

Chapter 24

Cognitive suicide

Lynne Rudder Baker

To deny the common-sense conception of the mental is to abandon all our familiar resources for making sense of any claim, including the denial of the common-sense conception. It may be thought that the image of Neurath's ship being rebuilt at sea plank by plank, may be of service to those denying the common-sense conception. On the contrary, the image works the other way. Local repairs, in the common-sense conception, presuppose a concept of content, but content seems not susceptible to physicalistic formulation. Thus, physicalists are in no position to replace the common-sense conception plank by plank. From a consistent physicalistic point of view, what is at issue must be the entire framework of attitudes specified by 'that'-clauses.¹ If it is hazardous, as it surely is, to attempt to rebuild a ship at sea all at once, it is all the more hazardous to undertake rebuilding with no replacement material available.

On the other hand, in the absence of a replacement, it is literally inconceivable that the common-sense conception of the mental is false. But it is such a thought that, with a measure of trepidation, I next want to explore. I shall set out several ways in which denial of the commonsense conception may be self-defeating or otherwise pragmatically incoherent. If the thesis denying the common-sense conception is true, then the concepts of rational acceptability, of assertion, of cognitive error, even of truth and falsity are called into question. It remains to be seen whether or not such concepts (or suitable successors) can be reconstructed without presupposing the truth of attributions of content. Of the three kinds of incoherence I discuss, the first two may be familiar (though not, I think, sufficiently appreciated).²

Lynne Rudder Baker, edited extract from 'Cognitive Suicide', chap. 7 of *Saving Belief: A Critique of Physicalism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987).

1. The arguments in this chapter are aimed at those prepared to relinquish attitudes specifiable by 'that'-clauses, whether or not they want to develop some other concept of content not specifiable by 'that'-clauses. Content in the common-sense conception is specified by 'that'-clauses.
2. See, for example, Norman Malcolm, 'The Conceivability of Mechanism,' *Philosophical Review* 77 (1968), 45-77. Also, Lewis White Beck, *The Actor and the Spectator* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1975), formulates a sense in which arguments for mechanism may be 'self-stultifying.'

Rational acceptability at risk

The first way in which the view denying the common-sense conception may be self-defeating is this: Anyone who claims that the thesis is rationally acceptable lapses into pragmatic incoherence because the thesis denying the common-sense conception undermines the concept of rational acceptability.

The skeptic about the common-sense conception has two, perhaps insurmountable, obstacles to overcome: one concerns the idea of *accepting* a proposition or theory; the other, the idea of *justifiably* accepting a proposition or theory. Obviously, if the common-sense conception is eliminated, no one is justified in believing anything; indeed, no one believes anything, justifiably or not. The skeptic who would salvage the idea of rational acceptability is then left with two problems. First, he must come up with some successor to the family that includes 'believes that,' 'accepts that,' and other such expressions, which will permit a distinction between, say, 'accepting' (or whatever the content-free successor of accepting is) one thing and 'accepting' another *without adverting to content*. The arguments of Part I, which reveal the difficulty, if not the impossibility, of providing nonintentional and nonsemantic sufficient conditions for a state's having a particular content give us reason to be dubious about making the correct distinctions in a vocabulary that does not attribute content.

Putting aside worries about how a content-free mental state can replace acceptance, the second difficulty here concerns the normative notions of rationality, justification, and good argument. If the thesis denying the common-sense conception is true, then it is unclear that there could ever be good arguments for it or that anyone could ever be justified in 'accepting' (the successor of accepting) it. The thesis seems to undermine the possibility of good argument and justification generally.

