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Author

Jacobson, Anne Jaap

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Eliminativism as Magic

Anne Jaap Jacobson
Department of Philosophy
University of Houston
Houston, TX 77204-3785
AJJACOBSON@UH.EDU

Eliminativism is in part the view that there are no such things as beliefs and desires. Though Steven Stich (1996) has recently argued effectively against accepting the arguments of many eliminists, he maintains that eliminativism may be correct. His argument depends on construing beliefs as natural kinds. Part of his motivation is a causal construction of beliefs as reasons for which we believe, act and feel.

Understanding magic as involving a trick that the audience is distracted from noticing, I locate a trick in Stich's (and others') presentations of eliminativism. The trick is reading the folks' ontology of the mind off of the grammatical-logical form of folk statements. The results of the trick can be seen, for example, in recent explanations of so-called propositional attitudes; for example:

"First, we may distinguish those mental phenomena that involve *sensations:* pains; itches ... Second, there are mental states that are standardly attributed to a person or organism by the use of that-clauses ..." (Kim, 1996).

The second class of mental states comprise the propositional attitudes, the text tell us. (See also, among many others, Braddon-Mitchell and Jackson (1996.)

Given how badly we have failed to see this trick, I locate a contributing cause of our distraction in Davidson's (1963) early causal account of action explanations. (Stich also cites Brandt and Kim (1963).) On Davidson's account, the reason for which one acts consists in a belief-desire pair which causes the act. Accordingly, action explanation are statements of beliefs and desires that provide the explanans in causal explanation. It seems to follow immediately that reasons are belief-desire pairs that cause actions. We expect to read ontology off of causal statements because they are supposed to tell us what did the causing.

In this paper, I give five arguments which contest the causal theory Davidson gives us. In particular, they present a series of unsolved problems for the causal theorist. As such, they undercut the central support for the idea that logical form determines ontology. I have discussed the first, second and third problems in published work (Jacobson, 1992; Jacobson, 1993).

(1) Problem One: Pure Facilitators: Pure facilitators are Davidsonian belief-desire pairs which cause actions without being goal-determining.

(2) Problem Two: Time Sharing: Davidsonian belief-desire pairs can be in the history of an action, but to specify the goals they have to be contemporaneous with the action.

(3) Problem Three: Belief Perseverance: Coming to give up a belief does not automatically entail giving up all the beliefs for which it is the main support; this raises a question about the causal connectedness of a belief to what we correctly cite as our reasons.

(4) Problem Four: Disanalogies between causal statements and reason-for-which statements: It is true that if the belief that P causes action A and A causes the belief that Q, then the belief that P is a cause of the belief that Q. However, it is false that if the belief that P is the reason that I A and my A-ing is the reason why I believe that Q, then that P is my reason for believing that Q. Reasons are more like evaluations. Epistemic and prudential merit is similarly not necessarily transmitted along chains of causation.

(5) Problem Five: The Shattering of the Concept of Belief: Examination of cases of pathology indicates that "belief" and "desire" are nothing like natural kind concepts. Natural kind concepts participate in generalizations in a way in which our ordinary psychological notions do not. That is to say, our ordinary notions do not carry with them traces of systematic explanations in which they are to fit.

My arguments imply that in their ordinary explanations the folk are not using the notions of beliefs and desires as natural kind notions.

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