

Comments on Hubert L. Dreyfus “Intelligence without representation”

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My main reaction to “Intelligence without representation” is to applaud. Dreyfus’s use of Merleau-Ponty is a refreshing new breeze in philosophy of psychology. About twenty or so years ago, philosophers struck an unfortunate course dictated by a pair of dubious assumptions: (1) that ordinary psychological attributions were at risk unless vindicated by some science; and (2) that the only possible scientific vindication required that intentional content be represented in the brain. Thus did representationalism become, in Jerry Fodor’s memorable phrase, “the only game in town.” As John Haugeland pointed out early on, skills (and moods) do not fit easily into the representationalist scheme. Happily, Dreyfus’s paper goes a considerable way toward an alternative approach to mind.

There is one question, however, that I would like to ask. Dreyfus gives the following sufficient conditions for my bodily movements to be experienced as actions:

1. I am in *control* of my movements in the sense that I can stop doing what I’m doing if I will to do so, and
2. my movements are *caused* by the gestalt formed by me and my situation.

As we have seen, “that means the situation is experienced as drawing the appropriate action out of me.”

The question that I want to ask concerns the second condition: what is meant by ‘caused’ here? Is ‘caused’ being used here in a sense compatible with the physicalist picture painted vividly by, e.g., Jaegwon Kim? (see, e.g., Kim 1993, 2000). Does it matter?

A physicalist may well ask: How can an experience of a situation as drawing the appropriate action out of me ever be sufficient (when added to “control”) for my movements to be caused in a certain way? Usually, physicalists think of bodily motions as caused by brain states. Are they wrong to think this? Perhaps they are right, but there are lawful correlations between certain types

of experiences and certain types of brain states that produce certain types of bodily motions. This suggests the following dilemma, which I present in the spirit of a Devil's Advocate:

- (a) Either experiences (types or tokens) of the relevant sort are identical to particular brain states or they are not.
- (b) If they are, then how can representationalism be avoided? That is, if an experience is identical to a brain state, doesn't that brain state represent the intentional content of the experience?
- (c) If they are not, then how can dualism be avoided? That is, if an experience is distinct from any brain state and is a partial cause of a movement, then don't we have two kinds of causes—a nonphysical cause as well as a physical cause (brain state)? Therefore,
- (d) [it appears that] there is a danger of lapsing back into representationalism on the one hand and of lapsing into dualism on the other.

Let me say a bit more about (c), the danger of lapsing into dualism. The reason that Option (c) seems to lapse into dualism is that physicalist principles enunciated by Jaegwon Kim would not allow an experience that was something other than a brain state to play a role in a causal explanation of a physical event like a movement. Option (c) brings to mind Kim's "problem of explanatory exclusion." A movement is a physical event, and every physical event—according to Kim's principle of the causal closure of the physical—has a complete physical cause. And, also according to Kim's lights, no event can have more than one complete and independent causal explanation. So, on this physicalist view, if an experience figures into a causal explanation of a movement, then that experience must be reducible to something certifiably physical. (This conclusion can be avoided if one gives up one or more of Kim's principles; but which one? And on what grounds?)

I raise this question about causation, not because I doubt that it can be answered, but because I am unsure of the larger metaphysical picture into which Dreyfus's attractive view is to be situated (see Baker 1987).

References

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