

A critical analysis of the reductive physicalist functionalist perspective on the nature of consciousness

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Abstract

A perennial problem in philosophy concerns human nature and especially the nature of human consciousness. In the present article, we will critically analyze the physicalist-reductionist view of functionalism regarding the nature of consciousness. In this endeavor, we will provide a description of functionalism followed by a critical analysis. In the conclusion we will try to identify the features of consciousness as they logically follow from the criticisms brought against functionalism. The research will try to answer questions such as: Are consciousness or mental properties physical or irreducibly mental? Is consciousness identical to a brain state? Is consciousness a causal-functional brain state type or token? Does the reductive physicalist functionalist explanation provide a coherent picture of the existence of mental phenomena and qualitative, subjective, first-person experiences? Are the arguments of functionalism defining in the mind/body, consciousness/brain debate, or do they leave room for other non-physicalist and non-reductionist views? The critical apparatus used to answer these questions is grounded in the objections brought to reductionist physicalist perspectives by some of the main actors in the history of the mind-body debate.

Keywords: *reductive physicalist functionalism, consciousness, mind-brain relation, causal functional relations, “qualia”.*

Introduction

The critical analysis of reductive physicalist functionalism is imposed by one of the goals that this perspective claims to achieve, if correct, that is, “to show that there is nothing associated with conscious brains which lies irredeemably beyond the scope of scientific explanation” (Maxwell, 2011, p. 2). Indeed, if this statement and its consequences are understood, it is a huge statement about the nature of reality in general and consciousness in particular. This confidence of functionalism is grounded in its historical success in providing a solution to the counterarguments brought to two other physicalist conceptions that tried to answer if consciousness or mental properties can be reduced to physical states:

behaviorism and identity theory. The first view tried to understand the mind in terms of bodily behavior. In Skinner's words, "thinking has the dimensions of behavior, not of a fancied inner process which finds expression in behavior" (Skinner, 1974, pp. 117-118). The second view considered that

the states of direct experience which conscious human beings "live through" and those which we confidently ascribe to some of the higher animals, are identical with certain (presumably configurational) aspects of neural processes in those organisms. (Feigl, 1958, p. 446)

From the perspective of objections to these views, behaviorism has been shown to be bankrupt because it has been successfully argued that certain organisms can be in a certain mental state without exhibiting any specific behavior associated with that mental state (for example, we can experience pain without expressing some behavior often associated with it). The identity theory fared no better either, as it was shown that organisms can be in certain mental states without being in the brain states associated with those mental states (for example, we can be in the pain state without being in the C fiber¹ firing state). However, these two objections have been successfully countered by functionalism by regarding mental states as functional states. In the functionalist view, mental states are identified by the functional roles they play in the life of the organism (Kind, 2019, pp. 63-64).

1. Description of functionalism

For the functionalist, a mental state can be exhaustively described as a state that has some kind of function, and the concept of function is defined in terms of causal relations to sensory inputs, behavioral outputs, and other "internal" states. In other words, each type of mental state has as its defining features a set of logical or causal relations in which a performer stands with the environmental inputs of the body, other types of "mental" states related to the state in question, and outputs understood as behaviors of the body (Moreland & Craig, 2017, p. 238). Defining functionalism, Jaegwon Kim states:

According to functionalism, a mental kind is a functional kind, or a causal functional kind, since the "function" involved is to fill a certain causal role... Mental kinds are causal functional kinds, and what all instances of a given mental kind have in common is the fact that they serve a certain causal role distinctive of that kind... what makes a mental event the kind of mental event it is, is the way it is causally

¹ Although the particular example of the C-fiber stimulation-pain identity is almost ubiquitous in philosophical discussions, it was only later promoted through the work of Putnam (See Putnam, 1975, pp. 362-385 and Rorty, 1965, pp. 24-54). It is also important to note that the phrase "C-fiber stimulation" in the mind-brain debate seems to be understood as a substitute terminology for any neural process that would be found to be in an identity relationship with pain.

