

AMIR HOROWITZ *

POŚLAJKO ON BELIEF SIMILARITIES AND BELIEF CAUSATION¹

SUMMARY: Poślajko (2024) suggests viewing beliefs (and possibly other mental attitudes) as holding a unique ontological status: they exist but are not real. This is Poślajko's belief non-realism. Poślajko also argues that the folk concept of belief is realistic in the sense in question (it is a concept of natural entities), and the conjunction of this claim and belief non-realism yields his belief anti-realism, namely the view that beliefs do not satisfy this folk concept. The purpose of the present paper is to challenge Poślajko's case for belief non-realism. In Section 2, I argue that since Poślajko's argument for the claim that mental kinds are not natural kinds because they fail to ground similarities presupposes that functional similarities cannot fulfil the similarity requirement for naturalness, this argument establishes the claim that beliefs are non-natural and hence non-real in a rather weak sense. In Section 3, I argue that Poślajko's claim that beliefs are not causally relevant states, as well as its entailment of the claim that beliefs are non-real, depends upon a terminological choice. In Section 4, I take issue with Poślajko's claim that the soundness of the success argument for the existence of beliefs requires, first, that we be successful at prediction and coordination because we use the theory of folk psychology, and second, that folk psychology provide an accurate description of the internal structure of the mind (requirements that are not met). However, I point out my own reasons for the view that the success argument fails to establish the existence or reality of beliefs qua psychofunctional content-bearing states, and further, that there are no such states, though, in my opinion, predictively and explanatorily successful ascriptions of propositional attitudes do expose aspects of the mind's architecture, namely its logico-syntactic structures.

* The Open University of Israel, Department of History, Philosophy, and Judaic Studies. E-mail: amirho@openu.ac.il. ORCID: 0000-0003-1913-0553.

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1. Introduction

In his book, *Unreal Beliefs: An Anti-Realist Approach in the Metaphysics of Mind*, Krzysztof Posłajko suggests viewing beliefs (and possibly other mental attitudes) as holding a unique ontological status: they exist but are not real. This might sound contradictory, but it is not, since in Posłajko's sense "real" refers to a specific nature of some existents, namely to naturalness in David Lewis's (1983) sense.² So, the ontological category of existence includes both real and unreal entities, and beliefs are among the latter. This is Posłajko's *belief non-realism*. Posłajko also argues that the folk concept of belief is realistic in the sense in question (it is a concept of natural entities), and the conjunction of this claim and belief non-realism yields his *belief anti-realism*, namely the view that beliefs—as they really are—do not satisfy this folk concept.³ Thus, (at least) part of mental reality is different from what it appears to the folk to be. An additional thesis of the book, one which is not part of its anti-realism, is that the folk concept of belief should be reformed.

The purpose of the present paper is to challenge Posłajko's case for the view that beliefs are non-real. To be natural in the Lewisian sense, properties must meet the following three criteria: function in causal explanations, ground objective similarities—which Posłajko takes to amount (in the context of the issue of mental realism) to constituting natural kinds—and be connected to more natural properties. Posłajko argues that beliefs meet none. In part I, I will argue that since Posłajko's argument for the claim that mental kinds are not natural kinds—inasmuch as they fail to ground similarities—presupposes that functional similarities cannot fulfil the similarity requirement for naturalness, then this argument establishes the claim that beliefs are non-natural and hence non-real in a rather weak sense. In part II, I will argue that Posłajko's claim that beliefs are not causally relevant states, as well as its entailment of the claim that beliefs are non-real, depends upon a terminological choice. In part III, I will take issue with Posłajko's claim that the soundness of the success argument for the existence of beliefs requires, first, that we be successful at prediction and coordination *because* we use the theory of folk psychology, and second, that folk psychology

² The feel of tension between the claim that beliefs exist and the claim that they are not real may be further mitigated upon bearing in mind that the sense of "exist" under consideration is the minimal deflationist one. I will not discuss this issue.

³ I refer to Posłajko's views as "belief anti-realism" and "belief non-realism", respectively, despite the fact that he does not employ these expressions (though he does refer to his views as "anti-realism" and "non-realism").

provide an accurate description of the internal structure of the mind (requirements that are not met). Still, for reasons different from Posłajko's, I share his views that the success argument fails to establish the existence or reality of beliefs *qua psychofunctional content-bearing states*, and further, that there are no such states. But I take folk psychology to be more faithful to mental reality than Posłajko does, for in my opinion predictively and explanatorily successful ascriptions of propositional attitudes do expose aspects of the mind's architecture, namely its logico-syntactic structures. I will briefly point out my reason for this view.

