Eliminative Materialism: An Artistic Lens

Malorie Eisenbrei
Denison University
Eliminative Materialism: An Artistic Lens
By Malorie Eisenbrei

The question of what drives human beings to think and behave the way that they do has pervaded philosophical thought since the time of Descartes. Twentieth century materialists approach human interactions with the world as objective manifestations of the physical mind. Some materialists are so extreme as to propose that all communication should be reduced to the objective reports of brain functions. This theory, defended by thinkers such as Paul Churchland for its potential to simplify and clarify communication, is problematic in that it undermines a sense of subjectivity required to understand art and literature, and it fails to recognize the benefits of ambiguity in regular human relationships. By discussing human relationships with art and with each other, I will show how Churchland’s claim that communication would be improved if it was reduced to straightforward accounts of brain activity is deficient. I will begin by briefly explaining materialist views, and go on to construct the argument reducing communication to brain functions is harmful to communication because subjectivity is beneficial. Subjectivity of artistic and literary experiences are what allow people to enjoy those experiences fully, and ambiguity in human relationships add substance to our interactions. I argue that because individual experiences and the process of interpretation are valuable, eliminative materialism would not harm human interaction contrary to what Churchland suggests.

Materialist philosophy is a tradition that emerged in the twentieth century that attempts to reduce human behavior and thought to neural impulses that happen in the brain. Among the least controversial materialist perspectives is that of D. M. Armstrong, who believed that although a person’s brain may compel him or her to act a certain way, those actions can be cognitively
stifled if that person so chooses. For instance, one may feel sadness but resist the urge to cry because something else drives the person to keep the emotion internal. Armstrong calls this phenomena “selective behavior,” asserting that people have natural predispositions, and consciousness should be defined as awareness of one’s own brain states (83). These predispositions may be outwardly manifested in actions. Unlike earlier materialists, Armstrong does not directly link all unconscious brain states to behavior, implying instead that people have conscious control over their actions. This less extreme version of materialism can be extended to influence the way a person lives his or her life and relates to other people.

Churchland builds on Armstrong’s perspective, claiming that conscious awareness of a person’s own brain state can help in communication with others. Churchland’s argument begins with the acceptance that human thoughts and emotions can be reduced to functions of the brain. This perspective leads him to the belief that materialism has the potential to aid communication between humans by clarifying what a person thinks and feels. Churchland argues that materialism can and should be used to “increase… mutual understanding… [and] contribute substantially toward a more peaceful and human society” (281). He exemplifies historic failures of science as evidence that “folk psychology”—or generally accepted ideas of the way a human mind works—is flawed because it leads to too much ambiguity in human interactions. Since generally accepted scientific theories have failed in the past, Churchland sees no reason not to overturn “folk psychology” in favor of materialism. By communicating with straightforward accounts of the way one’s brain is functioning, people will dramatically increase transparency in dialogue. This extension of a materialist theory of human nature is dramatically more extreme than that of Armstrong. While Armstrong offers an account of how people operate, Churchland attempts to extend materialism to dictate the way people live. He acknowledges potential
problems with his argument, predicting that his critics will point to the subjectivity of emotion as evidence that the human experience is more complex than simple brain states. This objection relates directly to how people understand art, and creates potential problems for Churchland in explaining how or why humans find value in material that is inherently subjective.

Because using materialist philosophy to guide the ways people communicate would increase clarity, Churchland claims that it has the potential to create a more peaceful world. Maximizing understanding of the motives that drive people to behave in certain ways would certainly increase awareness of differences and similarities between individuals, and perhaps entire cultures. However, if precision is the goal of communication and subjectivity should be eliminated from human interactions, then Churchland would likely support the application of brain-state-driven communication to painting and literature. Art, which either expresses or attempts to influence the way a person thinks or behaves, only has value to Churchland if it directly reflects the neurological behavior of the subject or the artist. Because the purpose of art is often to assist human beings in understanding subjective matter, conventionally accepted artwork has little to no purpose in Churchland’s ideal society.

Churchland would likely argue that visual art is essentially useless unless it is used to study the way brains operates. The subjective aspects of human nature are perceived to be inhibitors to communication. While Churchland would not dismiss all forms of art as worthless--it is reasonable to assume he may still find value in “stream of consciousness” compositions such as Mark Rothko’s “Untitled 1945” for their potential to reveal aspects of brain functions (Mark Rothko: Myths and Symbols 4)--he would find little use for art that is intended to be confusing, mysterious, or an indirect representation of the artists’ beliefs. For instance, the works of Dada artists, which reject coherence entirely or the possibility of a stable society, have little or no
value according to Churchland’s view. These examples pose a problem for Churchland’s argument because people do in fact find value in a variety of artforms. Outside the realm of visual art, the way people write literature and poetry would also need to change to meet Churchland’s standards of communication. Rather than providing a subjective account of the way a character experiences events, novels would be reduced to a collection of brain functions happening in sequence. While they would continue to allow readers to peer into the minds of others, most people would agree that something is lost in stories when they are told from a purely objective perspective. If artists and authors took a purely materialist approach to the way they produce their work, something would be lost in the communication that requires some level of incoherence or misunderstanding. For this reason, eliminative materialism is flawed in that its application to the real world would require people to give up some of the most appealing qualities of art and literature. That there is value in subjectivity, and by extension in the process of interpretation, is evident in an evaluation of art.

