

## Jerry Fodor (1935-2017)



Try to Fodor yourself... a bit! A legacy beyond and behind (some) theories of Fodor

“Scholarship is the process by which butterflies are transmuted into caterpillars.”

Jerry Fodor

“Jerry leaves an enormous legacy as a leader of a tectonic shift in the field of cognitive studies.”

Zenon Pylyshyn

One day after Jerry Fodor’s passing on November 29, 2017, I posted a note in a social network in which I described my first and unique personal encounter with him ten years ago. It was during a conference at which I also met Dušan Dožudić, *Prolegomena*’s editor. I didn’t hesitate to accept when Dušan invited me to write a memorial piece about Fodor. However, as the days passed and the deadline became closer, the task turned out to be more challenging than I thought. I initially wanted to write an entirely anecdotal note but, day after day, several *in memoriam* notes appeared. They were mostly written by people, like Zenon Pylyshyn and Georges Rey, who shared their academic life with Fodor, from informal meetings to sailing. I asked myself about the value of what I was commissioned to write. Thence I realized that the value of the anecdotal part of this manuscript relies on what I thought to be its irremediable deficiency, namely that it would be about the effects of one conversation on the academic life of a young student.

Intellectual exemplarity should not be equated to theoretical expertise: one could have written about the best achievements of an expert without hav-

ing said a word about someone that one considers intellectually exemplary, or whose behavior in academic contexts one thinks of as worthy of imitation. No doubt Fodor was an expert theoretician, but one whose legacy overcomes the power and accuracy of his theories. Fodor's theories can be found to be outdated products of an old-fashioned exercise of conceptual engineering, and there would nevertheless remain a bulk of things to learn from Fodor's argumentative style and dialectical attitude. As Daniel Hutto (a radical detractor of Fodor's theory of mind) said in his memorial note: "[w]hatever we think of his views or the famous Fodor flair and flourish, we should all seek to emulate his intellectual openness and honesty. He will be sorely missed, but never forgotten".<sup>1</sup>

Since the 80's, Fodor's philosophical system has been ubiquitous on the contemporary philosophy of mind and cognitive science. I'll risk myself to say that it's highly probable that every professional analytic philosopher of mind, cognitive scientist and cognitive psychologist (directly or indirectly) have had to deal with Fodor's views at some point of their careers. I indeed suspect that it's highly probable that the theories that nowadays we develop are not but covert heirs of Fodor – of course, not because cutting-edge theories are overtly Fodorian, but rather because their main tenets have been designed over the Fodorian realm, just as today's Rome stands on the rock foundations of the old empire. This probably explains why Fodor was voted the most influential Anglophone philosopher after WWII in 2016.<sup>2</sup> (This is not the place for writing an intellectual remembrance (see Rey, "A Remembrance of Jerry Fodor, 1935 – 2017"<sup>3</sup>), but there are some facts about Fodor's intellectual development that should be mentioned and that help to explain the ubiquitousness of his works as well as his beyond-the-theories legacy.)

Architects could not materialize their complex designs without the work of clever engineers – the harder to build a structure, the bolder the engineer. Fodor was a skilled mental architect as well as a master of conceptual engineering. Like an engineer Fodor devoted his earlier works to clean up the terrain for expressing his positive wit afterwards. For instance, his book *Psychological Explanation* was mostly devoted to bringing out "negative findings" against behaviorism.<sup>4</sup> Those findings (together with Hillary Putnam's,

<sup>1</sup> D. Hutto, "Jerry Fodor", *Philosophy Now*, Feb.-Mar. 2018, p. 47.

<sup>2</sup> B. Leiter, "20 'Most Important' Philosophers of Mind since WWII", *Blog Leiter Reports*, entry January 20–2016: <http://leiterreports.typepad.com/blog/2016/01/20-most-important-philosophers-of-mind-since-wwii.html>.

<sup>3</sup> G. Rey, G., "A Remembrance of Jerry Fodor, 1935–2017", *Blog DailyNous*, entry December 1–2017: <http://dailynous.com/2017/12/01/remembrance-jerry-fodor-1935-2017-guest-post-georges-rey/>.

<sup>4</sup> J. Fodor, *Psychological Explanation: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Psychology* (New York: Random House, 1968).