2. Natural Kinds and Similarities

In this part, I address Posłajko's arguments for the claim that mental kinds fail to ground objective similarities, and thus are not natural kinds. One of the arguments is based on the claim that, as functional, beliefs do not possess hidden essences. I argue that since this argument in fact presupposes that functional similarities cannot fulfil the similarity requirement for naturalness, then it establishes the claim that beliefs are non-natural and hence non-real in a rather weak sense, one which does not make room for multiple realizability of mental categories. In his other argument, Posłajko correctly points out that our standard folk content ascriptions cannot track non-trivial similarities, but, I argue, fine-grained, fully detailed, belief ascriptions do track non-trivial similarities.

Posłajko mentions the traditional model of natural kinds, proposed by Putnam (1975b) and Kripke (1980), according to which natural kinds are characterized by the fact that their members share hidden essences, e.g., atomic structure or DNA. Posłajko agrees with the view (of, *inter alia*, Beebe, Sabbarton-Leary, 2010; Cooper, 2013) that

this model cannot be extended to psychological kinds as there is little sense in claiming that they might be seen as possessing hidden micro-essences. If psychological kinds are defined functionally, then we cannot postulate a hidden structure common to all instances of such a kind. (Posłajko, 2024, p. 92)⁴

So, it is in virtue of the conceptual identification of the psychological with the functional that makes psychological kinds such as beliefs non-natural kinds on this model. Posłajko appears to endorse the analytic version of functionalism (mainly due to Lewis, 1972), according to which mental terms are defined by the folk-psychological generalizations about the relations among mental states, their environmental causes, and their behavioral effects.⁵ Note that psychological

⁴ All further references to Posłajko's work are to his (2024).

⁵ Specifically, Posłajko's argument presupposes (the standard) role functionalism, rather than realizer functionalism (proposed by Lewis, 1980), which identifies mental states not with functional roles but with their particular physical realizers, and takes functional specifications merely to refer to whichever lower-level properties satisfy them.

kinds' being non-natural in the sense in question means neither that mental states do not have micro-essences—if they are physical, then they do—nor that psychological concepts such as “belief” fail to capture similarities among their referents—*ex hypothesi*, they capture functional similarities (both between type-different beliefs and between different tokens of the same belief-types). But according to Pośłajko, those micro-essences do not make kinds psychological, and those functional similarities do not make kinds natural.

Pośłajko does not dwell much on the hidden-essence conception of natural kinds, which he takes to be unsuitable for psychological kinds, and turns to discuss the more liberal conception of Khalidi (2013) and Cooper (2013), according to which what distinguishes between psychological categories which are arbitrary and those which are objective is the latter's projectability. He considers this conception to be more suitable for psychology. Still, the claim that the category of beliefs is not natural due to its functional nature is significant to the issue of belief realism. Since the issue of the naturalness (or lack thereof) of psychological categories such as beliefs is, for Pośłajko, a route to the issue of their reality (or lack thereof), it appears that he takes their functionality to be at least part of what prevents them from being real. Furthermore, note the following three claims: first, their functionality prevents beliefs from being natural and hence real, according to Pośłajko, because, as functional, they do not possess hidden essences; second, functional categories can be realized physically; third, Pośłajko shuns away from dualism. The conjunction of these claims implies that the reason for the non-naturalness of beliefs that is pointed out in this context must be the fact that functions are not related to any specific physical realization. In other words, the reason is the (in principle) multiple realizability of functions; in still other words, it is the fact that functional categories are not physical categories.

However, to the extent that the non-naturalness and non-reality of beliefs depend on this characteristic, the sense in which beliefs are non-natural and non-real is rather weak. For in this sense, properties that figure in the special sciences (e.g., biological properties) and software properties, for example, would come out non-real. That is, on this conception, beliefs would come out as real (or non-real) as those properties. Pośłajko would certainly not be satisfied with such a mild belief non-realism, and indeed he asserts his denial of the reality of beliefs to be stronger than what mere multiple realizability implies. Acknowledging the plausibility of the idea that higher-level states such as beliefs are multiply realizable, he notes that this characteristic “might be (and probably would be) accepted by the strong realist about beliefs” (p. 67). And, as mentioned, in spite of his claim that beliefs are not natural kinds on the hidden-essence conception of natural kinds, he does not attach significance to this conception. But it is worth raising the issue of multiple-realizability and functionality not only because Pośłajko does claim that the category of beliefs is not natural due to its functional nature and so should confront the challenge that it leads to a rather weak belief non-realism, but also because of the relevance of this issue to another essential aspect of beliefs as natural kinds, namely that of whether the concept “belief” captures similarities.