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linked to other mental-event kinds and input/output conditions. (Kim, 1996, pp. 76-77, 79)

To identify as precisely as possible the fact that mental states, such as beliefs, fit into these types of causal relations, identity theorists have introduced a technical device called “Ramsey’s proposition.” The British philosopher Frank Ramsey proposed that in a sentence we eliminate the expression “belief that it rains” and replace it with an “x”. Then to precede the entire sentence with an existential quantifier, which says “there is an x such that”. Therefore, using an example, we could say that “there is an x such that the perception that it is now raining causes x, and x together with the desire not to get wet determines the behavior of carrying an umbrella” (Searle, 2018, p. 85). So a belief is absolutely anything, any x that meets these causal relations.

A device such as a mouse trap can be multiple realized into different physical structures. The mouse trap is what it is by virtue of the function it performs, not the material it is made of. Therefore, the specificity of this notion must be obtained from the perspective of the object’s functionality and not its physical nature. This aspect differentiates mouse traps, for example, from gold nuggets. The latter are what they are by virtue of their specific physical constitution, which also involves the possession of atoms with atomic number 79. This is why gold is different from pyrite (fool’s gold). Although pyrite shares the same yellow color, from the perspective of its constitution, it is natural iron disulfide. In functionalist optics, mouse traps represent a more suitable model for understanding mental states than the gold nuggets model (Kind, 2019, p. 64).

There are many other artifact concepts or biological concepts that are functionally specified. In this regard, Kim states:

*What makes an organ a heart is the fact that it pumps blood. The human heart may be physically very unlike hearts in, say, reptiles or birds, but they all count as hearts because of the job they do in the organisms in which they are found, not on account of their similarity in shape, size, or material composition. (Kim, *Philosophy of Mind*, 2011, p. 131)*

Therefore mental states are defined by their causal relations, and these causal relations constitute their function. They are not defined by certain intrinsic features. Taking the mental state of pain as an example, we can say that it plays a certain role in the life of an organism.

What all instances of pain have in common is not some single physical property or mechanism; it is the causal role they play in the psychologies of the organisms and

systems endowed with “tissue damage detectors”. (Kim, „Mental Causation”, 2011, p. 47)

Anything that can fulfill this causal-functional role is a pain.

Another model used by functionalists is that of artificial intelligence. Functionalism drew on computational analogies to articulate its position, due to major developments in computational science that coincided with its emergence. In this sense, the mental dimension is portrayed by functionalism through the image of software and not hardware (Kind, 2019, p. 64). On the basis of these premises, computational functionalism took shape and states that the brain is a digital computer, and what we call “mind” is a computer program or set of programs. The mind is to the brain what the program is to the hardware (See Laird, 1983 and Laird, 1988). Proponents of the strong artificial intelligence view have gone so far as to assert that a properly programmed computer does not merely pretend to have a mind, it literally has a mind.

Before turning to the origins of this analogy, we should note that the computer analogy paints a clearer picture of some of the essential features of functionalism.

For a computer to be able to “read mathematics and be able to add,” the computer must be able to receive certain input (“2”, “+”, “2”, “=”), produce certain outputs (“4” is displayed on a screen), and advance to certain other internal states (it is ready to display “8” if you input the command to multiply the new total by 2). (Moreland & Craig, 2017, p. 238)

This model emphasizes that for functionalism the defining features of mental states are not the conscious, private qualities of the states themselves known through first-person introspective awareness, but, as noted above, the logical and causal relationships that are realized between certain bodily inputs, certain bodily outputs and other “mental” states. Therefore, the meaning of mental terms is given by the role they play in a third-person theory used to describe and explain behavior (*Ibidem*).

In opposition to behaviorism, functionalism asserts that mental states are internal to the organism, even though both positions define mental states in terms of relations between inputs and outputs. In this sense, for a functionalist someone’s claim that they are in pain is considered to be a genuine report and not just a pain-like behavior expressed through moans, twitches, etc. (as the behaviorist claims) (Kind, 2019, pp. 64-65). The functionalist perspective is based on two important general principles. First, mental states are interdefined. This principle strengthens the verticality of functionalism in the face of the objections that led to the bankruptcy of behaviorism. Second, mental states are multiply realizable. This

principle gives functionalism longevity in the face of the multiple realization objection to identity theories (*Ibidem*).

