

REPLY

## Realism and the damnably useful: A reply to Phillips

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An unlikely defender of commonsense against arcane theory, Denis Phillips, has taken issue with “Teaching, Intention Based Research, and Physicalism”, where I argued against developing programmes of intentional explanation in educational research except where intention talk functioned as a kind of promissory note, going proxy for underlying physical mechanisms yet to be causally explained (Evers, 1983, p. 2). The kind of intentional explanation that received most scrutiny was, of course, the dualistic variety made popular in philosophy of education by R.S. Peters. It is a position that interprets reasons for behaviour as non-causal and causes of behaviour as non-rational; that sees these two modes of explanation as being logically distinct (See Walker, 1984, for a detailed survey of this ultimately ontic dualism in the work of Peters). My suggestion was that this theory failed to cohere when one paid strict attention to ontology and pressed for a comprehensive causal story of the physical activity required to instantiate rational behaviour.

Phillips (1984), however, holds a different view of intentional explanation, and one moreover that is presumably safe from the strictures my “mighty enterprise” (p. 17). Following Dennett (1978), Phillips thinks that intentional explanation is “damnably useful”, so useful in fact that

... if it comes down to a choice between pursuing the intentionalist program or pursuing the physicalist one, I would have no hesitation in opting for the former (even though I believe the later to be a true position). (Phillips, 1984, p. 18)

Evidently, then, true theories have their limitations as explanatory devices.

Fortunately, if Dennett is right, Phillips need never get down to making such a choice. For Dennett, a physicalist, has devised a simple strategy for getting intention talk (and the vast bulk of our ordinary, everyday folk psychological notions) to mesh parsimoniously with physical theory. The trick is to treat intention talk instrumentally, as a calculus for predicting and explaining the behaviour of (complex) systems. For Dennett, intentions and the like are, in Stich’s words

... explicitly relegated to the status of instrumentalistic fictions ... compatible with anything we might discover about the physiological or functional organization of the human cognitive system, so long as the instrumentalistic calculus does indeed provide a useful predictive device. (Stich, 1983, p. 243)

An untidy ontological dualism of physical and non-physical objects is thus avoided in favour of a methodological bifurcation of the instrumental and the real.

This strategy is not unknown in science. Perhaps the most notorious example is the proposal in Oslander’s preface to Copernicus’ book: “These hypotheses need not be true or even probable if they ‘provide a calculation consistent with observations ... (They are) sky geometry, without reference to physical reality”.<sup>1</sup>

However, what makes this ploy appear a case of having one’s ontological cake and eating it too, is that there are no clear rules for demarcating fiction from reality. And a methodological lapse here means that if one is really serious about insulating intention talk from science one could try locating

the fictions in science. Thus: it is misplaced to wonder whether a system so described is really made up of molecules; the point is that the behaviour of the system can be predicted and explained by ascribing a molecular structure to it (See the 'intentional' version in Phillips, 1984, p. 17).

Assuming Phillips does have to make a choice between the damnably useful and the merely true, just how useful is intention talk? Phillips' engaging examples certainly show that folk psychological notions are well embedded in commonsense. Their import is not so clear, however, when commonsense itself is under threat or when our account of 'useful' reflects the influence of arcane theory. Witness, for example, Paul Churchland's judgement, based on his more generous evaluation of the developing explanatory potential of the neurosciences:

Folk psychology suffers explanatory failures on an epic scale ... it has been stagnant for at least twenty-five centuries, and ... its categories appear (so far) to be incommensurable with or orthogonal to the categories of the background physical science whose long-term claim to explain human behaviour seems undeniable. (Churchland, 1981, p. 76)

According to Churchland, the intentional idiom was once used to explain most of the elements of nature. Its realm of univocal application has now mostly retreated to the domain of higher animals. Although it has been used for millennia to explain human behaviour, he notes that we are today "negligibly better at explaining human behaviour in its terms than was Sophocles" (p. 74). It cannot explain the nature of mental illness, creative imagination, intelligence, the nature of sleep, the phenomenon of memory, and, of course, "the nature of the learning process itself" (p. 73) to name just a few items. In all these matters, and many more, neuroscience is beginning to shed light (See, for example, Grossberg, 1982, for a powerful neural theory of learning and human memory).

Already, in special education where the focus is strongest, improvements in teaching have been implied by an understanding of some of the neural story of what makes for more efficient learning (See, for example, Gaddes, 1980). Nevertheless, Phillips (1984, p. 18) "cannot envision any payoff, in the foreseeable future, for physicalist research". His conclusion though, is unexceptionable: "you pay your money and lay your bets" (p. 18).

## Notes

1. Quoted in Stich (1983) and Barbour (1966).

## References

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