Let's move to Poślajko's argument for a negative answer to this question. It is one tenet of Poślajko's belief non-realism that "There are no objective similarities between states which are described by attributions of the form '*x* believes that *p*'" (p. 64). Poślajko asks us to consider two people who believe that JFK went to Harvard. The attribution of this belief to both is justified on the grounds that both meet some common-sense criteria for attributing it, e.g., assert "John F. Kennedy went to Harvard", or exhibit some behavioral dispositions that are related to it. He admits that there is something that makes each attribution of such a belief true, when it is: "this might be some combination of behavioral and verbal dispositions, sub-personal cognitive states, and phenomenal feels" (p. 65). However, he denies that "there is any deep similarity between the factors that make such attributions true in different cases" (p. 66). To show this, he asks us to further imagine that the two people to whom the belief that JFK went to Harvard is attributed differ in ways that are relevant to their possession of this belief:

The one is an academic who studies American presidents [...] the other is a distracted student who is utterly disinterested in the life of past politicians but has read some stuff about Kennedy and somehow remembered the fact that he went to Harvard. The dispositions of these two persons—both behavioral and verbal—would most probably be diverged in this case, and we might suppose that the more basic sub-personal cognitive states would also be very different [...] We have also no reason—at least according to a minimal non-realist—to suppose that the phenomenal aspect of belief would be the same (or reasonably similar) in these two cases. (Poślajko, 2024, p. 66)

I agree with much of what is claimed here, though not with all. Indeed, Poślajko illustrates that the individuation of beliefs—as we standardly ascribe them—is wild and undisciplined. Stich (1983) presented examples that illustrate this phenomenon, and so did Crane (2017) and Curry (2021; whom Poślajko mentions in this context). We may also add to the list the example of people who are attributed the same belief despite speaking and thinking in different languages—they certainly differ with respect to some relevant sub-personal states.⁶ Note that the point of all these examples concerns the ascription of content. The examples do not concern the psychological mode of believing—it is content whose ascription is supposed to be wild and undisciplined. And I agree that it is. To be precise, I agree that our standard folk content ascriptions—or at any rate part of them—are wild and undisciplined to the extent that they cannot be said to track non-trivial similarities between the supposed bearers of content (e.g., belief-states).

But a defender of the reality of beliefs might protest that this falls short of undermining her view (or at any rate a version of it that is worth considering).

⁶ They also differ with respect to some verbal dispositions, but this is true only under a non-intentional individuation of these dispositions and arguably only the intentional individuation matters.

One possible way for her to base this protest is to argue that there is a gap between beliefs as they are and belief as they are ascribed by us. Brian Loar (1988) distinguishes between “social contents”—the contents we ascribe to people by means of *de dicto* or oblique ascriptions, and “psychological contents”—real contents of people’s mental states, which supervenes on conceptual role, that is, on the state’s relations with other mental states, perceptual input, and behavioral output.⁷ As applied to the JFK belief example, the belief realist may argue that the identical content ascriptions in question—those which ascribe to both subjects the belief that JFK went to Harvard—do not accurately describe the real contents of the subjects, which differ, as the functional roles associated with their respective beliefs differ. If so, then this example does not put to test the thesis that type-identical beliefs enjoy similarities, since the beliefs under consideration are not type-identical.

Trivially, the distinction between contents that are ascribed to people and contents they really have presupposes intentional realism, which Pośłajko appears to reject, but such a presupposition is legitimate as a challenge to belief non-realism. That is, it is upon Pośłajko’s shoulders to undermine this distinction. One possible way for him to undermine Loar’s distinction is to argue against the idea that mental content can be reduced to psychological conceptual role (for my arguments against conceptual role theories of content, see Horowitz, 1992; 2024), but the very idea of this distinction can incorporate any other realist approach to content, and assuming that all realist approaches to content are doomed to fail does not appear to be a legitimate move on the non-realist part in this debate.

However, there is a deeper problem with approaches such as Loar’s. The distinction in question is committed to the claim that the whole practice of content ascription may be misguided, and this claim makes little sense in an intentional realist picture. At least, it is strongly unmotivated. For if the whole practice of content ascription is, in principle, wrong, what reasons could we have for identifying any mental property or relation that is not captured by content ascriptions with content? How at all could we identify content in complete separation from our content ascriptions? To assume that there is such a property or relation appears utterly arbitrary. So, Pośłajko’s JFK argument is not challenged by any approach that is based on a distinction between real and psychological content.

Still, there is a less radical alternative that challenges Pośłajko’s argument to the effect that beliefs do not ground similarities. On this alternative, on many occasions content ascriptions yield only partial descriptions of our mental contents. In other words, they are often elliptical, and in still other words, they standardly individuate mental contents in coarse-grained ways while it is possible (though for most practical purposes not necessary) to individuate many of them in more fine-grained ways. Thus, the academic and the distracted student

⁷ Andrew Woodfield argues for a similar view (1982; for a conceptual role account of mental content, see Block, 1986).