In many cases, if a person is justified in accepting a thesis, then there exists evidence for the thesis, which the person appreciates. It is difficult to see how the ideas of evidence and of appreciating the evidence can be unpacked in the absence of states with content. Of course, the skeptic about the common-sense conception, reaching for consistency, may 'agree' (or do whatever replaces agreement in a post-common-sense framework) that ideas of evidence and of appreciating the evidence are part of the common-sense conception, which is to be left behind. Then, if the skeptic holds that the thesis denying the common-sense conception can be rationally accepted, he owes us some other 'account' (an appropriate successor of an account) of 'justification' (an appropriate successor of a justification) that does not presuppose the repudiated ideas. The successor concepts must allow both for a distinction between being 'justified' in 'accepting' *p* and not being so 'justified' and for a distinction between being 'justified' in 'accepting' *p* and being 'justified' in 'accepting' *q*, without presupposing that there are contentful states. But every skeptic about the common-sense conception freely uses ideas integral to the

common-sense conception in his attack (another common-sense idea that the skeptic must replace) on it.

The language of accepting and denying, as well as of evidence, hypothesis, argument, is part and parcel of the common-sense conception. Before the skeptic about the common-sense conception has any claim on us, he must replace these ideas with successor ideas that make no appeal to states with content (or otherwise do without such ideas). What is at stake here, as all parties to the discussion agree, are all attributions of contentful states. If the successor concepts advert to content, then they do not avoid the common-sense conception that I am defending. But if they do not advert to content, it is difficult to see how they can make the needed distinctions between accepting (or rather its content-free successor) one thesis and accepting another. And the absence of such distinctions would make it impossible to accept any thesis at all.

Here, then, is a dilemma for the skeptic about the common-sense conception: From the perspective that denies the common-sense conception, either he can distinguish being 'justified' in 'accepting' that *p* from being 'justified' in 'accepting' that *q* or not. If not, then no one is 'justified' in 'accepting' the thesis that denies the common-sense conception of the mental or any other thesis. But if so, then, in light of the arguments of Part I, the skeptic must absolve himself of the charge that he is covertly assuming contentful states by producing relevant content-free successors to concepts of acceptance and justification. If the skeptic declines on grounds that absolving oneself of charges is part of the common-sense conception that is to be discarded, then he is playing into the hand of the critic who says that the skeptic jeopardizes any standards of rational acceptability.³

On the face of it, one can hardly see how to free rich concepts, like that of being justified in accepting a particular thesis, of layers of content. At least, the challenge is there for the skeptic about common sense to come up with replacement concepts that permit distinctions like those between accepting and not accepting a thesis and between being justified and not being justified in accepting a thesis—replacement concepts that make the needed distinctions without presupposing that any attribution of content has ever been true.

Churchland has taken the tack of urging the rational acceptability of denying the common-sense conception by proposing as an alternative to states with content an account of what constitutes a cognitive economy. Regardless of what alternative account he proposes, however, this move is not available to him. In order to be an *alternative* account to the common-sense conception, the successor must at least allow scientists to identify certain systems as cognitive; and in order to be an *alternative account* of cognition, the successor must allow scientists to hypothesize

3. Suppose that a skeptic tried a kind of *reductio ad absurdum* of the common-sense conception by using, say, the notion of rational acceptability in order to show that that notion has insurmountable internal problems; from this, he concludes, so much the worse for the idea of rational acceptance. It would remain unclear how any such argument could have a claim on us. We obviously could not rationally accept it.

that cognitive states have such-and-such a character. But no one has shown how concepts like those of *identifying* something as a cognitive system or *hypothesizing* that cognitive states lack content have application in the absence of content. Indeed, it is difficult to see how anything could count as advancing an alternative to the commonsense conception in the absence of contentful states. Without contentful states, what makes it *p* rather than *q* that one 'advances'? What makes an audible emission one of advancing at all?⁴

Indeed, it is difficult to see how to construe what scientists are doing generally when they engage in research if they lack mental states with content. The ideas of evidence, hypothesis, and experiment at least seem to presuppose content. (Or that is the only way I know to put it, even though I do not see how 'seems to presuppose something' could be true of anything if we have no contentful states.) It would help to see an account (or rather, a content-free successor to an account) of these ideas or of successor ideas in terms of which science could be practiced without presupposing states with content. The common-sense conception pervades the language of rational acceptability in scientific activity as well as in everyday affairs.

