

# ***NOTHING NEW: ONE OF THE NUMEROUS OBJECTIONS TO ELIMINATIVISM***

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## *Introduction*

The philosophy of mind, of which the body – mind problem is, by my account, it's most interesting field, may find the very beginning of itself in the thoughts of one Rene Descartes. Debates about the nature of the soul and the spirit were, ofcourse, the peaks of Greek philosophy aswell, but Descartes was the wisdom-lover that tried to explain the interaction of these two entities by means of rational categories, a pursuit he could not finish because of the knots he could not untie. But the philosophy of mind as we know it today begins in the twentieth century with Gilbert Ryle's critique of cartesian dualism. After Ryle (a behaviorist concerning this matter) the mind-body problem found itself reconstructed over and over again in just a few decades, thus taking the shapes of reductive materialism, non-reductive materialism, functionalism, eliminativism etc. Most of these names signify explicit materialistic standpoints, but the purpose of this small article is to stop at one of them, the most fatal of them all, and once more reflect upon the pillars on which it stands. The discussion of the day is, obviously, eliminative materialism.

### *1. Eliminativism in general*

In order to make the eliminativist theory more understandable for those who may not be already acquainted with it, I will attempt to give a short reconstruction of the theory from which eliminativism itself sprung from, in it's attempt to become independent from it whilst trying to bypass the problems that the previous theory got tangled up in. I believe that the fundamental flaws of eliminativism will become much more transparent if we show that the bridge between the identity theory and eliminativism is not a legitimate one.

#### *1.1. Reductive materialism (the identity theory)*

Unlike the once generally accepted dualism of mind and body, the identity theory claims that these two are not separate entities. According to this theory, all of our mental states (consciousness, beliefs, wishes...) are nothing more than physical states of the brain. But this does not mean that mental states do not exist, it only means that they do not represent anything more than the brain and its physical states. In short, the concepts of the brain and of the mind both refer to the same reality – the human brain, and all this means is that they are not ontologically independent.

### 1.2. *Eliminative materialism*

A different standpoint is the eliminativist one (if it is even possible for an eliminativist to have a standpoint), for he does not want to reduce the mind to the brain. The eliminativist is aware of the problems that reductionism has found itself in (not the topic of this discussion) so he claims that the reductionist attempt is not possible. This new approach that has now been brought to our attention is supposed to be a much simpler one and it consists of the total elimination of the mental. So, instead of trying to reduce one entity to another, the eliminativist simply decides to throw away the one that is causing him trouble, in this case the mind, and subsequently consciousness. To state this more clearly, eliminativism claims that all of our concepts such as a propositional attitude, consciousness, belief, intentionality etc. do not really refer to anything. The brain and the physical states of the brain are not the cause of consciousness nor consciousness itself, but physical states and physical states alone.

The consequence of accepting this theory and promoting it in practice, would be the complete elimination of our every day mental language (pain, desire, belief...) from the descriptions of our inner states, and the beginning of a new era in which we would use only neurological language in the descriptions of these states. For instance, if we were to get scorched, we would not exclaim that we are in pain, but rather that the c-fibres in our brain have been activated (Rorty, 1990). Ofcourse, this type of language expression is very strange and profoundly counterintuitive to us, but the eliminativist is convinced that the way that we have been trying to express our inner states is no more than *theory*, and in no case *a report* of what is happening.

### *1.3. Arguments for eliminativism*

The fact that the eliminativist does not begin the defence of his theory by means of direct philosophical or scientific argumentation in favour of it is very interesting. What he does instead is criticize the so called folk psychology theory. This should then result in the rejection of folk psychology, after which we would have no other choice but to accept the standpoint of eliminative materialism. Folk psychology (our everyday talk of our inner states by means of mentalistic language) is introduced into this context as a *completely mistaken and misleading theory of what goes on inside our brains*. Subsequently, the concept of consciousness is something that belongs to this obsolete and false theory and must be dealt with in the same manner. But why should folk psychological language be completely false? We have already stated that even the reductionist claimed that there was nothing more to consciousness than brain activity, but he never said that we have to eliminate it and stop talking about it.

Well, as we've previously said, eliminativists do not consider reduction as a possibility, but simply because they claim that *there is nothing to reduce*. To make this sort of a radical statement sound more reasonable, they turn to similar situations in the past, when it was also impossible to reduce one theory to another, so the older theory had been completely replaced with the new one. Short and simple, just as we could not reduce demons and witches to viruses and bacteria, after these were found to be the real cause of illness, we cannot reduce consciousness to the brain. Instead, we must throw it out of our scientific and every day language just as we did so with demons and witches. Once again, to use terms like consciousness or belief means only to theorize about what is really happening, neurological processes.

Other eliminativist arguments are based mainly on showing the simplicity and preciseness that emerge from their theory when one wants to describe his inner states. This is a common argument for every theory that may find its roots in Quinian naturalism.

