

# Fodor and Lepore on Holism\*

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## 1 Introduction

### 1.1 The main conclusions

Fodor and Lepore's main conclusions in *Holism* are these (see 206):

- A. If semantic properties are typically anatomic and there is no analytic/synthetic distinction, then meaning holism is true.
- B. There is no very pressing reason to suppose that semantic properties are typically anatomic.

A property is anatomic if not just one thing could have it. Suppose, by intuition or argument, a philosopher is convinced that there couldn't be just one proposition that had the property of being believed by Smith, or just one sentence of English that had the property of being translatable into Martian, or just one object referred to by current astronomical theory that was also referred to by Greek astronomers. Then one takes these properties to be ANATOMIC. Conclusion A tells us that if we do take these properties to be anatomic, then the only way to avoid holism is to appeal to the analytic/synthetic distinction. Holism has profound and troubling consequences. Nobody wants to avoid it by putting too much weight on the analytic/synthetic distinction. Hence, given

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A, we have a strong motive for examining B, and seeing if the arguments and intuitions about anatomicity are sound.

Conclusion A is established to F-L's satisfaction early on, and most of the book is spent arguing for B. The arguments for B are full of good distinctions, vigorous arguments and important insights. In fact, they are pretty convincing.

Unfortunately, the argument for A is less so. A has a substantive consequence by itself, for it rules out a combination of views, namely, accept anatomism, reject the analytic/synthetic distinction, reject holism. Today I'll talk about A. I will begin by discussing the meanings of the crucial terms in it.

## **1.2 The meanings of key terms in conclusion A.**

### **1.2.1 "Semantic Properties"**

Here are some examples of semantic properties:

1. The property of being an expression that translates some expression of English (T).
2. The property of expressing something I believe (T\*).
3. The property of referring to the same thing that some expression of English does (R).
4. The property of referring to something or other that currently accepted astronomical theories refer to (R\*).
5. The property of being a formula of a language L.
6. The property of being something that Smith believes.

### **1.2.2 "Anatomic"**

The word "anatomic" stands for a property of properties. In the glossary, it is explained as follows: "A property is anatomic just in case if anything has it,

then at least one other thing does.” There is a slight possibility of ambiguity here, between:

- (i) A property P is anatomic if for each x, if it has P, there is a y, other than x, that has P also.
- (ii) A property P is anatomic if for each x there is a y, other than x, such that if x has P, y has P.

There isn’t much difference here. P will be anatomic, under either reading, if two things have it. P will be anatomic, under either reading, if nothing has it, and there are two things. The difference shows up only when there is only one thing, and it does have P. Then P is anatomic on the first reading, but not on the second.

There is, however, a tinge of modality in anatomicity as it is discussed in the text, so that the two relevant readings really are

- (ss) A property P is anatomic if for each x, if it has P, there must be a y, other than x, that has P also.
- (ls) A property P is anatomic if for each x there is a y, other than x, such that if x has P, y must have P.

Let P be being believed by Smith. Consider the possible worlds in which Smith believes that Fodor lives in New Jersey. On the ss reading, anatomicity of P requires that in each of these worlds Smith believe something else. Perhaps in one of them, his only other belief is that Someone lives in New Jersey, while in another his only other belief is that Fodor lives somewhere. That’s OK, under the ss reading of anatomicity. But it is not OK under the long scope reading. There would have to be a second proposition, the same one in all the possible worlds in which Smith believes that Fodor lives in New Jersey, for the property of being believed by Smith to be anatomic. I’ll call these WEAK and STRONG anatomicity.

### 1.2.3 “Meaning holism”

The term “meaning holism” is the view that semantic properties are holistic. Here is what the glossary says about “holistic property”:

“A property is holistic just in case if anything has it, then lots of things do.” This doesn’t seem like a very good analysis of what it is to be a holistic property. I’ll refer to this position as lotsism. The relation of lotsism to holism is something that needs discussion.

At one point in the introduction, Fodor and Lepore suggest a somewhat stronger meaning: if something has a holistic property, then an endless number of other things have it too. Again, it is not clear why this is holism. I’ll call this “endlessism”.

