

# Functionalism

## What you need to know:

Functionalism: all mental states can be characterised in terms of functional roles which can be multiply realised.

Issues, including:

- the possibility of a functional duplicate with different qualia (inverted qualia)
- the possibility of a functional duplicate with no mentality/qualia (Ned Block's China thought experiment)
- the 'knowledge'/Mary argument can be applied to functional facts (no amount of facts about function suffices to explain qualia).

## Functionalism

- Mental states are identified with functional roles.
- To define something in terms of functional role is to define it in terms of what it does.
- In particular, mental states are defined in terms of the role they play in conjunction with environmental inputs, other mental states and outputs.
- For example, a pain is that which is caused by damage to the body, causes other mental states, such as anxiety and produces pain behaviour (e.g. groaning).
- Since a functional role can be realised by different types of material, functionalism is agnostic over what kinds of substance can instantiate minds.
- Because functional roles can be instantiated in different ways, mental states are multiply realisable. An alien with a silicon brain would still have the same types of mental state to us, even though they have a different kind of brain.

## Possible Exam Questions

What claim does functionalism make regarding statements about mental states? (3 marks)

Briefly outline functionalism (5 marks)

Briefly explain inverted qualia and how it challenges functionalism. (5 marks)

Explain how Block's China thought experiment can be used to argue against functionalism. (5 marks)

Briefly explain how the 'knowledge'/Mary argument can challenge functionalism. (5 marks)

Briefly outline functionalism and the issues related to it. (12 marks)

Explain the similarities and differences between functionalism and mind-brain type identity theory. (12 marks)

Explain the similarities and differences between functionalism and analytical behaviourism. (12 marks)

Is the functionalist theory of mental states correct? (25 marks)

## Block's China Brain

It is possible that there are creatures who are functionally identical to humans, but lack qualia.

**P1:** Consideration of the China thought experiment shows that it is possible for two functional duplicates to differ mentally such that one (the human) has qualia while the other (the population of China) does not.

**P2:** If it is possible for two functional duplicates to differ mentally such that one has qualia and the other does not then functionalism is false.

**C:** Therefore functionalism is false.

## The China Brain



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## Key terms

**Functionalism:** all mental states can be characterised in terms of functional roles which can be multiply realised.

**Inverted Qualia:** to put the subjective aspects of our mental states in the opposite position to someone else.

**Agnostic:** to not know. Functionalists are agnostic about what kinds of substance instantiate mental states, meaning they do not know or care whether a mental state is instantiated by a silicon chip or a brain.

## Arguments for Functionalism

- Unlike behaviourism, functionalism recognises the causal role mental states have with respect to other mental states and behaviour. This accords with common-sense.
- Unlike behaviourism, functionalism does not face the circularity objection. This is because functionalism defines mental states in terms of their causal roles.
- Unlike Mind Brain Type Identity Theory, it allows for the multiple realisability of mental states.

## Inverted Qualia

Suppose you and I react in the same way to seeing the colour blue. According to functionalism, we must therefore both have the same mental state, as the colour performs the same function for us. However, it is possible that our qualitative experience of blue is different. So, when you experience the quale of blue, I experience the quale of yellow. Therefore, functionalism cannot account for the intrinsic qualitative nature of qualia.

## The Mary/Knowledge Argument can be related to functional facts

P1: Mary knows all the functional facts involved in colour vision.

P2: But she learns something new when she experiences colour vision herself.

C1: Therefore, there is more to know about colour vision than what is given in a complete functional account of it.

C2: So functionalism is false.

