



Method Before Ontology: Reconstructing the Core of Eliminative Materialism

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Abstract

William Ramsey's recent account of eliminative materialism (EM) treats EM as an ontological thesis about what mental kinds do not exist. I argue, by contrast, that the core of EM in Quine, Feyerabend, Rorty, and Stich is methodological: it concerns how to revise, replace, or retire psychological posits under scientific pressure, with any ontological eliminations derivative of method. A close reading of the founding texts shows that inventory-style realism and a fixed priority of metaphysics over method misclassify EM's commitments. Restoring a method-first order clarifies confusions that have shaped the debate and aligns "scientific eliminativism" with the founders' method-first orientation. The result is a historically grounded reorientation: EM primarily counsels conceptual re-engineering in light of successful science, rather than a priori ontological austerity.

Keywords Eliminativism · William ramsey · Inventory realism · Rorty · Stich · Scientific change

1 Introduction

William Ramsey, one of the best-known experts on eliminative materialism (EM) and the author of the relevant SEP entry (Ramsey, 2024), recently published an article on what EM does and does not entail, entitled "What eliminative materialism isn't" (Ramsey, 2021). I argue that the core commitments Ramsey attributes to EM, despite their seemingly obvious character, are

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unsupported by the corpus evidence, given the idea's history and the primary texts written by the most accomplished proponents of the eliminativist position. Ramsey's core features seem natural because the name EM suggests that this school of thought urges us to eliminate something, and, since the context is the mind–body problem, it must involve eliminating the mind—or at least some of its features (cf. Gough, 2022, 2024b; cf. Taylor & Vickers, 2017).

Ramsey assumes that EM contrasts with revisionist approaches and stands apart from methodological debates. He presents this as the traditional, *proper* EM and, in setting out that contrast, largely brackets detailed textual or historical reconstruction, focusing instead on clarifying current usage. EM, he asserts, is undoubtedly concerned with eliminating some features of the mind or the mind itself. In his exposition of EM, Ramsey cites neither Sellars, Feyerabend, Rorty, nor Stich; even James Cornman—the coiner of “eliminative materialism”—receives only a passing mention (Ramsey, 2021, p. 11708).

Ramsey further maintains that EM entails the removal of certain elements from our ontology. No large-scale revision or radical taxonomic reworking could count as eliminativism, not even term-dropping reductionism. He is right that eliminating a term is not yet eliminating a kind, and right to distinguish eliminativism from mere term-dropping reductionism. He is also right that classical revisionist strategies are not themselves eliminative. If EM involved revisions, then its name would more properly be “revisionary materialism,” but it is not. Where we disagree is over priority: on my reading, EM makes methodological commitments that can, but need not, issue in eliminations; treating EM as an ontological hypothesis from the outset reverses this order. Ramsey speaks for many in rendering EM an ontological hypothesis. This paper diagnoses the source of such misunderstandings and articulates their broader implications, addressing common objections along the way.

A more comprehensive exposition might have included Quinean ontological commitment and the Kuhnian image of scientific change. Unlike Ramsey and many other commentators on EM, I undertake a primary-text analysis of Cornman and the “grandparents” (Sellars, Quine, Feyerabend) and the “parents” (Rorty, Stich). This historical-methodological framing also explains why EM's ontological claims should be read as conditional and posterior to method—an insight obscured when EM is cast as inventory realism (cf. Lee, 2018). By *inventory ontology* (or *inventory realism*) I mean the ontology-first stance that treats theories as catalogues of entities and properties, adjudicating disputes by tallying what “really exists” in a fixed ontological ledger. In this paper I reject that stance in favor of a method-first program on which ontological commitments are conditional, posterior deliverances of successful scientific practice (conceptual re-engineering under empirical pressure), rather than antecedent entries in an inventory. Accordingly, in what follows I appeal to the founders to recover their pragmatic decision-procedures for revision, replacement, or expunction of psychological posits under scientific pressure—the very pattern that later case-studies of conceptual change and

kind-pluralism operationalize (Brigandt, 2003; Gough, 2024a; cf. Haueis, 2024; see Taylor & Vickers, 2017).¹

In addition to this historical reconstruction, I explicitly bring it to bear on Ramsey's central contemporary cases: Machery on concepts, Griffiths on emotions, Hardcastle and Corns on pain, Irvine on consciousness, and recent debates about pluralism and kind-dissolution in cognitive science and philosophy of mind (Brigandt, 2003; Gough, 2022, 2024a, 2024b; Taylor & Vickers, 2017). On the method-first reading I defend, these pluralist and kind-dissolutionist proposals are best understood not as merely ontologically conservative "category dissolution" but as concrete applications of EM's decision-procedures for revising or retiring psychological posits under scientific pressure. Making this continuity explicit clarifies how my proposal relates to, and in some respects extends, existing critiques of Ramsey's taxonomy and his treatment of "scientific eliminativism."

Any alleged core features of EM are therefore reviewed and rejected through an examination of the basic ideas and motivations that underpin them. I follow Ramsey's strategy of clarifying EM by tracking which views should not be variants of EM, but my initial findings diverge from his and include his own proposal among the exclusions.

