

RORTY'S MATERIALISM

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I. The Disappearance Form of the Identity Theory.

Richard Rorty informs us that if we wish to interpret his identity theory in terms of strict identity then the problems which are generated become insurmountable. Strict identity is characterized by a relation in which

$$(x)(y)[(x=y) \supset (P)(Px \equiv Py)].$$

Accordingly, we would be forced into the apparent absurdity of predicating brain-state properties of mental terms and vice versa. "Physical processes such as brain phenomena..." would have to be able to be referred to as "dim or fading or nagging or false." Mental occurrences would then be "publicly observable or physical or spatially located or swift."¹ Of course, one could attempt to show that these seemingly absurd statements are not really absurd at all, that is, that they are not actually instances of category-mistakes as they seem to be. Rorty calls this particular approach the "translation" form of the identity theory.

The "translation" form has its own peculiar problems. It demands a "topic-neutral" language into which mind/brain expressions can be translated, thus avoiding category mistakes. Suitable "topic-neutral" translations have failed to materialize, however, and the "strict identity" interpretation of the identity theory has been weakened proportionately.

Rorty abandons the translation form and, with it, the strict identity interpretation. The kind of identity he has in mind is, in his words

...not strict identity, but rather the sort of relation which obtains between...existent entities and non-existent entities when reference to

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the latter once served (some of) the purposes presently served by reference to the former-- the sort of relation that holds, for example, between "quantity of caloric fluid" and "mean kinetic energy of molecules."²

What used to be called "quantity of caloric fluid" is identical with what is now known as "mean kinetic energy of molecules." If Rorty is right, sensations are of the same type as caloric fluid; so, it is possible that we could one day say that what "used to" be referred to by 'I am in pain' can now be referred to by 'My C-fibers are firing.' And, as with caloric talk, mental talk (or sensation-talk initially) would disappear. But more than that, the ontological status of sensation-talk would disappear with it. Thus, Rorty names his position the "disappearance form" of the identity theory.

By this novel reinterpretation of 'identity' Rorty claims both to avoid those problems inherent in the translation form and to remain faithful to the tenets of the identity theory. That is, the problems with topic-neutrality are obviated but not at the expense of the materialistic doctrine itself.

At the very outset, however, there seems to be a rather devastating criticism of Rorty's thesis, viz., that to eliminate 'sensation' is one thing, but to eliminate sensations themselves is quite another. Regardless of what one does with sensation talk, the independent reality of sensations will linger on. Excising the existence of the latter on the basis of the dispensability of the former is akin to throwing the baby out with the bath water.

Rorty employs the familiar analogy between demons and sensations at this point to show how the disappearance process works. Of course, demons and caloric fluid can never be proven not to exist. Non-existence is by definition not a discoverable thing. But "caloric fluid" is replaced by another concept whose referent is discovered to exist. And if it so happens that this new concept is sufficient to explain all that the old concept could explain; and if the new concept serves us better than the old; then it is not merely the terms "caloric fluid" which disappear, but the ontological status as well. With regard to demons Rorty says: "...the simplicity of the accounts which can be offered if we forget about demons is an excellent reason for saying that there are no demons."³ Likewise, the principle of simplicity would allow for the elimination of the ontological status of sensations if and when brain talk sufficiently replaces mental talk or dualistic talk.

Obviously, Rorty's task is not to advance brain-talk to that utopian stage, but to show the feasibility of such advancement. And showing feasibility amounts to no more than displaying the ways in which brain-talk is adequate in describing and predicting mental phenomena. In line with the simplicity principle, Rorty says we can eliminate "the referring use of the expression in question ('demon,' 'sensation') from our language [if doing so] would leave our ability to describe and predict undiminished."⁴