To sum up: The first threat of self-defeat for the thesis denying the common-sense conception of the mental stems from the consequences for the concept of rational acceptability. Without a new account of how there can be rational acceptability in the absence of belief and intention, we have no way to evaluate the claim denying the common-sense conception. This first threat suggests that, apart from the common-sense conception, we may not be able to say much about our so-called rational practices. The next kind of pragmatic incoherence suggests that, apart from the common-sense conception, we may not be able to say anything at all.

Assertion at risk

The second way in which the thesis denying the common-sense conception may be self-defeating is this: Anyone who asserts that view lapses into pragmatic incoherence because the thesis undermines the concept of assertibility; at least, he must offer some indication of how there can be assertion without belief.⁵ Both Patricia Churchland and Paul Churchland have denied charges that, if a certain thesis is true, it cannot be asserted. Paul Churchland has aimed to rebut the claim that

4. An objection that I do not meet the thrust of the eliminativists' arguments would seem to presuppose the common-sense standpoint. If eliminativism is correct, then in what sense do anyone's bodily movements qualify as arguments at all? Arguments about the allegedly self-defeating character of anything are, I think, frustrating to people on both sides of the issue. People on each side think that those on the other miss the point. From my side, it seems that I ask straightforward questions (like that above), which require answers but receive none.
5. It should be clear that I am not asking for a reduction of speech to thought; in particular, I do not suppose that thought exhibits intrinsic intentionality and speech exhibits derived intentionality. I do not think that a reduction either way—from language to thought to brain, or from thought to language to physicalistic theory of meaning—is promising.

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eliminative materialism—a corollary of the view that the commonsense conception is radically mistaken—is self-refuting. Here is how he sets out the argument that he intends to undermine:

[T]he statement of eliminative materialism is just a meaningless string of marks or noises, unless that string is the expression of a certain *belief*, and a certain *intention* to communicate, and a *knowledge* of the grammar of the language, and so forth. But if the statement of eliminative materialism is true, then there are no such states to express. The statement at issue would then be a meaningless string of marks or noises. It would therefore *not* be true. Therefore it is not true. Q.E.D.⁶

Churchland finds this argument question-begging and illustrates his point by presenting an argument against antivitalism, which, he claims, is both parallel to the above argument against eliminative materialism and obviously question-begging. The argument that he claims to be parallel is this:

The anti-vitalist says that there is no such thing as vital spirit. But this claim is self-refuting. The speaker can expect to be taken seriously only if his claim cannot. For if the claim is true, then the speaker does not have vital spirit and must be *dead*. But if he is dead, then his statement is a meaningless string of noises, devoid of reason and truth.⁷

But the arguments fail to be parallel in two crucial respects. First, the pairs of imaginary disputants differ in the presuppositions they share. The antivitalist would agree with the vitalist that being alive is a necessary condition for making a claim; he simply differs in his account of what it is to be alive. The eliminative materialist, on the other hand, could not consistently agree with his opponent that having beliefs or other attitudes identified by content is a necessary condition for making claims. The eliminative materialist is not offering a different account of what it is to have beliefs; he is denying that anyone has beliefs. The parallel to an eliminative materialist would be an antivitalist who held that dead men make claims. Therefore, the silliness of the argument against antivitalism has no bearing on the argument against eliminative materialism.

Second, the error in the argument against antivitalism has no echo in the argument against eliminative materialism. It is a mistake to charge the antivitalist with being dead on account of lacking a vital spirit *either* on the assumption that antivitalism is true *or* on the assumption that antivitalism is false. If antivitalism is true, then the lack of a vital spirit is irrelevant to death; if it is false, then the antivitalist, who mistakenly denies vitalism, has a vital spirit and is not dead.

