

The argument from atomism

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Abstract (392 words)

The purpose of my paper is to add another to a list of dozen or so arguments for dualism: the ‘argument from conceptual atomism’:

1. Word meanings (=‘concepts’) are non-complex (i.e. atoms) at the semantic level of representation. This is basically to say that semantic complexity is where there is syntactic complexity, which is what words (or rather lexemes) lack. A classical collection of arguments for atomism is in Fodor and Lepore (2002).
2. Concepts are not and do not supervene on syntactically (or physically) individuated mental representations, whatever neurological pattern these may be. Being represented by a particular symbol (or neural correlate) is a property non-essential to a concept. Essential to a concept is its content.
3. The contents of concepts are not, and do not supervene on, (causally individuated) inferential relations between syntactically individuated mental representations. Such inferences depend on a grasp of the concepts they are meant, by so-called ‘inferentialists’, to explicate (e.g., Gentzen-style introduction and elimination rules for conjunction require for their understanding a grasp of the concept CONJUNCTION, see Fodor 2004).
4. The contents of concepts are not and do not supervene on referential (‘informational’, causal) relations to an environment, described in ways that do not presuppose the concepts in question. Generally speaking, how organisms relate to an environment depends on what conceptual resources they possess. In the absence of the latter, standing in causal relationships to an environment won’t lead them to spring into existence; general learning rules cannot explain them, if they are atoms (Hinzen 2005).
5. If concepts are individuated by their content, and this content does not supervene on mental representations, inferential or referential relations, it seems they do not supervene on anything other than themselves. If physicalism is taken, as standardly, to rule out the existence of mental entities, physicalism is false.

Basically, this result is expected: functionalism replaced behaviorism by allowing causal power to internal representations, assuming the *meanings* of the latter could be somehow functionally explained (by causal roles). But there is no reason to believe that the *primitives* of the combinatorial system of human thought and language can be so explained, if indeed they are atoms.

Fodor and Lepore (2002), *The Compositionality Papers*, Oxford.

Fodor (2004), “Having concepts: a Brief Refutation of the Twentieth Century”, *Mind&Language* 19,1: 29-47.

Hinzen (2005), “Spencerism and the Causal Theory of Reference”, forthcoming, *Biology&Philosophy*.