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Psychosemantics. JERRY FODOR. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1987. 173 p. $19.95.

In *Word and Object,* W. V. O. Quine[1] acknowledged the "practical indispensability" in daily life of the intentional idioms of belief and desire, but disparaged such talk as an "essentially dramatic idiom" rather than something from which real science could be made in any straightforward way (*ibid.*, p. 219). Many who agree on little else have agreed with Quine about this, and have gone on to suggest one or another indirect way for science to accommodate folk psychology: Wilfrid Sellars, Donald Davidson, Hilary Putnam, Richard Rorty, Stephen Stich, Patricia Smith Churchland, Paul Churchland, Stephen Schiffer, and myself, to name a few. This fainthearted consensus is all wrong, according to Fodor, whose new book is a vigorous—even frantic—defense of what he calls *Intentional Realism:* beliefs and desires are real, causally involved, determinately contentful states. "We have no reason to doubt," Fodor says, "that it is possible to have a scientific psychology that vindicates commonsense belief/desire explanation" (16).

The first of the four chapters motivates the intricate set of arguments to follow with a spirited paean to the powers of commonsense psychology, but it adds up to less than its rhetoric leads one to expect. The opposition, after all, has not been unimpressed with what Quine called the practical indispensability of the intentional idiom; I, for one, have tirelessly sung the praises of what can be done from the intentional stance, and even Paul Churchland,[2] the most radical of the critics, has acknowledged, and even offered a metaphysical analysis of, the systematic predictive power of propositional attitude attributions. What we doubters have not yet seen is the argument from the practical indispensability of propositional attitude talk to Fodor's hard-core realism, which this chapter should presumably provide. It stops short, however, with a tactical proposal: "we can't give them up *because we don't know how to.* So maybe we had better try to hold on to them" (10; see also the concession in footnote 2, p. 155). What then follows is a reasoned catalogue of what the hard-core realist is committed to: in the main, the *Representational Theory of Mind,* which claims there are "entities which —like the attitudes—are both semantically evaluable and etiologically involved" (26). Something has slipped, however. In which camp

[1] Cambridge: MIT, 1960.

[2] *Scientific Realism and the Plasticity of Mind* (New York: Cambridge, 1979), pp. 101–107.

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would Fodor place someone who was a realist about entities which met these two conditions but were not *enough* like the propositional attitudes to constitute a (realist) vindication of commonsense psychology?

Never mind. Fodor's tactical proposal is well worth adopting in the spirit of scientific opportunism: try for the boldest, simplest, most satisfying theory first, and see where it leads you. Recent history offers a nice example on Fodor's side: the proposal that we should be straightforward realists about Mendelian genes and treat them as tokens of expressions in the language of inheritance, straightforwardly realized in hunks of DNA, has been a vastly informative oversimplification. If, now that we understand the underlying mechanisms better, we see that there are theoretically important mismatches between the language of "bean-bag genetics" and the molecular and developmental details—mismatches serious enough to suggest that, all things considered, there do not turn out to be genes (classically understood) after all—this is an understanding which would have been well-nigh inaccessible without the ladder of realist oversimplification. So we can proceed with the exploration of the implications of intentional realism, secure in the recognition that we can always back off to a position of instrumentalism (like the current instrumentalism about classical genetics) when we have learned more.

The second chapter deals with the oft-explored problems posed by the Twin Earth thought experiments of Tyler Burge, Putnam, and others. If psychology is going to be science, it had better not posit mysterious action-at-a-distance, so a principle of the "supervenience" of the psychological on the physiological must be honored: the brains of organisms differ whenever their minds differ (30). At the same time, if psychology is going to deal with real, determinate content, it must honor the principle that "extension constrains content." The only way to meet both conditions at once is to distinguish notions of narrow and broad content. *Narrow content* is supervenient on the organism's internal, causal states, and *broad content* is then held to be a function of narrow content relativized to environmental context. Plunking an organism into different contexts while holding its brain constant cannot change its narrow content, but can in principle alter the broad content of its psychological states. This is a proposal that has often been made before, for the same reasons (see, for instance, my defense of "notional attitude psychology"),[3]

[3] "Beyond Belief," in Andrew Woodfield, ed., *Thought and Object: Essays on Intentionality* (New York: Oxford, 1982), pp. 1–95.

