Hard Naturalism and its Puzzles

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1. Introduction

Most analytic philosophers today would call themselves naturalists. According to B. Stroud, the minimum commitment necessary is the exclusion of the *supernatural* from their philosophical system. (B. Stroud, 1996) And since today most philosophers seem unwilling to include any supernatural entities such as God or psyche in their accounts of reality or the mind, all could count as naturalists. Yet some forms of naturalism are harder that others. (P.F. Strawson, 1985) The hardest probably being eliminative naturalism suggesting the elimination of all mental language from our everyday vocabulary. This form of naturalism claims that scientific evolution will prove that mental terms are just pseudo-entities. I will argue that even though they strongly depend on science, hard naturalists can hardly account for the evolution of science.

2. Hard naturalism

The term *naturalism* refers to the general view that everything is natural. What gives hard naturalism a more specific touch is how one conceives nature. Hard naturalists take *natural* to mean *physical, material, scientifically explainable*. The claim that *all is natural* then implies that *all is to be studied by the methods of physical science*.

The question is what happens if something stands out against physical explanation. The most worrying example comes from consciousness: mental states resist a purely physical description. To use a crude example, it seems different to say "I am afraid of dogs" than say "seeing dogs produce adrenalin secretion in my brain". The two sentences have different meanings: They are used in different contexts to draw attention in different aspects of my experience. One important difference being that the former describes the way I feel, providing the phenomenology of the experience from the first person perspective, while the later is a neutral description form the third person perspective.

Now, according to hard naturalists, such as P. M. Churchland, propositions of the former type cannot be translated into propositions of the later type just because the way we approach mental phenomena is already mediated by *folk psychology*. Folk psychology is, according to him, an implicit *theory*; a theory which people use in order to understand, explain and predict their own or other people's psychological events and behaviour. Following folk psychology, we attribute *desires, fears* or *beliefs* in our attempt to explain our behaviour. Propositional states, such as these, are theoretical constructions and therefore should be evaluated with reference to experience. Like all theoretical entities, *desires* and *beliefs* are open to revision and total elimination, if proven false.

Lots of other folk theories have proved wrong in the past: Folk astronomy claiming that the earth is the centre of the universe, or folk physics talking about phlogiston. Churchland goes on arguing that folk psychology is such a *false* theory, "significantly worse [...] than [...] folk mechanics, folk biology and so forth" (Churchland, 1989, p.231). He compares it with the theory of witches, demonic possession, exorcism and trail by ordeal: *Demons* and *witches* just like *desires* and *beliefs* are theoretical entities. And just as we got rid of the theory of witches, we must now eliminate folk psychology. *Folk psychology is false since it resists physicalistic explanations.* As Churchland writes:

> If we approach *homo sapiens* from the perspective of natural history and the physical sciences, we can tell a coherent story of his constitution, development and behavioral capacities which encompasses particle physics, atomic and molecular theory, organic chemistry, evolutionary theory, biology, physiology, and materialistic neurotheory. That story, though still radically incomplete, is already extremely powerful... And it is deliberately and self consciously coherent with the rest of our developing world picture... But FP [folk psychology] is no part of this growing synthesis. Its intentional categories stand alone, without visible prospect of reduction to that larger corpus. (Churchland, 1981, p.75.)

Churchland clearly aims for a unifying physical theory that can account for all there is. Physical science is the best candidate for such an account. In order to save its *growing synthesis*, then, we should reduce all mental terms about desires, beliefs, fears etc in physical terms about brain activities. If this is not possible, we should eliminate the mental vocabulary from our ordinary language altogether. Neuroscience talk about brain states is supposed to fill in everyday vocabulary about mental states.

It should be clear that when Churchland asks for the elimination of folk psychology, he asks for the abolition of a basic corpus of ordinary dispositions and practices. *Folk psychology* refers to the way we all think and talk about all kinds of issues in our everyday life. It has to do with descriptions and concepts we all use everyday in ordinary language. When we say that the world is round, for example, we express a *belief*, when we take an umbrella before we leave our house, we again reveal our belief that it may rain. So, the implications of Churchland's views thus go further than his philosophy of mind: Scientific explanations about the physical world are the only kind of *explanation* he is willing to admit.

Physical science is *the only* explanatory principle. Consequently, all kinds of problems people are struggling with (psychological, moral, aesthetic issues etc) should be translated into scientific, materialistic, physical language. If this is not possible, their resistance is strong evidence that they are *pseudo-problems,* which we should abandon *by eliminating* all relevant terms from our vocabulary. Philosophy too is taken in as a branch of theoretical proto science that articulates hypotheses for other sciences to test. (Churchland, 1986) Churchland' s views then suggest a very strong version of scientism: Physical science is the norm by which the legitimacy of all quests, descriptions and explanations will be measured.