Noam Chomsky's, Daniel Dennett's and others') were the initial strikes that triggered the cognitive revolution; a revolution that was the outcome of an engine of which Fodor never stopped being a power unit. Thus the main statement of that revolution: "[b]ehavior is organized, but the organization of behavior is merely derivative; the structure of behavior stands to mental structure as an effect stands to its cause [...] Canonical psychological explanations account for the organization of behavior by appealing to principles which, they allege, explicate the structure of the mind".<sup>5</sup>

It's worth mentioning that Fodor forged the cradle of his philosophical system on the shoulders of Hilary Putnam (his PhD supervisor) and Noam Chomsky. In the 50's there were two regent theories purported to exorcise the ghost of the machine that Descartes had invoked several centuries ago: the mind-brain identity theory and behaviorism. Like his contemporaries, Fodor cleaned up the terrain by demonstrating the incompleteness of the theoretical horizon that was assumed to be available or, in other words, by arguing that the catalog of available options was not exhaustive. Mentalism (in negative terms: the thesis that there's not a logical connection between mental terms and behavioral terms) entered the scene, and went hand in hand with Putnam's functionalism, as well as with Chomsky's nativist theory of language acquisition.

The hardcore of Putnam's functionalism is the thesis that mental states can be individuated by the functional roles that they play in a Turing machine – a mathematical model of computation. So, according to this view, detailed descriptions of the operations performed by that sort of machine fix the identity of its states. Putnam claimed that the mind does work that way, such that the identity of mental states is fixed by their functional roles or, in other terms, that mental properties are individuated in virtue of internal functional roles that mediate between observable behavior and perceived parts of the environment. This view was the seed of the computational theory of mind on which Fodor reflected throughout his entire academic life.

This package of views helped Fodor to defend psychological explanations against neurobiological and behavioral reductionism, thereby firming up the blindage that would protect the explanatory autonomy of cognitive psychology – one of the essential ideals of the cognitive revolution.<sup>6</sup>

On this way, together with other philosophers (like Daniel Dennett) and against others (like Paul Churchland), Fodor accepted that folk psychology has an incredible predictive power but, more strongly, that intentional states

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<sup>5</sup> J. Fodor, *The Modularity of Mind: An Essay on Faculty Psychology* (Cambridge Mass.: MIT Press, 1983), p. 2.

<sup>6</sup> See J. Fodor, *The Language of Thought* (New York: Crowell, 1975).

(like beliefs) are causally responsible for behavior. This view was known as Fodor's intentional realism. Fodor championed the view that the core function of the mind is manipulating representations and, therefore, that the job of cognitive psychology is to develop nomological frameworks that explain the representational causal roots of behavior – a labor that also leads to elucidate mental structure. Fodor devoted decades to the defense of intentional realism against the treats held up by behaviorists, eliminativists, interpretationists, connectionists, instrumentalists, etc. To put it ironically, the Fodorian realm was built with a special kind of bricks, called (in the *Philosophical Lexicon*) fodorgraphs. "A fodorgraph is an explicit representation which is what is left when you take a literal physical image, subtract the spatial array of colored marks, and then throw away the paper".<sup>7</sup>

*The Modularity of Mind* (1983) is Fodor's most influential book. Behind the complex set of descriptions of how the whole engine of the mind works with fodorgraphs, some cognitive psychologists find in it an implicit set of instructions for future theoretical design. They found something similar to what architects would have found in Gaudí's plans of the Sagrada Familia if they hadn't been destroyed by anarchists during the Spanish civil war. By contrast, others think that the Fodorian realm must be reformed and that new realms should not be entirely built with fodorgraphs. I think that Fodor would agree with the later view to a larger extent than one would think, so stating that "the current situation in cognitive science is light years from being satisfactory. Perhaps somebody will fix it eventually; but not, I should think, in the foreseeable future, and not with the tools that we currently have in hand".<sup>8</sup> It's indisputable that Fodor was one of the most important architects of the mind of the XX Century, as well as a highly audacious and self-critical conceptual engineer.

