

ENOUGH WITH THE NORMS ALREADY!

JERRY FODOR
Rutgers University

This isn't really a paper. It's more of a temper tantrum. Perhaps it will make up in vehemence what it lacks in arguments.

Everybody goes on about norms. Well, I am fed up with norms. If I never see another norm, that will be soon enough for me. Enough with the norms already. I am not, of course, antithetic to *every and all* norms. To the contrary, there are many norms with which I absolutely concur. For example, Flanders and Swann famously remarked that 'eating people is wrong' (In 'The reluctant cannibal'). Well, eating people *is* wrong (except, perhaps, in the most dire of emergencies.) Speaking for myself, I simply can't imagine eating a person. I honor this norm and I wish it well.

By contrast, the norms with which I am fed up are the kind that are alleged to block certain philosophical projects of naturalization to which I am professionally committed. In particular, I'd very much like there to be a naturalized account of the kinds of concepts (or terms, or constructs, or properties, or predicates, or whatever) that figure centrally in semantic and in intensional psychological explanations. Among the former, I tentatively include 'is true', 'is false', 'is necessary', 'entails', 'means', 'refers to' and so forth. Among the latter, I tentatively include 'believes', 'intends', 'desires', 'acts', 'thinks', 'sees as' and so forth. In neither case do I know exactly what belongs on the lists; suffice it that the notions I would like to see naturalized include all the ones that occur ineliminably in such psychological explanations as we take to be true (or will take to be true when/if we finally arrive at reflective equilibrium).

In particular, I'm interested in the prospects for constructing a naturalistic propositional attitude psychology. The idea is that believing, intending, and other states that figure in typical explanations of cognitive phenomena, informal or in the laboratory, would be treated as relations to a certain class of mental particulars ('mental representations'); and mental processes would be defined over these. This approach has been around, in one form or other, at least since Hume, according to whom mental repre-

sentations are 'Ideas' (something like mental images), and mental processes are causal (associative) relations among Ideas.

But a lot of philosophers think, on the one hand, that all the concepts, properties,..., whatever that such an account of cognition would require (for economy's sake, I will henceforth call them all 'whatevers' because that avoids having to decide about just what ontology a naturalistic theory of cognition might be supposed to postulate), are, as it were, quasi- or crypto-normative. And these philosophers also think that practically as a point of definition, that what is normative can't be naturalized. So, because of the normative character of whatevers, the naturalization project can't but fail in precisely the areas where I most want it to succeed. In a nutshell, the norms I'm fed up with are the ones that are supposed to be incompatible with a naturalistic account of the psychology of cognition.

I strongly suspect that all the issues about the naturalization of whatevers have to do, in one way or other, with questions about symbols. I shall therefore assume that any explanation that is remotely plausible in the psychology of cognition will have to endorse (not just some notion of mental representation but also) some notion of 'mental representations'. In the core cases, mental representations are discursive (non-iconic) symbols. That's to say that their tokens must be susceptible of semantic evaluation and they must have causal powers. Except for the 'discursive' part, this would come as no surprise to Hume, for whom Ideas are typically *of* something (in effect, they have referents) and association is a process of (mental) causation. Unlike Hume, however, I doubt that mental representations are anything like images. The reasons for denying that they are are familiar in both the philosophical and the psychological literatures, so I won't rehearse them here.

In short, I want there to be a language of thought. I may, of course, be ill advised to want this; but, if so, I want to be ill advised on empirical grounds; I do not want to be ill advised a priori. So, assuming that what's normative can't be naturalized, I don't want accounts of mental symbols or mental processes to be ipso facto normative.

Where did all this normative stuff come from? Some of it must surely be blamed on Hume, who claimed (or, at least, is claimed to have claimed) that you can't derive 'ought' from 'is'. But I imagine that its modern incarnations started with, on the one hand, G.E. Moore's formulation of the 'open question' argument and, on the other hand, Wittgenstein's suggestion that the use of symbols is a kind of rule-governed behavior. The open question argument went something like this: Whatever naturalistic

account you propose for goodness (or for ‘good’), the question will remain intuitively open whether something that is good according to that account is, in actual fact, good. I think this is plausible because I suppose (and so, I take it, did Moore) that any account that doesn't leave the open question open would have to be not just *necessarily* true but a priori; and that got such an account to be a priori, it would have to be true by definition (hence analytic). Unlike Moore, however, I very much doubt that there are *any* definitions or analyticities, normative or otherwise. And even where there is definitional equivalence between a naturalistic expression and a normative expression, the two might nonetheless differ in their pragmatics, which may or may not count as a parameter of their ‘use’. (As far as I know, no one has any serious proposal on offer as to what aspects of the use of an expression constitutes its ‘use’ in the technical sense where, we’re told, use either is meaning or is what meaning supervenes on. That being so, issues like whether perlocutionary force is a parameter of use are moot as things stand.)