But the argument against eliminative materialism, stated more carefully than Churchland concedes, challenges the eliminative materialist to show how there can

6. Paul M. Churchland, 'Eliminative Materialism and Propositional Attitudes,' *Journal of Philosophy* 78 (1981), 89 (Chapter 23, p. 399 of this volume.); cf. his *Matter and Consciousness* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT/Bradford, 1984), 48 (emphasis his).

7. Churchland, 'Eliminative Materialism and Propositional Attitudes,' 89 (p. 400 of this volume) (emphasis his).

be assertion without belief or other states with content. It begs no question to assume, as the argument against eliminative materialism does, that eliminative materialism is true.⁸

Churchland explains his rejection of the argument that eliminative materialism is self-defeating by claiming that the argument assumes a certain theory of meaning, one that presupposes the integrity of the common-sense conception. But only to a minimal extent is a particular theory of meaning assumed; issues that divide theorists like Frege, Davidson, Kaplan, Montague, and Grice are wholly irrelevant to the argument that eliminative materialism is self-refuting. The argument against eliminative materialism makes the minimal assumption that language can be meaningful only if it is possible that someone mean something.

Of course, history is full of received views that turn out to be false. That a hot object heats up a cold object when caloric fluid flows from one to the other or that knowledge is justified true belief are two examples.⁹ Unlike the assumption about meaningful language, however, these examples are instances of explicitly formulated theories. Moreover, the superseding theories make it intelligible why people said (false) things like 'The sun revolves around the earth.' But from the perspective that denies the common-sense conception, it would be a mystery why anybody would ever say (false) things like 'I ran inside because I thought I heard the phone ring.' (Of course, the emission of the noises would have a physical explanation.) Not only would thinking that one heard the phone ring fail to be either reason for or cause of one's rapid house-entering behavior, but worse, one would never have *thought* that she heard the phone ring. Nor, if the common-sense conception is false, did anyone ever *seem* to think that she heard the phone ring. As noted earlier, a mental state of seeming to think that *p* would be, if anything, more content-laden than one of merely thinking that *p*.

It is clearly incumbent upon anyone who wants to deny the near-platitude that language can be meaningful only if it is possible that someone mean something to show how there can be meaningful language even if no one has ever meant anything, even if no one has ever intended to say anything. The claim of the syntactic theory—that mental activity consists of relations to uninterpreted sentences—just begs for an account of what those who advocate the syntactic approach are doing when they write; without such an account, the sentences that they write can have no more claim on us than do crevices etched into the Rock of Gibraltar by the weather.

Suppose someone were to say: On a speech-dispositional view, assertion does not require belief or any other state with content. So we can have assertion and language, even without contentful states. But, we should reply, a satisfactory speech-

8. This point was also made by Karl Popper in 'Is Determinism Self-Refuting?' *Mind* 92 (1983), 103, a reply to Patricia Smith Churchland, 'Is Determinism Self-Refuting?' *Mind* 90 (1981), 99–101.

9. These examples were suggested by Charles Chastain, who commented on an earlier version of this chapter at the Oberlin Colloquium in Philosophy, April 12–14, 1985.

dispositional view has yet to be developed.¹⁰ Since assertion *simpliciter* is sincere assertion, an alternative to the common-sense view, speech-dispositional or otherwise, would have to distinguish assertion from 'noise' on the one hand and from lying on the other. Such an alternative account of assertion would be called on to do three things:

- (i) Without appeal to the content of mental states, the alternative account of assertion must distinguish assertion from other audible emission. Perhaps the account would distinguish between kinds of causal history.

But it is difficult to guess how to specify the right causal history without attributing to the speaker some state with the content of what is asserted. (This difficulty will be discussed further in the next section.) Notice also that a speech-dispositional account presupposes an answer to the question of which audible emissions manifest speech dispositions and hence provides no answer to it.

- (ii) The alternative account of assertion, again without appeal to the content of mental states, must distinguish sounds that count as an assertion that *p* rather than as an assertion that *q*.

