STUDIA SEMIOTYCZNE (SEMIOTIC STUDIES), 38(1), 77–87
ISSN 0137-6608, e-ISSN 2544-073X
DOI: 10.26333/sts.xxxix1.06

Article

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THE FOLK ARE DOING FINE (BUT THE PHILOSOPHERS ARE IN TROUBLE)

SUMMARY: In his book *Unreal beliefs: An anti-realist approach in the metaphysics of mind* (2024b), Krzysztof Posłajko proposes to separate the question whether beliefs exist from the question whether beliefs are real, and defends the view that whereas beliefs exist, they should not be considered real. He goes on to argue that his anti-realist position implies that our folk psychological understanding of belief is in need of revision, as this common sense understanding at least implicitly builds on an unfounded commitment to realism. In this commentary I raise some objections to the latter claim. Specifically, I question the assumption that common sense notions of believing in Western folk psychology is grounded in specific metaphysical assumptions about mental states. Also, I will review anthropological work in various cultural and linguistic communities showing that there exist many practices of interpersonal understanding in which the ascription of inner mental states hardly plays a role. My claim is that the folk are doing fine: folk psychological practices are multifaceted and fluid phenomena that serve a wide variety of goals. I conclude by arguing that the ones in trouble might be the philosophers, as Posłajko's arguments have a lot of critical potential against causalist accounts in the philosophy of mind.

1. Introduction

When someone says: "I believe that a new pandemic is just around the corner", is that person thereby reporting the existence of a specific inner entity, namely a belief state? Are there reasons to presuppose that such things as beliefs really exist - and if they do, how should we understand them? Questions like

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these have gained renewed traction in recent years due to the rise of various novel and creative philosophical approaches to the metaphysics of mental states (Demeter et al., 2022; Fernández Castro, 2023, 2024; Gozzano, 2019; Kalis & Ghijsen, 2022; Mölder, 2010; Posłajko, 2022, 2024a; Schwitzgebel, 2002; Toon, 2023). For years, Krzysztof Posłajko's work has been an important voice in this debate, and it is a pleasure to see that his contributions have now culminated in his thought-provoking and carefully argued book *Unreal beliefs: An anti-realist approach in the metaphysics of mind* (2024b).

Posłajko's main claim in the book is that beliefs exist because the application criteria for the term 'belief' are superficial, and can therefore easily be met. However, according to Posłajko the question whether beliefs exist should be separated from the question whether beliefs are real. He argues that the latter question should be answered in the negative. So, whereas beliefs exist, they should not be considered real: this makes his position anti-realist. His main argument for anti-realism is that belief ascriptions do not track properties that can be understood as (sufficiently) natural, using David Lewis' distinction between natural and non-natural properties (Lewis 1983). Subsequently, Posłajko claims that his anti-realist positon implies that our folk psychological understanding of belief is in need of at least partial revision, as our common sense understanding at least implicitly builds on an unfounded commitment to realism.

Posłajko builds a solid and innovative argument for anti-realism. His account will add much needed impetus and weight to the broader anti-realist perspective, the presence of which in the literature has so far remained somewhat fragmented. Distinguishing the question of existence from the question of realism is an interesting move that creates conceptual room for a novel understanding of mental states, and Posłajko does a great job in showing the potential of such an understanding. At some points, the distinction also creates difficulties. Specifically, it is not always entirely clear what, in Posłajko's framework, the question of realism is about precisely. Early in the book Posłajko proposes that "the distinction between realism and moderate anti-realism about beliefs should be read in terms of the distinction between natural and non-natural properties" (p. 64). But later he claims that "if the folk consider the notion 'X' to denote a superficial / insubstantial category, and the property X that is denoted by this notion turned out to be a non-natural one, then the only thing we should conclude is that the folk concept adequately renders reality. This looks very much like realism" (p. 116) But why would this count as realism? If we follow Posłajko's own suggestion that realists take mental states to have natural properties, then everyone who holds that the notion of belief denotes non-natural properties, should count as an anti-realist. In response to this objection, Posłajko claims that "adherence to the claim that belief-properties are not natural in Lewis's sense is not in itself enough to classify a position as being a specimen of belief anti-realism. What is also needed is some sort of commitment to the idea that the folk notion of belief is in the wrong with respect to mental reality" (p. 117). But why would this be an additional requirement? Whether or not beliefs are real seems a question that is

distinct from the question whether or not the folk are correct about the reality of mental states.

