

Eliminative Materialism

What you need to know:

Eliminative Materialism: Some or all common-sense (“folk-psychological”) mental states/properties do not exist and our common-sense understanding is radically mistaken (as defended by Patricia Churchland and Paul Churchland).

Issues including:

- our certainty about the existence of our mental states takes priority over other considerations
- folk-psychology has good predictive and explanatory power (and so is the best hypothesis)
- the articulation of eliminative materialism as a theory is self-refuting.

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- Eliminativists believe that our common-sense understanding of the mind represents a theory termed ‘folk psychology’. Folk psychology is our everyday picture of the mind as a private world of sensations, emotions, beliefs etc. As such it constitutes a theoretical framework which we use to explain and predict behaviour. Therefore, it is a theory of the mind that ordinary people have.
- Eliminativists believe that folk psychology is false. Therefore, the concepts of folk psychology need to be eliminated and replaced by neuroscience.

Possible Exam Questions

What is folk psychology? (3 marks)

What do eliminative materialists claim about mental states? (3 marks)

Briefly outline eliminative materialism (5 marks)

Explain how eliminative materialism differs from mind-brain type identity theory. (5 marks)

Explain the argument that it would be self-refuting to articulate eliminative materialism as a theory. (5 marks)

Briefly outline eliminative materialism and the issues related with it. (12 marks)

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

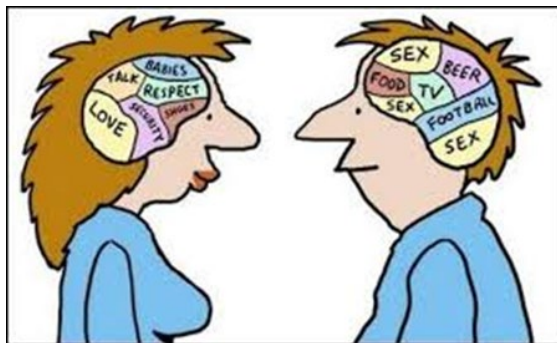
Explain the similarities and differences between eliminative materialism and Mind Brain Identity Theory. (12 marks)

Explain the similarities and differences between eliminative materialism and functionalism. (12 marks)

Is eliminative materialism correct? (25 marks)

Arguments in support of Eliminative Materialism

1. Folk Psychology is stagnant: Our best theories normally stimulate ‘research programmes’ - an active community of enquirers who accept certain parameters then research, develop and further the theory. Stagnant research programmes are ones where very little progress is made. When a research programme becomes stagnant, a new theory normally supersedes the old theory. Folk Psychology has made no progress for centuries. In response, some point to CBT as an example of a psychological treatment, built on folk psychology and yet very effective.
2. Folk Psychology is autonomous: Scientific theories tend to support one another. Evidence for one theory can often support another theory. The models theories generate do not contradict one another. For example, the theory of evolution, genetics, bio-chemistry comparative physiology and continental shift all support each other’s theories. Folk psychology lacks these connections



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Key terms

Folk Psychology: Folk psychology is our everyday picture of the mind as a private world of sensations, emotions, beliefs etc. As such it constitutes a theoretical framework which we use to explain and predict behaviour. Therefore, it is a theory of the mind that ordinary people have.

Stagnant: Not flowing or moving (when used of water or air); not developing (when used for ideas)

Autonomy: independence. Ability to act without the support of others.

Self-refuting: ideas or statements whose falsehood is a logical consequence of holding them to be true.

Issues with Eliminative Materialism

1. The intuitive certainty of the existence of my mind takes priority over other considerations: Eliminative materialism argues that some or all mental states do not exist. However, I know through introspection that mental states do exist. In fact, Descartes said that I cannot reasonably doubt the contents of my own mind. As a result, the existence of mental states should take priority over all other opinions because it is more intuitively certain than anything. Eliminativists respond by saying that just because something feels a certain way, doesn't mean it is true.
2. Folk-psychology has good predictive and explanatory power: Good theories must be able to explain everything. Newton's Laws of gravity explained most things, but there were some things it didn't quite work for. As a result, Einstein developed the theory of relativity, which superseded it. In the same way, even if folk psychology explains most things, if there are gaps in its explanatory power, it will be superseded by a better theory. Some argue that folk psychology has good explanatory and predictive power and so should not be abandoned. However, Eliminativists point out that it fails to explain mental illness, creativity, sleep, memory and learning.
3. Eliminative materialism as a theory is self-refuting: if eliminativism is true, there is no such thing as beliefs. But, if there are no beliefs, then no one can believe eliminativism!

Self-refuting Signs