Ramsey could also clarify the considerations on which he assumes that EM defends the elimination of the mind or its features. Of course, EM concerns the elimination of something and plausibly targets folk psychology, our self-conception, or its core—namely propositional attitudes. I agree with this much. I disagree that being about elimination is the same as defending that elimination. Beyond identifying potential targets, the inquiry must explore the prospects of complete elimination and take seriously the a priori possibility of an across-the-board elimination of folk psychology.

On Ramsey's depiction, few clear proponents of EM remain. No one, including Feyerabend, Quine, Rorty, or Stich, if we accept Ramsey's core features,

¹ On my reading, Gough's "mind concept eliminativism" is almost a worked example of the method-first EM template applied to mind itself: he starts from the pluralistic and patchwork use of "mind" and "mental," highlights the pragmatic and social costs of this usage (confusion, stigma, and hindered inquiry), and recommends term-level elimination when the balance of epistemic and pragmatic considerations favours it (Gough, 2022, 2024a, 2024b). This is a form of conceptual re-engineering, not an a priori metaphysical austerity program. Taylor and Vickers (2017) likewise treat eliminativism about fragmented scientific terms as a selective, context-dependent response to miscommunication and theoretical dysfunction, keyed to the roles those terms play in inquiry rather than to a prior ontological inventory. A complementary way to frame this method-first orientation is Brigandt's pragmatist account of scientific concepts in terms of reference, inferential role, and epistemic goal: concepts such as "gene" or "homology" can rationally change their reference and inferential role, so long as these changes serve evolving epistemic goals internal to successful practice (Brigandt, 2003, 2010; cf. Ereshefsky, 1992). Yet Brigandt himself explicitly distances his view from eliminativism, presenting pluralism and context-sensitive conceptual management as alternatives to elimination rather than instances of it.

can claim the title of eliminativist. Indeed, this is what Ramsey implies for Rorty (Ramsey, 2020). I therefore sketch the actual history of EM against Ramsey's conception (for a more detailed reconstruction, see Stich, 1983, pp. 13–23), to show that his natural construal of EM's core features lacks basis in its content and history when the relevant textual facts are considered. We begin with the history and curious evolution of EM. Section 2 traces the dialectic from ordinary materialism to methodological EM; §3 sketches early articulations; §4 treats Quine's explication-as-elimination; §5 revisits Cornman's taxonomy; §6 uses Sellars and Feyerabend to dismantle incorrigibility and unintelligibility worries; §7 re-reads Rorty's "disappearance" view; §8 concludes.

2 From Ordinary Materialist to Methodological Eliminativist

Across the post-war mind–brain debate, successive objections have targeted different stumbling blocks for materialism, and the dialectical focus has shifted accordingly. The proponents of mental realism chronologically judged the materialist philosophers to be guilty of suggesting the identification of the mind with the brain, the reduction of the mind to the brain, the dismissal of the mind as the point of scientific attack, a substantial revision to the traditional concept of the mind, exploring the prospects of a projected displacement of folk psychology, and finally advocate and encourage the elimination of anything related to the mental, effective immediately. In some polemical contexts, eliminativist proposals have been portrayed as hostile to consciousness, experience, or rational and normative dimensions of the mind.

Rationality and normativity are often taken to underwrite agency, responsibility, and our folk-psychological practices (cf. Kazemi, 2022). On the standard picture, these practices—especially propositional-attitude ascription—facilitate coordination and social explanation (see Andrews, 2015; Zawidzki, 2008). Folk psychology is our traditional self-conception that enables us to understand, predict, and manipulate one another's behavior and thought. Conceptions of folk psychology differ (theory-theory, simulation, pluralist accounts), but all agree that it structures everyday prediction/explanation (cf. Andrews, 2015). The explicit and tacit knowledge and underlying principles that are embedded in folk psychology form a system that is highly integrated inferentially. The propositional (or, sentential) notion of belief is frequently said to reside in our capacity to provide an inferentially and highly integrated system, possibly with some parts remaining either insulated or inaccessible.

Since the folk psychological notion of belief represents the utmost example of propositional attitudes that form the core of the folk psychological framework, I should provide a very rough, albeit not necessarily universally accepted, description of sentential belief. Sentential belief has correctness conditions; that is, it is truth-apt. Belief is available to consciousness, and thus the idea of unconscious belief strongly stretches the concept to the point of self-refutation. Belief is responsive to evidence, at least under ideal conditions. It resists volitional change, and it is stable across situations. Sentential belief differs from other

related mental states, such as acceptance, habit, alief, imagination, assumption, credence, faith, or guessing, to varying degrees and in different ways. Sentential belief is intimately connected to rationality as we typically construe it. Atypical notions of rationality may be consistent with rather atypical conceptions of beliefs (see MacFarlane, 2025). Recent epistemology is very diverse and sophisticated, and this set of features has been challenged in many ways (e.g., Staffel, 2025). However, it is still reasonable to think of it as a foil for a presentation of the eliminativist attack on belief (cf. Poslajko, 2022a, 2022b).

