

Handout #5: Ned Block's Absent Qualia Argument

1. Type-Functionalism (Again)

Block's definition of type-functionalism: 'Each type of mental state . . . is a disposition [or the state of being disposed] to act in certain ways and to have certain mental states given certain sensory inputs and certain [other] mental states.'

Behaviorism: Each mental state is the state of being disposed to act in certain ways given certain environmental stimuli.

An objection: The holism of the mental. We can't identify the desire to stay dry with a disposition to take an umbrella when it is raining because one can lack this disposition and still want to stay dry so long as one doesn't realize (or know, or believe) that it is raining. Indeed, even if one wants to stay dry and knows it is raining, one may still lack a behaviorally manifest disposition to take an umbrella, if one knows that one will be late for one's appointment if one looks for one's umbrella and one wants to be on time more than one wants to stay dry. The lesson: Individual mental states don't cause behaviors on their own. Mental states have behavioral effects in (fairly large) groups.

2. Chauvinism and Multiple Realizability

A theory of mind is *chauvinistic* if it fails to attribute a mental state to something that does have that state. When a theory is chauvinistic it *imposes necessary criteria* for mentality that *aren't really necessary*.

Two Functionalist Arguments Against the Identity Theory

a. Martians: Suppose we encounter aliens that behave just like us. They speak a language we eventually translate into English. They grimace when they're burned and they say things we translate as "I am in pain." Now suppose we do some Martian biology and discover that Martians are made of very different chemical elements than are we. Intuitively, we'd want to say that the Martians do in fact feel pain, but the identity theory says they don't.

The Problem of Other Minds: If you want to say that we don't know that the Martians feel pain, how do you know that the people around you feel pain? Do you need to: (i) inspect your own brain, (ii) cut someone open and look at his brain, and (iii) establish that his brain is made of the stuff as is your own, in order to verify that he is capable of having the kind of experiences that you regularly undergo? Would significant differences in the neurological realization of pain in humans and other animals undermine your confidence that these other animals feel pain even if they act exactly as we do when we

are in pain? Might dogs fail to experience pain? Is this really consistent with our observations?

b. Multiple Realizability: Some mental activities are largely localized in (or correlated with processes that are localized in) particular areas of the brain. The brain has distinct centers for language production (Broca's area) and language comprehension (Wernicke's area), centers where one's declarative memories (or memories of facts) are put into place, areas devoted to the processing of visual information, and different areas devoted to storing one's procedural memories (i.e. one's know-how or skills). (The list goes on.) However, if one sustains damage in one of these areas early in life, it is not uncommon for the brain to "recruit" areas normally devoted to other activities to compensate for the damage. As a result, what would otherwise be a language processing area in a subject's brain might become an area devoted to visual perception or vice versa.

Suppose A is normal and has a pain. Area X of A's brain is active. Suppose B sustained damage to area X when he was young. When B has pain, area Y (not X) is activated. If both A and B are in pain, being in pain cannot be equated with having a certain kind of electrochemical activity in area X and it cannot be equated with having a certain kind of electrochemical activity in area Y.

According to the functionalist the Martians and both A and B are in pain because while the *biological* events going on in all three are *different*, these three different biological states all play the same *causal role*. Being in pain just is playing this causal role. The lesson: the functionalist thinks the identity theory is chauvinistic.

Question: Might there be a more abstract characterization of biological states (i.e. one that abstracts from the anatomical location of the realization) according to which A, B and the Martian are all in the same kind of biological state?

3. Liberalism

Block's Argument Against Functionalism: Absent Qualia

Block objects to functionalism on the grounds that it is too **liberal**.

A theory is guilty of excessive *liberalism* just in case it *sets sufficient conditions* on having a mental state that are met by things that don't *really* have that mental state.

Qualia: the *qualitative aspects* of a mental state are those properties of it that make up *what it is like* to be in that mental state. (Alternatively, a mental state has these qualitative aspects or *qualia* insofar as being in that mental state occupies at least some of one's *attention*.)

Describe Block's two examples: (a) **The Homunculi-Headed Robots** and (b) **The Nation of China**.

An Interpretive Question: How, according to Block, do these examples show that functionalism is *too liberal*, and (in particular) that functionalism cannot account for qualia?

A Philosophical Question: Is Block right when he claims “**that no version of functionalism can avoid both liberalism and Chauvinism**” (Chalmers (ed.), 2002, 95)?