At another point in the introduction, as they are developing the dire consequences of holism, F-L say,

“All of this [i.e., common sense] would SEEM to be false if meaning holism is true, since, as the reader will recall, meaning holism would require that if any one sentence occurs in my theory, then PRACTICALLY ALL of the sentences that occur in your theory must occur in my theory...” (p 9, 2nd emphasis added)

I’ll call “practically allism” the thesis that if one item in a theory, language or system of beliefs has a semantic property, then practically all of the things in the theory, language or system of beliefs must have that property.

The problem with calling lotsism or endlessism “holism” is that it is not so easy to see why the dire consequence of holism, that F-L want to avoid, attach to lotsism or endlessism.

Here is one dire consequence of holism.

“An expression has R\* iff it refers to something or other that currently accepted astronomical theories refer to. Suppose that R\* is anatomic, hence holistic. Then it might turn out that no theory

could refer to (for example) stars unless it could also refer to (as it might be) planets, nebulae, black holes, the center of the galaxy, the speed of propagation of light, and the location of the nearest quasar. It would follow that Greek astronomy (hence, Greek astronomERS) couldn't ever have referred to stars. And it would follow from THAT that (what one had naively supposed to be) the Greek view that stars are very nearby and that they ride around the heavens on glass spheres is actually NOT CONTESTED by our view that the stars are very far away...In fact, strictly speaking, it would follow that the Greeks didn't HAVE any view about STARS; we can't, in the vocabulary of contemporary astronomy, say what, if anything, Greek astronomy was about..." (11-12)

I think this is indeed a dire consequence. And it is fear of these consequences that seems to motivate the book. But it is not clear what has this consequence. It is not even clear that Fodor and Lepore are saying that holism has this consequence. What they say is that it MIGHT TURN OUT that all of these things were true, if  $R^*$ , the property of referring to something that currently accepted astronomical theories refer to, were holistic. They don't say it would turn out that way, just that it might.

At any rate, it certainly isn't clear why lotsism or endlessism would have this consequence. Suppose that no theory could refer to anything referred to by current astronomical theory, unless it referred to lots of things referred to by current astronomical theory. The Greeks knew, and referred to, lots of stars, so the lotsist nature of current astronomical theory won't have the dire consequences that F-L sketch.

How about endlessism? It isn't a problem either. The Greeks referred, in addition to lots of planets, to endlessly many numbers, places, and times just as current astronomical theory does. So what is the problem to which lotsism or endlessism are supposed to lead?

What would have these dire consequences is practically allism. So I will assume that it is meaning practically allism that is at issue, when we talk about meaning holism.

(Fodor and Lepore distinguish meaning holism from confirmation holism, and so from the thesis that our attributions about the meanings a given language or mind attaches to things might be holistic, in the sense that evidence about all of the meanings is conceivably relevant to each attribution. I think this is absolutely the right distinction to make.

I will note that my own sense of history is that meaning holism, as distinguished from confirmation holism applied to meanings, did not acquire its hold on the philosophical imagination as a result of arguments of the sort that Fodor and Lepore discuss influencing a lot of philosophers, but on the basis of (even more bizarre) arguments influencing a very few philosophers, whose convictions then influenced a lot of philosophers.)

## **2 The case against molecularism**

### **2.1 Molecularism**

As I said, the conclusions listed in 1.1 sound pretty “iffy”, but there is a substantive conclusion implied. Fodor and Lepore have ruled out one version of a position they call molecularism. Here is how this position is explained in the glossary:

“A molecularist says that if there are any beliefs that we share, there must be other beliefs that we also share. But he denies that all our other beliefs have to be shared in order that we should share any of our beliefs. He is likely to appeal to the analytic/synthetic distinction in this regard: to share the belief that P is to accept all the analytical inferences in which P plays a role.”

I take it that being a shared belief is an example of a semantic property. So the meaning molecularist agrees with the meaning holist that semantic properties are typically anatomic, but denies they are holistic. Fodor and Lepore have not ruled out this possibility, so long as one accepts the analytic/synthetic distinction. But they think that if one abandons the analytic synthetic distinction, and one is a semantic anatomist, then one must be a semantic holist.