have different beliefs with respect to JFK, even though the same content ascription is standardly used to describe both beliefs. For example, we may say that Sam (the academic) believes that JFK, who was the president of the USA from 1961 until his assassination in 1963, and whose main achievements as a president were [...] excelled in his studies at Harvard, and that Tom (the distracted student) believes that the American president named JFK went to Harvard. Now, you might object that some of the details that figure in this ascription of Sam's belief are not part of the content of his belief, and that, generally, all content ascriptions resist analysis of this kind. I think there are reasons to doubt this claim, but suppose it is true, and thus that we cannot truly describe the content of Sam's belief in a way that is more fine-grained than the just-mentioned description of Tom's belief. If so, then there is no reason to say that their respective beliefs differ in behavioral dispositions, for example. (Of course, they may say different things about JFK on various occasions because they differ with respect to some other JFK beliefs, but what matters is the contribution of the beliefs under consideration to the behavioral dispositions under the same circumstances, that is, how these beliefs would have been interacted with identical beliefs or desires). So, if a fine-grained individuation of these two people's relevant JFK beliefs is feasible, then these beliefs differ in type and so this example does not put to test the idea that beliefs ground similarities. If, on the other hand, we justly ascribe to these people the same JFK belief-type and no fine-grained individuation is feasible, despite their different relevant backgrounds and the like, then they share behavioral dispositions.

Now, behavioral dispositions, like dispositions of any kind, do not arise *ex nihilo*, and, most plausibly, identical behavioral dispositions are underlain by factors of the same type. Indeed, these factors need not be of the same physical type, and assuming that beliefs are in fact multiply realized, then they *are not* of the same physical type. But factors that underlie the same behavioral dispositions are, most probably, structurally similar and functionally similar (see Putnam, 1975a argument for the claim that functionalism is the most plausible theory of mental state types). So, it appears that fine-grained, fully detailed, belief ascriptions do track similarities and beliefs do ground similarities at some level of reality. The insistence that the fact that beliefs ground merely high-level similarities supports the case for belief non-realism (no other characteristic of structural and functional similarities may be relevant to their exclusion), presupposes that only type-physicalism is a (physicalist) realist account of mental kinds such as beliefs.

3. Are Beliefs Causes?

The reasoning that I have just presented for the obtaining of functional similarities among beliefs that are treated as identical is concerned with the causal basis of the manifestations of the dispositions associated with beliefs (though functional properties are not, strictly speaking, causal properties). So, it is related to the issue of mental causation and, specifically, belief causation. Poślajko at-

tacks this issue directly on several fronts, because he takes the question of belief realism to hinge upon the question of whether we can accept the idea of beliefs as (higher-level) causes. His reply to the latter question—and hence to the former—is negative. I will now discuss his argument to this effect, and argue that the truth of his answer turns out to be a matter of mere terminological choice.

Central to Pośłajko's argument is the idea that "the [supervenience] base of beliefs is wider than the occurrent psychofunctional state of a believer", and therefore "the difference-[making] account of causation does not vindicate the idea that beliefs are causes" (p. 101). According to the difference-making account, to say that property *A* causes property *B* means that making a difference in the value of property *A* would result in a change of value in property *B* (e.g., List, Menzies 2017; Menzies, 2008; Woodward, 2008). Pośłajko assumes, for the sake of argument, that this account resolves the problem of higher-order causation; his claim is that, even then, the problem of the causal relevance of content persists. The claim that the supervenience base of contentful mental states such as beliefs is wider than the occurrent internal mental state is usually understood as the semantic externalist view (mainly associated with Burge, 1979; Putnam, 1975b), according to which factors external to the possessor of a mental state—be these environmental-physical ones or social ones—participate in determining its content. According to Pośłajko, however, semantic internalism is also committed to that claim, for it is committed to the view that whatever constitutes the content of a belief is *temporally* external to the occurrent mental state of the believer. Whether the internal factor that constitutes mental content is physical or phenomenal, it must be located in the past of the believer. So,

the supervenience base of my current belief contains at least two states: the first is the past event that is partly constitutive of my concept, which is part of my belief; the second is my current psychofunctional state related to this belief. (Pośłajko, 2024, p. 103).

Let's refer to this view as "diachronic internalism".⁸

Pośłajko argues (pp. 103–104) that this view entails, in an interventionist framework,⁹ that beliefs are not causally active. The argument is this: Suppose that, due to being presented by fake scientific evidence, I drop belief *B*₁ and adopt, instead, belief *B*₂, and as a result perform action *A*. This appears to be a case of an interventionist mental causation. However, suppose that a doppelgänger of mine in a nearby possible world has the same psychofunctional state as the one that is associated with my *B*₁. After being exposed to the same interven-

⁸ As noted, according to the standard understanding of externalism, such a view should be classified as externalist, but my classification of it as a unique internalist view aligns with Pośłajko's terminology, which reflects his claim that not only under (standard) externalism do beliefs lack causal efficacy.