I have to confess that I'm one of those who think that that the new realms shouldn't be made of fodorgraphs, but this belief doesn't affect my admiration for Fodor. The best of reasons for this is, I guess, that his intellectual legacy overcomes his theoretical achievements. One could think that Fodor is the kind of philosopher we all should disagree with to some extent and, nonetheless, concede that his mind was a powerful thinking mechanism, flexibly endowed with a prolific creativity. There were many (theoretical) battles in his life; many lessons and challenges in an academic lifespan... his, full of passion for reasons. Reasons!... too many to many, very few to many.

Fodor was a passionate, super rigorous analytic philosopher with a funny, puckish and pugnacious dialectical style. In other words, Fodor was a hero

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<sup>7</sup> D. Dennett & A. Steglich-Petersen, *Philosophical Lexicon*, 2008, <http://www.philosophicallexicon.com>.

<sup>8</sup> J. Fodor, "A Science of Tuesdays", *London Review of Books*, 22(4), 2000, p. 5.

of stylistic freedom. Or to put it plainly: he had an impeccable style that ran wild. His prose is full of humor, irony, and a vast collection of linguistic devices and twists, though the arguments behind it are highly rigorous. As far as I see, this kind of stylistic freedom has been progressively disappearing from the analytic philosophy literature during the last decade. Day after day I read papers and drafts written by my contemporaries, and I usually feel impressed by their overt rigor and order, but I also feel sad to find out the extreme minimalism of our prose. Fodor's prose is a valuable part of his intellectual legacy; it is a model of creative and fresh writing. As Rey claims:

[Fodor] was almost compulsively jocular, and this led many readers sometimes to dismiss his writings as unserious. This would be a bad mistake. Fodor's jokes were invariably deep and philosophically insightful [...] It can't be stressed enough that such jokes are invariably backed up by rich argumentation. Indeed, in addition to his wit, his dialectical abilities were legend.<sup>9</sup>

As a native speaker of Spanish, I ought recognize the natural difficulty that derives from using complex linguistic sources, like irony, humor, sarcasm, satire, and metaphors in English. The pressure that contemporary academy exerts on us is partly responsible; it operates under the motto "the faster, the better"... and learning to use those sources correctly takes time! There's a steadily wild competition for grants, funding and tenures, and (some think) there's no time to lose in developing a richer prose as well as an original style. Maybe I'm wrong but it seems that the main ideal of a vast majority of current graduate students is to become plain-prose papers-making machines. It seems that some decades ago (four, five?) risking oneself to develop an original style was part of the intellectual growing of professional philosophers – think about Dennett, Kripke, Davidson and, of course, Fodor.

Remarkably, Fodor was a prolific writer of book reviews.<sup>10</sup> Maybe that habit maintained his critical style updated and his intellectual muscles in shape; such a habit could well be taken as evidence of Fodor's respect for the intellectual work of others. Sadly, this task is also getting missed nowadays. I can make my bet that most of the graduate students that I know (several friends) believe that writing book reviews is either a waste of time, an easy way of getting books for free, or a desperate way of finding a venue to publish without the mishaps of the double-blinded system. In any case, some of them think that writing book reviews is a sort of dispensable practice which

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<sup>9</sup> G. Rey, G., "A Remembrance of Jerry Fodor, 1935–2017", *Blog DailyNous*, entry December 1–2017: <http://dailynous.com/2017/12/01/remembrance-jerry-fodor-1935-2017-guest-post-georges-rey/>.

<sup>10</sup> For a complete list in *London Review of Books*: <https://www.lrb.co.uk/contributors/jerry-fodor>

merely serves as warm-up for the more important task of publishing papers in top-tier journals.

Writing book reviews derives from exercising skills in a way that's not always required for writing papers. A good review requires that the reader, on the one hand, shapes a synthetic though critical opinion of a whole theory and, on the other hand, starts up a dialogue and, sometimes, a novel debate – as happened with Chomsky's review of Skinner's *Verbal Behavior*. We should follow Fodor's example and try to expend some time reading stuff that's outside the strict bibliography of the paper that's on the track for submission.

Fodor's enduring boldness was also idiosyncratic of his dialectical style – maybe the best expression of such a boldness is *What Darwin Got Wrong*.<sup>11</sup> Perhaps philosophical innovation and wit arises more naturally from a sort of irrational impulse to check out and confront theoretical pictures, rather than from an overt plan of introducing slight adjustments to well rated (forthcoming) papers.