## 2.2 The master argument

In the introduction, F-L give us the argument from anatomism of being a belief of Smith's to holism of being a belief of Smith's:

**Premise 1:** Being-some-or-other-belief-of-Smith's is anatomic.

**Premise 2:** (The analytic/synthetic distinction isn't principled, so) there is no principled distinction between the propositions that Smith has to believe to believe that P and the propositions that Smith doesn't have to believe that P.

**Conclusion:** The property of being-some-or-other-belief-of-Smith's is holistic.

Now I will consider whether this conclusion follows, and if so in what sense of "holism".

## 2.3 Fodor lives in New Jersey.

So first let's consider the argument for lotsism. If it is good, then we will have the conditional, if anatomism, then lotsism.

Let's consider a particular proposition, call it P. Let P be that Fodor lives in New Jersey. Suppose Smith believes that Fodor lives in New Jersey. The first premise is that Smith couldn't only believe this, and that seems quite plausible. It would be at least odd if Smith believed that Fodor lived in New Jersey, and didn't believe the following propositions:

Fodor exists

New Jersey exists

Someone lives in New Jersey

Fodor lives somewhere

Someone lives somewhere

Now, call this list of propositions X. There are lots of propositions that are not in X. For example, there is this one, that I will call Z:

Z: Redwood City is Palo Alto without the attitude

(This appeared on a large billboard on the Bayshore Freeway, between Palo Alto and Redwood City, paid for by the Redwood City Chamber of Commerce or something like that.)

Intuitively, Smith might well believe P, and all of the members of X, without believing Z. So, intuitively, there is a pretty plausible position, which is that the property of being believed by Smith is anatomic, in that if one proposition is believed by him, a few others must be too, but that not all or even practically all propositions must be believed by Smith, for him to believe a given proposition.

## 2.4 Apparent exegetical problems

The question is, how is the conclusion supposed to follow? F-L say the following, as their second comment after the conclusion:

“2. The form of argument A is:” “if some a’s are F, and there is no principled difference between the a’s that are F’s and the ones that aren’t, then ALL a’s are F. [my italic]”

But surely no one, not the most rabid holist, claims that to believe one proposition, one must believe ALL propositions. The conclusion can’t really be that Smith believes everything. So what is the conclusion supposed to be?

Well, it might be that he believes lots of things, or endlessly many things, or practically everything. Call this the omnibelief interpretation.

Another interpretation is suggested by the fact that semantic properties usually come in families, like truth AND falsity. Maybe we can get a better interpretation for the conclusion if we bring in the other properties in the same



family as being believed by Smith, such as being disbelieved by Smith or having Smith suspend belief with regard to. So the conclusion might be that if Smith believes or disbelieves P, if he has an explicit doxastic attitude towards P, let us say, then he believes, disbelieves, or suspends belief in every (lots, endlessly many, practically all) other propositions. Call this the families interpretation.

F-L finish Comment 2 with the observation “So argument A has the form of a “sorities” or “slippery slope”” This leads to a second problem with Comment 2, that slippery slope or sorities arguments aren’t valid. F-L point this out themselves on page 27. For example, it doesn’t follow from the fact that if removing the first hair from Smith’s head won’t make him bald, and that, given that a person is not bald, removing one hair will not make them bald, that we cannot make Smith bald by removing hairs from his head. It does not follow from the fact that an abortion in the 4th week of the ninth month is wrong, and that if an abortion is wrong at time t, it is wrong at time t minus a second, that abortion is wrong in the first minutes of pregnancy.

Now one might say that it is no big deal if argument A isn’t valid, because it is the holist’s argument, and F-L are claiming that the holist’s arguments aren’t any good. (They allow that it might be invalid on page 27) But remember that they use argument A to claim that the choices are just atomism and holism, ruling out molecularism. The conditional that the validity of argument A underwrites is one of their general conclusions (see 1.1. above). So they are really committed to the validity of argument A. It is argument A that gives the question of whether semantic properties are anatomic its interest. So it is disturbing that their Comment 2 labels argument A as a sorities.

Given this, my next complaint comes as sort of a comfort. It is hard to see why argument A is a version of the sorities or slippery slope anyway. Where is the slippery slope? In the usual sorities arguments, like the one about baldness, we are given an iterative procedure (pull a hair from Smith’s head) and a principle about it (losing one hair won’t make him bald). Where is the iterative

procedure with argument A?