⁹ Interventionism is Woodward's (2008) version of the difference-making account. The uniqueness of this version does not matter to the present discussion.

tion he comes to have the same psychofunctional state as the one that is associated with my *B2*, and as a result he comes to perform action *A*. Due to the different ways in which we acquired our concepts, his beliefs are *B1** and *B2**, respectively, that is, his beliefs differ in content from my corresponding beliefs. Now, the intervention in question (the presentation of the fake information) cannot change those past events that constitute the contents of our respective beliefs. It can only change the psychofunctional state in question. Since this state is part of the belief, a change in it is a change in the belief. And so, since a change in it brings about action,¹⁰ this case involves counterfactual dependence between belief and action. However, this dependence is not causal, because it is the change in the psychofunctional state that brings about the action. Thus, in an interventionist framework, beliefs are not causes—they are not causally responsible for changes in behavior.

As Poślajko notes, this argument is a variant of the arguments to the effect that wide content—content that depends on factors external to the subject—is causally inert. It is worth noting that these arguments have been challenged, notably by Tyler Burge (1986; 1989),¹¹ and that Poślajko's argument for the claim that beliefs are not causes pertains to a temporal element and does not apply to externalism. Perhaps Poślajko is assuming that those arguments can survive the challenge. Otherwise, for his argument to be effective, it must be that content is partly determined by a past factor regardless of whether it is partly determined by an external factor. While it appears that Poślajko only argues that diachronic internalism is entailed by internalism, it might be that he intends to argue for the categorical claim that content is always partly determined by a past internal factor. At any rate, I will now discuss his claim that beliefs are not causes on the assumption that this categorical claim is true.

First, we should distinguish between the causal status that can be attributed to properties and the causal status that can be attributed to events or states. Events are the paradigmatic causes. It is only in a loose sense that we can say that properties are causes. *Instantiations* of properties (which, according to many philosophers, are events) are causes, whereas properties can, at most, be causally efficacious, in the sense that events have their causal power *by virtue of* possessing certain properties. A notion that is weaker than that of the causal efficacy of properties is that of properties' causal relevance. According to Jackson and Petit, for example, what makes a non-efficacious property causally relevant to the causal production of an event is the fact that its realization ensures that a crucial

¹⁰ The claim expressed by this clause is not stated by Poślajko. It is my understanding that his argument leans on it.

¹¹ Burge's interlocutor on this issue, Jerry Fodor, was later convinced that Burge's view is closer to truth than his own (Fodor, 1994).

productive property is realized and, in the circumstances, that the event occurs (e.g., Jackson, Petit, 1990).¹²

Now, how should we understand Pośłajko's claim that beliefs are not causes? He does not deny that the internal psychofunctional states that are associated with beliefs are causes of behavior. For him, this does not suffice to endow *beliefs* with the status of causes. So, he must be rejecting the identification of those psychofunctional states with beliefs. Indeed, they are not the supervenience base of beliefs, but only parts thereof. Further, "What turns out to be genuinely causally relevant in explanations of actions, even in the interventionist framework, are not beliefs *qua* content-bearing states but psychofunctional occurrent states" (p. 105, emphasis added).¹³ This claim is also concerned with the issue of the causal relevance of properties or categories. According to it, the category of beliefs is causally irrelevant: those properties that make entities beliefs and the beliefs that they are (according to their individuation by our practice of belief ascription) are not causally relevant.¹⁴ Indeed, assuming either externalism or diachronic internalism, this appears to be true. However, Pośłajko is also making here the stronger claim that the psychofunctional states in question—which are the causes of human action—are not content-bearing states. So, they are not beliefs, and beliefs are not causes of human action. We should note that the claim that content-bearing states are not causes is different and does not follow from the claim that content, which makes beliefs beliefs and the specific beliefs they are, is not causally relevant.

Here is another way to look at the matter. We can take beliefs to be those internal psychofunctional states as individuated in terms of content, and hence as individuated in terms of factors external to themselves, while these external factors can be environmental-physical, social, or (in the framework of Pośłajko's diachronic internalism) past ones. On this suggestion, what beliefs are is one thing—they are *internal* states; how they are individuated is another—they are *externally* individuated. If this suggestion is true, then neither semantic externalism nor diachronic internalism undermines the idea of beliefs as internal psychofunctional states and thus the idea of beliefs as causes of human actions.

Thus, on both ways of viewing the matter, first, human actions are caused by internal psychofunctional states; second, beliefs are individuated externally, i.e.,

¹² The difference-making account can also be considered an account of causal relevance, although it is often presented—and Pośłajko presents it, as we saw—in terms of being a cause rather than in terms of being causally relevant.

¹³ Pośłajko's conditioning this claim upon interventionism should not be taken lightly. He claims that beliefs *qua* beliefs are causally irrelevant *even* in the interventionist framework, but interventionism is not innocuous. For example, it clashes with Burge's abovementioned view of mental causation, a view which allows beliefs to play a causal role in the framework of semantic externalism.

