

THE ATTACK ON METHODOLOGICAL SOLIPSISM

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ABSTRACT

Attacks on the Fodorian research strategy — by Baker and by Tuomela — are examined, and Baker's attack fully set out. Tuomela's criticisms of Baker's well-known counterexample to token-type identity are examined, and it is concluded that, even if Baker's counterexample does not completely go through, any assessment of its strength does not bode well for Fodor's overall position. An evaluation of what MS actually requires as a strategy is provided, and it is concluded that (as Fodor seems to admit), it cannot operate as a research position based merely on nomic regularity or psychophysical laws.

A number of commentators have cited the work of Lynne Rudder Baker for the forcefulness of its attack on methodological solipsism, and on the notion that narrow semantic types supervene in identical ways on functionally identical physical states.

This thesis of methodological solipsism might be thought to be extremely important, for if MS, as I shall call it, is some intermediate position, between say an instrumentalist approach to folk psychological terms on the one hand,¹ and a purely reductionist approach on the other², then the attack on MS — if successful — leaves us with precious little middle ground in between these two rather extreme positions.

Tuomela, for instance, gives Baker credit for doing methodological

¹ Dennett has been widely cited in this regard. See, for example, *The Intentional Stance*, Cambridge, MA: Bradford of MIT Press, 1987.

² The Churchlands are the best known proponents of this view. Patricia Smith Churchland also sets out the reductionist position forcefully in *Neurophilosophy*, Cambridge, MA: Bradford of MIT Press, 1986.

solipsism damage. He remarks:

Baker ... especially has presented sharp criticisms against supervenience [I]f her counterexample is accepted, one may take it to disprove [the narrow semantic thesis] when taken to express a conceptual necessity. But this would still leave the possibility that [this thesis] holds as a *de facto* regularity or perhaps as a psycho-physical law of a kind. And methodological solipsists and cognitive scientists could perhaps try to be happy with that.³

In this paper I shall argue for a position which does damage to both sides here (Tuomela's and Baker's), so to speak. I think at least one of Tuomela's criticisms against Baker's argument is well-taken, and when fleshed out it may do serious damage to Baker's counterexample to the narrow semantic thesis. Nevertheless, I will claim, this should be no cause for celebration for those who hold MS as a position, since it is also clear, I will argue, that conceptual necessity is what is required for this portion of the MS position, and, despite the comparative success or failure of Baker's example, strong conceptual necessity is not had here. Baker's example has been formulated in more than one way in her own work (Tuomela cites the example's being formulated as "... two replica girls coming from two different cultures ...")⁴ and perhaps the longest and most clearly explicated version of the example occurs in *Saving Belief*. It is with this version that I shall be concerned in this paper.

I

Before beginning an adumbration of the example, it is important to be clear about what it is that Fodor's methodological solipsism is supposed to accomplish. Fodor clearly sees himself as, in some sense, "saving" propositional attitudes; Fodor's marshaling of arguments against, for

³ Tuomela, Raimo, "Methodological Solipsism and Explanation in Psychology", in *Philosophy of Science*, Vol. 56, No. 1, March 1989, p. 30.

⁴ See Baker, Lynne Rudder, "Just What Do We Have in Mind?", in *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, Vol. 10, pp. 25-48, as cited in Tuomela, *op. cit.*

example, Paul Churchland's position is a further illustration of the scope of his view.⁵ But it avails a position little if the spelling out of the position seems to cause it to collapse into the very view it wanted to avoid; this collapse is what Baker and others seem to see as the end of Fodor's MS, and if Baker is right (or even if her example only shakes MS strongly, as it were) it means that Fodor's position moves more toward the reductionist.⁶

Fodor's championing of propositional attitudes is to be found, for example, in his remark that "[M]ental states are distinguished by the *content* of the associated representations, so we can allow for the difference between thinking that Marvin is melancholy and thinking that Sam is ..."⁷ Remember that what Fodor is concerned with here is narrow content, content that is only within the individual mental state.⁸ Again, to refer to Baker's reading of Fodor's project, she portrays him as:

[possessing] ... a representational approach [which] is to explain behavioral phenomena by subsuming them under generalizations in the language of content, a language continuous with that of ordinary intentional explanations in terms of beliefs and desires. Fodor does not predict that intentional psychology will be replaceable by physics.⁹

So the importance of counterexamples to Fodor's token-token MS

⁵ Fodor, Jerry A., "A Reply to Churchland's 'Perceptual Plasticity and Theoretical Neutrality'", in *Philosophy of Science*, Vol. 55, No. 2, June 1988.

