

Orthodoxy Defended... or... How to Pan Goldstein
(Commentary for Irwin Goldstein's "Neural Materialism, Pain's Badness, and A
Posteriori Identities")

Dave Beisecker, UNLV
(2003 Mountain-Plains Philosophy Conference, Laramie, WY)

1. In his paper, Irwin Goldstein offers an argument purporting to show that we ought to reject "orthodox neural materialism," including those various forms of functionalism to which most contemporary philosophers of mind subscribe. Briefly, the argument can be paraphrased as follows:

Premise 1: Orthodox neural materialists are committed to the idea that we could in principle get by solely with the vocabulary of the "orthodox" physical sciences (including neurophysiology, but not psychology).

Premise 2: But it seems obvious that such vocabulary is unable to capture the essentially normative character of certain mental states – namely the goodness of pleasure and the badness of pain and anguish.

Conclusion: Thus it should be evident that the essentially normative properties specified by psychological vocabulary will elude specification in descriptions couched in orthodox physical terms.

[By the way, note that this is one of those anti-materialist arguments that proceeds by identifying some essential feature of the psychological, and then claims that there is some sort of "explanatory gap", which prevents that feature from being explicated in physical, neural, or functional terms. In this case, the feature in question is normativity (or axiologicality)-- pain's "badness." Other well-known examples of this strategy target intentionality (Brentano's problem) and phenomenality (the "hard problem of consciousness").]

Assuming that psychological states do indeed have essentially normative characters (and I'd be among the very last to deny that!), the argument appears valid enough; so what are the options available to us in intellectual space? One might accept the conclusion and embrace either some form of moral and psychological eliminativism or Goldstein's non-materialistic, moral and psychological realism. Or if one still wishes to espouse some form of orthodox neural materialism, one might either premise. Either show how psychological vocabulary plays a distinct, indispensable role, even within a materialist framework, or show how normativity could be captured in non-normative terms after all.

2. Goldstein spends the bulk of his paper defending Premise 2 against what I'd call *reductive* materialists. In particular, he gives us reasons why we should not hold out hope for discovering any so-called a posteriori identities between the properties picked out by essentially normative (or axiological) discourse and orthodox physical

descriptions. According to Goldstein, materialists are really after some unidirectional explanatory relation, which cannot be performed by identity statements. Furthermore, Goldstein suggests that most so-called a posteriori identities are really something else entirely, which involves discoveries of linguistic and empirical facts, such as that a certain term or description happens to refer to the same thing as another piece of vocabulary.

3. Speaking on behalf of the reductive materialist, I find neither of Goldstein's contentions concerning a posteriori identities wholly compelling. Concerning the second contention (that so-called a posteriori identities are really something other than identities), it isn't clear to me why a reductive materialist shouldn't simply agree. Identity statements are not relational as their grammar suggests, but rather linguistic, just as Goldstein contends. The identity between Cicero and Tully, and the morning and evening stars simply consists in the co-reference of the involved terms. Why shouldn't one say the same of physical and mental properties? Indeed, one might think that materialists are in the very business of working out the proper relationship between the relatively value-laden vocabularies of morality and psychology on the one hand and the seemingly value-free terms of the orthodox physical sciences on the other.

4. Furthermore, depending upon one's background assumptions and explanatory purposes, it seems evident that identity statements can be perfectly explanatory. The fact that one never sees Clark Kent interviewing Superman is naturally explained in terms of an identity claim. Similarly, suppose that one is committed – as most materialists are – to the causal closure of the physical realm. It would seem perfectly proper to *explain* the evident causal powers of mental states (including such normatively-laden ones as pain) by invoking some sort of identity claim between physical and mental events. This, of course, is precisely what most materialists think is going on. While the identity itself “goes” in both directions, the appearance that physical properties are in some sort of privileged position (the sense that one needs to identify the mental in terms of the physical, but not vice-versa) arises, because what it is in want of explanation is the causal powers of *mental states*. As Goldstein himself acknowledges (p. 2), causes and effects are defining features of the *physical*. How psychological and morally charged entities can also acquire them is relatively mysterious, especially if they are supposed to have some effect on the distribution and trajectories of physical entities through actions.

5. That being said, there is a respect in which I'm inclined to endorse the direction of Goldstein's reasoning. For I don't see how invoking a posteriori identities will help reductionists establish that the vocabulary of orthodox physical science could ever take on the roles played by moral and psychological discourse any more than Goldstein does. As Quine often reminded us, the co-reference of singular terms and co-extension of predicates does not amount to *synonymy*. To show that we can dispense of one term in favor of another, then, one must do more than establish a mere identity. Perhaps Goldstein's extended discussion of identity is directed to making just this point. If so, then it turns out I heartily agree. The prospects of any full-scale replacement of the normatively-charged vocabulary of folk psychology with, say, talk about neural events, strikes me as dim indeed, even in principle.