The picture that seems to be behind calling argument A a sorities is that we start with P, and look at another proposition Q which it seems that one would have to believe, if one believed P. Then we find another proposition, very similar to Q, so similar that if one has to believe Q to believe P, then surely one has to believe it also. And so on, and so on, until by very small differences we have moved to a very big difference, and discovered that to believe that Jerry Fodor lives in New Jersey, one has to believe that Redwood City is Palo Alto without the attitude.

But F-L offer us nothing like the series of propositions differing slightly from a given one, along which we could run a sorities. We could try to help. Suppose that if one believes P, then one believes that Jerry lives in the state in which a certain point  $p$  occurs (a point somewhere in Trenton). Then, suppose that if one believes that so and so is true of a point  $p$ , then one believes that so and so is true of a point one millionth of an inch west of  $p$ . We might then slowly work the beliefs all the way to Redwood City, which would be a beginning into getting from P to Z. But of course neither of the assumptions seem very good. The second isn't any good because of the boundary between New Jersey and Pennsylvania. This boundary isn't very principled, but even if we granted the first assumption, it would provide a barrier to the sequence of slightly different propositions. The point is that even if there is no principled all purpose distinction to separate the beliefs one has to have if one believes a certain proposition from the ones one doesn't have to have, there maybe enough unprincipled distinctions to effect the separation in each case.

At any rate, as far as I can see, argument A is not a sorties. That's the bad news. The good news is that this frees us from worrying about the fact if it were a sorities, it wouldn't be valid, and we would have to figure out why the book just didn't end there, noting that the main argument for holism was no better than the argument I gave against baldness.

## 2.5 Premise 2

So, if it is a sorities, or if it is not, how is argument A supposed to work? The mystery is Premise 2. Premise 2 seems to be argued for in the following way:

The only principled distinction between propositions that Smith has to believe to believe that P and the rest, that anyone can suggest, is that the first group are the analytic consequences of P.

The analytic/synthetic distinction is not principled.

So, there is no principled distinction between the propositions that Smith has to believe to believe that P and the rest.

The molecularist can defeat the argument, then, by rejecting either of these premises—accepting the analytic/synthetic distinction, or finding another, principled distinction. But before worrying about that, she might wonder whether argument A, with the original premise 2, works. And this depends on what is meant by principled.

Now, if “principled” just meant nothing at all, the argument wouldn’t work. If you have to believe something in order to believe that P, and there is no distinction between the proposition you have to believe and the rest. But, if there is no distinction between all of these propositions, it is not obvious that there are lots of propositions anyway.

One very good thing about F-L is that they keep epistemology distinct from metaphysics. It may be that, in order to attribute the belief that P to someone, we need to take into account (or potentially might take into account) what they believe about lots of other propositions, or endlessly many other propositions, or maybe even practically all propositions. That does not mean that to have a belief in P, they need to have an explicit doxastic attitude to all these other propositions, or that, even if they do, that their doing so is not an independent fact about their beliefs.

The principle that is lacking from the analytic/synthetic distinction, then, should NOT simply be that we can’t TELL, without considering all of Smith’s

beliefs, whether a belief Q is one that he must or need not hold, if he believes that P.

The reference to the sorities, and the holistic theme, suggests that the picture is something like this. Our beliefs form a big web. Some beliefs are held tightly together by the overall structure of the web, and these one thinks of as connected purely by meaning, as analytically connected. Others are far from each other on the web, so one could be changed or ripped out with little effect on the other. These we think of as merely synthetically connected. But these distinctions are not precise and principled. One can get from any one place on the web to any other place by very small steps each of which seems to be “analytic”. However, this picture, or metaphor, is a far cry from giving us a handle on how the sorities would actually work.

When one actually tries to induce skepticism about the analytic/synthetic distinction, one is likely to appeal to cases in which an apparently analytical connection is undermined by other beliefs. To see how this might work, and its relevance, let’s return to our example. The set X consists of a number of propositions that might usually be thought of as analytical consequences of the proposition P that we are imagining Smith to believe, that Fodor lives in New Jersey. In contrast, proposition Z, that Redwood City is Palo Alto without the attitude, is not. We can also consider a number of propositions that Smith ought to disbelieve, if he believes that P. Call this set Y.

