

The Role of Folk Psychology in Churchland's Eliminative Materialism

The mind-body problem has kept philosophers busy ever since Descartes proposed it in the sixteenth century. The central question posed by the mind-body problem is the relationship between what we call the body and what we call the mind—one private, abstract, and the origin of all thoughts; the other public, concrete, and the executor of the mind's commands. Paul Churchland, a proponent of the eliminative materialist view, believes that the solution to the mind-body problem lies in eliminating the single concept that allows this problem to perpetuate—the folk psychological concept of mental states. Churchland argues that the best theory of mind is a materialistic one, not a folk psychological one. Unlike other materialist views such as identity theory, Churchland wants to remove the idea of mental states from our ontology because mental states cannot be matched 1:1 with corresponding physical states. This is why Churchland's view is called eliminative materialism—it is a materialistic account of the mind that eliminates the necessity for us to concern ourselves with mental events. At first this eliminative materialism appears to be a good solution to the mind-body problem because we need not concern ourselves with that problem if we adopt Churchland's view. However, there is a basic flaw in his argument that raises the question of whether we should actually give up folk psychology. In this paper, we will first walk through the premises of Churchland's argument, and then we will explore whether Churchland does a suitable job of justifying our adoption of eliminative materialism.

The central point of eliminative materialism is that we should discard our idea of mental states. Instead of adhering to Armstrong's materialist identity theory, which posits that there is a 1:1 correspondence between mental and physical states, Churchland denies the idea that any consistent mind-body identity can be achieved. The materialist identity theory was called into doubt because, as Churchland describes, "...it seemed unlikely that the arrival of an adequate materialist theory would

being with it the nice one-to-one matchups, between the concepts of folk psychology and the concepts of theoretical neuroscience, that intertheoretic reduction requires” (Churchland 349). The reason for this was that different physical systems can instantiate the same mental state, such as when I notice that both my roommate and her dog are happy. Even though the neurology of a dog’s brain is greatly different from my roommate’s brain, they both still appear to be happy. Hence, identity theory became doubtful because it could not explain how the same mental state can be caused by two completely different physical systems. Because we cannot match mental states with physical states, Churchland advocates that we should *eliminate* our idea of mental states. We are simply mistaken that they are a part of our ontology; it is not necessary for us to concern ourselves with mental states.

As with any problem, we must first try to get a foothold on concrete data before attempting to construct a rational argument about the problem. Below is a list of characteristics of what we call the “body” and “mind.” By studying the list below, we can see that the mind and body appear to be plainly distinct.

<i>Characteristics of the Body</i>	<i>Characteristics of the Mind</i>
Subject to physical laws	Not subject to any physical laws
Composed of matter	Consists of abstractions (awareness, introspection, self-consciousness)
Matter can affect other matter	Mind can affect other minds only through the body
Publicly observable	Private and unobservable
Body ultimately dies	Mind continues after death
Exists in space and time	Exists in time only
Bodies can meet	The mind enjoys “absolute solitude” (from Ryle)
The body executes actions	The mind wills actions to happen
The body senses	The mind perceives what the body senses

One fact that strikes us while comparing the characteristics of mind and body is the vague, abstract nature of the mind compared to the body. All physical objects we encounter have a certain vivid property of being physical; touches, tastes, smells, sights, and sounds all have a high degree of clarity and vivacity. As a result, they are easily remembered. The role of the body as a physical object is that it is the interface through which we come in contact with the physical world. However, properties of the mind are unclear and indistinct, and we encounter great difficulty in trying to determine the true nature of the mind. While

we can easily recognize physical objects, we find it difficult to describe exactly what mental states are. We know that our thoughts and emotions exist, but we cannot describe them in the same way as we can describe physical objects.

This may be exactly why folk psychology has been such a long-standing theory for describing our subjective experiences. We recognize the existence of facts such as our thoughts and emotions, but we are not yet able to state or comprehend exactly what it is that we think or feel. If we are unable to describe exactly what it is that we are feeling, then perhaps we are mistaken that we are feeling anything at all. This is exactly what Churchland suggests in eliminative materialism. Maybe there are no such things as mental events, only physical events, since folk psychology is no more than an “outright misrepresentation of our internal states and activities” as Churchland suggests (350). Instead of a folk psychological explanation of human behavior, we should look toward a more objective, neuroscientific explanation of it so we can avoid the semantic difficulty given by the mind-body problem.

Eliminative materialism appears to offer a quick, easy solution to the mind-body problem because it frees philosophers from having to even think about the problem. However, as is often the case in philosophical problems, quick and easy solutions deserve even greater scrutiny. Upon reading the article, Churchland did not seem to do justice in addressing the benefits of folk psychology. An opponent of eliminative materialism might say that there is little substantial argument for why eliminative materialism is a more accurate theory than folk psychology, especially when the opponent might be able to see many areas in which folk psychology has performed well. Since Churchland never addresses the benefits of folk psychology, he has not given us a complete argument as to why we should discard a theory that has been perfectly untouchable for centuries. So, if there turns out to be little reason to discard folk psychology, then Churchland will have been ineffective in advocating eliminative materialism.