Folk psychology's social importance, lurking in the background, makes it very hard to see how it might be dispensed with while leaving human freedom and dignity largely *intact*. This social importance is the source of the heated debates over the status of EM. Indeed, there are many increasingly popular eliminativist ideas about many things, but they rarely spur heated discussions. Prior to the arrival of Sellars and Feyerabend, no known philosophers in analytic philosophy gave detailed arguments to show that the wholesale elimination of our self-conception is an intelligible idea; this means the idea is not incoherent or otherwise necessarily false: EM is, at least, a priori reasonable: the wholesale elimination of our self-conception is conceptually coherent, not self-contradictory. This feature is essential to original EM's negative construal. This construal simply states that the complete elimination of our self-conception is a coherent idea, not a self-contradictory, unintelligible one. This is where Sellars, Feyerabend, and Rorty begin their respective investigations. If there be any traditional or proper EM, *pace* Ramsey, then it must be in this neighborhood.

On my reading, Ramsey foregrounds derivative, ontological theses and, in so doing, inverts the order of explanation: his account privileges inventory realism where the founding texts make methodological decision-procedures primary (see Murphy, 2017). Accordingly, I treat EM primarily as a methodological stance about how to revise, replace, or expunge posits under scientific pressure; its ontological upshot is conditional and posterior (see Taylor & Vickers, 2017).² Contemporary distinctions between traditional and scientific eliminativism illustrate this methodological core (cf. Corns, 2016).

3 Overview of Earlier Formulations of EM

On precursors and founding articulations of EM: William James anticipates EM's construal of consciousness. Broad considers and then rejects the idea as self-defeating. Logical empiricists such as Feigl, behaviorist psychologists such as Watson, Boring, Skinner, and philosophers like Smart, Place, and Quine

² Taylor and Vickers (2017) independently articulate a method-first notion of eliminativism: selective elimination of terms in light of how they function in scientific debates, guided by contextual criteria. Their "selective eliminativism" is structurally continuous with the original EM's focus on how psychological posits should be managed within scientific practice, rather than with Ramsey's inventory-style ontology.

developed positions in the vicinity of EM. These positions are closely related to each other and are separable on a finer-grained analysis. These authors might not be eliminative materialists in the contemporary sense, but it is reasonable to say that they are sympathetic precursors. Nevertheless, it is only with Feyerabend and Rorty that we can talk about contemporary EM (or closely aligned formulations), which is primarily about the prospect of revising or replacing our folk-psychological self-conception.

From the late 1970s through the mid-1980s, eliminativists began to entertain the possibility of replacing the propositional conception of cognition with the then-recent connectionist cognitive models, operating at subpersonal and sub-conceptual levels (Stich, 1983). The proposed successors are non-sentential (Ramsey et al., 1990). Ramsey et al. (1990) present their argument as a conditional hypothesis. They claim that this conditionality distinguishes their work from Paul Churchland's, who seemed to them to be "more confident of connectionism [and] invoke [the] conditional as part of a larger argument for doing away with the propositional attitude" (Ramsey et al., 1990, p. 500). If connectionist models prove superior to the traditional mentalistic conception of belief, then it is rational to eliminate belief; the argument could extend to the family of propositional attitudes and selected further mentalistic posits (cf. Stich, 1983, p. 10).

This is the positive part of EM and it emerged only after the demonstration of the conceptual coherence (a priori reasonableness) of even wholesale eliminative options for folk psychology (see P. M. Churchland, 1992). Sellars, Feyerabend, and Rorty articulated this negative component. Today, many philosophers of mind and cognitive scientists regard this early programmatic version as at least conceptually coherent. The next section examines leading figures who precede Stich in the evolution of EM.

Before turning to Quine's relation to eliminativism, a clarification is in order. Reductionism and eliminativism are occasionally presented as opposing positions in the context of EM. That opposition holds, if at all, when reductionist materialism is identified with type-identity theory. What eliminativism opposes is indeed type-identity theory, and EM's opposition to reductive theories is only derivative upon it. Type identity theory, when (or if) anticipates a smooth identification with pure reduction, stands in tension with EM. By contrast, in Quine's usage, "elimination" often functions within a broadly reductionist program (with antecedents in his work on logical/mathematical elimination). Conversely, for some philosophers of cognitive science, of mind, or of science, reductionism is an adopted research strategy and only means neurobiological addressability without thick ontological commitments. These clarifications disentangle usage across contexts and will matter for the method-first reading of EM developed below.