Anyhow, the open question argument is one plausible source of the notion that theories of whatevers are ineliminably normative. Another is Wittgenstein’s suggestion that using symbols (mental or otherwise) is a species of rule-governed behavior. If that is granted, then the question arises whether, on a certain occasion, a symbol is used correctly or incorrectly. The idea is roughly that the semantics of symbols emerges from conventions for using them properly. And it seems plausible that notions like *proper* and *improper* are normative and ipso facto incapable of naturalization.

It’s easy enough to tell a story that makes this seem true for natural languages (English, as it might be). Natural languages are vehicles of communication, and there is no communication without synchronization. If, for example, you and I are to communicate in English, you must mean by ‘giraffe’ and ‘blue’ what I mean by ‘giraffe’ and ‘blue’ and vice versa; otherwise we won’t understand one another when either says that giraffes are blue. It’s natural enough to gloss this as ‘we must both be following the same rules for using ‘giraffe’ and ‘blue’’, where the normative force of the ‘must’ is instrumental; it means something like ‘on pain of failing to communicate.’

But then, it would seem that the sort of story that seems plausible enough for English breaks down if you try to apply it to mental representations (unless mental representations are expressions in natural languages; a question that I also wish not to be settled a priori). For one thing, we don’t

use the language of thought (hereinafter ‘LOT’ or ‘Mentalese’). Not, at least, in the sense in which our using it would involve our having intentions with respect to how we use it. We mean to refer to giraffes when we say ‘giraffe’. But (supposing that ‘swiggle’ is the word that refers to giraffes in Mentalese), we don’t use ‘swiggle’ to refer to giraffes with the intention of so doing. In fact, we have no intentions at all in respect to ‘swiggle’. Tokenings of expressions in Mentalese don’t count as *actions*; they’re things that just happen; presumably as a causal consequence of prior thoughts or of perceptual promptings. Least of all do we use ‘swiggle’ with the intention of acting in accord with norms for its use.

So, to gather all this together, English and LOT may well be different in that here are norms in accordance with which we use English, but (so far at least) none in accordance with which we use Mentalese. And maybe (*maybe*) a normless language is a contradiction in terms.

Notice, however, that here the normativity comes from the (instrumental) demands that *communication* makes, not from any demands (instrumental or otherwise) that *reference* makes. And there is, nothing so far, that shows that an expression’s being used for communication is, as it were, *constitutive of* its being a referring expression. So, suppose that there aren’t any *rules* for using a Language of Thought; psychology might still be naturalizable even though it claims that ‘squiggle’ refers to squiggles.

So now the question whether it is possible to naturalize Mentalese comes down to the question whether Mentalese is used as a vehicle of communication. Which, of course it isn’t. Nobody ever used ‘squiggle’ to communicate anything to anyone; not even to themselves. Rather, the assumption is that Mentalese is used as the vehicle of *calculation*, (which, according to the kind of psychological theories I have in mind, is what many mental processes consist of). So, finally, the question about naturalization comes down to whether or not there can be a language that is used to calculate but not to communicate; a *de facto* private language. Or at least I shall assume that it does in the rest of this discussion.

I suppose that the burden of proof is on anybody who argues: ‘no language without norms; no norms without communication; hence no *de facto* private languages’, hence no Mentalese. I assume that, in any such argument, questions about normativity and questions about *de facto* publicity are inextricably tangled together: either normativity is inferred from publicity or that publicity is inferred from normativity, and both are taken to be essential properties of languages. It would be nice to have a reason to believe that this sort of argument is sound, but it’s remarkably hard to find

one in the literature. What follows is a sketch of some of the candidates that have occurred to me. I don't claim that these exhaust the options; but I do claim that all of them are, in all likelihood, fallacious.

First Try: Nothing is a symbol unless there is a difference between using it correctly and using it incorrectly. But if *E* is an expression in a *de facto* private language, then there is no difference between using it correctly and using it incorrectly. So the expressions of Mentalese aren't symbols. So Mentalese isn't a language.

Reply: Who says there's no difference between using its expressions correctly and not using them correctly?