All the considerations mentioned so far are grounded in Putnam's original functionalist articulation. The researcher formulated his theory in terms of the Turing machine. This machine was a hypothetical device proposed in 1963 by the mathematician Alan Turing (hence the name "machinist functionalism" for Putnam's position). Essentially, all Turing machine operations can be characterized by a set of instructions given in the "machine table". "For each internal state of the computer, the instructions specify the output that will result from a given input" (Kind, 2019, p. 65). In this vein, if we conceive of the mind as such a machine, we can completely describe the operations of the mind along the path of a machine table.² A remark worth remembering is that the machine instruction table does not say anything about the physical constitution of the machine, but only provides a detailed specification of the operation of the machine. It can be made of any kind of material, even non-physical things. In this sense Fodor stated: "As far as functionalism is concerned, a machine with states S1 and S2 can be made of ectoplasm, if such a thing exists and if its states have the right causal properties" (Fodor, 1981, p. 129 *apud* Kind, 2019, p. 66). Putnam believed that the same could be true of the mind. Therefore, he considered his views to be compatible with dualism Putnam, 1975, p. 436). However, for functionalism to be compatible with dualism, the former would have to hold that the state that fulfills a particular causal role is a irreducible mental state (in the soul – for substance dualism or in the brain – for property dualism) and is internally characterized by essential conscious feeling, specific to that state (e.g. of the specific conscious sensation of pain). But most functionalists are physicalists and argue that states that happen to fulfill certain causal roles are neurophysiological states in the brain (Moreland & Craig, 2017, p. 239). For them, although it is possible for mental states to be realized in many different physical substances, they must all be realized in some physical substance. This physicalist version of functionalism is a version of token physicalism, not type physicalism.

For the functionalist, any instantiation of pain is realized in some physical state, but these physical states may be instantiations of different physical types, perhaps C-fiber firings in humans, while in hydraulic Martians something quite different. (Kind, 2019, p. 66)

² Although providing a machine table, a mechanical model for organisms, is a difficult project, it was considered by Putnam to be an "inevitable part of the program of psychology" (See Putnam, 1975, p. 435).

This physicalist-reductionist functionalist variant will be subjected to criticism in the next section.

2. Criticisms of reductionist physicalist functionalism

Although there are many criticisms we can make of functionalism, we will limit our inquiry to just a few of them. Most of these objections will focus on the fact that functionalists miss one of the defining features of mental states, namely, the internal features of these states known through introspective awareness.

2. 1. THE INVERTED QUALIA ARGUMENT

In this sense, first, we will focus on one of the objections to behaviorism, namely the argument of the inverted spectrum or what is called the problem of inverted qualia. This objection was developed by philosophers Ned Block and Jerry Fodor (Block & Fodor, 1972, pp. 159-181). The argument supports the possibility that some people have inverted color experiences.

Essentially, the problem posed by this argument is that two mental states different in terms of their intrinsic qualitative features can stand in exactly the same causal relations to the environment, to other mental states, and to behavior, which means that they appear to be functional equivalents. (Gheorghiu, 2015, p. 287)

To understand this objection William Lane Craig and J.P. Moreland gives us an illustration (Moreland & Craig, 2017, pp. 239-240). The authors invite us to think about two people, Jones and Smith, who entered a room together. As they visually scanned the room, they mentally selected the red objects from others there and stated, "The red ones are here." According to the functionalist understanding, both Jones and Smith are in exactly the same mental state, namely, the state of being aware of redness. However, it is metaphysically possible for Smith to see colors normally, but Jones to have inverted color awareness. Jones may have awareness of blue whenever Smith and anyone else see red, and vice versa. In this case, based on the specific mental state experienced, Smith will sort the red objects from all the others and Jones will do the same with the blue ones. From the perspective of functionalism, they are both in the same mental state, because that state is caused by certain inputs (scanning the room with gaze) which produces certain outputs (sorting the red objects from the others plus the belief that the term red applies to these objects). However, Jones and Smith are not in the same mental state if mental states are characterized by their inner nature: Jones is aware of bluishness and Smith is aware of redness. Jones and Smith operate in the same way but based on very different mental states. In conclusion, since it is possible to have two different mental states but the same unique functional state, the latter

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cannot be identical to the former. In other words, mental states cannot be reduced to functional brain states.