But, would such an elimination leave our ability to describe and predict undiminished? On the surface it seems not. However, Rorty offers two elucidations in order to render an affirmative answer to this question more palatable. First, "ability" to describe and predict means logical possibility not mere physical convenience. Certainly it would be impractical to eliminate sensation-talk from our vocabulary, just as it would be impractical to substitute "molecule-clouds" for "tables." But logically speaking, it could be done, and this is all that matters. Second, our natural repugnance at the statement, "There are no such things as sensations," stems not from the indubitability of the sensations themselves but from habit. That is, we are in the habit of positing the existence of non-inferentially experienced phenomena such as sensations, whereas, we are not in the same habit with respect to inferred entities such as demons or caloric fluid. Habit, however, has little or nothing to do with ontology. Consequently, Rorty claims, even though it might seem odd to eliminate sensations, the fact that it is possible to do just that makes sensations a proper candidate for the simplicity criterion. Therefore, since a materialistic explanation is as adequate as, and simpler than, a dualistic one, parsimony urges us to adopt a materialistic identity theory.

II. How Rorty's Eliminative Materialism Contains a Deceptive Shift of Emphasis.

My basic criticism of Rorty's materialism is that his particular brand of "identity" is not amenable to an application of the simplicity principle. On the one hand Rorty seems to want to replace sensation terms by brain-state terms which would then carry a double role. On the other, he seems to want to let the ontological status of the sensation-talk referents wither away because the brain-state terms (now viewed as single-tracked) have successfully replaced the sensation terms--forgetting that it was only by this stipulation that the replacement was effected to begin with. If this is indeed what Rorty has done then it is clear that the simplicity criterion cannot apply here for the following reason. Either the descriptive role of brain-talk is insufficient to encompass the descriptive role of sensation-talk; or it is sufficient only

because brain-talk surreptitiously retains a dualistic ontology within a deceptive single-tracked language.

The last sentence of the preceding paragraph states in a nutshell a crucial criticism of Rorty's position and accordingly it must be expanded and clarified. The point being made is that the simplicity criterion fails to apply because brain-talk is inadequate to describe what sensation-talk describes. Richard Bernstein argues that it is only in a restricted "scientific sense" that the description requisite is fulfilled.⁵ He says,

The issue is not whether or not I can describe the same thing or event in neurophysiological discourse, but whether I can give the same types of descriptions and reports that I now give of my sensations and feelings in the new purified neurophysiological science. If I can't then there is a perfectly legitimate sense in which I can say that although for scientific purposes my ability to describe and predict is undiminished, nevertheless my ability to describe is diminished if I adopt the new neurophysiological discourse. Why? Because there would be no way of saying in this ideal language what I can now correctly say.

Rorty would counter that one can simply replace mental terms with brain-state terms. "It would make life simpler for us if you would, in the future, say 'My C-fibers are firing' instead of saying 'I'm in pain.'"⁶ We could, merely by convention (if our scientific knowledge were up to it), simply agree to eliminate further use of mental language, and, in its place, issue the appropriate neurophysiological statements. Thus, by merely readapting brain-talk, the mental descriptive role could be incorporated and Bernstein's objection would be answered. Thus, synonymity would answer Bernstein's objection. There are two obvious responses which can be made about Rorty's simple substitution-of-terms hypothesis. First, there is little in this doctrine to take exception with. We may as well refer to different sensations by their French names as by neurophysiological names or mental names. Names are only words and, apart from their meanings, words are only noises or scratches. Second, if this is all that Rorty's program is based on then it is shallow and uninteresting.

The first response serves to give Rorty's eliminative materialism hypothesis an air of plausibility. If all Rorty's program does is to switch vocabularies, only the obstinate would refuse to go along. The second response represents a criticism which Rorty attempts to sidestep by shifting emphasis. His new emphasis is away from the mere substitutions of vocabularies, and towards the

materialistic referents of neurophysiological terms. If this is the case, then, in Rorty's disappearance theory, mental terms have indeed disappeared--by replacement; their referents, however, have disappeared by fancy footwork alone.