4 Quine: "Elimination as Explication"

It is common—but disputable—to label Quine an eliminativist or as leaning toward eliminativism; more cautiously, Quine is best read as tolerant of eliminative maneuvers in certain contexts. The textual evidence is provided in Quine's most famous

book, entitled *Word and Object* (esp. 1960, pp. 263–266). *Word and Object* does not offer a sustained treatment of the mind–body problem (for related discussions, see Quine, 1953). He uses the mind–body issue as a point of departure for a larger project, which involves illustrating how the relation between explication and elimination in mathematics could be extended into many domains. Even though we see complementary revisions in mathematical cases of explication, Quine thinks that mathematical explications should be considered to involve elimination. One can liken it to “synonymy through co-extensionality.” One expression means nearly the same as another expression if it is a synonym for it, especially in the explicative context. Thus, if angry means X, and if X is a neurophysiological statement, then the neurophysiological explanation can replace the psychological one. They are equal and, in a sense, one of these two might become redundant: elimination by redundancy. I am certainly not talking here about actual explanations of the world. Explication alone does not by itself mandate elimination in ordinary scientific or everyday practice; the point here is theoretical, as in Quine’s discussion.

Quine questions any logical necessity to retain a psychological-level explanation when a neurophysiological account could, in principle, suffice for completeness. He argues that we do not have to keep the macro level in specific situations, such as when we must give *complete* explanations of the relevant domain. These remarks are never meant to serve as practical advice for psychologists, let alone for laypeople. This is merely a theoretical conclusion that has been arrived at from a very abstract perspective. As can be seen, Quine knows all too well that people have heated debates about the distinction between reductionist and eliminativist term-dropping (Cornman, 1968b; Lycan & Pappas, 1972; Rorty, 1965; Savitt, 1975). He responds by challenging the dichotomy’s significance.

Ramsey knows Quine’s attitude toward the duality, but thinks of his repudiation as having conflated two distinct things. We will see the same repudiation in Rorty as well. Ramsey thinks that Rorty conflates two fundamentally distinct term-droppings: the eliminativistic and reductionistic ones. This time Rorty develops Quine’s attack. He develops the case with detailed examples from the history of science. In a very Quinean fashion, Rorty asserts that our inclination to treat the theory changes differentially has little to do with the differential natures of those changes and more to do with our psychological reactions to that change. In principle one could deny the existence of tables, though pragmatically we do not. Eliminative talk about the tables is almost inconceivable from a practical point of view, even though it is possible, and not just logically possible (Rorty, 1970). The skeleton is Quinean; the articulation is Rorty’s.

Almost all of EM’s champions, according to Ramsey, have conflated the two distinct modes of theory change in the early period of eliminativism. He speaks about the early period as though the purported distinction between the two had gone unnoticed by both Quine and Rorty and by like-minded others. By contrast, these authors recognized the distinction and argued against its import. The point is not that the distinction was overlooked, but that its explanatory status was contested.

The claim is not that defenders of EM deny any distinction between elimination and reduction; that would be unwise and historically inaccurate. Surely, type identity theory—as it (or if it) anticipates a smooth identification between the psychological

and neurological types—pursues strategies quite different from those employed by Stich. Stich did not predict that there would be a smooth intertheoretical identification between theories at the psychological and neuroscientific levels, especially concerning propositional attitudes. Indeed, this is one of the pillars of propositional-attitude eliminativism. In Cornman's words, it is named as postulation-elimination materialism, contemporary EM for short. The propositional attitudes have been postulated in order to account for some commonly cited features of how our minds work. Churchland questions some of those claims and explores replacements in terms of neurocomputational posits (cf. Rockwell, 2011). This line of reasoning has never been a part of the Quinean treatment of the problem. On the contrary, Quine makes a strong distinction between his explication as elimination and a much more ambitious program of neurophysiological replacement (1960, p. 265).

Quine thus occupies a distinctive place in the history of eliminativism. Let us now turn to examine James Cornman's motivations in his attack against eliminativism. Cornman is a leading figure in the early period of eliminativistic theories of materialism. He invented the term EM. I have to note that not all of the developers of EM like this title because it suggests many mistaken ideas about the theory's contents. This uneasiness with the established name is most conspicuous in the Churchlands' writings, who prefer to replace it with the term *revisionary materialism*. In a sentence, EM unfortunately connotes a final judgment about an ongoing process, blocking the intended message of early proponents of EM, which is that the scale of revision that will be made to the troubled mentalistic categories and the result of these revisions in terms of "our future decision to talk same or differently" cannot be known beforehand (P. S. Churchland, 1988, p. 398).

5 James Cornman and His Invention of the Name EM

Materialist theories of all kinds have been often charged with meaninglessness or category mistake—objections presented as decisive on logical grounds. The accused's ideas cannot even be expressed without being simultaneously falsified.

The terms translatability, eliminability, reduction, and identity were used in their logical context during the years that logical empiricism was the dominant philosophy. Identity was the identity of indiscernibles, which is frequently thought to be the ultimate criterion of identity, namely, Leibniz's principle. Failing translation was commonly taken to support the ineliminability of the mental. Thus, any identification of the physical with the mental automatically yields great conceptual difficulty on the part of physicalism.