¹⁴ The claim that beliefs *qua* content-bearing states are not causes is reminiscent of Stich's (1978) claim that there are no entities that are both semantically evaluable and causes of behavior.

by factors external to the current psychofunctional states in question; third, the properties that individuate beliefs are not causally relevant. On one of these ways, these properties (externally) individuate *those internal states* and make them beliefs and the specific beliefs they are, and so it is beliefs that are causes of action; on the other way (Pośłajko's), since those properties that determine the identity of certain mental entities as beliefs and as the specific beliefs they are (be their ontological status what it may) are external to those internal states, *those states are not beliefs*—they are not content-bearing states.

How shall we decide whether those internal psychofunctional states are *beliefs qua content-bearing states* or not? According to Pośłajko, "... the problem is that beliefs lose their status as genuinely causally relevant factors for sub-personal psychological states which are individuated purely psychofunctionally" (p. 105). But why say that these states are individuated purely psychofunctionally, rather than that they are also externally individuated *qua* content-bearing states? No criterion can decide on the matter except for stipulation. The difference between these views is a difference that makes no difference: no possible metaphysics—no possible concealed facts—can settle the issue. It is a matter of nothing but terminological choice. This point is significant since if this issue is a matter of sheer stipulation, then, to the extent that it is supposed to contribute to the case for the non-naturalness of beliefs, and in turn to the case for their non-reality, then the issue of the reality of beliefs itself becomes a matter of sheer stipulation. In fact, taking Lewisian naturalness to be the mark of the real is itself a stipulation. Pośłajko argues that

The issue of realism about beliefs and the question of whether belief properties are natural seem to strongly coincide: in both cases, the positive answer is partly justified by accepting the claim that beliefs play a genuine causal-explanatory role [...]. The indicators are similar in both cases. (2024, pp. 58–59)

However, if, as this passage appears to suggest, there is an independent test for the reality of beliefs—namely the playing of a genuine causal-explanatory role—why is the appeal to naturalness needed?¹⁵

Of course, I do not claim that the existence of beliefs is a matter of stipulation. My claim regarding stipulation in this context is only concerned with the issue of the "reality" of beliefs as addressed by Pośłajko. Additionally, this claim does not diminish the significance of Pośłajko's observation about the uniqueness of beliefs and their role—if any—in mental causation. However, I think that this uniqueness does not challenge their reality and provides no reason to assign them

¹⁵ Pośłajko may argue that his terminological choice is preferable on the grounds that the folk psychological concept of belief is a concept of a mental cause of behavior *qua* content-bearing state. However, first, I doubt that this folk psychological concept is so specific and fine-grained. (I am indebted to an anonymous referee for this point). Second, the current issue concerns the nature of mental states themselves, rather than their match with folk psychology.

an inferior ontological category within the realm of existence, unless it is thus stipulated.^{16, 17}

That said, I believe that the idea of the separation between the internal psychofunctional states and intentional properties, which figures prominently in Poślajko's discussion, is very significant. Furthermore, I believe that no concrete entity possesses intentional properties. I will refer to this issue in the next section.

4. The Success Argument

Beliefs, alongside other propositional attitudes, notably desires, are mentioned in successful explanations and predictions of behavior. To the extent that these explanations and predictions are causal, this fact might be taken to challenge Poślajko's view that beliefs are non-real. The success argument for realism about propositional attitudes *qua* content-bearing states (Fodor, 1987; Lahav, 1992; Pylyshyn, 1980) in fact challenges views such as Poślajko's along such lines. I will now present Poślajko's treatment of this argument and criticize it. Finally, I will briefly show why I share his view that the success argument fails to establish the existence or reality of beliefs *qua* psychofunctional content-bearing states, and, relatedly, why I take folk psychology to be more faithful to mental reality than Poślajko does.

Since the success argument purports to establish that content-bearing states exist and are causes of behavior, it should be taken to pertain not merely to their existence but also to their reality in Poślajko's sense. Indeed, this is how Poślajko (p. 148) presents the argument (restricting it to beliefs):

¹⁶ There are philosophers who endorse "Alexander's dictum", according to which to be real is to have causal powers. But even if we understand this principle as a requirement for having some superior ontological status within the set of existents rather than for membership in this set, it makes no sense to take it to distinguish in such terms between those two abovementioned ways of viewing the matter, and the claim regarding stipulation remains intact.

¹⁷ Recall that Poślajko's belief anti-realism is not the claim that beliefs are non-real, but the claim that they do not match the folk concept of belief. In particular, Poślajko argues that the folk concept of belief is a concept of a causally active entity, whereas beliefs are causally irrelevant. Let me just briefly remark that I am not sure that the folk concept of belief is indeed a concept of a cause. I tend to think that although people would agree that beliefs play a causal role vis-à-vis behavior, the concept of belief itself is silent on the issue of belief causation. If, for example, we are reported that science has discovered the causal mechanism responsible for behavior and that beliefs are not part of it, it seems that those of us who will be persuaded that this report is correct, will not take it to undermine the existence of beliefs. On the other hand, it seems to be a crucial part of the folk notion of belief that beliefs have contents—that they are beliefs *that...*—and a psychological mode (that of believing).