Let us look more closely at the main contention that the criticism espouses. Rorty has eliminated "sensation" but not sensations themselves. Consider the two statements:

- (A) My pain is agonizing.
- (B) My C-fibers are firing rapidly

If we choose to comply with Rorty's vocabulary replacement, we may, in the future, use 'B' whenever we want to express the meanings of either 'A' or 'B'. But in so doing, we must keep in mind that the reporting function of 'A' is tacitly present in 'B'. Nothing has been eliminated at this stage except the scratches or the verbal noises "My pain is agonizing." Of course, to opt for 'B' expressions exclusively would be to adopt a language which says much more than 'A' expressions alone can say. 'B' expressions would then serve an explanatory role which 'A' statements presently do not. 'B' statements would refer to the causes or correlations previously associated with the now defunct 'A' statements.

Of course, to eliminate the 'A' statement is not necessarily to eliminate the 'A' function. If we choose to say 'B' at all--we may be saying 'B₁'. 'B₁' is more than 'B', it is the 'B' statement plus the 'A' function. Opting for 'B₁' statements would then express these two different ideas:

- (1) The cause or correlation of a pain is nothing more than a brain-state. (explanatory role)
- (2) The agony associated with the pain (which used to be expressed by sensation-talk) is now implicitly expressed by 'B₁'-talk. (reportive role)

It would be possible to teach a child to say "abaracadabara" upon touching a hot stove; but then "abaracadabara" would still serve the same function as "ouch, stove hot." Likewise, "my heat sensitive C-fibers are firing rapidly" would serve to express the same function as "ouch, stove hot." But, of course, it would do more. It would referentially locate the neural states associated with the sensation. (However, "association with" is not necessarily synonymous with "cause of"; it may simply mean "correlation with"--a possibility which no one denies.)

Now such brain-state talk is certainly economical since it serves two functions with one statement. But this economy of language should not be confused with simplicity of ontology. Perhaps it would be wise for us to opt for this brain talk--unless, of course, it could be shown that it would be too impractical (i.e., too physically complicated) and provided the attractive simplicity of brain-talk doesn't deceive us. Rorty admits that dropping sensation language in favor of brain-state talk is, in fact, too impractical and inconvenient.⁷ But this only says that it will not be done, not that it can not. So what will concern us here is the deception factor inherent in Rorty's program.

"The pain I am experiencing is my C-fibers firing" is quite an acceptable response from a person whom we believe to be in pain as long as we keep in mind the two separate functions which the new statement implies. But--and this is where the deception enters--the tendency is to translate the statement as "The pain I am experiencing is nothing but my C-fibers firing." Indeed this is the interpretation which Rorty desires, thus eliminating the sensation, the pain. The 'nothing but' serves to omit the second function of brain-talk (i.e., the reportive role). By eliminating sensations rather than just sensation-talk we have done much more than when we eliminated demon talk in favor of germ talk. It is possible that we have lost an essential function on the one hand, and a mere ad hoc. hypothetical entity on the other.

The dilemma we are confronted with is this: either brain-state-talk does fulfill the descriptive function or it doesn't. If it doesn't (because neglecting the reportive role) then it is not adequate to account for the same kinds of things that dualistic talk can account for. For instance, it would fail to describe the common pain adjectives such as intense, throbbing, etc., as our present sensation language is readily able to do. If it does fulfill the descriptive function then it can only do so by virtue of the fact that it is a two-seated language and is implicitly committed to a dualism--of functions at least. That is, it does two essentially different things: it explains, by referring to neurophysiological movements, and it describes sensations in the exact same way that sensation talk "used to" describe sensations. Thus, if brain-state-talk does fulfill the descriptive function, then it is as much a two way street as dualistic talk, and it is no less committed to a mind/body dualism.

Rorty's reply to similar criticism has been that his critics are begging the question. They are assuming the existence of mental entities, and faulting the new, neuro-physical language for failing to describe these entities.

as the old, dualistic language did. But, since it is just the existence of these assumed entities which is being questioned, the critic's argument is clearly circular. However, my point is that Rorty is faced with a dilemma: either the new language does embrace the ontological commitment of dualistic talk, or it does not. If it does, then the plan fails (i.e., since it would be surreptitiously double-tracked). If it does not, then the new talk fails to describe what dualistic talk describes (no matter what that is), and is not, therefore, amenable to the simplicity criterion.