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but Fodor adds novel intricacies in its defense to counter the increasingly intricate objections that have been spawned in subsequent years. (If Fodor wants to fight this fight, I will happily hold his coat, suppressing, on this occasion, the doubts I have about some of his background assumptions.)

It is in chapter three that Fodor begins to distinguish himself sharply from those he takes to be the enemies of scientific psychology. When everything is held to merge with everything else, when there are no clean joints at which to carve nature, science tends to wind down to a lazy halt: holism as the heat death of science. (The theory of "blending inheritance" which stymied Darwin might be cited as a telling example.) So Fodor sets himself up as the guardian of good crisp boundaries, and hence the enemy of all relativism, pragmatism, and various other unspeakable but fashionable doctrines, banded together under the black flag of *Meaning Holism*. Science is nothing if not "naturalistic," however, and, when one tries to naturalize psychology, it begins to look more and more biological, and hence teleological, and hence functionalistic; its crisp traditional categories—in particular, propositional attitudes—begin to slide toward the murky relativity of functional interpretation, and beyond: to the indeterminacy of radical interpretation.

Some version or other of meaning holism is the natural resting place of this slide, but it "really is a crazy doctrine," Fodor says (60). (This sort of statement should ring alarm bells in any author. What are the odds that all those worthy opponents out there are crazy enough to hold the crazy doctrine one is arguing against?) According to meaning holism, the content of any particular belief depends on what else you believe (now is that not the silliest thing you ever heard?). Fodor rebuts various arguments for meaning holism (unpersuasively, in my opinion, for reasons that would not fit in the space allotted me), but in the process he gives some hostages to the opposition.

First, he distinguishes sharply between two brands of functionalism, and endorses only the weaker version:

> . . . all you need is the claim that *being a belief* is a matter of having the right connections to inputs, outputs and other mental states. What you *don't* need—and what the philosophical motivations for Psychofunctionalism therefore do not underwrite—is the much stronger claim that being the belief *that p*, being a belief that has a certain *content* is a matter of having the right connections to inputs, outputs, and other mental states (69).

So Fodor ends up defending an eviscerated functionalism, and disagreeing with those of us, from Sellars to the present, who in one

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way or another take "functional role semantics" to be the chief beauty of functionalism. For Fodor, content is not a function of function after all. Or, at any rate, it is not *much* of a function of function, for Fodor must yield another hostage: functional role "is a marginal—a not very important—determinant of meaning" (72). If content is not (primarily) a matter of functional role, what is it a matter of? Denotation. According to his alternative denotational semantics, "concepts are individuated by reference to the properties they express, thoughts by the states of affairs they correspond to, and so forth" (91). Independently of any functional role that a concept or mental representation might play within an interanimated set of its fellows, it can, as a matter of brute metaphysical fact, denote (or express) a property, thanks to its causal (but not functional) link to that property.

The task then falls to him, in the last chapter, to make good on this by defining in nonsemantic, nonfunctional, nonteleological terms the conditions under which a mental representation expresses a property. In the end, after successive elaborations and improvements, we are offered the *Slightly Less Crude Causal Theory of Content:* a "sufficient condition for 'A's to express *A* is that it's nomologically necessary" that (1) "All instances of A's cause 'A's when (i) the A's are causally responsible for psychophysical traces to which (ii) the organism stands in a psychophysically optimal relation"; and (2) "If non-A's cause 'A's, then their doing so is asymmetrically dependent upon A's causing 'A's" (126).

What with its mention of intact organisms and psychophysically optimal conditions, one can certainly doubt that this account succeeds in avoiding appeal to teleological assumptions. Even if, by some marvel of circumlocution, it can be held to skirt those shoals, such exercises, like the desperate definitional evasions of the behaviorists, do not so much defeat as pay homage to the contrary insight. Moreover, Fodor's account forces him to recant his analysis of the Twin Earth cases (if I have correctly traced out the requisite counterfactuals—Fodor gives the reader scant advice on this). Suppose some stray *XYZ* causes Fodor's Mentalese "water" symbol to light up; surely its doing this is not asymmetrically dependent on H_2O doing this; so 'water' for Fodor means H_2O-or-*XYZ;* Fodor and his Doppelgänger are broad-content twins after all. So far as I can see, all the escape routes from this conclusion are blocked by conclusions even less palatable to Fodor.