Fodor doesn’t exist

There is no such place as New Jersey

No one lives in New Jersey

Fodor doesn’t live anywhere

No one lives anywhere

Now someone who is dubious about the analytic/synthetic distinction might be dubious that it absolutely follows that if Smith knows the relevant facts about meaning and believes that P, he believes all of the members of X and

disbelieves all of the propositions in  $Y$ . Suppose Smith believes that  $P$ , and also believes that Fodor is a mythical character and New Jersey is a mythical place. Then Smith might believe that  $P$ , but also believe that There is no such place as New Jersey, and that Fodor doesn't live anywhere.

Suppose then that I am an anatomist, and that I think that the analytic/synthetic distinction in "not principled" in the sense that no statement or belief follows from another MERELY in virtue of meanings or knowledge of meanings; some combination of other beliefs could always defeat the implication. The analytic/synthetic distinction is at best a relative one. Can I stop short of holism?

It seems to me that there is a possible view that combines the following ideas.

First, holism cannot mean believing everything, but at most having a doxastic attitude (belief, disbelief, suspension of belief) towards everything or practically everything.

Second, each proposition involves certain ideas of properties and relations and certain ideas of individuals. Being a believer involves having possession of some basic logical operations, existential quantification, say. To believe a proposition  $P$ , one has to have an attitude towards all the propositions that one can get by existentially quantifying into the argument places of  $P$ . So, to believe that Fodor lives in New Jersey, one has to have a doxastic attitude towards the propositions in  $X+Y$ .

Third, which doxastic attitude a believer in  $P$  has to the propositions in  $X+Y$  does not just depend on the meanings of  $P$  and the propositions in  $X+Y$ . Other beliefs, involving other concepts, may break the connection between  $P$  and the propositions in  $X$ , or punch holes in the barrier between  $P$  and the propositions in  $Y$ , as in our example above.

This possible view (I don't suppose that it is plausible in detail, although it seems so in spirit), would grant anatomism with poin 2, and reject ana-

lytic/synthetic in point 3.

That is, suppose that Smith believes that P. There are two consequences:

- i) Smith must either believe or disbelieve or suspend belief in each of the propositions in  $X + Y$ , and this is so whatever else he believes, disbelieves, or suspends belief in.
- ii) All (lots/endlessly many/practically all) propositions R are such that the issue WHETHER Smith is required to believe Q, or disbelieve Q, or neither might conceivably turn on whether Smith believes or disbelieves R.

The anatomism accepted here is of the strong or “long scope” variety.  $X + Y$  is a set of propositions towards which the believer in P must take a doxastic attitude. So here is a molecularist sounding position, that eschews the analytic synthetic distinction, accepts long scope anatomism and escapes holism.

Of course, F-L may not like the family interpretation of their conclusion, and hold out for the omnibeliever interpretation. What if the conclusion is that if Smith believes that P, Smith believes practically everything?

### 3 Weak anatomism

If it is the omnibeliever interpretation that is wanted, it seems the molecularist must retreat to weak or short-scope anatomism. She can simply say,

Given the Smith believes that P,

- i) Smith must believe some of the other propositions in  $X + Y$  (weak anatomism)
- ii) The analytic/synthetic distinction is no good.
- iii) Endlessly many other propositions may be relevant to WHICH of these he must believe, if Smith has the sort of mind that consider and/or believes endlessly many other propositions. But then, he may not. He may only have considered a few dozen simple propositions about Fodor, New Jersey, the live

in relation and the existential quantifier and negation. He may be capable of considering a lot more, but perhaps he just doesn't.

This defense, however, turns on accepting only short scope or weak anatomism. So we need to turn to this issue.

On pp 27ff, where F-L explicitly discuss a defense of molecularism. They consider a view which they credit to Boghassian, Loewer and Maudlin, that goes like this:

“...there are disjoint sets of propositions such that (1) believing any one of these sets is sufficient for being able to believe P; (2) you must believe at least one of these set in order to believe P; (3) none of these sets is such that you must believe it in order to believe P.”

This seems pretty plausible. But F-L have an argument against this position, which depends on finding the ambiguity in their technical term, “anatomism” that I mentioned above. They say:

“There is...a quantifier-scope ambiguity lurking in the definition of “anatomic,” and hence in premise 1 of argument A.”

