

ELIMINATIVISM ABOUT BELIEF AND DESIRE

THE THREAT TO COMMON SENSE PSYCHOLOGY

The Eliminativist Challenge

What if states like belief, desire, hope and fear cited in our common sense psychological framework turned out not to be among the causes of human behaviour? Our everyday psychological scheme would misrepresent our internal states and activities - just as conceptions of the world which mentioned witches, ether, phlogiston, etc. misrepresented the nature of reality. Paul Churchland has suggested that there may be some reason to accept the legitimacy of this challenge to common sense psychology since: we cannot expect a truly adequate neuroscientific account of our lives to provide theoretical categories that match up nicely with the categories of our common sense framework. Accordingly, we must expect that the older framework will simply be eliminated, rather than reduced, by a matured neuroscience. (Eliminativist Materialism and the Propositional Attitudes, J.Phil 78, p67)

This is the eliminative materialist's option. And even if we reject it the threat it poses is real enough. Consider the following passage from Brian Loar's *Mind and Meaning* (1981):

...if it were to turn out that the physical mechanisms that completely explain human behaviour at no level exhibited the structure of beliefs and desires, then something we had all along believed, viz. that beliefs and desires were among the causes of behaviour, would turn out to be false. Naturally, we would continue to use the belief-desire framework to systematize behaviour, but that should then at the theoretical level have the air of fictionalising and contrivance. (pp14-15)

This offers a form of irrealism about psychological talk, where we are either in error when we speak this way, or else merely using such talk without any pretention to describe what is real. We can call this option, non-factualism about psychological states.