mental states cannot be restricted by any seemingly analytic statements about the mind.

An argument against direct knowing and pre-theoretical beliefs is contained in Sellars' argument against sense-data theorists. The argument is aimed at disputing the idea of giveness. The Myth of the Given is what Sellars thinks is at the base of the arguments put forth by sense-data theorists. Sense-data theorists endorse the

9 Quine, W.V.O. (1961). Two Dogmas of Empiricism, *From A Logical Point of View.* New York: Harper and Row.

view that one can have a sensation without having any prior concept, and that sensations provide us with propositions about appearance properties of objects that will ultimately serve as grounding for other inferred propositions. The position assumes the primacy of appearance properties.

Sellars begins by arguing that things being this or that way is logically prior to them looking this or that way. Saying that something looks green is a report on an experience, which is, from the first person perspective, indistinguishable from the experience involved in seeing that something is green. But making the report about the character of the experience indicates that for some other consideration the claim is not being endorsed. Thus, we have two indistinguishable experiences but when we speak of *looks* we are withholding endorsement, while when we speak of things being this or that we endorse the experience. The concept of something looking green presupposes the concept of something being green. Moreover, being able to endorse a claim that something is green presupposes the knowledge of what constitutes standard conditions for detecting such properties.

What we seem to have is a sort of circle, where to report that something looks green one has to have a concept of being green which presupposes knowledge of what constitutes "standard conditions" for perception of color. It seems that reporting on the looks of things is possible only after one has acquired an entire conceptual framework. Sellars argues thusly: "…(T)he process of acquiring the concept of green may--indeed does--involve a long history of acquiring piecemeal habits of response to various objects in various circumstances, there is an important sense in which one has *no* concept pertaining to the observable properties of physical objects in Space and Time unless one has them all…" (Sellars, EPM, 148). We come to the end of Sellars argument, which concludes much like Quine, that all beliefs are revisable. "For empirical knowledge, like its sophisticated extension, science, is rational, not because it has a *foundation* but because it is a self-correcting enterprise which can put *any* claim in jeopardy, though not *all* at once" (Sellars, EPM, 170).

In sum, we have serious challenges to both analyticity and direct knowing, which were the preconditions for unrevisability. Commonsense beliefs, I argued, were beliefs that are necessarily true. Thus, if all beliefs are revisable, none of them are commonsense.

Impact on the Elimination of Folk Psychology

EM relies on the claim that folk psychology is an empirical theory like any other. The arguments establishing the inferential nature of individuation make the premise possible. The ability to tell thoughts apart from sensations, or the ability to have thoughts and sensations is a result of the piecemeal acquisition of a conceptual

framework. "For we now recognize that instead of coming to have a concept of something because we have noticed that sort of thing, to have the ability to notice a sort of thing is already to have a concept of that sort of thing,…" (Sellars, EPM, 176). It is not then that we have FP because we have mental states; rather we individuate mental states because we endorse a theory about those states.

Eliminativists argue further that FP can be replaced. But the argument that FP is replaceable as a conceptual framework rests on the arguments that show plasticity both in understanding and perception.[10] Churchland provides various examples in which conceptual frameworks can change the way we perceive objects.[11] An example of perceptual change that results from conceptual change is seen in the changed experience when a person moves from being a novice to an expert in a particular field. A musical trainee learning to distinguish various notes in a chord becomes capable of perceiving distinct sounds, changing from hearing the wholistic sound of the chord to the sound of three distinct notes constitutive of the chord, for example.

In reconceptualizing from FP to Neuroscience, a similar change can occur when we become able to individuate brain activity directly. By endorsing a neuroscientific conceptual framework, we can learn to notice brain activity in lieu of mental states. The argument is built on the assumption that conceptual change cannot be stifled by perceptual limitations or other human physical limitations because plasticity assures that we can perceive the objects posited by the theories we endorse. Changes in our theories about the mind can change the way we introspect our mental states.

Any theory is then not just revisable in principle, but replaceable in practice. If one equalizes the status of all beliefs in such a way, one can establish the possibility that FP is false, but one is also saddled with the consequence that the categories of commonsense are nothing special. Although it is true that that makes them a candidate for elimination, it also deflates the need for that elimination. If FP is not commonsense, then its categories cannot restrict our understanding of mental states and the science of our inner states can proceed without paying much heed to the folk view about those very same states.