⁶ Tuomela also argues against Fodor — see *op. cit.* Nevertheless, his argument focuses on a different portion of Fodor's position. He identifies Baker as attacking Fodor on supervenience; he claims to be attacking Fodor on explanation.

⁷ Fodor, Jerry A., "Methodological Solipsism Considered as a Research Strategy", in *The Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, Vol. 3, p. 63, 1980.

⁸ In attacking Block's CRT as expounded by Block in his publications, Fodor and Lepore note that "... 'narrow' content is 'in the head'..." (p. 167); Jerry Fodor and Ernest Lepore, *Holism: A Shopper's Guide*, Cambridge, MA: Basil Blackwell, 1992. Fodor also cites his own "A Modal Argument for Narrow Content", *Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 88, 1991, pp. 5-26 (cited on Fodor and Lepore, p. 168).

⁹ Baker, Lynne Rudder, *Saving Belief*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987, p. 8.

position is that one more blow is struck for reductionism, so to speak, and against methods which purport or allege to salvage propositional attitudes. If reductionist arguments seem to hold the day, then, although the prospects for a science of the mind look somewhat better for the future, they are at present not as bright as they might be, because we still are not in a position to reduce once-and-for-all. Perhaps more importantly, such reductionism, since it is widely associated with the complete dismissal of propositional attitudes, does little to aid us in the notion of developing a science of the mind that has even meager room for folk psychology. Fodorian MS functionalism, on the other hand, with its emphasis on narrow content, could deal with the numerous “twin” examples that have already been posed in the literature precisely because such functionalism does not tie into any naturalistic account of the agent’s interaction with the environment. Fodor and Lepore summarize the import of this stance well in their more recent work wherein they note that most of the celebrated counters to theorizing in philosophy of mind seem to rely on features that are amenable to MS. As they write, “Notice that the symmetry of the Putnam and Frege cases depends on assuming that meaning obeys an ‘individualistic’ principle of supervenience — that is, depends on assuming a ‘narrow’ notion of mental content, according to which ‘narrow’ content is ‘in the head’.”¹⁰

In any case, the counterexample to Fodor’s position, as concocted by Baker, is as follows:

Imagine a documentary movie that compares subjects in psychology experiments. Each subject is shown videotapes of violent episodes and is asked to classify the incidents. The subjects are encouraged to reason aloud. In the case of non-English-speaking subjects, what we hear is the narrator’s translation of the subject’s utterances.

[The example continues with a note that the subjects — one English-speaking and one not — are asked to classify incidents as either ‘provoked assault’ or ‘aggravated assault’, and that these two terms do not have the same extension in English. But the non-English-speaking person’s society does not have a category of behavior

¹⁰ Fodor, Jerry and Lepore, Ernest, *Holism: A Shopper’s Guide*, Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1992, p. 167.

corresponding to 'aggravated assault'.] ... Suppose, however, that Subject N checks the box for provoked assault with a particular motion of her left hand and that Subject E labels the incident as aggravated assault with a particular motion of her left hand. In fact, suppose that Subject N and Subject E each flex the same muscles in the same way to the same degree. Considered as bodily movements, what each does is a token of the same physical type. And, considered physically, the proximate causes of their muscle-flexings may be supposed to be tokens of the same physical type.

Suppose further that the portion of Subject N's dialect relevant to the story is phonologically indistinguishable from English The key is that Subject N expresses her belief about provoked assault by uttering a sentence in her language that is syntactically and phonologically identical to the English sentence "Aggravated assault is serious".¹¹

As Baker goes on to conclude, "The story of the two subjects shows not only that two mental state tokens of the same kind (for example, belief, desire, or intention) may be of distinct restricted semantic types without differing physically, but also that two sequences of mental state tokens, pairwise of the same kind, may be pairwise of distinct restricted semantic types without differing physically."¹²

Now Baker goes on (and in this version it takes several more pages) to make modifications to the example to allow it to do specific damage to Fodor's position.¹³ Since those modifications are roughly in the same vein, it is not necessary to recapitulate all of them here: the point is that all things are held the same except for the semantic differences between the utterances. Now Baker takes it that her example is an adequate counter-example to Fodor's methodological solipsism, for, as she says:

It may be objected that we should speak of functional states only *within an individual*, and hence that examples concerning individuals in different states are not to the point. The objection

¹¹ Baker, in *op. cit.*, pp. 30-31.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 32.