This latter question is the one I would like to discuss in more detail in the remainder of this paper. Specifically, I will take a closer look at Posłajko's claim that "there is a serious mistake ingrained in the folk-psychological concept of belief" (p. 136), a mistake which he specifies as the mistake to at least implicitly attribute "internal, causally active states to subjects of belief" (p. 127). In the next section I will question the assumption that our common sense notion of believing does, even if only implicitly, assume a causalist theory of action explanation. In contrast, I will argue that in so far as the folk psychological discourse most Western academics will be familiar with embraces causalism, this seems a highly minimal and pragmatic form of causalism which is not grounded in specific metaphysical assumptions. I argue that more 'substantive' interpretations of folk discourse actually smuggle quite some philosophical baggage into the story. Building on this suggestion, I will then take a step back and show that there are actually many different folk psychological practices, and that these are multifaceted and dynamic phenomena regulated by a wide variety of goals and norms. By reviewing anthropological work in various cultural and linguistic communities I will show that there exist many practices of interpersonal understanding in which the ascription of inner mental states hardly plays a role. Folk psychology is thus not a uniform practice, and the folk are not always nor mainly concerned with making metaphysical statements. I will conclude that the folk are doing fine: the ones in trouble might be the philosophers, as Posłajko's arguments actually have a lot of critical potential against causalist accounts in the philosophy of mind.

The suggestions and questions I raise therefore do absolutely nothing to downplay the importance, quality and creativity of Posłajko's views. Studying his book has been a highly inspiring and rewarding experience, and I consider it to be one of the most important contributions to the philosophy of mental states that have appeared in the last decade.

2. A Causalist Folk Psychology?

Posłajko's arguments for the claim that our folk psychological concept of belief is at least partly mistaken, are mostly developed in chapter seven (*Minimal non-realism and common sense*). At the beginning of that chapter, he acknowledges that his notion of 'folk' is a parochial one: what he refers to is "the common sense of the contemporary, educated, western person" (p. 118). In this section I will follow him in focusing on the common sense understandings of mental states that Western philosophers will generally most familiar with (in the next section, I will take a step back from the parochiality). Posłajko's claim is that the Western folk notion of believing is implicitly causalist, and mistakenly so. As a method Posłajko relies on conceptual analysis, integrating two sources of evi-

dence: firstly, the observation of ordinary language, and secondly the mindreading literature in experimental psychology.

Regarding the observation of ordinary language, he builds on the analysis of Frances Egan (Egan 1995). Egan defends a minimalist construal of folk psychology, arguing that our common sense understanding of mental states involves the assumption that our mental states cause our behaviour: "We often say things such as 'He believed he was about to be fired because he saw a confidential memo that criticized his job performance' and 'She quit smoking because she believed it was affecting her health.' There is no reason to suppose that 'because' here functions any differently than in locutions which are clearly causal, such as 'The fire started because the electrical system was overloaded.' " (1995, p. 187). According to Posłajko, this supports his claim that our common sense understanding of beliefs is up for revision: after all, in the preceding chapters he has argued that beliefs should not be understood as causally active states. However, I think this conclusion is too quick. In fact, Egan also argues that this commitment to causalism does not presuppose nor rely on any specific metaphysical justification, nor does it entail a commitment to any specific cognitive architecture such as a language of thought or a connectionist model (pp. 186-7). If Egan is right about our folk psychological discourse not being grounded in identifiable metaphysical commitments, then an anti-realist metaphysical position will do nothing to undermine the legitimacy of that discourse. My proposal (which I think comes quite close to Egan's) is to consider folk discourse as a discourse that operates largely independently of, but is in fact compatible with, a wide variety of scientific and metaphysical positions[1].

But, one might ask, how could such a common sense 'minimalist causalism' be compatible with Posłajko's anti-realism? The most plausible answer is that the folk use causation terms in a much looser and less specific way than philosophers do, a suggestion for example also made by Curry (2018). Posłajko considers this possibility and discusses Curry's arguments (2024b, p. 120). However, he retorts by saying that he is not convinced: "No matter how we spin it, it seems there is no deep difference in the way causal vocabulary functions in the context of psychological explanations and other types of explanations" (p. 120). I do not share Posłajko's intuitions here. Given that even philosophers amongst themselves already disagree substantially on how to understand causation, and given that causation does not seem to be a uniform concept in the first place (Cartwright 2004, 2006), do we really have grounds to suppose that the folk all have a similar understanding of causation, which is moreover the same understanding that philosophers have? Terms like 'cause', 'because', etc. are indeed *used* in everyday life to explain behaviour – but this is not the same as saying that the users of these terms commit themselves to any particular metaphysical claim or

[1] Of course, any statement that claims the existence of a causal relation is, in a sense, a metaphysical statement. However, my point is when the folk make such statements, they generally do not make such claims on the basis of any identifiable metaphysical theory or definition of causation.

theory. In contrast, I want to maintain that even if folk psychological discourse is used to predict and explain, and even if notions like 'because' and 'inner cause' play a role in such predictions and explanations, they often seem to do so in a very 'light' and pragmatic sense.