The incompatibility between the scientific and folk-psychological frameworks is created by the properties that are purportedly attributed rigidly by commonsense about the mind to mental states. Those properties are then contrasted with the

10 Churchland, P.M. (1979). *Scientific Realism and the Plasticity of Mind.* Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, Chapters 1 and 2.

11 This argument is supported in Churchland, P.M. (1979). For a similar view one can turn to: Feyerabend, Paul (1969). Science without Experience, *Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 66, no.22. For an example of how to adjust perception in accordance with the Copernican theory of the arrangements and motions of the solar system, see Churchland, P. (1979), pp. 25-36.

properties Neuroscience attributes to brain states. If incompatibility between the properties of two theories about the same domain arises, identifications, or other such explanatory relations, between the entities of the two theories become impossible, and one might opt for the elimination of one of the entities. However, if the categories of 'belief,' 'sensation,' 'desire,' etc. can be completely shelled out of all folk-psychological properties through revision and refilled with properties specified by neuroscience, the argument that the categories of commonsense should be eliminated is a call for a mere change in words. No salient result can be reached by arguing that FP should be eliminated because the theory can just slowly be adjusted to be in continuity with any scientific theory.

The established first premise of eliminativism entails the indeterminacy of the second premise, which is that FP is false. If there aren't criteria by which we can distinguish commonsense beliefs from other types of beliefs, it is difficult to ascertain the scope of FP as well as which parts of the theory are commonsense. All the features attributed to mental states cited by commentators, some of which were mentioned in the first section, are not chosen by those because they are commonsense but because it seems to some that they are part of our everyday parlance. One can dispute that this or that property is entailed by FP only if we know a way of determining the core tenants of that view. I argued that there are none.

Given that I have maintained that there are no commonsense beliefs, I think that there isn't a commonsense psychology. Still one could informally observe that our current FP has changed over time. It seems obvious that more and more, in everyday parlance, people mention the brain as the locus of their mental activity; they are aware of some neurotransmitters, often referred to as "chemical activity" in the brain. People are more and more aware of brain disease and how it affects behavior and so on and so forth. This could indicate that neuroscience has slowly begun to seep into our everyday interpretations of behaviors. FP is slowly being shaped by advances in science. An eliminativist could say that it is not that FP is changing, it is disappearing. In order to argue that FP is disappearing, however, one would have to establish that a theory is our commonsense psychology, and the eliminativist, as I have argued, do not do that. I maintained that if the criterion of ubiquity of psychological platitudes is used, once a claim becomes ubiquitous it is commonsense. We can conclude that the changes in FP are just the changes of an empirical framework under the influence of other empirical frameworks. There are no large shifts from one major framework to another, just slow moving progress.

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Mogućnost revizije zdravorazumske psihologije

(Apstrakt)

Različita shvatanja problema odnosa uma i tela oslanjaju se na dve opšte strategije objašnjavanja pojava: jedan pristup uzima u obzir zdravorazumske intuicije, a drugi te intuicije odbacuje. Prva vrsta teorija pokušava da zasnuje viđenja pojedinih pojava na zdravom razumu. Eliminativni materijalizam (EM) nije ta vrsta pristupa. EM dokazuje da je zdravorazumska psihologija pogrešna i da bi je trebalo zameniti neuronaukom. Eliminacionizam se veoma često osporava. Neki napadaju pretpostavku da zdravorazumska psihologija predstavlja teoriju; drugi napadaju tvrdnju da je reč o pogrešnoj teoriji koju je moguće zameniti. Ja nameravam da razmotrim tvrdnju da je zdravorazumska psihologija empirijska teorija koja se može zameniti, što će me dovesti do neočekivanog osporavanja eliminacionizma. Moje je stanovište da se zdravorazumska psihologija ne može eliminisati zato što ne postoje zdravorazumske teorije.

KLUČNE REČI: zdravorazumska psihologija, zdrav razum, eliminativni materijalizam, mogućnost revizije, neuronauka.