This is not the place to discuss how Place and Smart made moves to render this perennial objection irrelevant. However, in 1962, Cornman published a short commentary to offer a potential solution to these conceptual difficulties (Cornman, 1962). Cornman argues against Jerome Shaffer's refutation of the identity theory (1962, p. 492) by stating that the identity of mind and body may be like the identities that we routinely encounter in science, namely a cross-category identity, not a Leibnizian one. Cornman did not endorse this solution, but instead offered it to

explore whether it was proper to apply the cross-category identity concept to the mind–body context. This move was thought to have the potential to advance a materialist program widely regarded as facing deep difficulties.

Cornman published two influential papers six years later about the possible elimination of sensations and about categorizing materialistic theories (Cornman, 1968a, 1968b). He divides materialist theories into two major camps: (i) the identity theory (reductive materialism) and (ii) the postulation-elimination *and* sensation-elimination theories (eliminative theories). These articles are a natural point of departure for understanding early EM and its interlocutors, and the ones that these two articles are written in response to, such as Quine's early publications and Rorty (1965). Cornman's primary object is Quine's attitude toward the mind–body problem and also Rorty's innovations to rebut the objections raised against Smart, Place, and Quine. The relation between Quine and Rorty runs deep concerning EM. We will examine this in the section on Rorty-era eliminativism.

It is Quine himself who is highly skeptical of the distinction between reductive and eliminative theories and Cornman acknowledges his repudiating response. This notwithstanding, Cornman asserts that sensations cannot be denied since they are not posits but are instead experienced directly. The examples that Cornman gives on pages 19 and 20, citing Rorty (1965), nicely illustrate how sensation-elimination theory could be a consistent idea. It is consistent if sensations are like mythological creatures. Otherwise, the elimination with identification is self-refuting. If the thing that is to be explained is identical to the thing that is to explain, then both should either be real or nonexistent. In any case, framing the issue in referential terms is meant to show that sensation-elimination theory is not incoherent, and its plausibility is another problem. Cornman (1968a, 1968b) anticipates later eliminativist moves (e.g., P. M. Churchland, 1981).

In Quinean philosophy, it makes little sense to double the posits when they are not theoretically necessary. Doubling posits conflicts with virtues such as simplicity and elegance, which supports postulation-elimination strategies. In Ramsey's terminology, Quine's case is a paradigm case of reductive term-dropping rather than what Ramsey calls eliminativism proper. Such reductions vindicate the reduced theory's posits. This type of theory change is antithetical to eliminativism, if one is to believe what Ramsey repeatedly states (cf. Griffiths, 1997; Hardcastle, 1999; Irvine, 2012; Machery, 2009). To put it succinctly, the label "EM" was introduced in part to mark views distinct from Quine-style reduction and identity. By forgetting both Quine's and Rorty's pragmatism, Ramsey thinks that they fail to distinguish two types of term-dropping theory change. Neither Quine nor Rorty buy Ramsey's inventory-style ontology (cf. Horst, 2014, pp. 220–221).

Ramsey's interpretation diverges significantly from the foundational principles of original EM. His ontology-first reconstruction diverges from historically grounded eliminativist programs. This reflects a familiar equivocation risk in the eliminativism literature (Bickle, 1992; Northoff, 2004; Savitt, 1975). Ramsey's analysis draws on an appeal to prevailing usage that downplays close engagement with early texts. Furthermore, this alleged consensus obscures the fact that there are many philosophers and intellectual historians who hold that reduction, revision, and elimination cannot ultimately be separated in actual term-dropping theory changes. Ramsey

acknowledges that revision, reduction, and elimination can form a continuum; my claim is that, in many historical cases, their final separability is limited for philosophically relevant reasons. Ramsey argues that agreeing with a theory entails accepting its implications. However, *exploring* a theory commits one to its premises, even simply to figure out its actual results, not just its mostly indeterminate implications. This involves the explorative use of a theory, which we see through the texts of Feyerabend, Rorty, Stich, and Paul Churchland. For Paul Churchland in particular, I can safely say that he bets on the outcome of a hardly foreseeable course of future events concerning the fate of propositional attitudes (P. M. Churchland, 1981). The stance is explicitly conditional: outcomes depend on how future science develops, and success conditions are non-trivial to specify. In any case, the actual formulations developed by EM's chief proponents undercut key premises of Ramsey's construal.

While this issue warrants attention, there are additional aspects of Ramsey's eliminativism that merit further discussion. Here is one such oversight. Ramsey agrees with neither Quine nor Rorty, two figures that Cornman names as eliminativist. Surprisingly, Cornman's construal of EM is compatible with Ramsey's presentation thereof. Cornman tries to develop a categorization for materialistic theories and, by drawing a classification that, in my view, obscures methodological issues, Cornman helped set a trajectory later reflected in Ramsey's framing. The flaws in the depictions of EM have somehow been inherited through communications by Cornman to many others and more recently to Ramsey. Cornman might be the first person to conceive of the issue primarily as being pertinent to the ontological level and framed it in terms of reference and denotation (Cornman, 1968b, p. 17). Ramsey's understanding of eliminativism echoes Cornman's framing by privileging referential considerations over methodological ones. This framing tends to align EM with logical behaviorism in an unhelpful way. Instead of grouping Quine with logical behaviorists like Ryle and distinguishing them from Rorty, the new classification makes three of them harmonious neighbors. The resulting classification obscures significant theoretical differences.