2.2. THE ABSENT QUALIA ARGUMENT

A second objection, related to the first, is called the absent qualia problem (See Block, 1978, pp. 261-325). Conscious experiences have a qualitative aspect, a “what it is like to be in a state” (*qualia*). There is a qualitative sensation in the act of drinking orange juice that is quite different from the qualitative sensation in the act of listening to Handel’s music. “Each conscious state is a quale because there is a certain qualitative way of feeling for each state” (Searle, 2018, p. 85). Pain, for example, is essentially characterized by a certain kind of painful feeling that can be known directly through cognition, through direct contact with our first-person, inner and private subjective feeling state, but functional relations do not have these features, therefore they cannot be the same. The problem with functionalism is that it ignores this qualitative aspect of our conscious experiences, and thus qualia are absent from functionalist explanations. Therefore, can functionalism’s claim that the ability of unconscious machines to imitate consciousness, embodying the correct functional states, be evidence that these machines are actually in that mental state is true? Of course not!

This seems wrong. Even if a robot could be set up to grimace, shout “Ouch!” and so forth after being stuck with a pin, the robot would still not be in the state of being in pain because the specific conscious property of painfulness would be absent. (Moreland & Craig, 2017, p. 240)

However, qualia have real existence in our everyday experience, so any theory that denies their existence is either explicitly or implicitly false.

2.3. THE “CHINESE NATION” ARGUMENT

Along this line of thought, Ned Block developed a specific form of the absent qualia objection called the “Chinese nation” argument (Block, 1978, pp. 261-325). Block seeks to prove the falsity of functionalism’s claim that some systems that intuition tells us cannot have mental states actually do have mental states. Block elaborates his argument in what is known as the Chinese nation or Chinese brain argument. He invites us to portray the functionalist program, with its stages, carried out by the brain, as a great mass of people embodying this program. In this sense, we can imagine the number of neurons in the brain as the corresponding number of citizens in China. At this point, we can continue the scenario by imagining that the population of China fulfills its staged functionalist program in exactly the same way as the brain does. “But nevertheless, as a result, we know intuitively that the population of China does not have any mental states

as a whole, in the way that a single person actually has mental states” that include *qualia* (Searle, 2018, p. 109). So, the Chinese brain system is not mentally equivalent to ours. Therefore, if the Chinese brain system were a functional duplicate of any of us and yet could not have *qualia* like us, then functionalism would be false.

2.4. WHAT IS IT LIKE TO BE A BAT?

Along the same lines, we can recall Thomas Nagel’s criticism against physicalist reductionism in general, applicable to functionalism, which proved that this conception cannot provide a complete explanation of the ontology of consciousness from the perspective of the first person. In his article, “What is it Like to Be a Bat?” (Nagel, 1974, pp. 435-450), Nagel persuasively explained that being a bat is fundamentally a subjective phenomenon, understood only from the bat’s unique point of view. As a conscious mammal, he experiences *qualia*, but does so in a different manner than humans. For example, for spatial orientation, the bat uses echolocation, and we use the senses of sight, sound and touch. Therefore, we will never know what it is like for a bat to use its sonar. The objective observations of the functionalist theorist cannot encapsulate what it is like to be of the bat. This inability is a major collapse for functionalist theory because subjectivity is an essential fact of experience that it cannot capture. Moreover, this reality cannot be adequately penetrated even by an act of imagination. As Nagel noted:

In so far as I can imagine this (which is not very far), it tells me only what it would be like for me to behave as a bat behaves. But that is not the question. I want to know what it is like for a bat to be a bat. Yet if I try to imagine this, I am restricted to the resources of my own mind, and those resources are inadequate to the task. I cannot perform it either by imagining additions to my present experience, or by imagining segments gradually subtracted from it, or by imagining some combination of additions, subtractions, and modifications. (Nagel, 1974, p. 439)

Therefore, from Nagel’s perspective, one could have a complete knowledge of the neurophysiology of a bat, a complete knowledge of all the functional mechanisms that enable bats to live and navigate, yet there could be something that escaped to the knowledge of this person: What it is like to be a bat? How I should feel. And this is the essence of consciousness, because for every conscious being there is a “what it is like” aspect of its existence. This characteristic is omitted and cannot be defined by an objective, third-person account of consciousness. From what has been said so far, it can be clearly seen that mental properties are not identical to the functional relations of a physical system. In none of the physical causal-functional relations is there a “what it is like” to be in that

physical state. There is no “what it is like” to be a synaptic firing pattern that serves a specific function.

