Fodorian Semantics, Pathologies, and “Block’s Problem”\textsuperscript{1}

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Abstract. In two recent books, Jerry Fodor has developed a set of sufficient conditions for an object “X” to non-naturally and non-derivatively mean X. In an earlier paper we presented three reasons for thinking Fodor’s theory to be inadequate. One of these problems we have dubbed the “Pathologies Problem”. In response to queries concerning the relationship between the Pathologies Problem and what Fodor calls “Block’s Problem”, we argue that, while Block’s Problem does not threaten Fodor’s view, the Pathologies Problem does.

Key words. Asymmetric causal dependency, Block, Fodor, content, meaning, pathologies, semantics

In two recent books, Jerry Fodor has developed a set of sufficient conditions for an object “X” to non-naturally and non-derivatively mean X. Since the more descriptive name, the “Asymmetric Causal Dependency Theory of Meaning”, is awkward, we prefer to call it simply Fodor’s View. In an earlier paper we presented three principal reasons why Fodor’s view is unsatisfactory. First, we showed that the conditions of the theory are not in fact sufficient for meaning. Second, we provided two reasons for thinking that the conditions are vacuous, i.e., nothing in the human language of thought or public languages means what it does in virtue of Fodor’s conditions. The first reason stems from the existence of “pathological” causes of mental tokens (the Pathologies Problem). The second reason is based on the existence of Twin-Earth counterparts to objects in the external world. These counterparts show that nothing satisfies Fodor’s theory.

We still believe that all of these reasons suffice to show that Fodor’s view is indeed unsatisfactory, but in the present paper we wish to allay some worries about the Pathologies Problem. Foremost among these is the worry that we have only re-discovered a problem that Fodor calls “Block’s Problem” – Fodor credits the problem to Ned Block (Fodor 1990, pp. 111f). We believe that while Block’s Problem is directed at the same point in Fodor’s theory as the Pathologies Problem and has a similar conclusion, it is in fact different. Most importantly, we believe that Fodor adequately rebuffs (what he calls) Block’s argument, but has yet to provide an adequate response to the Pathologies Problem. In describing matters in this way, we set aside the question whether or not Fodor correctly interprets what Block says. If Fodor errs in his interpretation, we apologize to Block for following Fodor. To show all of this we will first briefly describe Fodor’s view, then present the Pathologies Problem before moving to contrast it with Block’s Problem.

1. Fodor’s View

In Chapter 4 of *A Theory of Content*, Fodor develops a semantic theory within the tradition of “correlational semantics”. He claims that “X” means X if:

1. ‘Xs cause “X”s’ is a law.
2. Some “X”s are actually caused by Xs.
3. For all Y not = X, if Ys qua Ys actually cause “X”s, then Ys causing “X”s is asymmetrically dependent on Xs causing “X”s (p. 121).

In the present context of the Pathologies Problem and Block’s problem, the principal condition of interest is condition (3). Condition (1) is simply Fodor’s version of the information-carrying condition at the heart of all forms of correlational semantics. We might emphasize that condition (1) should be understood in a nomological, rather than merely causal sense. Put in more explicit form, (1) asserts that there is a lawful connection between the property of being an X and the property of being an “X”. An anomic causal theory, unlike Fodor’s, would allow an individual object X to cause tokens of “X” without specifying the relevant nomically correlated properties of Xs and “X”s.

Condition (2), that some “X”s are actually caused by Xs, is added in an attempt to get around infamous “Twin-Earth” examples. We will have nothing special to say about it, since, first, its meaning is clear enough and, second, the details concerning why Fodor takes it to be necessary to solve Twin-Earth Problems and how he thinks it succeeds have nothing to do with either Block’s Problem or the Pathologies Problem.

Condition (3), the asymmetric causal dependency condition, is the heart of Fodor’s theory. We may suppose that it is a law that, under certain conditions of good light with no occluding objects and so forth, a cow will cause “cow” tokens to occur in a person’s brain. At this point in the analysis, “cow” is a token of its type because of its syntactic or formal properties, not its semantic properties. We may further suppose that it is a law that, under certain conditions including poor light, a horse will cause “cow” tokens to occur in that person’s brain. Condition (3) requires, in the first place, that if we somehow break the connection between cows and “cow”s, then we break the connection between horses and “cow”s. The dependency, thus, is between one covering law, the law covering cows and “cow”s, and another, the law covering horses on a dark night and “cow”s. In other words, one law depends on another. Next, the dependence of one law upon the other is supposed to be asymmetric. Break the horse-“cow” connection and the cow-“cow” connection remains. Finally, the dependence of one law on another is supposed to be synchronic. It is not that the person’s brain would not have been governed by the horse-“cow” law had it not been previously governed by the cow-“cow” law; rather, the horse-“cow” law would not be instantiated in the person if the cow-“cow” law were not instantiated in the person. The laws must be such that the one must be in force in order to have the other law in force, and not vice versa.