1. Folk psychology is extremely predictively successful.
2. Beliefs are posits of folk psychology.
3. Posits of extremely predictively successful theories are real.

Conclusion:

Beliefs are real.

If the argument is sound, it undermines Poślajko's contention (p. 112) that there is no empirical support for belief realism, for the first premise is supposed to be supported empirically. It is this premise that Poślajko attacks. He accepts that people do remarkably well at predicting the behavior of their fellow-subjects, but argues that for establishing the claim that folk psychology is a successful theory "one must show that we are successful at prediction and coordination *because* we use the theory of folk psychology [...]" (p. 148, emphasis added). According to Poślajko, this condition does not obtain. Leaning on Dennett's (1998) distinction between folk psychology understood as a craft and understood as ideology, he argues: "Fodor's idea that we predict and coordinate behaviour because we rely on the theoretical apparatus of folk psychology is just one of many possible interpretations of the success of our folk-psychological craft" (p. 149).

I think the focus on the theory of folk psychology on the part of Fodor and, consequently, of Poślajko leads the discussion astray. The issue concerns the reality of beliefs, while the appeal to folk psychology is supposed to be merely a means to vindicate their reality. As Poślajko agrees, we successfully predict behavior by ascribing beliefs. The issue is whether we can conclude from this that beliefs are real, and this question comes down to whether the appeal to that which makes those states beliefs is essential to this success. This issue need not refer to folk psychology as a theory. The only relevance of the theory of folk psychology to the success argument is that it is the enterprise that posits beliefs. This is the only theoretical apparatus to which we should appeal. In fact, we can dispense with reference to folk psychology and present the argument (as it is indeed often presented) as one that simply leads from the predictive and explanatory success of ascribing beliefs to the reality of beliefs. If to ascribe beliefs is, by definition, to use the theory of folk psychology, then trivially the predictions succeed because we use the theory, but in such a case nothing needs to be shown beyond the appeal to beliefs. And if the use of this theory is something beyond and above the ascription of beliefs, it is not required for the predictions to work. In either case, it is the appeal to beliefs that is responsible for the success. Indeed, the simple and natural explanation of the success in question is the assumption that we have beliefs and desires, but whether this is true—whether this responsibility means that beliefs *qua* content-bearing states underlie this success—is another matter, to which I shall turn shortly.

Poślajko adds another requirement to the soundness of the success argument: that folk psychology provide an accurate description of the internal structure of

the mind. Following Hochstein (2012), he doubts that this is the case. The validity of this requirement depends on what “the internal structure of the mind” is taken to mean. Certainly, to ascribe beliefs in terms of content is not to ascribe the physical causal mechanisms of the mind (at least in the *de dicto* sense of this claim). It is of the very essence of folk psychology to bypass such mechanisms, without, of course, denying their existence and reality. (If the presumed fact that beliefs cannot be identified with such mechanisms is taken to show that beliefs are not real, then, it seems to me, we are again in the realm of stipulation). But to bypass them is not to deny their existence or reality. Further, predictively successful ascriptions of beliefs may expose some aspects of those mechanisms; it is the gist of the success argument that those mechanisms possess causally relevant aspects that are ascribed by such ascriptions. That is, postulating some aspects of them may account for their predictive success. I think it does, though I share Pośłajko’s suspicion about the real import of the success argument. Specifically, I do not take it to establish the existence or reality of beliefs *qua content-bearing states*, which is what it is usually taken to establish. The argument fails to show that the causes of behavior possess intentional aspects.

I discuss this issue extensively in my *Intentionality Deconstructed: An Anti-Realist Theory* (2024), the main thesis of which is intentional anti-realism, namely the claim that no concrete entity possesses or can possess any intentional property. I will now present my reason for believing that the success argument does not vindicate the existence of intentional properties, and then my reason for believing that it does vindicate the existence of other aspects of the structure of the mind. I contest the argument’s third premise. I share the view of selective scientific realists such as Philip Kitcher (1993) and Stathis Psillos (1999), according to which the explanatory and predictive success of a theory only indicates the truth of those parts of it that are explanatory or active in the theory’s explanations and predictions. The question for folk psychology, therefore, is whether it makes room for a distinction between such parts or aspects and others. And it does, for in ascribing a propositional attitude to one, we thereby ascribe to one not only a psychological mode and content but also a logico-syntactic structure (the logico-syntactic structure of the ascribed propositional content). Postulating such structures suffices to account for the success under consideration, since they can stand in logical relations of all sorts and thus can guarantee both theoretical reasoning and (what is directly relevant to the success argument) practical reasoning. If this is correct, then the success argument fails to vindicate the existence of mental states with intentional properties, for the minimal postulation of the existence of mental states with logico-syntactic properties suffices to explain the success.