The structure of Churchland's argument is as follows:

P1: Our common sense framework of folk psychology is an inaccurate and misleading one.

P2: The mind-body problem appears to exist because we cannot intertheoretically reduce folk psychology into theoretical neuroscience.

P3: In the past, similar irreducible theories have been discarded because they simply could not fit within the current ontology.

C: Getting rid of folk psychology should end the existence of the mind-body problem.

The soundness of Churchland's argument rests on whether the three premises of his valid argument above are true. Premise 3 is a historical fact, so it must be true. The truthfulness of Premise 2 is evident in identity theory's failure to provide a 1:1 match-up between mental and physical events, thereby not allowing folk psychological theory to be reduced to theoretical neuroscience.

However, the truthfulness of Premise 1 is questionable, and this fact is what lies behind my objection against eliminative materialism. When Churchland said that our common sense psychological framework is a "false and misleading conception of the causes of human behavior," he did his best in later sections of the article to denounce folk psychology. However, any person can think of ways that folk psychology has helped to form adequately correct ideas of human behavior, examples of which will be given below. Because Churchland's treatment of folk psychology has essentially been one-sided, we cannot be sure that his argument for eliminative materialism is a sound one.

Churchland has neglected the powerful abilities that folk psychology has already given us in describing, explaining, and predicting human behavior. Folk psychology is something that we all practice on a daily basis, since social interactions consist primarily of mentally describing, explaining, and predicting each other's behavior. It has been very useful in helping us to relate to one another; without it, society could not exist. First, we can describe people as having certain mental states similar to our own; for example, if my roommate smiles, then I describe her as being happy because I also smile when I am happy. Second, we can explain the behavior of others by making inferences about their mental states. To demonstrate this, if Person X is shivering, then I infer that the shivering was caused by Person X's mental

state of feeling cold. Last, we can predict the behavior of others by assuming that they are in particular mental states. For example, almost every well-behaved child knows not to bother their parents when they come home tired from work; by assuming that his or her parents are in a tired mental state, the child avoids having to deal with fussy parents.

Folk psychology is also a prerequisite for any social function, including the study of science from which theoretical neuroscience is derived. We act a certain way around someone whom we believe to be happy than around someone whom we believe to be crazy or suicidal; an anxious situation would arise if a happy, normal person were to suddenly become institutionalized. Other cases of social incongruity might include trying to play basketball with our great-grandmothers, or if we knowingly let the neighborhood burglar in because it was too hot outside. Folk psychology has certainly done more for keeping society cohesive than theoretical neuroscience has; without the social glue of folk psychology, no rational endeavor such as theoretical neuroscience could even hope to get started. This is because it takes a cooperative body of people to advance any area of research, and if people are unable to relate to one another, then no progress could ever be made. Folk psychology must therefore inevitably come before theoretical neuroscience, and for theoretical neuroscience to advance, folk psychology must exist.

Churchland's response to the proposed objection above would likely consist of rebutting the benefits of folk psychology. Because "intertheoretic reduction" between folk psychology and materialism is not possible, Churchland argues that one theory must be discarded, and the one that should go is folk psychology (349). This has been done many times in the past, such as the abandonment of caloric in favor of a kinetic energy explanation of heat, the abandonment of phlogiston in favor of an oxygen explanation of combustion, the abandonment of witches in favor of the idea of mental illness, and the abandonment of a 2,000-year-old geocentric theory of the universe in favor of the one we currently hold today (Churchland 350-351). In time, folk psychology may also pass, regardless of whether it has been a long-standing successful theory.

Another reason why folk psychology is an inaccurate theory is that we have difficulty in determining the nature of our mental thoughts or states. Because of this difficulty, Churchland suggests that we

should abandon all thought of mental states. We understand mental concepts in terms of folk psychological ideas; it is indisputable that we have a folk psychology in the sense of a collection of ideas of mental states. However, we cannot use folk psychology to access the meanings of our mental concepts; we can recognize that we feel happy or sad, but we are unable to determine the meaning or origin of our feelings. For this reason, Churchland argues, we need to use theoretical neuroscience, not folk psychology, to discover the true nature of the mind.

Eliminative materialists like Churchland agree that folk psychology is an inaccurate theory and that folk psychological ideas like feelings, experiences, and beliefs are mistaken ideas. To these philosophers, no one knows how long folk psychology will last. However, we should be worried more about whether eliminative materialism will last in the face of the long-standing theory of folk psychology. It is true that such unshakable theories such as Aristotle's physical account of the universe have been toppled over many times in the past. However, we should also stop to consider the many recent theories that have been raised, for example, against Einstein's relativistic account of the universe, or even earlier attempts by natural philosophers like Ptolemy and Tycho Brahe to elucidate the structure of the universe. Many of these fringe theories have fallen over time; modern-day examples of fringe theories can be found simply by typing "antigravity" on any search engine on the Internet. By comparison to the long-standing theory of folk psychology, eliminative materialism is also a fringe theory. Perhaps eliminative materialism will also fall short of overthrowing folk psychology, but perhaps, Churchland is correct in saying that our "collective conceptual destiny lies substantially toward the revolutionary end of the spectrum" (Churchland 353). Only time will tell whether eliminative materialism will someday become our new account of the mind.