



OXFORD JOURNALS
OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS

Mind Association

Holism. by Jerry Fodor; Ernest Lepore

Review by: Muhammad Ali Khalidi

Mind, New Series, Vol. 102, No. 408 (Oct., 1993), pp. 650-654

Published by: [Oxford University Press](#) on behalf of the [Mind Association](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2254052>

Accessed: 09/04/2012 23:40

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at
<http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



Oxford University Press and Mind Association are collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Mind*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

ff.). So Flanagan believes. But he allows that whether epiphenomenalism or materialism is closer to the truth about the nature of consciousness is to be settled empirically sometime in the future.

A main strength of this book is that Flanagan describes relatively clearly and nontechnically much impressive recent research in neuroscience and shows how it can help us to determine the nature of consciousness. The author is able to show how neuroscience can contribute to an understanding of consciousness to those who have no special scientific training. How can there be subjectivity in the natural world? Chapter 3 includes description of the enormous potentiality and complexity of the human brain which leaves no doubt in this reviewer's brain anyway that it is up to the task. Flanagan notes and illustrates: "The brain is a supremely well connected system of processors capable of more distinct states, by several orders of magnitude, than any system ever known" (p. 60).

Flanagan is open to the possibility that many of our current ideas about materialistic features of consciousness may turn out to be false, but he insists that all the major issues in the area are to be settled empirically. I wonder especially about the value of seeing consciousness as a Jamesian stream; not that consciousness is instead a faculty or a Kantian transcendental unity. But why not set aside fetching metaphors and aim at multilevel descriptions of episodes of different kinds of awareness and unawareness?

Flanagan takes the attitude that we must get on with the research and analysis at all relevant levels and see what we find. We might invoke Crick's principle of starting with a relatively simple and manageable feature of the problem. For example, Patricia Churchland describes and illustrates work that shows brain wave similarity during dream sleep and being awake in contrast to deep sleep. The similarity shows upon her slide. So the brain (the pons) doesn't seem to need external stimuli for certain kinds of activity (Presidential address, American Philosophical Association meeting, San Francisco, March 1993). This kind of result might seem like a very small part of getting at what consciousness is like, but is there a better way to proceed? What are the viable alternatives? Shall we bury our heads in the sand? And isn't it exciting to use consciousness to solve some of its own mysteries, to work on itself?

Philosophy Department
San Jose State University
San Jose
California 95192
USA

CAROLYN BLACK

Holism, by Jerry Fodor and Ernest Lepore. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991. Pp. xiv + 274. £30.00 H/b, £9.95 P/b.

This book's subtitle advertises it as "a shopper's guide" to holism and the preface promises a "critical survey" for "readers considering a purchase" (p. xi). But the conceit of providing an impartial service to the philosophical customer is some-

what misleading, since this controversial work bears less resemblance to the latest edition of *Consumer Reports* than to Ralph Nader's *Unsafe at Any Speed*.

After an introductory first chapter in which Jerry Fodor and Ernest Lepore define holism, sample some of its adverse consequences, and rehearse a prototypical argument for the doctrine, they devote a chapter each to philosophers who have advocated holism or whose ideas may serve to support it: W. V. Quine, Donald Davidson, David Lewis, Daniel Dennett, Ned Block, and Paul Churchland. Although the authors engage in textual explication at times, their formidable dialectical skills are most evident in the reconstruction of arguments that are, or might be, used to promote the cause of holism by each of these philosophers. They proceed to find fault with all of them and conclude that there are no good arguments abroad for holism. Rather than try to evaluate their interpretations, I will confine my remarks to their characterization of the doctrine of holism itself.

According to Fodor and Lepore, holism is a doctrine about "*the metaphysically necessary conditions* for something to have meaning or content" (p. 1), and it is defined by way of the doctrine of *anatomism*. A certain property is said to be *anatomic* just in case if anything has it, then at least one other thing does; by contrast, a property is *atomistic* or *punctate* if something can have it without any other thing having it. Then, a property is said to be *holistic* if it is very *anatomic*: "if anything has [it], then *lots* of other things must have [it] too" (p. 2).