This would require a physicalistic reduction of semantics much stronger than, say, Davidson's, which takes for granted the availability of an interpreted metalanguage and takes the truth predicate as a primitive. The arguments in Part I are easily modified to suggest that the difficulties in supplying nonsemantic conditions for application of semantic notions may be insurmountable.

- (iii) The alternative account of assertion must at least have conceptual room for a distinction between sincere assertion and lying.

Since the distinction between sincere assertion and lying is made by reference to whether or not one believes what one is saying or whether or not one intends to mislead, it is less than obvious, to say the least, how to make out a comparable distinction without presupposing mental states with content. Certainly no one has offered any evidence that a concept like sincerity can be reconstructed without appeal to the content of mental states.

10. Quine's view, for example, seems susceptible to arguments similar to those Chomsky deployed against Skinner. See Noam Chomsky, 'A Review of Skinner's *Verbal Behavior*,' in *Readings in the Philosophy of Psychology*, vol. 1, ed. Ned Block (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1980), 48–63. In addition, Alan Berger has argued that Quine's account presupposes ideas to which he is not entitled. See Berger, 'A Central Problem for a Speech-Dispositional Account of Logic and Language,' in *Studies in the Philosophy of Language*, ed. Peter A. French, Theodore E. Uehling, Jr., and Howard K. Wettstein, *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, 14 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989). In any case, a speech-dispositional account does not seem to meet (i)–(iii) below; nor, as we shall see, can it accommodate the locust/cricket case.

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Thus, I think we have substantial reason to doubt that any alternative account of assertion that is free of appeal to contentful mental states will be forthcoming.¹¹

Although Churchland has offered several scenarios in which he imagines the actual displacement of the common-sense conception by neuroscience, they all bypass the question raised here. For example, Churchland asks: 'How will such [post-common-sense conception] people understand and conceive of other individuals? To this question I can only answer, "In roughly the same fashion that your right hemisphere 'understands' and 'conceives of' your left hemisphere—intimately and efficiently, but not propositionally!'"¹² At this level of description, the analogy is unhelpful, as Churchland signals by his use of scare-quotes around 'understands' and 'conceives of.' One's right hemisphere does not conceive of one's left hemisphere at all. Not only does the idea of nonpropositional 'understanding' remain mysterious, but a strictly neurophysiological account of understanding would seem to leave us in the dark about how anything, including putative denials of the common-sense conception, could have meaning.

To sum up: The second threat of self-defeat for the thesis denying the common-sense conception stems from the consequences for assertion. Without a new 'account' of how there can be assertion in the absence of belief and intention, we have no way to interpret the claim denying the common-sense conception.¹³

Truth at risk

The third way that the view denying the common-sense conception may be self-defeating is this: If the thesis is true, it has not been shown to be formulable. We can formulate a thesis if and only if we can specify what would make it true. In addition

11. Since Stich has explicitly linked the notion of sincere assertion to belief, I should expect that he would let sincere assertion go the way of belief. He says that it is difficult to see how the notion of 'sincere assertion of p' 'could be unpacked without invoking the idea of an utterance *caused by the belief that p*.' *From Folk Psychology to Cognitive Science: The Case Against Belief* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT/Bradford, 1983), 79 (emphasis his).
12. Churchland, 'Eliminative Materialism and Propositional Attitudes,' 88 (p. 399 of this volume). Churchland thinks that with the resources of a future scientific psychology, we could 'manage to construct a new system of verbal communication entirely distinct from natural language,' which everyone may actually come to use. In that case, the categories of natural language, along with propositional attitudes, would disappear (87) (p. 398 of this volume). I can imagine the disappearance of natural language, along with the disappearance of the human race as the result of a nuclear war, say; but neither I nor anyone else has the ability to imagine business as usual without natural language or propositional attitudes. Imagining is itself a propositional attitude. Of course, I can imagine a world without propositional attitudes; but from the fact that I imagine it, it follows that such a world is not ours.
13. It is no criticism that I presuppose the common-sense conception in discussing, for example, the possibility of a surrogate 'denial.' All we now have are common-sense ways to understand what, for example, a denial is; we cannot very well dispense with common sense and keep even a surrogate for denial, unless we have some idea of what that surrogate is. What is it? Is it just a prejudice of common sense that a denial is always a denial of something?