### *2. The fundamental flaw of eliminativism*

It seems appropriate that one so radical and controversial theory should be confronted to a great deal of criticism. The arguments most often used against it are (1) the self-refutation objection – the eliminativist either believes that there are no beliefs, which is contradictory, or he

has no beliefs and he doesn't believe his own theory; (2) the argument claiming that folk psychology is not a theory, so it cannot be dealt with as a theory; (3) and the argument claiming that folk psychology is a theory, but a very successful theory (Ramsey, 2003).

But, perhaps these arguments are not as needed as they seem to be, further more, arguments two and three only raise new questions about the status of folk psychology, and I doubt that there is any chance for more than ten people to agree on that. The sort of argument we need in this case must be at least as simple as eliminativism supposes itself to be. This argument would simply have to show that consciousness can not be eliminated the same way that witches and demons were. This is why we must ask our selves: 'Is there a significant difference between talking about consciousness and talking about demons and are there any examples to prove it?'

### *2.1. The categorial flaw*

The significant difference between demons and consciousness really does exist but the form of the eliminativist argument is such that it hides this difference. Namely, the eliminativist presupposes that folk psychological terms are intended for *explaining* something, but this is not the case.

«Consciousness is a non-sensible, but it is not a theoretical entity, nor is 'consciousness' a theoretical concept. Theoretical concepts are introduced into science in order to explain all kinds of phenomena, but consciousness is not a concept we use to explain something; on the contrary, consciousness is something that needs explaining. [...] So it is clear that this concept will, just as propositional attitudes or senses, not be used in the final theory, because the final theory will be the *explanans*, while concepts such as consciousness, senses, perception, propositional attitudes etc. will remain what they always were – *explanandums*, entities that need to be explained. It would be very bad if the the *explanans* possessed the same concepts it wanted to or should have explained. If it were so, then there really wouldn't be an explanation because it would be circular.»  
(Pećnjak, 2002)

The concept of consciousness has obviously been comprehended incorrectly and the main mistake of eliminativism is, believe it or not, a categorial flaw, not so different from the one that caused the of the contemporary mind - body problem. These terms were quite simply misused. It looks as though this argument is just like saying that folk psychology is not a theory. But we are not dealing with folk psychology as a whole that also has its attempts of dealing with certain theoretical problems. Right now we are dealing with certain concepts that have been misinterpreted within eliminative materialism. This does not mean that there are no folk-psychological theories. Still, both in folk psychology and reductive materialism, as well as in any other theory I've ever heard about, consciousness has always been something that needs explaining, not something that explains something else.

## 2.2. *The problem of Antipodeans*

If I have at all been successful in unvailing the fundamental flaws of eliminativism, despite the plausible effort that has been put into it, I would now like to say a bit more about the illegitimacy and the needlessness of going from reductionism to eliminativism. I believe that it would be best to do this on the example of Richard Rorty's Antipodeans (Rorty, 1990). The Antipodeans were the inhabitants of another planet, and they were very much like us, except for one little difference, they did not possess the concepts of mind or of consciousness. When they would scorch themselves they would not say that they are in pain, but rather that their c-fibres have been stimulated. By every account they would be the perfect example of eliminativist type behavior. Still, there are reasons to believe that they too possess consciousness, although the concept itself is foreign to them. When scientists from earth asked them how do they know that their c-fibres have been stimulated, their first answer was that they *just know*. I think that this is the first place in the Antipodean description where Rorty made a big mistake, because to say that we *just know* something in earth language usually means that we have some sort of an intuition, and we know very well that there is no place for intuitions in eliminativism. Shortly after, the earthly scientists were interested if the blooming Antipodean neurology had discovered a neuronal state (the cause of the intuition) that could give them an insight into what was happening inside of them. The answer was an affirmative one. There is the *neuronic state T* that sends the information. I consider this to be Rorty's second mistake because I see nothing stopping

me from claiming that this is a conscious state. In that case the ball would be back in the reductionist corner and the question would arise: Why eliminate consciousness as an entity or a concept when there is obviously a reality to which it refers, even if this reality is purely physical. It is obvious that we still have the right to claim that the concepts of our mental language do refer to something.

### *Conclusion*

In the end I must conclude that eliminativism is both illegitimate and unneeded. That it lacks legitimacy I believe has been shown in (2, 2.1) because it uses mental terminology as an *explanans*, thus making a mistake in categories (not the same one as Descartes, but still a mistake), and that there is simply no need for it I believe has been shown in (2.2), because it does not show us why we shouldn't call some brain states conscious states.

There are ofcourse many more interesting ways of confronting eliminativism, but they are not the agenda of this short elaboration. There is also a more modern current of eliminativism, so called functional eliminativism, with which philosophers deal with by other means, but after all, it is also built on the fundamentals of his older brother, so I don't think that it is really a serious threat to those who wish to keep the concepts of mind and spirit, even if they may be only physical processes in our brains.

### *Bibliography*

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