¹³ *Ibid.*, roughly pp. 34-42.

is not to the point. ... the objection denies that we can make sense of the notion of functional equivalence across individuals; but if functionalism failed to allow that two individuals are in the same functional state, then it would lack the generality required of a science.¹⁴

The difficulty with the example for Fodor's thesis is, of course, that the differing semantic types of the utterances do not mirror differences in formal structure of the utterance tokens, nor, presumably would they mirror differences in structure of the syntactic neuronal moves which would accompany the production of such utterances. Nomologically speaking, then, the inquiring scientist of the mind might find herself in any one of a number of situations where the syntactic structure — as indicated by whatever sorts of changes or weightings in the synapses — failed to distinguish between semantic or representational structure, and thus it would be impossible for the theoretician to make any generalizations based on syntactic or neuronal relations, thus undoing the notion of a science of the mind. Notice also, as Baker carefully asserts at the end of the paragraph quoted above, that "... if functionalism failed to allow that two individuals are in the same functional state, then it would lack the generality required of a science." The whole point of a science, presumably, is that it allows us to make strong generalizations, in principle either confirmable or disconfirmable, about a given subject matter. If Fodorian MS functionalism obtained in the way that it should, two mental state tokens of the same kind could not be of distinct restricted semantic types without differing physically.

In other words, Fodor's MS fails to save belief (or desire, or some other kind of intent) in anything like the way needed to avoid reductionist moves on the one hand or a purely instrumentalist outlook about propositional attitudes on the other.

II

Now to return to the original argument, Tuomela feels — and he

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 36-37.

seems to be headed in the right direction — that at least two lines of criticism to Baker's argument are available. I will provide an adumbration of one of those, and add additional criticisms; it must be borne in mind however, that even if Baker's counterargument suffers from some sort of technical difficulty, this by no means indicates that MS is out of the woods. For the very fact that we can rather easily think of Bakerian counterexamples here is an indication that the correlation which Fodor obviously wants between semantic type and mental state is by no means as easy to build as he thinks it is. More to the point, Tuomela's original stricture that MS might be thought of in terms of "*de facto* regularity" does nothing to save MS, and rather undercuts it. For *de facto* regularity is not enough here; conceptually speaking, we need assertions of nomologically universal strength in order to provide a foundation for the science of the mind. In fact, Tuomela's rather apologetic remark about regularity merely adds fuel to the fire in this particular case.

The obvious weakness in Baker's counterexample is that there is a bit of a question-begging air about the production of phonologically-identical strings of syntax on the basis of (putatively) identical mental states where these strings have differing representations. Here we encounter a genuine area of conceptual difficulty: we know what Baker means — and her argument seems appealing — but precisely because we currently do not know enough about the mind to make the relevant correlations, we cannot be at all sure that the production of the phonologically-identical strings involves nothing more than identical syntactic/synaptic maneuvers. In other words, the argument calls for a strong assumption, an assumption for which we currently do not have enough evidence.

The utterance "Yo!" is phonologically identical, when said by Sylvester Stallone, to the Spanish-speaking child's reply to the teacher who wants to know who has an answer to a certain question. Said in a certain tone of voice, and so forth, one might get utterances which would be indistinguishable even with the more sophisticated auditory-measurement technology which we now possess. But it seems to be going too far here to assert that we can assume that there are identical mental states operant in the case of the Philadelphian and the Hispanic; in fact, that seems to be part and parcel of what is up for grabs. So one obvious reply to Baker's counterexample is that she is asking us to

buy too much when we have to buy this level of identity in order to make the example work.