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to undermining concepts of rational acceptability and of assertibility, the thesis denying the commonsense view may make incoherent the concepts of truth and falsity, as applied to mental states and language, in which case neither it nor any other thesis would be formulable.¹⁴

In the interest of reducing obscurity, let me make some observations. Content is attributable by 'that'-clauses. Just as a mental state has content if and only if it is correctly identifiable as, for example, a believing that *p*, so an utterance or inscription has content if and only if it is correctly identifiable as a saying that *p*. At this point, however, the contours of the terrain blur. Although these terminological matters may be carved up differently without detriment to my argument, related issues—for example, whether or not the (alleged) impropriety of 'believes that' carries over to 'says that'—are no mere matters of terminology.

I hope to avoid begging any substantive questions by joining the skeptic of the common-sense conception in his main contention, namely, that mental states have no content, that is, they are not correctly identified by 'that'-clauses. I shall urge that this contention comes to grief on the question: Can such content-free mental states have truth value? Case 1: If so, what makes mental state tokens that are not identifiable by 'that'-clauses true or false? Case 2: If not, what makes utterances and inscriptions true or false?

Anyone who denies the common-sense conception on the basis of the argument from physicalism is a scientific realist who cannot beg off these questions. Even so, since I see no reason to suppose that thought may be reduced to language or language to thought, adequate answers to these questions do not require anything resembling a scientific theory, only an indication that there is space, as it were, for answers. It is difficult to see how insistence that cognition requires a distinction between truth and falsity (or at least between being right and being wrong) could be written off as dogmatism or mere prejudice.

Case 1: Suppose that the skeptic about the common-sense conception says that, yes, mental state tokens may be true or false even without content. In this case, the skeptic must answer the question: By virtue of what is a mental state token, identified without 'that'-clauses, true?

On the horizon are only two approaches to truth available to the skeptic who denies the common-sense conception. One is to try to account for the truth of a true mental state (identified in wholly nonintentional terms) by means of a correspondence between it and a particular state of affairs. The other is to try to account for the truth of a true mental state in terms of the way that the state was caused or the way that such mental states typically are caused. I find neither of these approaches promising.

First, in the absence of attitudes identified by content, a mental state token, as identified by a physicalistic psychology (syntactic or neuro-physiological), may be

14. If one endorses a redundancy theory of truth, then the problem raised in this section about truth would reduce to the problem raised about assertibility.

true if it 'corresponds' in the right way to states of affairs. But how are mental states to be mapped on to states of affairs? Which correspondence is the right one?¹⁵

Given only the syntactic or neurophysiological properties of mental state tokens and the physical properties of contexts, any token may be mapped on to any state of affairs. (Indeed, it is difficult to see why any molecular configuration is to count as one mapping as opposed to another if there are no mental states with content.) A natural way to select an appropriate mapping—one that plausibly has a claim to securing truth—would be to identify mental states by content. But if mental states could be identified by content, then the skeptic about the common-sense conception would be refuted. Thus, I do not see how the truth of mental state tokens can be explained in terms of correspondence between mental state tokens and states of affairs without invoking content.

The second way to characterize the truth of mental state tokens without presupposing attitudes identified by content would be in terms of the causes of one's mental states. Truth could then be understood in terms of standard causal chains. To take an oversimplified example, snow's being white may cause, in some standard way to be specified, a certain mental state *m*, which in turn contributes to an utterance, 'Snow is white.'