Ramsey's and Cornman's mistakes are to be expected, given the formulations they prohibit as being versions of eliminativism. I have uncovered a number of places in which Ramsey reviews several possible motivations and refutes them as legitimate reasons for eliminativistic talk. I argue that most of these motivations are paradigmatic reasons to eliminate some of the mind's features. Examples are below.

Ramsey allows us to claim that these reasons are sufficient to drop a major theoretical commitment or a part of folk psychology, but not to justify its elimination. The analysis of these occasions would lead us to see a deeper error lurking behind Ramsey's line of reasoning. The first one can be found in Section 2 of Ramsey (2021), which depicts EM's alleged core features. Ramsey claims that when properly understood, EM involves the idea that "something once thought to exist actually does not exist" (Ramsey, 2021, p. 11,709). The paradigmatic examples are said to be celestial spheres, demons, and caloric fluid. He also gives examples pertinent to some features of the mind that people might see as candidates for elimination: belief, conscious sensations, concepts, emotions, folk psychology, propositional attitudes, or memory. Eliminativists should be defending the opinion that beliefs,

conscious sensations, or memory do not exist. This line of reasoning would be obvious, if it were true. To see whether or not the line of reasoning is correct, let us first see what that does not amount to. Ramsey states multiple times that eliminativism is not equal to ideas such as the following:

Adequately understood, EM is the claim that some categories or terms, once thought to be involved in folk psychology, are now considered inferior, useless, less accurate, vague, misleading, or redundant. Thus it should be dropped from scientific vocabulary if and when and to the extent that there emerges a rival theory that is likely to prove superior. However, this is a long and convoluted process involving intricate interactions among several disciplines at many levels of research. Through this intricate journey, any framework, or any posit of it, a taxonomy, or a theoretical commitment will probably be revised, fragmented, taxonomically reworked, edges frayed, disintegrated, and then realigned, or otherwise reformed. In the most extreme case, this could culminate in the outright elimination of the entity in question—a profound excision that transcends “mere elimination through disunity followed by replacement.” (The preceding description is articulated from the perspective of actual eliminativists, such as Rorty and the Churchlands.)

Ramsey argues that this approach has nothing to do with eliminativism *proper*, and that the conflation of these with eliminativism *proper* is a fundamental mistake and a source of further confusion. He asserts that revisions or taxonomic reworkings imply the existence of what the original term really denotes, but our understanding of what it denotes is mistaken to varying extents. The result is vindication, not elimination.³ Ramsey’s approach appears to consider theoretical commitments and frameworks in a manner analogous to ostensible objects. This reflects a commitment to an inventory-style realism, where theoretical commitments are treated analogously to objects; my concern is that this framing sidelines methodological criteria. His ontology is capable of making an inventory of objects and properties, without caring how they are to be represented. His entities behave like ostensible physical objects or proper names. To assess the methodology at stake, the next section turns to Sellars and Feyerabend.

6 Wilfrid Sellars and Paul Feyerabend

Sellars is one of the earliest figures to argue for the theoretical character of folk psychology, even while taking much of the framework to be broadly correct. Once one acknowledges the framework’s theoretical nature, it becomes intelligible—even if

³ Once we drop Ramsey’s inventory realism, the recent pluralism–eliminativism debates about concepts like *mind*, *concept*, *emotion*, *pain*, *species*, and so on (Machery, Griffiths, Corns, Hardcastle, Taylor & Vickers, Ereshefsky, Gough) can be seen as natural descendants of the method-first eliminativism of Quine and Rorty. What distinguishes them from EM is not a different metaphysics but a difference in *target and ambition*: they pursue local, empirically guided conceptual engineering of specific, fragmented terms rather than the wholesale replacement of folk psych

controversial—to consider its wholesale rejection. This stepping-stone is the link between contemporary EM and mid-century discussions about the philosophy of mind. The conceptual coherence (a priori reasonableness) of across-the-board elimination is one of the original formulations of EM and was reinvigorated in Churchland's work (P. M. Churchland, 1981). Readers who do not know the relevant history may find this formulation modest in scope. The question, then, is how EM became one of the most contested positions in late twentieth-century analytic philosophy of mind.

Let us try to make sense of this puzzle. Sellars states that our self-conception is correctable: it likely contains error as well as truth, and even the manifest image is, in principle, revisable—up to displacement. The manifest image, which in our case is a manifest image concerning our self-conception, often functions as if it enjoyed objective, non-revisable status. Philosophers are drawn to the pole of the manifest image, instead of the scientific one. Sellars tells a long story to explain why philosophers and laypeople consider the manifest image to be something objective and uncorrectable. However, he argues that the transcendental nature of the manifest image hides the probability of the need for the correction thereof, and the possibility of its turning out to be false (Sellars, 1991, p. 14). This is the core of Sellars' relation to eliminativism: folk psychology seems transcendental, but it is not. It is neither sacrosanct nor a litmus test.