6. Yet I still fancy myself a functionalist, and thus, by Goldstein's lights, an orthodox neural materialist. Our disagreement concerns the *first* premise of his overall argument. About the only thing Goldstein has to say in its defense is that the neural materialists are united in believing that psychological properties can be "specified" in terms of orthodox material ones. This might be correct, as far as it goes, but I'm not entirely sure what is meant by "specification" here, and I fear that Goldstein is trying to saddle the orthodox neural materialist with something overly strong. To my ears, one might be able to "specify" something, without having to say all there is to say about it. And so a specification can pick out something without having to pick out all of its intrinsic properties (such as normativity). So as in the case of identity, I don't see why *co-specification* would have to amount to anything like *synonymy* (hence dispensability).

7. It turns out there is plenty of room for a functionalist to deny that orthodox physical vocabulary completely exhausts -- and hence (in principle) renders dispensable -- moral and psychological vocabulary. Functionalists need not be motivated by any reductive impulse, or some illicit sense that the psychological discourse itself stands in need of justification in terms of the more orthodox sciences. Rather, as hinted at above, it is the presumed *causal powers* of psychological properties that stand in need of explanation, not the applicability of the vocabulary itself. In order to avoid the idea that mental causes exert occult influences upon the physical order, we must make sure that the mental state responsible for some physical effect could not occur in the absence of the physical events *also* taken to be responsible for that effect. Philosophers of mind are thus faced with the task of forging some logical or nomological connection between the mental and physical.¹ It has struck many philosophers that the functionalization of mental discourse is the most promising way to provide a seamless integration of mental activity into the causal order. The idea is that we begin by identifying certain global patterns of causal interactions as *what it takes* for a system to engage in mental activity. An individual's being in a specific mental state is then identified with its undergoing specific "phases" of those overall patterns. For a mental state to be realized, then, the underlying physical substrate must have the powers to bring about the realization of other mental states and behavior understood as actions. Functionalization thus *guarantees* the causal efficacy of the mental realm, but it does so by maintaining that any power mental states have to bring about physical change ultimately resides in the causal powers of their physical realizers.²

8. At this juncture, one should ask: where do the relevant patterns come from? How are they identified, and why are we so concerned with them and not others? Notice crucially that the functionalist's identification of the relevant patterns requisite for mental

¹ As Jaegwon Kim points out (*Mind in a Physical World*), appealing here to the notion of "supervenience" only exacerbates the problem, for it renders mysterious how mental events could ever have *mental* effects.

² The chief task for the functionalist is to supply an account of how abstract patterns of activity could exhibit the discernibly rational structure associated with mental activity. And the real challenge is that of capturing the *normativity* inherent in such patterns. They must be robust enough so that, in the case of doxastic or belief-like states, one can justifiably say that a subject has gotten things *right* or *wrong* and, in the case of conative or desire-like states, that a subject's desires have been *satisfied* or *unsatisfied*. I would maintain that the so-called "laws" of folk-psychology play the role of specifying intuitive constraints a pattern must meet for it to count as discernibly rational.

activity need not (and does not) come from any concern within science. These are the patterns that exhibit what Dennett would call a “discernibly *rational* structure.” As such, they allow us to make sense of the norms that gain a grip on us in our everyday moral and epistemic transactions. Most situations in which we are interested in another’s beliefs, desires, pains, or pleasures, are cases where we are primarily interested in something *other* than scientifically predicting or explaining their behavior. We want information about the world (in cases of belief), or we are wondering what we should do with someone (in the cases of desire, pain, or pleasure). Even in cases where we are interested in another’s beliefs and desires for the purpose of rationalizing their actions, usually we do so with the aim of determining just what we ought to *do* with them. The appropriate reactive attitude to an apparently vicious bit of behavior turns upon whether the action is a result of an inaccurate or incomplete grasp of the way things are or whether it stems from a truly vicious character. Attributions of folk-psychological states thus inform our deliberations about how we *should* react to others. In these deliberations, we assume that a subject’s mental states have some bearing upon how they behave, but that doesn’t preclude their causal potency from residing in the causal potency of the physical states which realize them.

9. The point is that psychological concepts have their primary applications outside of narrowly scientific contexts. Indeed, I would suggest that an adequate conception of scientific practice (an obviously *norm*-governed enterprise) actually requires us to recognize the propositional attitudes that comprise the basic framework of (folk) psychology. If so, then there is little hope in eventually replacing the psychological with the orthodox scientific. For the psychological comprises an indispensable and conceptually *prior* aspect of our ordinary conception of ourselves as concept-mongering beings, which is presupposed by our abilities to engage in empirical inquiry at all. None of this, however, undermines functionalism, the primary aim of which is to provide an understanding of how our ordinary “manifest” conception of ourselves can be brought into coherence with an image of our place in nature properly informed by science. So I take it that one can be an orthodox materialist, without thinking that one could eventually do away with our normatively-charged psychological talk.