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# Eliminativism – Wednesday talk

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# Remember the interface problem

- If there is a problem about the integration of propositional attitudes with the rest of science and other scientific explanations, what should we do?

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# Are beliefs and other propositional attitudes real?

- Dennett ("Real Patterns" 1991) argues that this very question has little point: There will be many cases that are of a disputed nature, such as *centre of gravity, voices, shadows*

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# Grading realism about beliefs

- If appeals to beliefs are useful, are they also true, are beliefs real?

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# Varieties of realism

- "Industry strength Realism" (Fodor)
- "Regular strength realism" (Davidson)
- Mild realism (Dennett)
- Milder-than-mild irrealism: patterns are *only* in the eyes of the beholders (Rorty)
- Eliminativism – there are no beliefs (Churchland)

Dennett 1991:30

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# Dennett's "mild realism"

- "...mild realism is the doctrine that makes the most sense when what we are talking about is real patterns, such as the real patterns discernible from the intentional stance."  
(Dennett 1991:30f)

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# Talk of beliefs is not much worse off in CogSci

- Compared with the idealizations we use in physics, or the use of Newtonian physics to get things done in physical calculations

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# Dennett in defence of Folk

## Psychology

- All engaged in this debate agree that: “‘folk psychology’ provides a description system that permits highly reliable prediction of human (and much nonhuman) behavior.” (Dennett 1991:42)



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# Dennett's final verdict on the question of realism and instrumentalism

- "Now, once again, is the view I am defending here a sort of instrumentalism or a sort of realism? I think that the view itself is clearer than either of the labels, so I shall leave that question to anyone who still finds illumination in them." (Dennett 1991:51)

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# Churchland's eliminative materialism

- "Eliminative materialism is the thesis that our commonsense conception of psychological phenomena constitutes a radically false theory, a theory so fundamentally defective that both the principles and the ontology of that theory will eventually be displaced, rather than smoothly reduced, by completed neuroscience." (Churchland 1981:67)

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# Classical top-down explanations

- Classical CogSci/Phil of mind has been top-down in its explanations: start with the manifestations – intelligent behaviour – and look for what might be implementing this, without regard to its *actual* realizer in human beings: the brain.
- The classical view was that the brain was irrelevant (almost)

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# Different reactions to this

- Searle
- Churchland(s)

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# Co-evolutionary strategy

- History of science shows that relations between theories is messier than top-down theories assume. There are actually *very few* clear cases of intertheoretic reduction in the history of science.
- Take the interaction between different levels of explanation, different theories, seriously!
- **Hence:** Take the workings of the brain into consideration!

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# The argument for eliminativism

1. PropAtt attributions form a theory, Folk Psychology (loose definition of FP)
2. FP is a theory for two reasons:
  - ❑ It contains terms we use to make sense of how people act
  - ❑ It contains theoretical terms – we cannot observe beliefs directly
3. Central terms in a theory refer (claim about theories)

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# Why FP is a theory

- "FP is so *obviously* a theory that it must be held a major mystery why it has taken until the last half of the twentieth century for philosophers to realized it. The structural features of FP parallel perfectly those of mathematical physics; the only difference lies in the respective domain of abstract entities they exploit." (Churchland 1981:71)

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# Where FP fails

- "A serious inventory of this sort reveals a very troubled situation, one which would evoke open skepticism in the case of any theory less familiar and dear to us. ... When one centers one's attention not on what FP can explain, but on what it cannot explain or fails even to address, one discovers that there is a very great deal..." (Churchland 1981:73)



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# Where FP fails, quotation contd.

- "As examples of central and important mental phenomena that remain largely or wholly mysterious within the framework of FP, consider the nature and dynamics of mental illness, the faculty of creative imagination, or the ground of intelligence differences between individuals.

# Quotation contd.

- "... ignorance of the nature and psychological functions of sleep, ... ability to catch an outfield fly ball on the run ... the internal construction of a 3-D visual image from ... differences in the 2-D array of stimulations in our respective retinas. ... the rich variety of perceptual illusions ... the miracle of memory ... On these and many other mental phenomena, FP sheds negligible light."  
(Churchland 1981:73)

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# The argument for eliminativism, contd.

4. There are examples of successful theories that have turned out to be false, such as the Ptolemaic theory, or phlogiston theories
5. FP is a bad theory – it cannot be used for explanations and predictions, and it doesn't fit into the rest of science
6. So FP should be scrapped
7. Hence its central terms should be scrapped, too

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# Stich on eliminativism

- *Deconstructing the Mind* (1996). Here Stich takes back some of the above argument about the role of FP in a theory. Again, considerations from the philosophy of science and philosophy of language are put to use.

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# What should we have instead of Folk Psychology?

- Neural networks, connectionism, rooted in neurobiology?
- More about that tomorrow – ties in with Fodor's counterattack in "Why there still has to be a language of thought"!