In any event, other pesky counterexamples suggest themselves, and Fodor himself acknowledges that his account still has some problems he does not yet know how to solve. In the meantime, he usefully draws attention to some of the implications he will invite us

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to swallow once he has sorted out those problems. Consider the young child who uses the word 'father', recognizes his father, etc., but has so far given no sign of having the concepts MALE or PARENT. Does he have the concept FATHER? The meaning holist is free to say that the child only gradually comes to approximate having the adult concept of FATHER, as he acquires more relevant beliefs,[4] but, for Fodor, the meaning atomist, there is a deep (and quite possibly unknowable) fact about what concept the child actually has. It may, unwittingly, already have the concept of FATHER, in spite of its disappointing responses to a variety of presumably telling tests: "you can have the concept MALE PARENT without having access to its internal structure" (161). This independence of meaning from function on Fodor's view is even more striking in an objection he raises against himself: " 'On your view, entertaining (as it might be) the thought that three is a prime number could constitute *an entire mental life?*' This too is satisfactory as a reductio ad absurdum only on the assumption that its conclusion is false" (89). I do not think these implications show that meaning atomism is crazy, but as Fodor says, in a similar connection, "chaque à son rocker" (*sic,* p. 124).

In an appendix, "Why There Still Has to Be a Language of Thought," Fodor offers three arguments for why the internal, semantically evaluable, etiologically involved states of intentional realism—the beliefs and desires—have to be organized in a language-like system. He is right to have isolated these arguments in an appendix, for they are independent of his main argument; if you have bought the rest of his case, they do indeed sharpen his account, but, if you have not, there are ways of recasting them all to conform to your unrepentant meaning holism or even instrumentalism.

The convolutions of argument found in *Psychosemantics* make it a difficult book to review fairly in short compass. The argument strategy adopted by Fodor throughout the book is to emphasize small disagreements and generally force all fence sitters to jump one way or the other. Then, by a series of nested arguments designed to corral the obstreperous dogies, he can end up having fenced off the only defensible territory. There are several weaknesses in such a strategy. First, a single gap in the fence is all it takes to escape Fodor's roundup, and so the argument tends to degenerate into fence-busting, fence-mending squabbles about minutiae—very important minutiae, Fodor would insist, but I find it hard to believe that this is the way to make progress. Moreover, this emphasis on amplifying disagreements can backfire in the end, when it is time for

[4] Cf. my *Content and Consciousness* (Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1969), p. 183.

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Fodor to make his ecumenical concessions, as he does, to verificationism or procedural semantics, to behaviorism or associationism, and the other heresies of previous chapters. It turns out that the crazies were not so crazy after all. "Whenever I tell this story to Granny, she grins and rocks and says 'I told you so' " (118). "All right, Granny, have it your way . . . Only do stop rocking; you make me nervous" (122).

Finally, Fodor is too wise to think his series of arguments can flat disprove the claims of the opposition, so time and again he resorts to claims about shifting the burden of proof, begging the question, outsmarting by embracing the conclusions of reductions, and other exploitations of the rules of the game. The book is a tireless exercise of that philosopher's pastime, burden-tennis. Burden, burden, who has the burden of proof now? Fodor mostly plays solitaire burden-tennis, against an imaginary opponent often personified as Granny or Aunty, which permits him to express the opposition view in terms that suit his rebuttal, without having to address the issue of whether this is a sympathetic rendering of any real opponent's claims.

All this fancy footwork and shadowboxing leads Fodor into an increasingly tight place, which reminds Aunty, bless her heart, of the time Winnie-the-Pooh got himself similarly stuck when trying to leave Rabbit's house. Pooh's idea was to fast for a week, while Christopher Robin read him a book. Fodor, in his increasingly desperate effort to free himself from the house of Gavagai, has written himself a book, and while it may not be to everyone's taste, Aunty thinks *Psychosemantics* is just the sort of book Pooh had in mind: "a Sustaining Book, such as would help and comfort a Wedged Bear in Great Tightness."[5]

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[5] A. A. Milne, *Winnie-the-Pooh* (New York: Dutton, 1926), p. 30.

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