

## Attacks On Psychological Explanation

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Psychology, and the folk psychology on which it is based, have been under attack by a succession of philosophers who have tried to show that a science of psychology is impossible. They claim that intentional states, such as beliefs and desires, that are referenced in psychological explanations of behavior either do not exist, or if they exist, are not the sort of things that can be causes of behavior. I defend the views that intentional states exist and that they are causes of behavior. And I rebut the principal criticisms that have been directed against psychological and folk-psychological explanations of behavior.

The primary subject matter of psychology is behavior. "Behavior," in this meaning of the term, is something the agent does. So if I stick my arm out in order to signal for a turn, this is something I do, but if the extension of the arm is a manifestation of the St. Vitus' dance, that is something the arm does. Generally, the term "behavior" is restricted to bodily movements. Thus, although striking the keys of the typewriter and the thinking that preceded it were both things that I did, only the former counts as behavior. I will say that a bodily movement is behavior only if it is intentional under some description.

Folk-psychology explanations of behavior are explanations in terms of agents' reasons for doing things. I flip the switch in order to turn on the light. The behavior to be explained is my flipping the switch, and the explanation is that I wanted to turn on the light and believed that I could do so by flipping the switch.

I explained my flipping the switch by referring to my reason for doing it, but the behavior could have also been explained by referring to my intention in doing it. I flipped the switch in order to turn on the light, that is, the cause of my flipping the switch was my intention to turn on the light. Which explanation is to be preferred? The explanation in terms of intention is simpler and goes right to the heart of the matter. Regardless of how my intention was formed, it was my intention to turn on the light that triggered my flipping the switch. On the other hand, explanation in terms of reasons is a more complete explanation, and a central concern of folk psychology is why we have the intentions we do.

My flipping the switch is the result of a fairly complex bodily movement, and the bodily movement is the cause of the switch moving to the on position. The cause of my flipping the switch was my intention to turn on the light. But a complete explanation of the occurrence of the bodily movement can be given entirely in physiological terms. How then are my intentional states related to the neural

events that the physiologist says are the cause of the bodily movement? When an explanation is requested for my flipping the switch, is the explanation in terms of reasons or the explanation in terms of neural events more appropriate? The neurological answer to the question "Why did he flip the switch?" hardly seems to be an answer at all. Does this mean that the question is not a request for a causal explanation? I think that the explanation in terms of my reason for flipping the switch is a causal explanation, but that there is a subtle difference between what the reasons explanation explains and what the physiological explanation explains. In the example of my sticking my arm out in order to signal for a turn, the explanandum is my extending my arm out and the explanans is my intention to signal. In the physiological explanation, the explanandum is what happens to my arm and the explanans is certain occurrences in the nervous system. If we take "the arm moving out the window" and "my sticking my arm out the window" to refer to the same event, the neural explanation would explain the event under the first description and the reasons explanation would explain the event under the second description. Or the explanations could be regarded as explanations of somewhat different events. Think of the expression "my sticking my arm out" as referring to the entire activity that begins with the events inside my body and ends when the bodily movement occurs. The behavior that is explained in terms of reasons would then be this entire activity, whereas the physiological explanation would be the explanation of the terminal event – the bodily movement.

Folk psychologists assume that organisms whose behavior is explicable in terms of beliefs and desires are rational. Something of what this means can be seen by contrasting these two arguments. "Rover is a dog; all dogs bark; therefore, Rover barks." And "She thinks that Rover is a dog; she thinks that all dogs bark; therefore she thinks that Rover barks." The first argument is valid, and the second argument is contingent. Nevertheless, according to folk psychology, the conclusions of arguments like the second argument are often true when their premises are true. Similarly, if X and Y provide inductive support for Z, then she believes that X and she believes that Y will provide inductive support for she believes that Z. In short, folk psychology holds that formation of belief is generally in accordance with elementary logical principles. Logic also plays a part in the formation of desire: if she want Y and believes that X is a means to Y, this will dispose her to want to do X, though whether she will actually do X may depend on other considerations.

Ryle did not think that beliefs and desires could be causes of behavior, because beliefs and desires are dispositions and dispositions are not the right sort of things to be causes of anything.<sup>1</sup> In fact, the very existence of beliefs and desires are on shaky grounds with Ryle. This is because Ryle's theory of dispositions is a nonreductive theory, that is, there is nothing to be said about an object's disposi-

tion to X except to say that it Xes in certain circumstances; there is no basis in the object for it responding like it does. Ryle says this even though he admits that the disposition is not the same thing as its manifestations and the object may have the disposition even when it is not being manifested. But if the disposition is not the same thing as its manifestations in certain circumstances and it cannot be identified with some condition of the object, what could the disposition be? Perhaps it is a mere *abstractum*.

