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## Of "Mice" and Men: A Criticism of Jerry Fodor's Theory of Mental Content

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Oral Presentation 1.1

OF "MICE" AND MEN  
A CRITICISM OF JERRY FODOR'S THEORY OF MENTAL CONTENT

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Jerry Fodor is currently one of the top philosophers of mind. One of his main projects is the attempt to naturalize the intentionality of our mental states. Intentionality is roughly cashed out in terms of belief/desire psychology, the theory that humans have beliefs and desires with semantic content or meaning, and that these beliefs and desires are more or less the cause of their actions. The supposition that our mental states have meaning seems in tension with a physicalist ontology, which includes only natural, syntactic objects. It is unclear how neurons or chemicals can have meaning in the way that our mental states appear to be meaningful. Fodor attempts to provide an account of the Intentionality of our mental states which reduces this meaning to purely physical, syntactic entities. If he were successful then he could retain a belief in intentional mental content while remaining a strict physicalist.

The two tools which are available to a physicalist are physical objects and relationships between physical objects. Fodor constructs a theory which equates the meaning of a mental state with the causal relationships it bears to objects in the world. His theory, however, does not succeed as an explanation of meaning because it fails to distinguish meaningful situations from non-meaningful. It therefore falls to pansemanticism, the assignment of meaning to objects, such as smoke, which obviously are not meaningful in the same way as our mental states. Furthermore, given the complexity of relationships in the non-meaningful world it appears likely that a pansemantic counter-example will exist for any theory which attempts to reduce meaning to relationships.