3. Problems with hard naturalism

The question is whether hard naturalism can provide an explanation of scientific evolution. Churchland insists that all questions regarding human consciousness, for example, will be resolved by physical science. His argument is

supposedly inductive, for, as it is often said, "induction is the method of science". So he infers the future of science from its past: Since science has progressed and has managed to illuminate some issues concerning human consciousness, it will evolve more and resolve all relevant questions in the future. Yet, his argument goes beyond induction; it rather appeals to Churchland' s intuitions about the future of science and of ordinary language. For there is no evidence nowadays that beliefs and desires will be eliminated from our folk vocabulary. We have no clue whether science (perhaps some new branch of science) will embrace them into our common natural history or even whether this whole natural history will prove inaccurate and change. From our current viewpoint all these hypotheses are mere speculation.

Meanwhile, Churchland identifies explanation with the reduction of any phenomenon into physical phenomenon. Yet, he has no full-fledged, specific paradigms of such a reduction to offer. Failing an alternative coherent description of mental phenomena, his insisting on eliminating the ontology of ordinary language seems impracticable. Moreover, the identification of scientific explanation and physical reduction restricts the concept of science, without even defining it conceivably.

The hard naturalist, though, can answer this line of criticism: being a philosopher (and thus a proto-scientist) they don't need to provide a full-fledged theory to take folk psychology's place. (Churchland, 1986, p.6). They only need to give an outline of what this theory should be like; and, according to them, this proto-theory is already being built. (Churchland, 1991, p.67)

Yet Churchland views suffer an imminent tension: he takes for granted that many concepts, that are basic for communication and understanding, are pseudo-concepts with no literal meaning. Meanwhile, they are the concepts, which we are brought up with. From day one, we learn to engage those concepts and use them to understand all there is around us, including science. Ordinary language is full of mental vocabulary and the way we approach all human experience is full of folk psychology presumptions and explanations. Official education teaches us to think using such concepts descriptions and explanations. The phenomena we approach are described by them; all our starting hypotheses involve them. These are the concepts Churchland himself uses: when he says that folk psychology is a pseudo-theory he expresses a *belief* of his, there is no other way to say it.

Of course, one would answer that this only goes for now; when folk psychology gets eliminated there will be some other, better way to say it. (Churchland, 1981, p.87) But *for the time being* those are the only concepts we have; it is through them that today's scientists are trained. If we accuse them of being void, we can no longer sensibly train today's scientists. Neither can we sensibly articulate today's hypotheses or theories.

Eliminative naturalists such as Churchland write and teach in a language they consider meaningless. But you cannot teach using a language and simultaneously suggest that most concepts and dispositions embedded in this language are senseless. This only makes what you say senseless as well.

4. Conclusion

Naturalism sees science and scientific method as a valid way people have in their attempt to explain the world. But how do people get engaged into scientific method(s)? Does naturalism manage a theoretical explanation of how scientific education and evolution work?

Hard naturalism identifies scientific explanation with an ideal physicalistic reduction. Yet, hard naturalists such as Churchland offer no strict criteria about what *physical* means: is meteorology a physical science? Is cognitive psychology a purely physical science today? *Science* seems restricted into very few branches and, what's more, one cannot even know the criterion by which a discipline qualifies as scientific. Churchland offers only some intuitive remarks about how the scientific worldview will be like by proposing the elimination of all terms that today's science has trouble accounting for.

Moreover, by insisting that all non-reducible terms should be eliminated form our explanatory story, the hard naturalist restricts *the phenomena* in need of explanation into very few. Many questions posed by today's people (psychological or ethical worries and troubles) are considered pseudo-questions, raised by the pseudo-theory of folk psychology, which our language supports.

Most importantly, Churchland' s hard naturalism, despite the scientism it implies, does not manage to illuminate the very fact of scientific education and evolution. It makes it incomprehensible that people who teach and think into pseudo-terms produce new good theories and educate new scientists that help science evolve. If our language is full of pseudo-concepts and false ontology, it is a mystery how scientific education was made to work and still continues to do. Consequently, it is a mystery how science progressed and still continues to do so. The conceptual rules used in everyday life are the same rules the scientist uses, even within his technical vocabulary. And despite this very fact, new scientists learn good science, make valid hypotheses and produce compelling theories. Even the most revolutionary among them rely, at least at first, on common world picture. Or, even when they question it, they are articulated in language.

It seems that the primacy ascribed to science comes with a high price: it makes science "stand alone, without visible prospect of reduction to that larger corpus", to paraphrase Churchland. (1981, p.75) According to him, scientific practice is not *part* of human practices but stands way *above* them. It is the primary explanatory method and the one that will eventually eliminate all other branches. It will eliminate the problems other disciples confront, even the vocabulary that gives rise to those questions. But if one puts science so much higher than any other human practice, they cut its every connection with the community it comes from, the very community that practices it. Hard naturalist's scientism has to face this paradox: the very primacy of science's explanatory methods makes it harder to explain how science is communicated and evolved.

Literature

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