It is not clear whether Ryle thought that all behavior could be causally explained. As has been noted, causal explanations in the terms of beliefs and desires are ruled out; in fact, any kind of explanation in terms of inner events, mental or physical, would be rejected. Ryle says that abnormal behavior can be causally explained, but he suggests that it is inappropriate to ask for causal explanations of normal behavior.<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, he seems to say that causal explanation of normal behavior is easy, requiring no special expertise. In the end, Ryle leaves it up in the air whether all behavior is subject to causal explanation. But if Ryle is not as clear as we would like him to be, the action theorists are perfectly clear. Here are two quotes that illustrate.

... if we are in fact confronted with a case of genuine action (i.e., an act of doing something as opposed to suffering something), then causal explanations are *ipso facto* inappropriate.<sup>3</sup>

... when we are concerned with explanations of human actions, there causal factors and causal laws in the sense in which, for example, these terms are employed in the biological sciences are wholly irrelevant to the understanding we see.<sup>4</sup>

Action theorists claim that causal explanations of human actions are impossible. If there were no causes of human actions, this would explain why causal explanations of actions are impossible. I assume that the theorists would not deny that human actions are events. And if they are events, why should they be exceptions to the rule that every event has a cause? Absurd as it sounds, some of the theorists may have thought that actions are uncaused events. I am inclined to think so, because some of the theorists seemed to think that causal determination of actions is incompatible with freedom and responsibility, but they also seemed to think that we are free and responsible.

However, some of the theorists may have agreed that actions have causes, but they cannot be causally explained because it is impossible in principle to discover what the causes are. But this view, which implies that there are truths that are in principle impossible to discover, is almost as anomalous as the view that actions are uncaused events.

Some of the reasons that action theorists have given for denying that causal explanation of behavior is possible are briefly discussed below. My discussion relies heavily on Davidson's "Actions, Reasons, and Causes."<sup>5</sup>

1. Singular causal statements imply causal generalizations, but when actions are explained by reasons, generalizations are unavailable. Davidson admits that we cannot usually cite generalizations when we make statements of the form "P's reasons for doing x was y," but he says the same thing can be said about most singular causal statements. Thus, I may not be able to support my statement that it was the impact of the stone that broke the window even though I am sure it was the cause.

2. A reason for an action cannot be the cause of the action, because a cause must be logically distinct from its effect, and a reason for an action is not logically distinct from the action. All that this logical connection argument amounts to is that if X is the cause of Y, then there must be some true description of X (other than it is the cause of Y) and some true description of Y (other than it is the effect of X). Intentions easily pass that test. They can exist alone; they do not have to be expressed or exercised. And the fact that expressions of intention can occur without exercises of intention means that other people can find out that a person is intending to X without finding out whether she does. The occurrence of the intentional action entails the existence of the intention, but there are ways in which the action can be described without mentioning the intention with which it was done. In fact, in many cases the observer will not know what the intention is.

3. A person knows without observation or induction what the reasons for her actions are, but causes of events cannot be known except by observation and induction. Therefore, reasons are not causes. Knowledge of what our reasons and intentions are should be distinguished from our knowledge of the causal efficacy of our reasons and intentions. Perhaps we know the former without observation and induction, but the latter is probably something we learn from experience. I know that I can wiggle my fingers at will, but not my ears, and I think that this is something that I learned from experience.

Many recent philosophers concerned with psychology think of themselves as philosophical contributors to cognitive science. Nearly all of them endorse the view that if intentional states exist they are incarnated in the nervous system. Noneliminative materialists claim that intentional systems exist and are incarnated in the nervous system. Jerry Fodor defends a position which he calls *intentional realism* and defines as "the doctrine that propositional attitudes are contentful ... and causally efficacious ... states instantiated in ... neural systems ..."<sup>6</sup> Noneliminative materialism is not a threat to folk psychology. Most of its advocates would agree that the explanatory power of folk-psychological explanation does not depend on knowing how intentional states are instantiated. And doctrines like intentional re-

alism are entirely consistent with folk psychology. It may even be that folk psychologists have always thought that beliefs and desires are instantiated in the bodies of humans.