But this proposal, too, as we saw in Chapter Five, has difficulties. It is unlikely that the notion of a standard causal chain can be filled out satisfactorily. The problem of specifying standard or normality conditions simply arises once again. Moreover, as the cricket/locust example indicated, two routes may be indistinguishable as long as they are described nonintentionally; yet one may lead to a belief that *p* and the other to a belief that *q*, where '*p*' and '*q*' differ in truth conditions. Finally, in many cases, a belief that *p* is not connected with the state of affairs that *p* in any obvious way.

Therefore, I do not think that the notion of correspondence or of cause will secure the distinction between truth and falsity of mental state tokens lacking content. So let us turn to case 2.

Case 2: Suppose that the skeptic about the common-sense conception says that, no, mental state tokens without content may not be true or false. In this case the skeptic must answer the question: By virtue of what are inscriptions and utterances unmoored to mental states that are true or false themselves true or false?

Before addressing these issues directly, consider the rather drastic consequence of having to conclude that, without content, mental states also lack truth value.¹⁶ It

15. Tarski's theory of truth is of no help here. That Tarski has not formulated a 'materialistically adequate' concept of truth has been argued by Hartry Field in 'Tarski's Theory of Truth,' *Journal of Philosophy* 69 (1972), 347–375. For further criticisms, see Robert C. Stalnaker's *Inquiry* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT/Bradford, 1984), ch. 2.

16. Denying truth value to mental states would have several further unfortunate consequences. One could not reasonably be held accountable for the truth or falsity of one's statements if their truth or falsity is in no way connected to one's mental states. One would have no duty to speak the truth and avoid falsity. Indeed, it would be a mystery how falsity and error could even be of concern to us if our mental states lacked truth value. (If mental states lack content, one could not even think that one is saying something true or that one is saying something false.)

would follow that no one is, or ever has been, in cognitive error. Still assuming for the moment that the skeptic about the common-sense conception is correct, all those false attributions or would-be attributions of belief, desire, and intention cannot be the product of any mistake on our part.

One may rather relinquish the possibility of describing anything as cognitive error before letting go of a preferred theory. Still, the difficulty of a distinction between truth and falsity, even the truth or falsity of particular inscriptions, would remain. One may utter sentences, some presumably true and some presumably false; but the truth or falsity of the sentences that one utters would have nothing to do with any semantic value of one's mental states. The falsity of any utterance would be no reflection on the speaker, whose mental states are free of any taint of error. Indeed, the fact that certain sounds we emit are true (if they are) can only be fortuitous. It would be as if we were simply transmitting sounds, whose truth or falsity is beyond our ability to appreciate. This point alone raises suspicions about how audible emissions, swinging free of semantically evaluated mental states, can be true or false. So, to return to the development of case 2, if there is no such thing as cognitive error, if mental states lack not only content but also truth value, by virtue of what are inscriptions and utterances true or false?

Truth or falsity attaches to items that are semantically interpreted. But any arbitrary mapping of symbols on to states of affairs is an interpretation. What distinguishes the mapping that pairs symbols with their truth conditions? By virtue of what does an inscription signify one state of affairs rather than another, or signify anything at all?

By now, the line is familiar. A causal account is no good: Snow's being white cannot cause 'snow is white' to express that fact. A 'use' account is no good: To say that 'snow is white' is used to express the fact that snow is white just smuggles in contentful states—for example, that people intend to express such facts. A speech-dispositional account is no good: Such an account must suppose that many people assent when queried, 'Is snow white?' But that supposition leaves the fundamental question without a hint of an answer: What makes the investigator's audible emission a query or the respondent's audible emission an assent?

In addition, a speech dispositional account would return the wrong verdict on cases like the cricket/locust example. Suppose that a radical translator comes to the ward where our two combatants languish. Since the two combatants have exactly the same dispositions, they assent to exactly the same stimulus sentences. So on a speech-dispositional analysis, their utterances should receive exactly the same translation into the translator's language. But that would be a mistake. Each is a competent speaker of his language, in which syntactically and acoustically similar tokens differ in content. In jointly producing a single token, one says that locusts are a menace; the other says that crickets are a menace.