In the later parts of his article, Sellars discusses why people feel that there might not be a neuroscientific counterpart of sensations. This discussion is typical of debates over the internal coherence of eliminativist proposals. The problem they attempt to fix is occasionally called self-refutation or conceptual violation; at other times, it involves changing the subject or being unintelligible (see Ramsey, 1990). Feyerabend, Rorty, and Stich make new additions to this initial defense. Devising a compelling defense against an objection based upon an allegation of self-contradiction poses a persistent challenge within the dominant conceptual paradigm (cf. Poslajko, 2019).

For Feyerabend, folk psychology is theoretical in character as well. Denying its theoretical status would insulate it from empirical criticism and foreclose scientific enrichment or alteration (see Feyerabend, 1963, p. 62). This formulation of the problem is close to contemporary eliminativism, which marks a significant advance on Sellars' formulation of the problem and *emphasizes* the harms of ignoring its theoretical nature.

One of the major contributions of Feyerabend to the emergence of contemporary EM is his attempt to counter a universal objection to eliminativism. The argument from self-refutation or unintelligibility is old as eliminativism itself. Feyerabend attempts to refute the refutation, and I think that he succeeds in doing so. Indeed, our traditional conception of the mental world was previously thought of as being empirically irrefutable in the past. It was often treated as insulated from empirical refutation. The defenders of folk psychology argue that the total elimination thereof is meaningless and unintelligible because it is self-contradictory. Feyerabend's way of phrasing the problem is striking and illuminating. The charge is that merely stating the eliminativist position generates contradiction; that is the essence of the purported refutation (Feyerabend, 1963, p. 50).

Meaninglessness creates unintelligibility through contradiction. The mentalistic idiom and the materialistic language are claimed to be incommensurable. There must be something very wrong with the materialist language concerning our self-conception because the available mentalistic idiom can be found in everyday use.

Like Sellars, Feyerabend concludes his argument by stating that the argument he presents clears the path for the defense that a neuroscientific or a purely neurophysiological account of human beings is both a coherent and plausible idea (Feyerabend, 1963, p. 65; Sellars, 1991, p. 37). A careful reading of these two seminal papers reveals that these papers anticipate many later objections and replies.

The objections and replies are all very similar. The next section examines Rorty-era eliminativism, in which we encounter the same discussions with different terms, focus points, and scope. The familiar topics recur: alleged logical contradiction, shifts in meaning, conceptual–empirical demarcation, appeals to common usage, and related concerns. Rorty begins by arguing that the identity theory makes sense, not that it is true. He explores the identity-theoretic option rather than presupposing it. Rorty explores EM and comments on it in detail in order to assess it carefully.

7 Rorty-Era Eliminativism

Richard Rorty is not EM's name-giver, but he is the first philosopher who defends it by using its name in his "In Defense of Eliminative Materialism" (Rorty, 1970). Already in 1965, he defended a "disappearance" version of the identity theory. Rorty's critique of the alleged incorrigibility of mental reports begins with "Mind-Body Identity, Privacy, and Categories" (1965).

As noted above, the context is the same. The debate centers on identity theory and its opponents. From 1965 to 1975, Rorty systematically addressed coherence-based objections to the identity theory (see Black, 2018). He takes up themes from Sellars and Feyerabend and influences later eliminativists.

Rorty's strategy begins from the identity theory. He offers a concise, somewhat atypical characterization: "The proponent of the Identity Theory (by which I mean one who thinks it sensible to assert that empirical inquiry will discover that *sensations* (not thoughts) are identical with certain brain-processes)" (Rorty, 1965, p. 24). He clarifies this definition in an associated footnote. Identity theorists predict that empirical inquiry will discover that sensations are identical to some brain processes. The distinguishing mark is not the prediction itself but the claim that the prediction is intelligible and coherent.

Rorty raises similar concerns as the previous eliminativists had. The opponents of eliminativism want to take the established usages of the terms for granted. No empirical study, for example, could show that sensations are identical to this or that brain process because, according to the meanings of sensations, they cannot be physical processes. Critics treat this as a linguistic constraint that empirical discovery cannot overturn. An obvious reply from an eliminativist would be to remind people that such discoveries would change the ways in which we talk, thereby making the existing classifications outdated (Rorty, 1965, pp. 24–25).

There are more sophisticated objections today, yet both the established-usage objection and the self-refutation charge remain influential as a priori challenges.

Why did many eminent philosophers seek to rebut Rorty's "disappearance" version"? Rorty offers reasons in the opening pages of the third section of Rorty (1965), entitled "The Analogy between Demons and Sensations." This part includes Rorty's second argument against his opponents, which compares mental events with purported supernatural entities.