Eliminative materialism, however, is a threat. Its central claim is that beliefs and desires do not exist. And since they do not exist, they cannot be explananda in causal explanations of behavior. In the rest of the paper I will defend folk psychology against criticisms of the eliminativists.

Churchland offers three criticisms of folk psychology.<sup>7</sup> 1. "FP suffers explanatory failures on a massive scale." 2. "It has been stagnant for at least twenty-five centuries." 3. There is little prospect that its intentional categories will be reduced to neuroscience.

1. Some of Churchland's examples of massive failure are the dynamics of mental illness, the faculty of creative imagination, the nature and functions of sleep, the ability to catch an outfield fly, a 3-D visual image, and the rich variety of perceptual illusions.<sup>8</sup> The categories of folk psychology do not apply to the examples mentioned by Churchland. So these are not examples of failed attempts to explain behavior.

2. Some writers have tried to rebut Churchland's second claim by denying that folk psychology has been stagnant for at least twenty-five centuries. However, I think that the basic principles of folk psychology have remained unchanged for a lot longer than twenty-five centuries. I agree with Strawson that "there is a massive central core of human thinking" and that "there are categories and concepts, which in their fundamental character, change not at all."<sup>9</sup> If the principles of folk psychology belong to that massive central core of thinking, is that a black mark against folk psychology?

3. There is little prospect that folk psychology will be reduced to neuroscience. I suppose that successful reduction would show that intentional states are incarnated in the nervous system. This is central to the eliminativist case. Virtually everybody agrees that if beliefs, desires, etc. exist they are incarnated in the nervous system. So the eliminativists win their case – intentional states do not exist – if they can show that the states are not incarnated in the nervous system. Some writers who have accepted the likelihood that beliefs and desires do not exist have gone on to give causal explanations of behavior in terms of intentional states. But I agree that if intentional states do not exist they cannot be causes of behavior.

Ramsey, et al., announce that they will defend the conditional claim that if certain connectionist hypotheses are true, then eliminativism is true.<sup>10</sup> I cannot survey the complete argument, but the crucial consideration is that intentional states must be naturally isolable, that is, have a definite location in the brain with identifiable boundaries, if they are to be represented in the brain.<sup>11</sup> But anything that can

be represented in the connectionist model is widely distributed in the brain. And, since all agree that intentional states exist only if they are represented in the brain, it follows that they do not exist.

It is not one of the tenets of folk psychology that intentional states are naturally isolable in the brain. Wide distribution is consistent with folk psychology. My suit is located in two closets in my house – the coat in one closet and the pants in another. It would not do violence to folk psychology if intentional states had that kind of location in the brain.

The authors' conclusion is curious. "If these models turn out to offer the best accounts of belief and memory, we shall be confronting an *ontologically radical* theory change that will support the conclusion that propositional attitudes, like caloric and phlogiston, do not exist."<sup>12</sup> As an hypothesis designed to account for belief and memory, it gets whatever support it has from them. It is curious then that the hypothesis implies that beliefs and memories do not exist. And something similar has been happening ever since behaviorism appeared upon the scene. Behaviorists thought that their subject matter was behavior, but they denied that there are mental causes of behavior. But behavior just is bodily movement that has a mental cause. Thus, they turned their backs on the very subject matter that they were supposed to be investigating.

#### Notes

1. G. Ryle, *The Concept of Mind* (Chicago: The Univ. of Chicago Press, 1984), pp. 116-149.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 326.
3. R.S. Peters, *The Concept of Motivation* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1958), p. 12.
4. A.I. Melden, *Free Action* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1961), p. 184.
5. Donald Davidson, "Actions, Reasons, and Causes," in *An Introduction to Philosophical Inquiry*, ed. Joseph Margolis (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1968), pp. 205-211.
6. Quoted in John D. Greenwood, "Introduction: Folk psychology and scientific psychology," *The Future of Folk Psychology*, ed. John D. Greenwood (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1991), p. 4.
7. P. Churchland, "Eliminative Materialism and Propositional Attitudes," *Journal of Philosophy*, 78 (1981), pp. 76-77.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 73.
9. P.F. Strawson, *Individuals* (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Books, 1963), p. xiv.

10. W. Ramsey, S. Stich, and J. Garon, "Connectionism, eliminativism, and the future of folk psychology," in *The Future of Folk Psychology*, p. 94.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 97.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 116.