

LSU PHIL 4941 / Spring 2016 / John Protevi

<http://www.protevi.com/john/PhilMind>

Classroom use only.

Paul M Churchland, "Eliminative Materialism and the Propositional Attitudes," in Chalmers 2002, 568-580. Originally, *Journal of Philosophy* 78 (1981): 67-90.

## Introduction

I: Why FP is a Theory

II: Why FP might (really) be False

III: Arguments Against Elimination

IV: The Conservative Nature of Functionalism

V: Beyond FP

## INTRODUCTION

EM holds that folk psychology (FP) is a false theory. The referents of its concepts (e.g., propositional attitudes of belief, desire, and so on) do not exist and its principles (the type of rationality it assumes) do not track the real powers of thought. Thus FP will have to be eliminated in favor of the objects and principles of a completed neuroscience (CN). FP will have been to that completed neuroscience what the old chemistry of "phlogiston" and so on is now to contemporary chemistry: a mistaken path that is now known to have posited non-existent entities.

EM is different from reductive materialism (RM). RM holds that the referents of the concepts and principles of FP are true objects, but that they can be described by (that is, "reduced to") neuroscientific language. We have seen RM in identity theories: mental terms and brain terms have different senses, but the same referent (brain states).

It used to be that qualia were the stumbling blocks to materialism; now it's the intentional that is viewed as irreducible.

According to EM, FP is an empirical theory.

### I: Why FP is a Theory

1. It unifies the following topics in phil mind:
  - a. Explanation and prediction of behavior by use of belief-desire psychology and its laws.
  - b. Semantics of mental terms, which are fixed by network of FP laws.
  - c. Enables making sense of "problem of other minds" by means of a hypothesis, rather than analogy with our own mind, or induction from observation of behavior.
  - d. Introspective evidence is explanatory on the assumption of FP as a theory.
  - e. Intentionality / propositional attitudes are a feature of FP as a theory; they aren't a mystery of nature; they are what the FP theory calls for.
2. PC then draws an analogy btw FP and physics, as theories

- a. “The structural features of FP parallel perfectly those of mathematical physics; the only difference lies in the respective domains of abstract entities they exploit – numbers in the case of physics and propositions in the case of psychology”
- b. Once you buy that, you can make sense of the relations of 4 positions on mind-body problem
  - i. Identity theory: FP is smoothly reducible to CN; concepts of FP are preserved as their referents are brain states
  - ii. Dualism: FP is irreducible to CN as it non-redundantly describes a non-physical, yet natural, domain.
  - iii. Functionalism: FP is irreducible to CN, as it is abstract organization of functional states realizable in different material substrates, hence CN, as a brain science, describes a realization base that is only sufficient, not necessary, for realization of FP.
  - iv. EM: FP won’t be reduced, bcs it is such a bad theory; it will be displaced by CN as a better theory.

## II: Why FP might (really) be False

1. Failures of FP to explain:
  - a. Mental illness
  - b. Creative imagination
  - c. Variability of intelligence in a population
  - d. Sleep
  - e. Sophisticated sensori-motor activities (catching a fly ball)
  - f. Perceptual illusion
  - g. Memory
  - h. Learning, especially large-scale conceptual change
2. History of FP
  - a. Retreat (from animism)
  - b. Infertility (hasn’t developed since the Greeks)
3. Poor prospects of integration with other scientific theories

## III: Arguments Against Elimination

1. Functionalism holds that FP
  - a. Is not an empirical theory;
  - b. Is not false or refutable by empirical claims;
  - c. Should not be transcended as defunct
2. Functionalism attacks EM on two fronts
  - a. Normativity: FP expresses an ideal of rationality that real humans might fall away from, but that needs to be upheld and cannot be reduced
  - b. Abstraction: FP is not bound to its human neural realization base; its principles can be defined independently of neuroscience (hence it can’t be reduced to or eliminated by CN)
3. Shifting the burden of proof: these two fronts make it seem
  - a. As if it’s up to empirical systems to instantiate FP
  - b. Instead of it being up to FP to describe the “internal activities of a naturally distinct class of empirical systems.”
4. Fodor

- a. Claims psych should look for best functional characterization of us
- b. He still has a low opinion of EM
  - i. There's nothing really wrong with FP; in fact FP's propositional attitudes show up in Fodor's Language of Thought hypothesis
  - ii. It's still all about functions, so natural realization base is irrelevant

#### IV: The Conservative Nature of Functionalism

1. The abstraction angle:
  - a. Analogies with eliminated former sciences:
    - i. Alchemy: "being ensouled with [one of the alchemy salts] is actually a functional state" – it's an abstract description of the powers that such ensoulment brings to its multiple realization bases
    - ii. Phlogiston: having it is a functional state defined by causal dispositions
    - iii. The four humors theory: same thing
  - b. What prevents functionalism in phil mind from being same sort of defense of FP?
  - c. What we need to do is find the natural kind that *directly* gives rise to capacities displayed by various systems
  - d. Note that EM can be either functionalist or naturalist: its target is FP
2. The normativity angle:
  - a. Logical relations do not imply normativity; we just happen to value many of the relations among propositions; but what about despair as logically following disappointment in highly valued states of affairs? Why is that "normative"? It's just predictable.
  - b. FP only gives us minimal, not ideal, rationality
  - c. Why assume that intellectual virtue is captured at level of propositional attitudes? Why bind thought to language?
  - d. Why not go to level of a "deeper and more general kinematics of cognitive activity"? EM is not anti-normative: it just doesn't think FP is the level where the best accounts of thinking will be found.

#### V: Beyond FP

1. Three scenarios, progressively moving nature of thought away from natural language
  - a. Dynamic systems theory in which cognitive states are complex and dynamic "solids" in an N-dimensional phase space
    - i. This will account for explanations of behavior, learning, mental illness, and intelligence variation
    - ii. A proposition would be a one-dimensional and static projection from this N-dimensional dynamic solid
      1. It will convey some information about the cognitive state
      2. But won't be able to express the true dynamics going on
        - a. That is, there won't be any laws about the relation of FP states
        - b. The true laws of thought will be much more complex dynamics
    - iii. Success here might not immediately displace everyday use of FP, but then again it might eventually do so

- b. Evolved perceptual capacities might underlie natural language use, which needs only a thin portion of those capacities.
    - i. So we might be able to learn another type of language with “alien” syntax and semantics. The relations among its elements (the ways in which we evaluate X-strings) might not map onto true / false, entailment, and so on, which are sentence-bound.
    - ii. As this new language spreads, old-fashioned “natural languages” die out, and with them disappear the propositional attitudes of FP, replaced by the X-strings of the new language.
  - c. Informational transmission (cross-hemisphere learning) within brains suggests that cross-brain communication and entrainment might be possible. Why bother to talk then when you can brain-meld? Why bother with propositions between people when your hemispheres don’t communicate propositionally?
2. These scenarios were designed to nudge aside the aura of indispensability of FP.
3. Rejection of a common reductio:
- a. The claim is that the only thing that saves EM from meaninglessness (just being a string of marks) is intentionality-animation (someone has an attitude toward the propositions expressed by the sentences).
  - b. But this is question-begging: it assumes FP is part of the justification of FP. It’s like saying no one can deny vital spirits because without vital spirits you would be dead and dead people cannot deny anything.