

Experience and Function

Characterisation of Functionalism.

Functionalism is the view that a mental state M is individuated (made what it is) by its causal profile, or by what M causes and by what M is caused. A mental state is defined in terms of the functional role that it has in the overall mental economy. For instance, believing that *Paris is beautiful in spring* causes me to daydream about being there when I see the Eiffel Tower, say ‘oh, how marvellous’ when somebody tells me they visited recently, and so on. This pattern of outputs and inputs is what this belief is (identify this belief). In contrast, a *dualist* says that M is a state of the soul, or immaterial substance; and a *materialist* says that M is a state of the brain.

Background.

In ‘Inverted Earth’, Block aims to show that (a) functionalism about qualitative experience is wrong, and that (b) there is a distinction between qualitative experience and intentional content—what M is about. The second is important for the view he promotes, which is *functional role semantics* (FRS). This is functionalism applied to the *content* of M , rather than the experience we have when we are in M . According to FRS, M 's content is individuated in terms of its relation to other mental representations (other contentful states), or in terms of its causal profile in connection to other mental states.

This makes FRS more like an *internalist* theory of meaning or content. What an utterance means or what a content is about depends on the mental states of the utterer or speaker, e.g., the speaker's intentions. So, if two speakers are exactly in the same mental state and utter ‘The sky is blue’, then they *mean* that the sky is blue, and hence these words *refer* to the blue sky and M is *about* the blue sky. In a slogan: intension determines extension; the direction of fit is mind to world.

The contrasting view is externalism: the direction of fit is world to mind; and meaning and content is dependent on reference. (For an externalist theory, see Putnam's ‘Twin Earth’ thought experiment.) Question: how is meaning or mental content individuated? *Internalists* say: by an inner state of the utterer, speaker, or thinker. *Externalists* say: by the way the world is, since ‘meanings ain't in the head’ (Putnam). These ideas generalise from words to mental content.

A Further Thought Experiment.

“There might be a strange man who sometimes feels pain, just as we do, but whose pain differs greatly from ours in its causes and effects. Our pain is typically caused by cuts, burns, pressure, and the like; his is caused by moderate exercise on an empty stomach. Our pain is generally distracting; his turns his mind to mathematics, facilitating concentration on that but distracting him from anything else. Intense pain has no tendency whatever to cause him to groan or writhe, but does cause him to cross his legs and snap his fingers. He is not in the least motivated to prevent pain or to get rid of it. In short, he feels pain but his pain does not at all occupy the typical causal role of pain. He would doubtless seem to us to be some

sort of madman, and that is what I shall call him, though of course the sort of madness I have imagined may bear little resemblance to the real thing.”¹

Questions for Discussion.

Why is this man’s pain ‘mad’? How does Lewis characterise pain? Do you think this thought experiment is plausible? If not, why not?

Background.

There is a parallel case of Martian pain: a Martian who is in pain may behave and feel just as we do, but his pain is physically realised in a different way (by hydraulic pumps and valves). Taken together, the two cases show that ‘simple’ functionalism and ‘simple’ identity theory are wrong. The identity theory gets mad pain right but Martian pain wrong; and functionalism gets mad pain wrong but Martian pain right. Why? (1) If pain *is* a brain state, then Martians cannot have pains (they lack brain states). But if pain is a brain process, so mad pain is possible (even if pain has a different function). (2) If pain *is* a functional-causal role, then mad pain is not pain at all. But if pain is defined by a specific causal profile, then Martian pain is possible. Any sound *materialistic* theory of the mental must account for both exceptional sort of pains. The madman and the Martian are both in pain, but for different reasons. How is this possible? Answer: pain is associated with a specific causal profile and a specific physical realisation only *contingently* (rather than necessarily, or factual rather than *a priori*, or world-bound rather than true in all possible worlds). Hence, Lewis’s theory is a blend of functionalism and identity theory: pain *is* whatever state occupies the pain-role (i.e. *filler*-functionalism).

*Metatheory: Thomas Kuhn on Thought Experiments.*²

To this point, essential parts of my argument have been conditioned by what I take to be a philosophical position traditional in the analysis of scientific thought since at least the seventeenth century. If a thought experiment is to be effective, it must, as we have already seen, present a normal situation, that is, a situation which the man who analyzes the experiment feels well equipped by prior experience to handle. Nothing about the imagined situation may be entirely unfamiliar or strange. Therefore, if the experiment depends, as it must, upon prior experience of nature, that experience must have been generally familiar before the experiment was undertaken. This aspect of the thought-experimental situation has seemed to dictate one of the conclusions that I have so far consistently drawn. Because it embodies no new information about the world, a thought experiment can teach nothing that was not known before. Or, rather, it can teach nothing about the world. Instead, it teaches the scientist about his mental apparatus. Its function is limited to the correction of previous conceptual mistakes.

1 From Lewis, D. K. (1980). Mad Pain and Martian Pain. In N. Block (Ed.), *Readings in the Philosophy of Psychology*, Volume I, pp. 216–22. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

2 From Kuhn, T. S. (1977). A Function for Thought Experiments. In *The Essential Tension* (pp. 240–65). Chicago: Chicago University Press.