2.5. THE “CHINESE ROOM” ARGUMENT

The “Chinese room” argument refers to a famous example provided by John Searle to prove the inability of functionalist optics to explain thoughts and understand meanings by reducing mental states to functional states in a computer. Moreover, the example proves that causal-functional relations are not the same thing as intentionality. Searle states:

Well, imagine that you are locked in a room, and in this room are several baskets full of Chinese symbols. Imagine that you (like me) do not understand a word of Chinese, but that you are given a rule book in English for manipulating these Chinese symbols. The rules specify the manipulations of the symbols purely formally, in terms of their syntax, not their semantics. So the rule might say: “Take a squiggle-squiggle sign out of basket number one and put it next to a squogglesquoggle sign from basket number two.” Now suppose that some other Chinese symbols are passed into the room, and that you are given further rules for passing back Chinese symbols out of the room. Suppose that unknown to you the symbols passed into the room are called “questions” by the people outside the room, and the symbols you pass back out of the room are called “answers to the questions”. Suppose, furthermore, that the programmers are so good at designing the programs and that you are so good at manipulating the symbols, that very soon your answers are indistinguishable from those of a native Chinese speaker. There you are locked in your room shuffling your Chinese symbols and passing out Chinese symbols in response to incoming Chinese symbols. On the basis of the situation as I have described it, there is no way you could learn any Chinese simply by manipulating these formal symbols. Now the point of the story is simply this: by virtue of implementing a formal computer program from the point of view of an outside observer, you behave exactly as if you understood Chinese, but all the same you don’t understand a word of Chinese. (Searle, 1984, pp. 32-33)

According to this example, the person outside the room has a computer simulation in front of him (this simulation portrays functionalism). She notices that this room receives inputs and outputs in such a way that it seems to understand Chinese. However, the room does not possess mental understanding, it merely imitates it. In reality, like this room, computers cannot exemplify mental states, but only imitate them.

2.6. THE MENTAL INTENTIONALITY ARGUMENT

Moreover, by his example, Searle showed, countering functionalism, the intentional nature of our mental states and proved that intentionality has nothing to do with intention, but means that a thought is “in relation to”, “about something”. Mental states have intentionality, but physical states do not. Mental states have

that “about,” “regarding,” “relating to,” “concerning” something beyond them (Searle, 2018, pp. 48-50; 160-161 and chapter 6). None of the brain states are characterized by such a thing. Therefore, mental states are not identical to brain states. In the case of mental intentionality there are no limits on the kind of object it can hold as a term. All things can be the target of a mental act. In contrast, physical relations can only be realized for a narrow range of objects (e.g., electric current only flows through certain things). Moreover, regardless of whether physical objects enter into certain relations or not, they always remain identifiable (a table and a chair would continue to exist and be detectable no matter how much I change the spatial arrangement) but intentional contents do not (e.g. one and the same belief cannot be about me and later about an article, the belief is what it is, at least in part, by virtue of “what” the belief is about). Finally, any physical object must exist in order to be able to enter into certain physical relationships (the book and the desk must exist before the first is above the second) but I can also manifest my intentionality towards non-existent things (I can think of Tolkien’s elves) (Moreland & Craig, 2017, p. 221).

2.7. THE KNOWLEDGE ARGUMENT

This argument was proposed by Frank Jackson and focuses on a thought experiment involving Mary, a brilliant color researcher (Jackson, 1982, pp. 126-136 and Jackson, 1986, pp. 291-295). Through an exercise of imagination, we are called to visualize a life in which Mary initially lives in an environment where all the objects around her are black and white. The story of her life is consumed in a futuristic scenario marked by a complete elaboration of the science of color, a science that Mary acquired with the help of a black-and-white textbook. She knows all about the eye-brain relationship, what color processing entails and their similarity ratio. Later, Mary is exposed to a colorful environment that obviously produces a startling event in her. With the sight of a color other than white or black, she learns something new. She learns what it’s like to see that new color. Therefore, although she had been educated and possessed perfectly all the physical data regarding colors, she did not know the whole story. Therefore, in contrast to reductionist physicalism, not all facts about color perception in humans are physical facts.

By this argument Jackson showed that phenomenal properties are distinct from and irreducible to physical properties, since one can in principle know all the physical facts about a certain kind of conscious experience, on the basis of the materialist explanation, without knowing anything about what it is like to actually have that experience. For this reason, the physicalist version of functionalism

cannot provide an adequate description of our mental states. Any explanation of the mind that omits these qualitative experiences is inadequate.

