

## **Eliminative materialism**

Substance dualism, behaviourism, identity theory, and functionalism all assume our usual understanding of mental life, in terms of beliefs, desires, emotions, feelings, and so on. Eliminative materialism (aka eliminativism), by contrast, argues that it is not, and that future scientific developments will show that the way we think and talk about the mind is fundamentally flawed. It is so mistaken, in fact, that we should abandon all talk of the mental, and stick to talking about brain processes instead.

This claim is not a form of reductionism; it is a form of elimination. Reduction says that there are mental properties, but they are, in fact, physical, or behavioural, or functional properties. Eliminativism says that there are no mental properties – nothing exists that corresponds to mental terms like ‘belief’, ‘desire’, and so on. In fact, nothing corresponds to Intentionality.

### **‘FOLK PSYCHOLOGY’**

The argument for eliminativism goes like this. First, according to eliminativism, our common-sense understanding of mental states and processes – often called ‘folk psychology’ – is in fact an empirical theory about human behaviour. We are using a set of concepts, e.g. of different types of mental states (belief, desire, emotion, sensation) and processes (thinking, feeling, sensing), and a set of general, very loose laws to describe, explain and predict behaviour. For example, if someone is thirsty, they will – under normal conditions – look for something to drink. If someone believes it is raining outside, and doesn’t want to get wet, they will – under normal conditions – pick up an umbrella or other covering to keep them dry. And so on. As functionalism has indicated, the meaning of the concepts is given by the role they play in the network of laws. (Desires motivate behaviour, beliefs represent the world, and so on.)

Second, empirical theories can be tested, and if they turn out not to be accurate, then they should be abandoned in favour of a more accurate theory. Because the concepts of folk psychology gain their meaning from the network of laws, if it were shown that our common-sense laws are actually not very good at explaining and predicting people’s behaviour, then we should abandon our common-sense concepts as well.

Third, scientific research indicates a strong connection between the mind and brain states and processes, e.g. that behaviour is caused by events in the brain. Therefore, our common-sense theory of the mind needs to be related to a neuroscientific theory. This is the question of reduction. Will the common-sense ontology of states and processes (beliefs, desires, etc.) reduce to the ontology of neuroscience (brain states and processes)? Eliminativism argues that it will not reduce, because our common-sense theory of the mind is false.

Why believe this?

1. There are many aspects of mental life that folk psychology cannot explain, such as mental illness, the nature of intelligence, sleep, perception and learning.
2. If we look at the history of folk psychology, it reveals no progress since the ancient Greek authors, 2,500 years ago. Meanwhile, neuroscientific explanations are constantly growing in scope and power.
3. We cannot make folk psychology coherent with other scientific theories. In particular, the ideas of Intentionality and consciousness are highly problematic. If it does not fit in with empirically robust theories, such as neuroscience, we have reason to abandon it.

## **OBJECTIONS**

We can challenge each of these points, and whether they support eliminativism. To the first point, we can say that folk psychology is not intended to be a theory of these aspects of mental life, so it is no criticism that it does not explain them. It is only meant to explain human behaviour; or even more specifically, human action.

To the second, we can say that folk psychology has evolved over time. For instance, the Greeks used an idea of fixed and unchanging 'character', whereas now we tend to appeal more to the situation someone finds themselves in. Or again, ideas about unconscious beliefs and desires have become part of folk psychology. And if we look at recent empirical psychology – aside from neuroscience – we find that theories using common-sense concepts and ideas have produced new knowledge. To eliminate the concepts of beliefs, desires and other common-sense mental states from psychology would do away with much scientific psychology as well as folk psychology.

To the third, we can argue that folk psychology does not need to be reducible to other scientific theories in order to be compatible with them. Our folk psychological explanations appeal to properties that neuroscientific explanations do not cover; but the two kinds of explanations can be made coherent through token identity theory.

Eliminativism will reply that these points are not very strong. First, we need to know how human action or behaviour relates to the rest of mental life. To have very different sorts of theories explaining different aspects of the mind is unsatisfactory. Second, the developments in folk psychology are relatively superficial. Our common-sense explanations of behaviour are still far less powerful than the kinds of explanations we find elsewhere in the sciences. The only way to address this problem is to look to neuroscience. Third, why should we accept an abstract functional account of how the mind works based on common-sense? Why not start with looking at the actual workings of the functional system, i.e. the brain, and derive our functional account from it?

### **Eliminativism is incoherent**

The discussion so far has accepted the suggestion that folk psychology is an empirical theory. But there is good reason to suppose that this is a misunderstanding. We can argue for this indirectly.

Eliminativism, it seems, presents arguments, which are expressions of beliefs and use beliefs about what words mean and how reasoning works, in order to change our beliefs about folk psychology. Yet it claims that there are no beliefs. So what does eliminativism express, what is it trying to change? If there are no beliefs, including no beliefs about

meaning, no beliefs linked by reasoning, then eliminativism expresses nothing at all – it is meaningless. So if eliminativism is true, it is meaningless. So it can't be true.

Eliminativists say that this begs the question. It presupposes that there are beliefs and meanings in the folk psychological sense. Compare: there was an argument in the 19<sup>th</sup> century between people who thought that to be alive required some special energy, a 'vital force', and those who said there was no such force. The vitalists could argue that if what their opponents said was true, they would all be dead! Yet now we know there is no special 'vital force', that life arises from ordinary chemical reactions.

But we can press the objection. Eliminativism is eliminating Intentionality. The very ideas of meaning, or 'making sense', of 'true' v. 'false' belief, or 'reasoning' itself, are to be rejected, as they all rest on Intentionality. So how can we say that eliminativism is true, or a theory that makes more sense than folk psychology? Just as the opponents of vitalism appealed to chemical reactions, we need some alternative to Intentionality according to which it makes sense to say that folk psychology is false. But eliminativism does not give us this. Without it, we cannot conceive that folk psychology is false, because that very idea presupposes the folk psychological concept of Intentionality.

The analogy with vitalism fails. The anti-vitalist agrees that he must be alive to make his claim (and then gives an account of life). The eliminativist says he does not need beliefs in order to make his claim, and gives us no account of how it is possible to make a claim without having beliefs.

Folk psychology turns out not to be an empirical theory (which might be wrong), but a condition of intelligibility, a condition for thinking, reasoning, making claims at all. So we can't eliminate it. If it can't be reduced – as eliminativism argues – then we must embrace a non-reductive theory of the mind.