

Phil 397
The Mind/Body Problem

Fall 1995
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Stephen Stich: *What Is a Theory of Mental Representation?*
[Handout #7]

§ Two Forms of Eliminativism

Weak Eliminativism:

___ **The representational states of commonsense psychology will play no role in a mature theory about the causes of human behavior.**

___ **The intentional states posited by commonsense psychology are not part of the ontology of cognitive science.**

Strong Eliminativism:

___ **Commonsense mental states don't even exist. There are no such things, just as there are no phlogiston, or witches.**

§ The Naturalistic Constraint on Theory of Mental Representation:

___ **The theory must show how representational properties of mental states can be explained in terms that are compatible with the broader, physicalistic view of nature provided by the natural sciences.**

Stich: the naturalistic constraint is misguided.

§ The Philosophical Approach to Mental Representation

___ **conceptual analysis (to give necessary and sufficient conditions for the concept of mental representation).**

Stich's position:

___ **there is now a fair amount of evidence suggesting that the assumptions underlying this traditional philosophical project may be simply mistaken.**

[Stich's Argument]:

- 1. The concept of mental representation is a concept.**
- 2. The philosophical approach to the analysis of concepts is to find a set of necessary and sufficient conditions for each concept.**
- 3. But such an approach has turned out to be not fruitful since our underlying structure for concepts are not just a set of necessary and sufficient conditions.**
- 4. Therefore, philosophy cannot provide an analysis for mental representation.**

§ Mental Representation and Eliminativism

[Cummins' Argument for Eliminativism]

1. According to computationalism, a pair of system can have the same computational properties, even though they differ in history, in environment, and even in physical makeup.
2. Beliefs, desires cannot be specified in a way that is independent of the environment.
3. Hence, beliefs, desires are not psychological states in the sense of 'psychological state' of interest to the computational theory of cognition.

§ Two Kinds of Theories of Reference

- ___ Cluster theory of reference of theoretical terms: Lewis, Carnap, Ryle, Cummins
- ___ Causal-historical theory: Putnam, Lycan

Stich's criticism: (p. 185)

(A) On the description theory, Eliminativism is trivially true.

___ Why?

_____ Description set A picks out a set of entities Xs, and description set B picks out another set of entities Ys. $A \neq B$, therefore $Xs \neq Ys$. For one to have a theory based on B-descriptions, one must eliminate talk about Xs. Therefore, eliminativism is true.

(B) On the causal-historical theory, eliminativism is trivially false.

___ Why?

_____ There is only one natural kind of belief that is picked out through a causal-historical chain. Theory A may give it a different description from what theory B would give. If theory B is true, then theory A is simply false. But even if theory A is false, it is still about the same kind of entities that theory B is about. One cannot eliminate those entities. Therefore, eliminativism is false.

§ STICH'S GENERAL LINE OF ARGUMENT:

1. There are many competing theories of mental representation and it is impossible for them to come up with a coherent project.
2. Furthermore, what mental representation is cannot be settled by the traditional philosophical method of conceptual analysis (defining necessary and sufficient conditions for what counts as a mental representation).
3. Other interdisciplinary projects might be more successful than philosophy. As long as one can give a high predicative reliability, one can save the notion of mental representation.
4. Whether mental representation can be naturalized bears on many issues such as what kind of theory of reference one is appealing to, it thus cannot be used to argue for or against eliminativism.
5. Therefore, the whole attempt on philosophers' part to define mental representation is totally futile and is doomed to fail.