2.8. ARGUMENT FROM THE CONCEIVABILITY OF PHYSICAL BODIES DEVOID OF “QUALIA”

I subscribe to David Chalmers’s position that we can conceive of beings that are physically identical to us but are devoid of qualia. Chalmers appeals to the idea of zombie, which in philosophy is a being twinned with man, molecule for molecule, function for function, but “it is just that none of this functioning will be accompanied by any real conscious experience. There will be no phenomenal feel. There is nothing it is like to be a zombie” (Chalmers, 1996, p. 95).

Based on this observation, we can construct, Chalmers-like and Cartesian-style, an anti-physicalist argument, proceeding from conceivable facts to possible facts. If we can conceive of a world of zombies in which qualia are entirely absent, then this world is metaphysically possible. If this world is metaphysically possible, then qualia transcend physical facts. Therefore, identity reductionist physicalism is false.

Building in a similar fashion, after acknowledging the strength of Descartes’s conceivability argument, Thomas Nagel states:

Descartes’ argument also has the following inverted version, which, to my knowledge, he never used. The existence of the body without the mind is as conceivable as the existence of the mind without the body. That is, I can conceive that, internally and externally, my body is doing exactly what it is doing now with full physical causation of its behavior (including typical self-conscious behavior), but without any of the mental states I now experience, or otherwise, any others. If this is indeed conceivable, then mental states must be distinct from the physical state of the body. (Nagel, 1980, p. 205)

Nagel’s argument holds that I can conceive of my body as existing and being exactly as it is, but without my mind. Therefore, the mind is not identical with the body and with any of its parts or operations.

Moreover, Descartes actually used this inverted version of the conceivability argument, although Nagel very frankly stated that, to the best of his knowledge, Descartes did not use it. In the fifth part of the Discourse on Method, Descartes states:

I emphasized that if there were such machines, with the organs and external appearance of an ape or any animal devoid of reason, we would have no possibility of recognizing the difference between them and these animals. Whereas if there were machines that resembled our bodies and imitated our actions as far as was morally possible, we should always have two very sure means of recognizing that in spite of

appearances they are not in the least human: the first is that they could never make use of proper words, nor of other signs, as we do when we communicate our thoughts to others; for one can easily conceive a machine so constructed as to utter words, some even in connection with bodily actions which will produce changes in its organs, for example if we touch it at a certain point it will ask what we wanted it to do we say, if we touch her in another point she cries out that it hurts and other similar things; but she will not be able to combine words in such a way as to respond meaningfully to everything that is spoken in her presence, as even the most stupid people can do; the second means is, that, though they do many things as well, or perhaps even better, than we, they inevitably err in others, which proves that they do not act by knowledge, but only by virtue of their organs; for while reason is a universal instrument, which can serve in all circumstances, these organs need a particular arrangement for each particular action; hence it follows that it is morally impossible to have sufficient organs in a machine to make it act in all situations of life as our reason allows us to act. (Descartes, 1990, p. 143. emphasis is mine).

In this paragraph and according to the previous context (see Descartes, 1990, pp. 139-143), Descartes points out that if we had machines, a kind of superlative of machines created by God, and they possessed the organs and external configuration of animals without reason, we would not be able to distinguish them from these animals. On the other hand, if the same machines had the external configuration and behavioral manifestations specific to humans, we could spot the difference by appealing to two means of recognition.

The first means has to do with the inability of these machines to make use of words, to combine them, to respond meaningfully to everything spoken in their presence. His argument is grounded in the idea that “one can easily conceive of a machine thus constructed...”, that is, the idea of such a machine is rationally conceivable. Certainly not referring to the fact that such a machine could easily be built in its day (especially with the technology of the time). This first means that he proposed in support of his thesis, to identify the difference between a man and a machine identical to man, in form and function, was constituted in an argument in favor of Cartesian substance dualism, namely, the argument of the conceivability of physical machines, identical to man in form and function, but devoid of reason.

Therefore, in this text, Descartes actually uses the inverted version of the mind-without-body conceivability argument. In the same way, he proceeds from conceivable facts to possible facts. If we can conceive of a world with machines identical to man in form and function, but devoid of reason, then this world is metaphysically possible. If this world is metaphysically possible, then reason transcends physical facts. Consequently, my reason is not identical with my physical body, or, applying what has been said to functionalism, my reason is not identical with causally functional physical relations.