Ostensibly, the main aim of this work is merely to show that there are no good arguments for holism. However, the authors also suggest that, if true, the doctrine may have some disastrous implications. The basic grievance against it is that it appears to rule out a notion of identity of meaning or content across different believers or in the same believer at different times. Moreover, Fodor and Lepore suggest that we need such a notion for intentional explanation, a science of psychology, an account of scientific theory choice, and the standard picture of language-learning and communication. They conclude that holism, at least as it now stands, appears unable to deliver any of these desirables. I will present two independent difficulties with this account.

The first concerns the claim that holism is a doctrine about the *necessary* conditions for something to have meaning. Although this assumption pervades the work, the authors never fully justify it. Such justification would have been in order since many of the main arguments are designed to show that holism has not been demonstrated by its supporters to be necessary. To cite one example, the authors consider how one might argue in a Davidsonian spirit from the compositionality of language to holism. This line is ruled out, however, on the basis of the mere *possibility* of a noncompositional language (pp. 65-66). But it is not explained why it would not be enough to show that language is actually compositional and deduce that it is actually holistic. In a later chapter, the authors maintain that "it does seem to us that there are properties of both natural languages and human thought that strongly suggest that some form of compositionality holds for linguistic and mental representation" (p. 175). This is not seen to undermine their earlier argument, presumably because that argument was directed against the

claim that compositionality (and therefore holism) was *necessary* to languagehood.

The assumption that holism is a necessity claim is also implicit in the way in which holism is constructed from anatomism. According to Fodor and Lepore, a typical anatomic property is that of being a sibling: there could not be only one person in the world who instantiates this property (cf. being married, being a co-author). Later in the book, the authors allow that legal properties such as being a criminal may be holistic (very anatomic), on the grounds that one could not be the only one in the world to have a legal property (p. 109). That is, although one might be the only criminal in the world, one can only be a criminal if there are others with legal properties, e.g. someone to be a magistrate, prosecutor, juror, etc. This observation helps to point to a crucial difference between two types of anatomic property: those like being a sibling and being a co-author whose anatomism is indeed necessary (since it follows logically from the fact that they are at once symmetric and non-reflexive relations), and those like having a legal property and having meaning whose anatomism is contingent (since it follows just from the fact that they belong to complex functional systems which confer certain roles upon them). What most holists seem to be saying is that having meaning is something like a legal property, a property of which it is contingently rather than necessarily true that it is holistic. The authors conjecture that the claim that legal properties are holistic is “conceptually necessary”, which presumably means that it is analytic. However, most of the philosophers they argue against, and even the authors themselves (see p. 185), reject the analytic-synthetic distinction, so one ought to regard both as claims to contingent truth rather than conceptual or metaphysical necessity.

Fodor and Lepore seem at times to recognize the distinction between the contingently and necessarily holistic, for they differentiate between “content holism” and “translation holism”. Translation holism is described as the claim that “nothing can translate a formula of *L* unless it belongs to a language containing many (nonsynonymous) formulas that translate formulas of *L*” (p. 6). The main reason for making the distinction is that “a meaning holist might admit the possibility of punctate languages, minds, and the like as a sort of metaphysical curiosity but still deny that a punctate language could express anything that can be expressed in English ...” (p. 209, n. 3). While this option is closed to a content holist, it remains open to a translation holist. One difference, therefore, between the two types of holism is that content holism is a doctrine of necessity, whereas translation holism is one of contingent fact (since it is presumably derived from the properties of actual natural languages like English). Although Fodor and Lepore claim that most of their arguments apply equally to both doctrines, their pervasive assumption about metaphysical necessity seems to fit only the doctrine of content holism.

The claim that having meaning is contingently holistic does not amount to saying that, as a matter of brute fact, there happens to be more than one meaningful thing in the world. It is the claim that, given the properties of natural languages

as we know them (e.g. finitude, learnability, compositionality, universality in Tarski's sense, etc.), their units have meaning by virtue of standing in relations to certain other linguistic units, rather than by virtue of direct relations with non-semantic determinants. That is why meaningful things travel in packs. Rather than ask whether holism is a necessary property of language, we should try to determine which view of meaning, holist or atomist, provides a better account of what we need to explain. Holism will be established on the basis of whether it is successful in accounting for other contingent facts, not if it can be proven as a metaphysical necessity or by a priori argument (*pace* pp. 206-7). Moreover, the things that need to be accounted for include some of the features of language listed by the authors themselves: intentional explanation, a science of psychology, an account of scientific theory choice, and the standard picture of language-learning and communication. If holism does not sit well with most or all these features, it ought to be put seriously in doubt.

