

Dan Sperber articles, October 2, 2002

Terminology

Epistemology -- the study of knowledge

Metaphysics -- what comes after (underlies) physics; study of first principles; study of what is as a whole (in contrast to particular sciences); the study of the suprasensible realm.

Ontology -- a branch of metaphysics, the study of what is

Types vs. Tokens (classes vs. individuals)

Intertheoretic Reduction -- explanation of phenomena in one science by means of another science; systematic replacement of technical terms in one science with those of another science. It isn't always clear what counts as reduction.

"Issues in the Ontology of Culture" (1986)

Problem: What is the relation between sociology/anthropology and psychology (and, in turn, the physical realm more broadly)? Sperber forces us to treat this as an ontological problem.

We've seen Durkheim's approach already. He explained collective representations in epistemological terms and social facts through the notion of emergence/supervenience.

Type and Token Identity

Type-identity of the social and the *psychological* is premature (p. 559)

Token-identity of the social and the *psychological* avoids strict reduction, but allows for partial reduction (p. 559)

Token-identity of the social to the *physiological* requires an intermediate *psychological* description (pp. 559-60) (for why this happens, see the next paper)

Upshot: the best approach is to consider weak token-physicalism: namely, that a cultural token is a complex of psychological and environmental tokens

Resemblance

Descriptive Resemblance: Wittgenstein, Needham, and family resemblance

Things picked out by the same word resemble each other

Interpretive Resemblance: not Geertzian interpretative anthropology

Notions picked out by actual or potential terms resemble each other

Example: Marriage

The anthropologist picks out the local concept (an its name or group of names) that corresponds to the "theoretical" concept

Note: A notion is a concept minus the theoretical problems relating to the ontology of concepts

Ontological Payoff: Interpretive Resemblance commits the anthropologist to the existence of representations but not the things held to be represented (i.e., the belief in spirits, but not necessarily spirits themselves)

Cultural states of affairs are just the distribution of representations within a population

"Culture and Matter" (1992)

Epidemiology of Representations entails:

- (1) Not that representations are pathological
- (2) Representations are transformed almost every time they are transmitted

This leads to the question (which Sperber doesn't address): how are representations individuated? (i.e., how do we know when two representations are instances of the same type, one having been transformed into the other?)

The ontology of Sperber's undertaking resembles that of epidemiology (p. 61). Causal explanation of existence of public narratives and mental stories is provided by the description of their consecution (p. 62).

This leads to another question (for Sperber's treatment of intertheoretic identity): how does this address the problem of conservation laws