Conclusions

Our critical analysis has shown that functionalism denies the existence of ontologically subjective phenomena, despite the fact that the latter are experienced by each of us. However, because common sense, as Kant recommended, should not be used as an absolute argument in philosophical debates, philosophers have developed more complex arguments to reinforce the same truth by appealing to qualia, inverted spectra, Chinese nations, Chinese rooms, etc. All these arguments prove that conscious mental states cannot be defined only in causal-functional terms, even if they also fulfill a causal role. The complex of criticisms leveled against this physicalist version of functionalism portrays consciousness as possibly ontologically distinct from neural states, with phenomenal features that are characterized by a qualitative sense of “what it is like to be in a state”.

There is also an epistemic subjectivity of consciousness that involves direct access, epistemic authority, and private access. We have direct access to our conscious states without having to resort to secondary states. By focusing on our inner life, we are in a position to know what is going on in our own mental life with greater epistemic certainty than other people have in trying to know what is going on in our inner forum. Furthermore, we have a way of knowing our own conscious states that is not available to others through direct introspection.

By implication we could say that functionalism could regard epistemic subjectivity with its features as having no ontological but only epistemic implications, that specifically, epistemic subjectivity does not show that conscious states are irreducibly immaterial and that they are not identical to brain states. He might argue that all epistemic subjectivity shows is that there are two different ways of knowing consciousness, one through first-person introspection and one through third-person neuroscientific theory-finding. However, through the raised criticisms, I showed that it is far from clear that a way of knowledge by man is physical. Ways of knowing have intentionality (that “about”, “regarding” the object of knowledge), but mere physical states of the brain do not. Moreover, the characteristics of epistemic subjectivity mentioned above are directly ontological and not merely epistemic. If a person is just a physical object, say a brain, made up exclusively of physical states, then the characteristics of epistemic subjectivity might be open to doubt, because they do not apply to physical states. The authenticity of these three features is explained only by the immateriality of conscious states. They cannot be applied to ways of relating to physical states, but involve various ways of relating to a non-physical state.

The same critics have revealed that another feature of consciousness is the “subjectivity” of viewpoint, which involves at least two features of consciousness. First, any conscious state necessarily belongs to a subject of experience. Any conscious state, in the ideal sense, not possessed by a subject, somehow floating in the air, is ridiculous. It is probably impossible to make decisive arguments in favor of the necessity of physical states belonging to a subject because they can exist without it. Moreover, conscious states are always the defining features of a subjective point of view. That is, they portray the subject’s unique and distinctive position in the world, by virtue of which he is aware of the world and thinks about it.

This research has shown that the explanation offered by functionalism is limited in its attempt to explain the nature of consciousness. It is not definitive in the consciousness/brain debate, but leaves the door open to non-reductionist and non-physicalist positions, such as Christian forms of theistic substance dualism. To this last position, not analyzed here, but whose logical possibility is strengthened by the arguments against these theories of identity, I subscribe.

Finally, from the literature of the theorists of physicalist-reductionist functionalism, it can be observed that any form of radical physicalist reductionism reveals not an exclusivist uniqueness in explanation, of the type of absolute truth, but an inalienable commitment to the naturalistic metanarrative, regardless of whether the scientific data match or not with other non-physicalist and non-reductionist conceptions. In this last tone we will conclude this article with a statement from Howard Robinson:

[William] James called materialism a tough-minded theory. We began this essay by wondering why, if this is so, materialists are so often on the defensive in philosophy. The explanation seems to be that though the materialist makes a show of being tough-minded he is in fact a dogmatist, obedient not to the authority of reason, but to a certain picture of the world. That picture is hypnotising but terrifying: the world as a machine of which we are all insignificant parts. Many people share Nagel’s fear of this world view, but, like Nagel, are cowed into believing that it must be true (1965: 340). But reason joins with every other constructive human instinct in telling us that it is false and that only a parochial and servile attitude towards physical science can mislead anyone into believing it. To opt for materialism is to choose to believe something obnoxious, against the guidance of reason. This is not tough-mindedness, but a willful preference for a certain form of soulless, false and destructive modernism. (Robinson, 1982, p. 125)

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