In fact, the success argument is a compelling argument to the effect that the explanatory and predictive success of folk psychology justifies the idea that we have internal psychofunctional states. Pośłajko accepts the existence and reality of such states, which are causes of behavior and which he regards to be parts of the supervenience base of beliefs (and probably of other propositional attitudes).

I assume he would agree that this is also established by the success argument. In my view, it is not only that the possibility of these states' having logico-syntactic properties blocks the success argument as an argument for intentional realism, as their postulation suffices to account for the explanatory and predictive success; I take this argument a step further. I take its rationale—that the explanatory and predictive success of a theory indicates the truth of those parts of it that are explanatory or active in the theory's explanations and predictions—to also support the view that these states in fact have logico-syntactic properties.

Indeed, low-level physical properties of these states are causally efficacious vis-à-vis behavior and they can account for the explanatory and predictive success of ascriptions of propositional attitudes in particular cases, but we cannot be satisfied with postulating such properties since content ascriptions often succeed to explain or predict instances of behavior as belonging to behavioral patterns that are not physical patterns (even though their instances are physical); recall the well-known examples such as those of stopping a cab or buying a share in the stock market. Postulating either intentional or logico-syntactic properties—both of which are conceptually implied by folk psychological explanations and predictions—would account for this phenomenon,¹⁸ but as the latter are minimal, we are warranted to postulate them but not the former.

In this respect, Poślajko's approach and mine differ in the ways they conceive of the truth of folk psychology, for I take those internal psychofunctional states that underlie human behavior to have a closer affinity to the folk explanations and predictions of behavior: the former, though lacking intentional properties, often possess those structural characteristics that the latter take them to possess. Poślajko's belief non-realism takes folk psychology to be less faithful to mental reality than I do, and he denies, whereas, as noted, I accept, that predictively and explanatorily successful ascriptions of propositional attitudes reveal aspects of the mind's architecture. Folk psychology consists of ascribing *contents*, but contents necessarily involve logico-syntactic structures and thus content ascriptions are ascriptions of logico-syntactic structures (they conceptually imply logical structures, which must take some syntactic form or another). So, folk psychology's commitment to the existence of such structures (though arguably indirect) is as strong as its commitment to contents. This commitment is a commitment to language-like structures, but it is not a commitment to how such structures are realized.¹⁹ The issue of the realization of the structures in question warrants wider discussion, but here I am only concerned with comparing Poślajko's view

¹⁸ The claim that postulating either intentional or logico-syntactic properties would account for the fact that content ascriptions often succeed to explain or predict instances of behavior as belonging to behavioral patterns that are not physical patterns does not depend on the properties in question being causally efficacious. It suffices that they be causally relevant (in Jackson and Petit's sense mentioned above), and we can see that they are.

¹⁹ For example, it clashes with radical connectionism (e.g., Smolensky, 1988), but it is compatible with implementational connectionism (e.g., Marcus, 2001).

and mine in terms of their fit with the core commitments of folk psychology, and as said, my view credits folk psychology with more faithfulness to mental reality than does Poślajko's.

But as we saw, both Poślajko and I reject the notion that the success argument—or any other argument—provides a good reason to postulate internal psychofunctional content-bearing states. I also share Poślajko's view that there are no such states.²⁰

5. Summary

Poślajko suggests viewing beliefs as holding a unique ontological status: they exist but are not real. I tried to challenge three of his arguments to the effect that beliefs are non-real: the argument that beliefs do not ground similarities; the argument that leans on his diachronic internalism to show that beliefs are causally irrelevant, and the argument against the first premise of the success argument for belief realism, namely that folk psychology is predictively successful. I argued, respectively, that since Poślajko has not ruled out the option that beliefs ground functional similarities, then his argument makes beliefs non-real in a rather weak sense; that his claim against the causal relevance of beliefs—and thus his claim against belief non-realism—turns out to be stipulative; and that the relevant understanding of that premise of the success argument is that it is the appeal to beliefs that is responsible for the predictive and explanatory success of ascribing beliefs, and that thus understood, it is true. But I also argued that this still fails to establish that beliefs *qua content-bearing states* are real (a point on which I agree with Poślajko), since we cannot rule out the possibility that logico-syntactic properties of our psychofunctional states underlie the predictive and explanatory success of folk psychology. Further, it seems that they do, and so I take folk psychology to be more faithful to mental reality than does Poślajko, even though I share his view that this reality does not include psychofunctional content-bearing states.

²⁰ I could only address here several aspects of Poślajko's approach to intentionality, which he discusses widely. Likewise, a discussion and defense of my intentional anti-realism (presented in *Intentionality Deconstructed*; Horowitz, 2024) lies beyond the scope of the present paper, for it does not play a role in my critique of Poślajko's arguments and in my approach to the success argument. Here I only explained my reasons for believing that this argument fails to vindicate the existence of mental intentional properties while it does vindicate the existence of mental logico-syntactic ones.

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