The word disappearance itself implies a form of eliminativism for many. Furthermore, now we also have an analogy between demons and sensations. Given that demons are taken not to exist, one might worry that Rorty is thereby committed to denying sensations. That is not his view. My discussion about Quine's remark about the parallelism between denial of existence and identification of existence should be borne in mind here. Rorty uses the same line of reasoning; if the sensation is nothing but some specific brain-related process, then why should we continue to use the term sensation? Demons are not plausibly reinterpreted as germs, whereas sensations may be identified with brain processes. This brings about an intuitive resistance to grouping two kinds under one umbrella and involves eliminating the referring use of the old term. Typically, we call the case of demons an elimination, but in the case of sensation we refer to it as a reduction, however smooth or bumpy this process is. This is why the Churchlands occasionally deny defending a type-identity theory. They anticipate that if there should be a reduction between the current conception of sensations and the future category of its neuroscientific counterpart, any such reduction would likely be non-smooth; accordingly, they do not describe themselves as type-identity theorists. This is not an essential distinction within physicalism for Rorty. As he states many times, the *intelligibility* of retiring "sensation" from our vocabulary is the distinguishing mark of his disappearance version of the identity theory.

Here is a very short recapitulation:

1. EM explores the eliminative outcome, instead of straightforwardly endorsing it.
2. It aims to establish the *intelligibility* of even complete elimination.
3. Its targets are very select and *limited*. Concerning belief and rationality, only the folk psychological (i.e., propositional) conceptions of these two are targeted.
4. It does not automatically proceed on the basis of folk psychology's flaws to an *ontological* prediction. When a rival paradigm emerges, which is likely to prove its superiority, then it is rational to try this alternative and see what happens throughout this exploration.
5. The label "EM" originated with a critic of the view, and contemporary usage has often outgrown that context; the label can be misleading.
6. One must bear Quinean pragmatism and a Kuhnian image of scientific change in mind in order to understand the nature of EM (cf. Gough, 2024b; see Haueis, 2024; cf. Taylor & Vickers, 2017).

This Quinean–Kuhnian orientation is also visible in the detailed arguments advanced by classical and contemporary eliminativists. Rorty's "disappearance" theory is motivated primarily by the explanatory stagnation of dualist vocabularies and by analogies to familiar episodes of scientific theory-change, rather than by any eagerness to deny the

existence of experiences themselves. Paul Churchland's case against propositional attitudes relies on the explanatory failures of folk-psychological generalizations and on the promise of neurocomputational models, functioning as a methodological critique whose ontological conclusions are explicitly conditional on the success of future neuroscience. Stich's critique of belief taxonomy is likewise grounded in the needs of cognitive science: persisting with folk-psychological belief-types may hinder the construction of adequate computational models. Machery's proposal to "do without concepts" and Griffiths' reclassification of emotions appeal to natural-kind structure and explanatory tractability: they recommend abandoning inherited taxonomies when they fail to align with causal structure. In each of these cases, what drives the argument are methodological and pragmatic judgements about explanatory practice. Any ontological rejection of folk posits is a derivative gloss on those prior judgements. From a method-first perspective on EM, what is primary is the decision to revise, replace, or retire posits that impede successful science; whether one describes the upshot as strict ontological elimination ("there is no such kind") or as radical conceptual engineering ("the old term should be dropped or repurposed") matters less than Ramsey's inventory-style reading suggests. The early figures in EM did not treat the distinction as decisive; rather, they challenged its import as pragmatic naturalists and were skeptical of inventory-style ontology.

On my reading, work by Machery on concepts, Griffiths on emotions, Hardcastle and Corns on pain, Irvine on consciousness, and Gough on mind and theory-of-mind should not be classified, as Ramsey suggests, as merely "ontologically conservative" category dissolution; they are concrete instantiations of EM's method-first strategy applied to new psychological domains.

8 Conclusion

If there is anything like a historically grounded *proper* EM, it is to be found in the writings of the view's founders and early developers. If figures such as Quine, Feys, Feys, Rorty, Stich, and the Churchlands are not counted among its founders and developers, the label "eliminativist" risks losing historical anchor. The account does not rely on a hypothetical or disembodied eliminativist. Philosophical views are historically situated: developed by specific authors against particular problem-agendas within a given landscape. Accordingly, EM is reconstructed from the standpoint of its originators' problem-settings, larger projects, and tacit methodological principles.

If EM is recentered as a method for adjudicating psychological taxonomy under scientific pressure, then "scientific eliminativism" in practice (e.g., kind-dissolution moves in cognitive science and affective science) reads as its natural continuation rather than as a rival conception. The upshot is not metaphysical austerity for its own sake but a methodological thesis: where mature cognitive science fails to integrate a folk category, EM counsels conceptual re-engineering rather than a priori ontology. This is also why contemporary "scientific eliminativist" programs are not external to EM but its testing ground: they test whether pruning or repartitioning kinds removes impediments to explanation. From Quine's explication-as-elimination to Rorty's disappearance theory to Churchland's attack on folk psychology, what unifies EM is not a metaphysical posture but a standing invitation to let successful science redraw our psychological ontology. On

this reconstruction, eliminative conclusions are conditional deliverances of a methodologically disciplined program, not antecedent articles of metaphysical faith.

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