This leads to the second difficulty with the way holism is characterized in this work, which involves the alleged consequences of holism for the study of mind and language. Since that claim is not meant to be the main purpose of the work, I will only try to indicate briefly how holism might escape the adverse results listed above. As I already mentioned, Fodor and Lepore suggest that holism might have certain dire consequences for the possibility of intentional explanation and related tasks, as manifested in an argument which is attributed to Michael Dummett (pp. 8-9). Briefly summarized, it states that holism dictates that the meaning of any term in an agent's set of beliefs is given by that whole set of beliefs. But, in general, no two agents' sets of beliefs are identical, so the meanings of two terms in the idiolects of different agents cannot be identical. Moreover, the authors also argue that any notion of similarity of meaning is parasitic on a notion of identity of meaning, so meanings cannot be said to be similar either. Since this rules out the possibility of comparing two agents' sets of beliefs, or indeed a single agent's sets of beliefs at different times, it seems to spoil things for intentional explanation, etc.

To gain some perspective on this claim and to see how it might be challenged, compare the debate between atomists and holists about meaning or semantic value with the obsolete debate between labour theorists and market theorists of economic value. As in that debate, the issue here is whether (semantic) value accrues to a realm of (linguistic or mental) entities by virtue of piecemeal and direct relations with external determinants, or whether value is distributed throughout the system by virtue of the relations that these entities have to one another. When thought of in this way, some of Fodor and Lepore's concerns about the implications of holism seem overblown. The comparison of meaning holism to the market theory of value serves as a reminder that changes at one point in the system need not lead to changes which reverberate around the entire system. The problem of comparing two agents' sets of beliefs is analogous to the problem of setting a "fair" exchange rate between two economies: to achieve this, what we need is not an exact isomorphism between them but an overall fit. We might make

an initial estimate based on the balance of trade between the two economies; if this comparison gives unexpected answers for the prices of too many commodities, we might revise the initial estimate, and so on. The fact that the two economies are not identical in structure does not prevent us from fixing an exchange rate.

Similarly, a translation function is constructed between two sets of beliefs which provides the best overall explanation of the alien's utterances and actions. The decision to translate an alien term with one of our own is not made on the grounds that the term features in all the same beliefs, or even a specific set of requisite beliefs. Of course, it will turn out that certain beliefs are shared for each particular term, but we cannot specify which ones these will be in advance since they can only emerge after the process of interpretation or translation is complete. Moreover, it might be a different set of beliefs for a different translation, thus avoiding a commitment to the analytic-synthetic distinction. An exact congruence between belief systems is not necessary for one term to be matched up with another, and the question of how much congruence is required can only be answered with reference to specific cases. This brief sketch at least suggests how a holist might block the anarchic consequence that every difference in beliefs entails a difference in meaning of every term.

Fodor and Lepore's discussion of holism is unrivalled in argumentative density and philosophical energy, and it will certainly lead to a storm of new activity. But I have tried to suggest that their characterization of the doctrine and its consequences is not compulsory. The authors have made a strong case for the thesis that holism is not a necessary condition for having content. However, it would seem more natural for holists to argue that, given some of the contingent properties of human languages, meaning is more plausibly regarded as holistic than atomistic. Such a position would elude at least some of the objections raised against the arguments for holism. Since Fodor and Lepore are trying to establish that there are no good arguments for holism, if even one argument scrapes through, it would vindicate the doctrine. They could claim that all the holists they have ever encountered have claimed that holism is a metaphysically necessary condition for having content. But it is doubtful that all the authors they discuss actually say this. Though perhaps not always clear about the status of their theses about language, some are notoriously skeptical about the whole notion of metaphysical necessity. Fodor and Lepore's position should serve to remind us of the philosophical rashness of necessity claims about language (or about almost anything else for that matter, witness the number of planets).

Society of Fellows in the Humanities
Columbia University
 New York
 NY 10027
 USA

MUHAMMAD ALI KHALIDI