This interpretation of folk psychological discourse has been extensively defended by Gilbert Ryle. For example, in his paper *On systematically misleading expressions* Ryle argues that if people say things like 'honesty does so and so' or 'equality is such and such', we should not take them to hold, even implicitly, that honesty and equality are entities. As he states: "the plain man who uses such quasi-Platonic expressions is not making a philosophical mistake. He is not philosophizing at all. [...] He knows what he means and will, very likely, accept our more formally proper restatement of what he means as a fair paraphrase, but he will not have any motive for desiring the more proper form of expression, nor even any grounds for holding that it is more proper" (Ryle 1971). I hold that this is exactly the attitude with which people use expressions like 'She quit smoking because she believed it was affecting her health'. In his book, Posłajko does acknowledge that the folk use belief terminology in a looser way than a causalist conception of belief seems to require. As explanation he points to Haslanger's distinction between manifest and operative concepts: whereas the folk report a causalist, 'metaphysically demanding' understanding of belief (this is their manifest concept), their actual use of the concept (their operative concept) can be much looser and less 'metaphysical' (Posłajko 2024b, p. 132). According to Posłajko, this implies that at least the folk's manifest concept is up for revision. Even though I agree that applying Haslanger's distinction here raises interesting questions, I am not really convinced that most folk have a metaphysically robust manifest concept of belief. Instead, I suspect that the causalist conception is primarily held by philosophers and scientists, something which becomes more clear when looking at Posłajko's second source of evidence.

Here Posłajko focuses on the mindreading literature in the empirical sciences of the mind: a lot of experimental psychology and cognitive science literature implicitly assumes a causalist framework. This is certainly true, but I am not convinced that this fact actually strengthens his revisionist claim about folk psychology. Causalism as a background assumption in psychology and cognitive science is part of an academic, theoretical discourse, and as such it can easily be explained (as Curry also points out) as a form of 'internalized philosophical dogma' (Curry 2018, p. 122): psychology and cognitive science share their functionalist cognitivist theoretical background with the analytic philosophy of mind. Egan makes a similar suggestion: "In the twenty years since the publication of Fodor's seminal book (1975) the classical computational model of the mind has become the received view in the philosophy of mind. It is not surprising that integral components of this conception […] have seeped into the collective philosophical consciousness to the point where it may be difficult for philosophers to separate these components from the body of theory that they share with ordinary folk. But they should be separated". I agree with Egan here. For philosophers

who have been born and raised with causalist intuitions about the mental, it might seem obvious that this is how people understand the mind. Moreover, of course insights and dogmas from philosophy and psychology do really find their way into folk psychological discourse: it is now for example quite common to say that one is feeling sad 'because one's serotonin levels are low', whereas a hundred years ago that would have been unintelligible. However, even if academic and non-academic discourses cannot be neatly separated, this doesn't mean that folk psychological expressions about causation entail a commitment to any of the theoretical assumptions that are at stake in the academic discourses from which such expressions are derived.

So, to conclude, even though some folk in Western cultures might, under the influence of philosophical and scientific discourses, have causalist intuitions, this cannot be considered a core commitment of 'Western folk' in general. I will now take a step back from the folk psychological discourse most Westerns academics will be familiar with, and show that far from being a uniform phenomenon, folk psychological practices actually come in all shapes and sizes, and are regulated by a wide variety of goals and norms.

3. Folk Practices of Believing

As said, Posłajko is laudably transparent in acknowledging that he uses a somewhat 'parochial' notion of folk psychology; moreover, he is well aware that "folk-psychological categories vary cross-culturally, and that the category of belief is not a universal one" (p. 96). In this section I will argue that such insights on cultural variation might have more substantial impact on his arguments than Posłajko is aware of. I will raise doubts about the idea that folk psychology is a uniform phenomenon; if it is not, this entails it might be impossible to make any meaningful claims about folk psychology as such. In support of my argument, I will discuss some examples of recent empirical work that investigates cultural and linguistic differences in practices of mental state ascription. I will argue that this work suggests that a) there are various different folk-psychological conceptions of believing and b) that several folk conceptions of believing do not assume that mental states cause behaviour, not even in the minimal sense described above.