Trying to innovate in contemporary analytic philosophy is usually a thankless task, as well as not a one well (intellectually) repaid: several writings and manuscripts remain ignored until some famous researcher quotes them; if not, they get a lot of ad hoc criticism in tours of conferences. Then the young dream of developing new philosophical systems gets evaporated by the speed required to obey the “Publish or Perish” commandment, whereas the (full of swirls) lifestyles of graduate students throw them to solitude when extreme nomadism seizes them. Fodor's dialectical style (and, as Hutto says, “inexhaustible intellectual energy”) is a model of intellectual courage and methodological audacity, rather than a relic for resignation... after all “[w]hat a strange business philosophy is”.<sup>12</sup>

I want to end up with the anecdotal story that I mentioned at the beginning.<sup>13</sup> It was in Kirchberg am Wechsel, Lower Austria, during the 31st International Wittgenstein Symposium, in August, 2008. I had just finished a bachelor in philosophy; I was in the fourth year of a bachelor in psychology and in the first year of a three-years master in philosophy of mind and cognitive science... Fodor's work and name used to appear constantly in seminars as well as in hall and cafeteria talks. For all of us (philosophy of mind and cognitive psychology students) Fodor was an intellectual hero.

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<sup>11</sup> J. Fodor, J. & M. Piattelli-Palmarini, *What Darwin Got Wrong* (London: Profile, 2010).

<sup>12</sup> J. Fodor, “A Science of Tuesdays”, *London Review of Books*, 22(4), 2000, p. 5.

<sup>13</sup> I posted it right after reading another one by Felipe De Brigard (“In Memoriam Jerry Fodor (1935–2017)”, *The Brains Blog*, entry November 30–2017: <http://philosophyofbrains.com/2017/11/30/memoriam-jerry-fodor-1935-2017.aspx>) by which I knew the bad news about Fodor.

At some point during the evening of the second or third day of the conference, René Campis (a friend and colleague) and I approached Fodor. We asked him whether he would have time for an interview next day. He kindly and immediately accepted. I was excited, anxious and enthusiastic; after all, having an interview with Fodor would be the most exciting academic experience that I'd have had until that moment. I was particularly nervous because that was my first time in Europe, and besides that I was going to move to Mexico one week later. They were days full of changes and fears.

We met at a bar called Mamas. Fodor told us that he was working on a radical criticism to neo-Darwinism (i.e., in what would become *What Darwin Got Wrong*). We talked about academia, about his career, his research prospects, and at some point we got involved in a conversation about mental representations and psychological explanation. That was when unexpectedly René said to Fodor: "Carlos have serious troubles with the explanatory scope of your intentional realism"... I had been pushed on the quadrilateral with a colossus. I started to sweat.

(Yes, in our research group in Cali (Colombia), we had discussed Fodor's works in several sessions during the last years, but I was still too immature as to provide the systematic argument that was required for articulating such a critical claim against the man that "modularize" the mind and championed intentional realism).

Fodor kindly and seriously asked: "what's your argument?" It may seem trivial, but that question and attitude somehow marked my academic life thenceforth: that was the first time that I got that kind of intellectual humility and interest from someone whose works I had been reading since some years ago. (That attitude contrasted with the flagrant arrogance exhibited by a couple of Colombian professors that during those years were working as self-proclaimed experts in philosophy of mind and who thought that the philosophical work done in the Colombian province was subsidiary from theirs.)

In my effort to answer Fodor's question I literally started a rap. Then he said "but... what's the evidence for defending that?" I kept rapping. Fodor listened that rap without interrupting; but at some point he replied with a symphony. My last and silly rap sentence was "probably my mentalese is a mess". We talked for a while and drunk a couple of beers. At a certain point Fodor told us that he had to leave and did not let us pay for the beers.

His friendly mood and attentive attitude helped me to fix the hope that the academy that, as a young student, I was going to meet later on wasn't going to be a sort of fort, guarded by a group of arrogant people who do not look for anything beyond their interests and who don't mind going over others – something that time to time I thought. My hope has been getting

fulfilled and I have had the opportunity to know successful and rigorous analytic philosophers worried about developing original styles, but to whom academy resembles a challenge that triggers different sorts of interesting passions and cooperative motivation, more than a vital sacrifice – something that I sadly know that some young students think.

Fodor's legacy is alive!

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