

“What You Think Matters”

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Abstract

In explaining why we do what we do, we appeal to the contents of our mental lives: to what we believe, desire, intend, perceive, etc. I argue that adequately appreciating these contentful causal explanations requires rejecting the very popular view in both philosophy and cognitive science that mental states and processes are identical to certain kinds of computational states and processes (identity computationalism). While many of the first identity computationalists rejected the causal efficacy of mental content, today's proponents typically think that mental processes are both computational and causally efficacious in virtue of their semantic content. I argue that this position is not coherent. Instead, we should embrace the view that we are semantically embedded: i.e. mental causal profiles are ineliminably content-involving.

After explaining why identity computationalism *prima facie* excludes the causal efficacy of mental contents, I discuss a recent strong line of defense. Michael Rescorla (2014) argues that mental processes are causally overdetermined in a supposedly unproblematic way. If viable, this view would save both our content-involving explanatory practices and the reductive power of the identity computationalist approach. I show that the initial plausibility of this view depends on problematic metaphysical backtracking. I close the talk by sketching a generative computationalist approach, on which computational tools are refocused in the service of explaining the processes that underlie mental phenomena compatibly with semantic embedding.