24.0 A Definition:

Eliminative Materialism is a *radical* form of materialism. Most people who are not aware of the subtle distinctions between various forms of materialism think that eliminative materialism *is* materialism. It is not. In fact, it is hard to find a defender of the view today.

The view’s most famous proponent is Paul Churchland, and while he is still officially an eliminative materialist, he is no longer as vocal in his defence. Another famous proponent, Stephen Stich, is now a functionalist.

In short, the view amounts to this: The mind-body problem is a problem of mapping psychological predicates to physical predicates. This problem is a pseudo-problem, because psychological predicates are meaningless. The only predicates that matter are the physical ones. They are postulates of an outdated scientific theory which should be abandoned and replaced by scientific theory. In other words, when we postulate a mental state (i.e. pain), we a postulating that mental state within the framework of a pre-scientific theory: folk psychology. Folk psychology is a theory that has stagnated, and should it be replaced by its dynamic successor: neuroscience.

This is a radical view, as it commits us to the thesis that all of our commonsense, pre-theoretical understanding of our minds, and thereby ourselves, is incorrect. There really are no such things as beliefs and desires. There are only brain states and neural activity.

In Churchland’s words: The one-to-one match-ups will not be found, and our commonsense psychological framework will not enjoy an intertheoretic reduction, *because our common-sense psychological framework is a false and radically misleading conception of the causes of human behavior and the nature of cognitive activity.*” (43)

25.0 The argument

The argument is deceptively simple. It turns on two points:

1) Folk psychology is a theory of behavior. Statements regarding beliefs or desires, as explanation of a given behavior, as postulates of that theory.

2) That theory is stagnating – it has all the hallmarks of a theory that is, in Lakatos’ words a ‘degenerating research program’:

   (a) It is an old theory that has not changed since it was developed.

   (b) There are many facts about its chosen field – namely behavior – that it cannot handle (either it has nothing to say, or it says something incorrect).

   (c) It does not have the resources to remedy those defects.

   (d) There is a new theory that promises to do all that it does, and more besides.

This argument is most often completed by appeal to ‘historical parallels’: Copericus and Ptolemy. Caloric theory of heat. Creationism.

Just as we did away with the stagnating theory, we too can do away with folk psychology.
26.0 A solution

The functionalist is committed to the status of folk psychology as a theory - so in order to get out of the 2nd step, the functionalist must show that there is a disanalogy between folk psychology and the historical parallels (after all, there may be two reasons for a stagnant theory: 1. it is stuck, and 2. it is correct – arithmetic has not progressed in 2500 years, but we don’t think it should be replaced).

The important disanalogy here is between the theory under attack, and the relationship it bears to its putative successor.

Caloric theory was replaced by the theory of molecular motion

Ptolemy theory replaced by Copernican theory.

Creationism replaced by evolutionary theory.

Each of these theories had facts about its chosen field (b) that it could not remedy (phases of Venus, transmission of heat in a vacuum, strata of sediment, carbon dating, the distribution of Darwin’s finches) but there was another theory that could explain those facts.

Is the same really true here? Consider the imprinting in newly-hatched chicks.

Folk psychology says something about this: according to it, there is something “a memory” that is laid down in the chick that represents the first thing it sees. That memory - “a mental image” – causes certain characteristic behaviors.

What can neuroscience say here? Neuroscience can tell us that such-and-such a retina stimulation is processed in such-and-such a way, and that causes a such-and-such a neural pathway to be fixed in this representation. But is that akin to saying ‘increasing kinetic energy increases heat’ that implies that there is no ‘substance’ that is passed from one hot object to another. The Copernican system tells us that the earth revolves around the sun. That implies that the sun does not revolve around the earth. Carbon dating tells us that the earth is millions of years old, that implies that Creationism is false, as Creationism tells us that the world is only 6 thousand years old.

The neuroscientific story does not tell us that no “memory” is laid down. Nor does it tell us that a “mental image” is not laid down. Neuroscience tells us how that memory is laid down, but there is nothing in the story that will negate our folk psychological theory.

The analogy is not apt, and therefore the argument is no good.