

In his essay “*Eliminative Materialism and the Propositional Attitudes*” Paul Churchland attacks folk psychology in support of his own position, eliminative materialism. An eliminative materialist claims that folk psychology and its vocabulary are so outrightly wrong that they will consequently be substituted by completed neuroscience. (Contrary, identity theorists would claim that a reduction of folk psychology to neuroscience would still preserve its ontology, and a dualist or functionalist would claim that this reduction is not possible.) In the following paragraphs I will try to show where Churchland in my opinion goes astray with his attack and thus why I am not convinced by his argumentation.

Churchland starts with the assertion that folk psychology is a theory, i.e. it makes predictions which then can be verified or proven wrong to strengthen or weaken the theory, respectively.

As an analytic philosopher, Churchland continues with the analysis of this theory. He considers three aspects: Its failures, its history, and its likelihood to merge in with other, scientific theories.

First, folk psychology fails when it comes to mental phenomena such as mental illness, creative imagination, differences between individuals, sleep and learning. When reading this list I was a little bewildered whether these “failures” of folk psychology were failures with regard to the question raised to it. Expecting an answer about imagination from folk psychology is like asking an alchemist to explain the property “weight” of his substances: It is always there, it does not seem to interfere with the theories prediction in general, it could be taken into account all the time, but to answer the real questions posed by the theory there is no need to do so. The question of folk psychology is, as I understand it, not “How does it work?”, but rather “What will happen?”. Asking the wrong question will result in the explanatory failures of folk psychology Churchland mentioned. I see the confusion of these two questions as Churchland’s first mistake.

Second, in folk psychology’s history the domain of application shrunk from the early days, when it used to cover even inanimate things like wind or moon, to the day of the ancient Greeks. Since then its content and success have not advanced, although it is far from perfect. Churchland uses this fact to illustrate his antipathy towards folk psychology. I think differently and to illustrate my view, I shall state the history of folk psychology in different words: Since the early days we have learned that there are scientific explanations for what happens with the wind and the moon and so on. These explanations are of varying complexity. Partially we dropped the folk psychology explanation in favor of an easily imaginable scientific one (the light of the moon being changed by particles in the air and thus changing color, instead of claiming it was jealous), but partially we just dropped the folk psychology explanation because we got to know that its predictive power was only small compared to what computers and experts can calculate (the change in direction and strength of the wind, for example). My claim is: We cannot drop folk psychology because of either reasons. We very probably will not find a simple scientific method for predicting human beings that is simple enough to employ it in everyday life on a large scale. Neuroscience is not intuitive enough for that. And, second, we will not be able to stop using folk psychology to predict human beings because we know that there are other, complicated explanations. The advantage of folk psychology is precisely that we can employ it at any time. With this I can also explain the failures of folk psychology (those that still emerge when we ask the right

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question): They are the result of applying Ockham's razor: The theory "folk psychology" did not advance over the last millenia since it reached an equilibrium between usability and predictive power. I must add that this does not apply when the science fiction Churchland describes in his last chapter becomes reality. He claims that a direct linking between brains could be possible, and with this folk psychology as a method for predicting human beings from the outside would obviously not be necessary anymore. But again, this is fiction, not science.

Third, folk psychology is hard to integrate with other theories, since its intentional categories are nowhere near the concepts of modern science like atoms, molecules and electricity. Here, Churchland argues polemically. He hails science and outlines comparisons of folk psychology with other overthrown theories. With this, his essay, that started out as an analytic approach to the problem whether folk psychology is worth to retain, does not retain its own standards: Theories should be judged according to their predictive power. And here, neuroscience and its fellows are – at least to my knowledge – nowhere near to what folk psychology can provide us with. They might for example be able to predict the movement of my fingers as I type, as initiated by my brain, but the causal reasons for this movement, the semantics, so to speak, are entirely out of reach. Folk psychology, on the other hand, seems to give a pretty good account for my movements with the assumption that I have the desire to write an essay and I'm struggling to do so.

My arguments have been, I must admit, somehow unscientific, since they used words like "simple", "complex" and even "useful". I would like to justify these arguments. As I conceive it, folk psychology can be seen under two different points of view. First, it can be seen as a "language" in scientific discourse that attempts to model some things of what we think is true about human minds. Second, it can be seen as a method that we use in everyday life to predict others. Both describe the same theory, but have very different preconditions for application. The scientific "language" must be exact, always applicable, failure-proof and can be as complex as it needs to be for that. The everyday applied method needs to be only applicable in most cases, it must be simple and robust and for this we can allow some failures.

Churchland did not make clear what exactly he is arguing against. Most of his argument strives to deal with the scientific "language", but for the complete elimination of folk psychology he visions in the last chapter the everyday applied method would also need to be extinguished. So while I admit and even hope that there might one day be better ways to describe human behavior scientifically, I do not grant Churchland the complete elimination of folk psychology.

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