I will argue that in having individual interpretations of another person’s behavior, that other person is humanized. If humans and their thoughts were reduced to simple functions of the brain, they would seem mechanical and lacking depth. Although communicating through reports of what one’s brain is doing may increase precision in understanding, it would reduce empathy in that the many dimensions driving human behavior would be reduced to a flat statement. Since art and literature have the ability to communicate multiple elements of a person’s behavior, extending eliminative materialism to these means of communication would cause them to lose some value. This problem is best exemplified through an account of literature that relies on interpretation and intentionally ambiguous literary devices such as metaphor. Margaret Mitchell’s *Gone with the Wind* is an example of how literature can serve to communicate on
multiple levels, many of which would be removed by reducing the text to brain states. On the surface, *Gone with the Wind* is a war novel about the American South before, during, and after the Civil War. If it was reduced in the way Churchland suggests, it would be a straightforward account of the obstacles the heroine Scarlett O’Hara faces as she tries to rebuild her comfortable lifestyle that was lost during the war.

If Churchland had written *Gone with the Wind*, Scarlett’s most famous line may have been reduced to: “I do not want my pancreas to produce ghrelin again.” This extremely straightforward statement communicates the heroine’s desire for food, but does not accommodate other interpretations of the quote. While readers would be certain that Scarlett’s character was feeling hunger caused by the hormone ghrelin, they would not perceive the broader implications of the statement. By instead proclaiming, “I will never be hungry again!” (Mitchell 658), Scarlett allows readers to understand her plight in multiple ways. While the statement can still be taken literally, it has broader implications. In the context of the novel as a whole, the statement may be applied to the attitude some Southerners took in the face of defeat, as well as a contrast between Scarlett and other characters who are less adaptable. Scarlett’s resilience is a reflection of the attitude an entire society is taking in the face of defeat. If *Gone with the Wind* is interpreted as a feminist novel, the statement may be understood as Scarlett’s decision to assume responsibility for her loved ones—particularly her sisters and son, who are essentially without father figures—by taking control of Tara and eventually starting her own business. Giving only a surface account of a character’s behavior or beliefs removes value for the reader insofar that their individual interpretations of a piece of writing is removed.

The ability to interpret art in ways that transcend the objective surface meanings stems from the ability to understand other human beings on multiple levels. If people communicated by
Churchland’s standards, some of the most relatable aspects of interaction would be lost. By describing the experience of the Civil War and Reconstruction through metaphor, Margaret Mitchell draws readers into her novel in ways neurological impulses cannot. When an emotion or feeling is reduced to chemical reactions within the body, that emotion or feeling is communicated less wholistically. The problems Churchland’s eliminative materialism faces when put into the context of art speaks more broadly to how people are inclined to interact with each other. If people were to abide by his standards of communication, relationships with other humans beings as well as art would lack depth or potency because the experiences of others would seem less personal. Experiences as they are subjectively understood are unique to each individual. If they were communicated through brain functions, people would lose some sense of individuality in themselves and their peers. Churchland’s version of materialism is problematic in that by removing subjective experiences, he challenges conventionally accepted standards of how people should relate to others and risks desensitizing people to others’ experiences.

Although eliminative materialism cannot be reconciled with traditional forms of literature or the concept of human beings as more deserving of respect than machines, a less radical perspective of materialism may be applicable. For example, D. M. Armstrong relates a materialist perspective of the human mind to the way people behave rather than the way they communicate. Armstrong is more concerned with explaining why people act the way they do, claiming that a purely physical conception of humans implies that they are influenced by “a special inner state… postulated to explain [a person’s] behavior” (81). Although people may have a “disposition to behave” in a certain way, a material mind does not imply that people should communicate through accounts of brain functions (Armstrong 77). Furthermore, something resembling subjectivity can be salvaged from Armstrong’s perspective through his
proposal that consciousness is merely “awareness of the state of [one’s] own mind” (83). Armstrong does not reject that people have conscious experiences, and he does not dehumanize people by denying that those experiences are multifaceted and complex. Rather, he suggests that the state of “consciousness” itself is misunderstood. Furthermore, he accepts the possibility that a person’s individual experience influences the way they understand the world and are inclined to behave. Since his version of materialism does not seek to change the way people communicate with others, it can be reconciled with the fact that art and literature have value. It does not undermine the subjectivity with which people experience the creative works of others or relate to other human beings.

I have attempted to show that Churchland’s argument that communication should be reduced to an account of brain states is problematic insofar as it challenges the way people understand art and others. However, materialism itself is not totally irreconcilable with conventionally understood means of understanding. If a materialist perspective is applied only to the way people behave and their “predispositions” as Armstrong suggests, it remains a practical way to view the human mind. It is unlikely that people will ever be inclined to accept Churchland’s perspective. The implications of the view that the human experience is nothing more than chemical reactions within the brain undermines a sense of individuality and self value. An evaluation of literature reveals that some statements, though simple on the surface, have the capacity to reveal significant motivations and emotions people experience. For this reason, some level of ambiguity and misunderstanding may be beneficial in that it forces people to view others as more than mere machines.
Works Cited