They then make the distinction between weak and strong, or short-scope and long-scope, anatomism.

(ss) A property P is anatomic if for each x, if it has P, there must be a y, other than x, that has P also.

(ls) A property P is anatomic if for each x there is a y, other than x, such that if x has P, y must have P.

It is the second, “long scope” reading that F-L meant to be discussing, they say. They admit that on the first, short scope reading, holding anatomism while rejecting the a/s distinction need entail no pernicious consequences. But,

“The trouble with this line of thought is that the kind of anatomism you get if you take ...the short scope reading is too weak to be

worth the effort of defending.. The way to see this is to ask yourself why it ever seemed important to argue that semantic properties are anatomic. We think that the answer is pretty clear: There is undeniably a pre-theoretic intuition that two people couldn't agree about ONLY ONE THING. The intuition is that, if you and I agree that protons are very small, then there must be lots of other propositions we agree about too—for example, that protons aren't tangerine or prime numbers or mammals....In effect, semantic holism proposes to hold onto this intuition even if the price is claiming that we can't agree that protons are very small unless we agree about EVERYTHING else.”

The main problem I have with this point is that a theorist need not agree with intuitions, she need only explain intuitions. The short-scope variety of molecularism may well be worth defending, if the long-scope intuitions can be explained as plausible but ultimately not quite right.

Let's granted we have the anatomic, long-scope intuition described. But, it seems to me, it is this very intuition that we will modify as soon as we give up the a/s distinction. Exactly the same sort of examples that will lead us to give up that distinction, should lead us to see that the intuition just described is the sort that needs to be explained rather than accepted at face value. If A is a doxastically normal individual, but B is the sort of guy whose doxastic structure drives people to abandon the analytic/synthetic distinction, then the fact that they both believe that Fodor lives in New Jersey may not imply that there is some one further thing they both believe.

So, If A and B are normal, similar individuals, and they both believe that Fodor lives in New Jersey, there are a number of other things they will both believe. But this is not just explained by meaning, it is explained in part by their relative normality. If B has other beliefs that are really odd, maybe they won't believe the same thing. The intuition wasn't just based on meaning and



logic, but meaning, logic and common sense expectations, and the latter are just what we have to bracket when we consider how principled the a/s distinction really is.

But, as far as the molecularist goes, it seems to me that the following is a reasonable position:

1) Long scope anatomism and the strict principled concept of analytical consequence are intuitive, but these intuitions have to be honored by explanation rather than acceptance at face value. Which propositions a person should believe, if they believe P, will depend not just on meaning and logic, but also on what else they believe. There are lots, perhaps endlessly many other beliefs that could be relevant, and perhaps any other belief could be relevant. But this doesn't mean that the content of P depends on all these other beliefs, but that as one has more and more concepts to work with, one can fall into stranger and stranger reasons for not believing the "analytical consequence" of P.

2) Short scope anatomism and the rejection of the a/s distinction do not lead to holism in any objectionable sense.

Let me end by noting something that F-L say on page 30, by way of arguing that it is strong anatomism that needs to be dealt with in handling the intuitions that lead to holism, that seems false. F-L say

"The holist wants to capture the intuition that you and I can't both believe the proposition that protons are very small unless we also both believe some other propositions. But beware of the quantifier ambiguity here too. This might mean "Unless each of us believes at least one proposition other than [P]", or it might mean "Unless there is at least one proposition other than [P] that we both believe". It's clearly the second reading that is demanded by the idea that you and I couldn't agree on just one thing...But the second reading is just STRONG anatomism..."

This last statement seems incorrect. There are three possible readings of the

intuition that 2 people can't believe the same thing unless they "both believe other propositions. They are:

1. For all propositions P, if Smith believes P and Jones believes P, then there must be propositions Q and Q', different from P, such that Jones believes Q and Smith believes Q'.
2. For all propositions P, if Smith believes P and Jones believes P, then there must be a proposition Q, such that Smith believes Q and Jones believes Q.
3. For each proposition P, there is a proposition Q, such that if Smith believes P and Jones believes P the Smith must believe Q and Jones must believe Q.

It is (2) that is demanded "by the idea that you and I couldn't agree on just one thing". But (2) does not correspond to strong anatomism. (3) does.