Now Tuomela's first line of criticism is presented tersely, but it is, I believe, illustrative of a related difficulty for Baker's position. Tuomela describes Baker's example as: "... a fictional example of two replica-girls coming from two different cultures, whose languages happen to be phonologically identical in the girls' mouths, so to speak, while the uttered linguistic tokens have quite different contents (in the sense of narrow semantic typification)."¹⁵

What he says about this example is "... it is hard to evaluate this kind of highly fictional example with wildly counterfactual assumptions (especially the broad assumption that the antecedent of (*) really is satisfied)."¹⁶ But when one looks at the formulation of (*) [an amalgam, apparently, of Baker and Tuomela's interpretation of Baker] one finds it formulated in such-and-such a way:

(*) If two sequences of mental state tokens cause two tokens of a single type of bodily movement and if the tokens in the causal sequence are, pairwise, of the same physical types, and if they occur in two individuals who are molecule-for-molecule duplicates, then the sequences are, pairwise, of the same narrow semantic types.¹⁷

Of course, the (as Tuomela has it) "wildly counterfactual" assumption that the two individuals are molecule-for-molecule duplicates makes the alleged counterexample, as Tuomela indicates, even harder to swallow than many Wonderlandish counterexamples are. But more to the point, it is the other conjuncts of the antecedent of (*) cause the most difficulty. The first conjunct is similar to, if not identical to, the line of criticism already broached here — there is a question-begging air about it the assumption. The second conjunct forces us to take a hard look at the notion that the "... tokens in the causal sequence are, pairwise, of the same physical types", especially insofar as bodily

¹⁵ Tuomela, in *op. cit.*, p. 30.

¹⁶ *Ibid*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

movements are described. For what would count as a criterion of identity here? *Ex hypothesi*, the movements are identical — it will be recalled that Baker wrote "... flex the same muscles in the same way to the same degree."¹⁸ But the obvious problematic here is that, even taking into consideration the otherworldly nature of such counterexamples, the construction of the example seems to presuppose, also *ex hypothesi*, precision of measurement for such sorts of things which would preclude hypostatizing the very identity in question.

III

So Baker's counterexample, although exceedingly clever and well-contrived, is not invulnerable to attack. The greater question still remains, however: what of MS itself? If one did buy the Bakerian counterexample, and if one were still interested in saving MS, ought one to be content with (as Tuomela describes it) "*de facto* regularity" or a "psychophysical law of a kind"?¹⁹

The crux of the matter is that it was precisely such regularity, or such "psychophysicality", that Fodor's MS was designed to avoid. Fodor is explicit in his condemnation of the project of naturalistic psychology; this he deems to be the project of creating nomic regular environment-organism generalities.²⁰ Fodor is explicitly not interested in the interaction between the organism and its environment — it is, according to Fodor, "all in the head." Even if one could accept that the nomic generalizations created here would be entirely "solipsistic", as it were, and not generalities between the organism and the environment, what one is left with is an analysis which cannot rely on conceptually-derived stipulation. But anything less will not do the job for Fodor, who wants us to be able to do research within the framework of a certain strategy, and where that strategy must be taken as primitive. It is, in any case, not clear how one could avoid allusion

¹⁸ Baker, in *Belief*, pp. 30-31.

¹⁹ Tuomela, in *op. cit.*, p. 30.

²⁰ Cited in Tuomela, in *op. cit.*, p. 36. Tuomela claims to be extrapolating from Fodor's "Methodological Solipsism", in *op. cit.*

to the non-solipsistic environment in some way (and it is important to note this parenthetically), because presumably a complete catalog of the Bakerian-like exceptions must allude to the non-solipsistic, since we are able to discover that they are exceptions by matching up the semantic referents with the strings of output.

IV

In this paper I have referred to abbreviated versions of two attacks on methodological solipsism, Baker's being the version presented at greater length. Unfortunately, none of the desiderata of argumentative cleanliness and sharpness of results are really met by either of these attacks, or, indeed, by Fodor's original construction of methodological solipsism. Baker's counterexample may not really go through; but this is the comparatively rare sort of counterexample that does great damage in any case, for the pristine quality of Fodor's theorizing is clearly undone by it, and it comes so close to going through, as it were — we are initially so entranced by it — that it may as well count as a success. Tuomela's full-scale attack on Fodor on explanation I did not present, but what is noteworthy insofar as the work we are doing here is concerned is his note that "*de facto* regularity" is something with which those who hold MS could try to be happy. I have presented my argument against that in the immediately above.

The conclusion to our analysis of this work on MS is not a happy one, and only partially because it leaves this important Fodorian position more-or-less unsalvageable. Reminding ourselves of the conceptual structure of his position, and the tightness it requires, serves to further our recognition of the difficulty of finding a research strategy which incorporates intentional constructs in a way which is more than merely instrumentalist. The attack on methodological solipsism is simultaneously an attack on the salvation of intentionality, and it is the latter, not MS itself, which we would like to save.