The eliminative materialist may attempt to escape between the horns of this dilemma by arguing that the new language will prove to be descriptively adequate since it only fails to describe what is really non-existent in the first place, viz. sensations. However, this ploy would beg the question. The non-existence of sensations cannot be used to support the feasibility of adopting the new language, since it is the adoption of the new language which is originally offered as support for the non-existence of sensations.

It is true that when we eliminate demons on the basis of eliminability of demon talk we are merely getting rid of excess baggage. But if we try the same thing with sensations and sensation-talk we shall have found that we have lost some necessary baggage. So this was Rorty's trek: he chose (for economical reasons) to use brain-talk for both neural references and the descriptive function of mental terms. Brain-talk, that is, was given a stipulative two way function. But later, under the guise of the simplicity principle, he actually eliminated one of the functions of his new comprehensive language--and he is the poorer for it.

Germ talk (in his demon analogy) isn't such a two way street as is brain-talk. It doesn't serve the double function of explaining, say, the appearance of the demons to the medicine man, while also explaining the causes for the sickness. Therefore, the only way we could accomplish the analogous elimination of sensations by way of adopting brain-talk is if we first discovered that there was in fact nothing to which sensation-talk referred. But, of course, that would be begging the question.

It is not the simplicity principle which is being implemented by Rorty here, but an attempt to sidestep the prerequisites upon which the principle is predicated. By quickly shifting from questions based on the reportive role functions, to answers from the explanatory role, the eliminative materialist eliminates too much. Rorty correctly points to those descriptive adjectives such as

"intense," "sharp," and "throbbing" which characterize the sensation function, but fail to make sense when applied to brain-talk. But his explanation of this pesky fact is insufficient. He says "If referring expressions can go out of date, why not adjectives as well?"⁸ The answer is that they can, but only if we stipulate that the function of such adjectives becomes synonymous with the new brain-talk expressions. That is, only if we mean by "My heat sensing C-fibers are firing at approximately such and such a rate" exactly the same (and more perhaps) as "my burned finger is throbbing with pain." But if we do so stipulate, it would hardly be cricket to reverse positions later on and to attempt to eliminate the function with which our new brain-talk was held to be partially synonymous in the first place.

Rorty's approach fails because it attempts the impossible: it tries to say in one language framework something about the hidden conditions of another, inaccessible framework. He asks us to use everyday English to hypostatize about the ontology inherent in an alien language--one whose vocabulary contains terms which resemble our present neurophysiological terms, but which fail to carry the same denotations as them. We can only reply quite as would the witchdoctor upon first being told about germs, "Oh, what you mean by germ talk (brain-talk) is just the same as what I mean by demon talk (dualistic talk)." The only reason for the witchdoctor's eventual capitulation is that there are those who reside in that "inaccessible" region; there are those who have seen the germs through microscopes. For the analogy to work there would have to be those in the inaccessible land of non-dualistic talk, those who have seen the inadequacy of our ontology and who envision a better way. It is only when you have seen the germs that demon talk seems primitive. Consequently, the strongest claim that EM can make is that it might be possible to have a non-dualistic language and that, therefore, materialism is at least vaguely plausible. This diluted conclusion is too weak to warrant any philosophical interest.

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NOTES

¹James Cornman, "The Identity of Mind and Body," The Mind/Brain Identity Theory, C.V. Borst, ed. (London: Macmillan and Co., 1970), p. 127.

²Richard Rorty, "Mind-Body Identity, Privacy and Categories," The Mind/Brain Identity Theory, C.V. Borst, ed. (London: Macmillan and Co., 1970), p. 189.

³Ibid., p. 192.

⁴Ibid., p. 194.

⁵Richard J. Bernstein, "The Challenge of Scientific Materialism," in International Philosophical Quarterly, VIII (1968), p. 267.

⁶Rorty, "Mind-Body Identity, Privacy, and Categories," p. 193.

⁷Ibid., p. 198.

⁸Rorty, "In Defense of Eliminative Materialism," in Review of Metaphysics, 24 (Sept. 1970), p. 120.