Second try: Excuse me, I misspoke. What I meant was that, if a language is *de facto* private, then there must be a *verifiable* difference between using its expressions correctly and not using them correctly; there must be 'criteria' for their use.

Reply: I'm not a verificationist. Assuming that 'squiggle' is an expression that refers to giraffes, it is wrong (mistaken, incorrect) to use it to refer to trees. But nothing *epistemological* follows as far as I know.

Third try: The normativity of the rules of English is instrumental. It derives from the use of English as a vehicle of communication. Since Mentalese is *de facto not a* vehicle of communication, its putative rules have no normative force. So there's an essential difference between Mentalese and English.

Reply: Strictly speaking, this begs the question whether normativity is an *essential* property of rules of language. But put that aside. The story is that the normative force of the rules of English derives from the use of English to communicate, which is a project in which we have an interest. But it seems perfectly possible that there is some *other* project in which we are likewise interested, and that the normativity of the rules of Mentalese derives from it. For example, we're interested in having true beliefs, so the instrumental value of Mentalese may derive from its *de facto* necessity for our doing so. It's one thing to say that there must be norms. It's quite another that to say that the norms must derive from the exigencies of communication.

Fourth try: Our acquiescence in the rules of Mentalese is merely tacit.

Reply: So too is our acquiescence in the rules in English.

Fifth try: Equivalence is defined for the rules of Mentalese only up to extensional equivalence. Whereas there can be a matter of fact about which of two extensionally equivalent rules a speaker of a natural language is following.

Reply: Maybe there is no choosing between extensionally equivalent rules for using Mentalese even if the extensions of counterfactual tokenings are included (which they should be). But I can't think of any reason for believing that, and some such reason is owing.

Actually I *can* think of a reason; but it presupposes that rules of natural languages are, as it were, 'written down' in the heads of its speakers. If they are, then the choice between extensionally equivalent rules might be a choice between intensionally distinct ways of mentally representing them. On pain of a Lewis Carroll regress, however, nothing like this could be true of the rules of Mentalese, so this line of argument is unavailable to anyone who denies that Mentalese expressions are symbols (and hence have no referents).

Sixth try: Expressions in Mentalese have no perlocutionary force. For a symbol to have perlocutionary force is for its tokens to be intended to have a certain effect on their hearers. Expressions in a private language (even expressions in a merely de facto private language) don't have hearers and its users don't have intentions with respect to them.

Reply: But this begs the question whether its being used with perlocutionary intent is an *essential* property of something a symbol. I deny that it is; or, anyhow, that it has been shown to be. (See above)

Seventh try: Languages have to be learned. Learning requires instruction by someone. So, de facto, Mentalese can't be learned; so it's not a language.

Reply: It's true that English has to be learned (or, anyhow that it has to be 'picked up'); and that Mentalese can't be (again on pain of a Lewis Carroll regress.) This shows that anyone who posits a language of mental representation will have to be, to some very appreciable extent, a nativist. What's wrong with that?

Eighth try: Languages have to be translatable from the epistemic position of a radical translator. Since Mentalese is de facto private, it is not so translatable. So it isn't a language.

Reply: I know of no reason to suppose that a language must be translatable from the epistemic position of a radical translators. Come to think of it, I know of no reason to suppose that English is.

Ninth try: Tokenings of a language have to have (or any how, to be capable of having) interpreters. Since Mentalese is de facto private, there is no interpreter of its tokenings. So Mentalese can't be a language.

Reply: The premise needs arguing for (on some grounds other than the assumption of verificationism. See the reply to *second try*). But suppose we pass that. Still, the question remains why a *counterfactual* interpreter ('If there *had been* an interpreter, he would have taken the token to mean such and such') wouldn't meet the specifications. Is there some reason why there shouldn't be counterfactual interpreters of Mentalese? (In particular, counterfactual interpreters who know about the causes and effects of its tokenings.) See Fodor 2008 for a sketch of how 'triangulation' (which, at least according to Donald Davidson, is par excellence what interpreters do for a living) might be worked out in terms of such counterfactuals.

I'm out of candidates. I have no proof that the only possible normativity/privacy arguments against the naturalization of Mentalese are of the kind that I've been surveying. But, I can't think of any others, and these do all seem to be to be distinctly dubious. I intend, therefore, to proceed on my way, assuming that there aren't any good arguments against a de facto Mentalese that turn on issues of privacy/normativity. If you think of one, do please let me know right away. I have an email account at which I can almost always be reached.

REFERENCES

Fodor, J. *LOT2: The Language of Thought Revisited*. Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2008.