No matter how hard the bullet one is prepared to bite, cases 1 and 2 are exhaustive: Either mental states without content can have truth value or they cannot. If they can, then we have not even a sketch of how; if they cannot, then we have not

even a sketch of how inscriptions and utterances can be true or false. But without a distinction between truth and falsity, neither the thesis denying the common-sense conception nor any other is even formulable.¹⁷

To sum up: The third threat of self-defeat for the thesis denying the common-sense conception of the mental stems from the consequences for the distinction between truth and falsity. Without a new 'account' of how there can be truth and falsity in the absence of true attributions of content, we have no way to formulate the claim denying the common-sense conception.

Thus, in light of the considerations just presented, it seems that we can neither rationally accept nor assert nor even formulate the thesis denying the common-sense conception of the mental. Indeed, if the thesis is true, it is at least problematic whether we can rationally accept or assert or even formulate any thesis at all.¹⁸ This seems ample reason to deny the conclusions of the arguments from physicalism.

The upshot

If the denial of the common-sense conception is self-defeating in any of the ways that I have suggested, then we must consider again the valid arguments that led to such a conclusion.

Argument from physicalism

- (1) Either physicalistic psychology will vindicate (in a sense to be specified) the common-sense conception of the mental or the common-sense conception of the mental is radically mistaken.
- (2) Physicalistic psychology will fail to vindicate (in the relevant sense) the common-sense conception of the mental.

Therefore,

- (3) The common-sense conception of the mental is radically mistaken.

17. Invocation of possible worlds is of no help. Suppose that one says: assign 'snow is white' the value 1 in all possible worlds in which snow is white; assign 'grass is green' the value 1 in all possible worlds in which grass is green, and so on. Such a procedure begs the question now at issue. If mental states lack content, by virtue of what does 'assign' mean assign? What makes '1' mean 'true' rather than something else?

18. One may want to respond that all that has been shown is that denial of the common-sense conception is not *currently* formulable or conceivable and that we cannot predict what enlarged conceptual resources there may be in the future. But in order for the thesis *ever* to be conceivable (or formulable, and so on), we would have to have a new conception of conceiving without content—that is, a conception of conceiving that did not distinguish between conceiving that *p* and conceiving that *q*. As vague as our current concept of conceiving is, it is difficult to see how it could be replaced by any concept that failed to distinguish between conceiving that *p* and conceiving that *q*.

If the conclusion cannot be accepted, we must reject at least one of the premises.¹⁹ Since the second premise may well be true—since, that is, it is a real possibility that science will fail minimally to vindicate the common-sense conception—the culprit is likely the first premise, the commitment to physicalism. In that case, we should have to reject the assumption that physicalistic psychology will either vindicate or eliminate the common-sense conception of the mental.

Less an empirical theory than a condition of intelligibility, the common-sense conception may not be an option for us. One need not be any kind of Cartesian dualist (certainly, Davidson and Wittgenstein are not dualists) to hold that physicalistic science is in no position either to vindicate or to eliminate the common-sense conception of the mental. Since cognition without content is empty, denial of the common-sense conception may be a kind of cognitive suicide that we are constitutionally unable to commit. Thus, we may have to reject the physicalistic dichotomy.

There may yet remain an alternative to the rejection of physicalism. It may be possible to accept the argument from physicalism as sound and, at the same time, to blunt the impact of its conclusion. Instead of supposing that the resistance of the common-sense conception to accommodation with scientific theory robs the common-sense conception of legitimacy, we may take the common-sense conception to be practically indispensable, even if, strictly speaking, it is false. Its usefulness may be thought to confer on it a kind of legitimacy, even a kind of instrumental truth.

19. From a significantly different angle, Terence Horgan and James Woodward have also defended folk psychology from the criticisms of Stich and Churchland. See their 'Folk Psychology Is Here to Stay,' *Philosophical Review* 94 (1985), 197–226. I did not see their article until after I had presented the arguments given here.