Firstly, studies in comparative linguistics have investigated the use of mental state terms across different languages. Wierzbicka (1997, 2018) did pioneering work in this area, and proposed a so-called *natural semantic metalanguage*, consisting of a list of semantic primes that were found in every language studied. Amongst other things, this showed that whereas some notion of for example knowledge and desire might be universal (or at least were found in all the languages included in the study), the notions of belief and intention clearly are not. Gladkova (2007, 2016) builds on Wierzbicka's work in studying the use of what we know as propositional attitudes in various languages. More specifically, she further develops Wierzbicka's comparison between the English verb *to believe*

that and the Russian related verb *sčitat'* (Gladkova 2016). Even though both terms roughly refer to a mental state verb that expresses an opinion to which the speaker is committed and for which they have grounds, the meaning of both terms differs substantially. For example, Gladkova argues that whereas *to believe that* involves some willingness to provide arguments for one's opinion and openness to change if others provide good counterarguments, this is not part of the meaning of *sčitat'*. On the other hand, whereas *sčitat'* refers to opinions that one has taken substantial time to develop, this temporal feature is not part of the meaning of *to believe that*. Gladkova argues that examples like these show that our use of propositional attitude terms is infused by what she calls cultural scripts. Folk psychological practices of mental ascription should not be seen as isolated activities, but as being part of broader cultural and communicative practices.

This brings me to the proposal that if we want to understand folk psychology in their broader cultural and social context, this might require anthropological methods. In fact, there is a recent surge in anthropological literature on the question how different communities talk about, and ascribe, mental states to each other and themselves (Duranti 2015; Luhrmann et al. 2011; Nuckolls 2017; Robbins & Rumsey 2008). More specifically, there is an interesting body of work on the notion of belief. Already in 1973, anthropologist Rodney Needham (Needham 1973) published a book in which he argued that it is problematic to ascribe belief states to people studied in the context of anthropological fieldwork. His objections were that so-called belief states do not have any 'bodily concomitants', no clear phenomenological quality nor are easily translatable into other languages. All this, according to Needham, showed that the concept of belief is a 'cultural artifact' and cannot be used to provide information on the nature of the human mind. Needham's conclusion nicely resonates with Posłajko's perspective on mental state ascription. Recent contributions in anthropological literature picking up on Needham's work (Risjord 2020; Streeter 2020) argue however that Needham failed to see that the notion of belief as a representational inner state has its source in philosophy and not in everyday life: "Anthropology inherited its commitment to representationalism from the 19th-century debates over the possibility of a human science" (Risjord 2020, p. 589). The lesson, according to these authors, is that it might be impossible to do anthropology without ascribing belief states to others in some minimal sense (Streeter 2020), but that anthropologists should refrain from projecting a philosophical conception of belief and instead be open to the many possible ways in which cultures and practices might understand minds.

As examples of such an open investigation, I want to briefly reflect on some observations on the role of mental state ascription in various practices as discussed in the ethnographic studies of Rosen (1995) and Carey (2017). Both point out that there are communities that largely refrain from ascribing inner mental states to one another, a phenomenon referred to as *opacity of mind*. Rosen's edited volume explores the various roles played by the concept of intention in differ-

ent cultural and communicative practices. In his introduction, he observes that certain communities that live under conditions of political oppression "have restricted the attribution of inner selves to the domain of intracommunity communication. Others, more poignantly, act as if they have no inner lives of their own as a way of preserving their culture against the intrusion of hostile powers" (p. 8). In a similar vein, Carey (in his ethnography of a group of communities in the Moroccan High Atlas) observes that these communities generally explain or interpret each other's behaviour by referring to observations of other behaviour or bodily appearances ('he is unshaven'), and not to inner mental states such as beliefs or intentions. According to Carey, this does not mean that these communities do not have a notion of an inner mental life: "it is quite impossible to interpret the meaning of even quite simple sentences unless we in some way impute intention to the speaker" (2017, p. 47). However, the important message of his study is that such imputation need not (and in this case, does not) take the form of the presupposing of the existence of representational inner states.

These examples show that folk psychological practices come in many forms, and in many cases do not match the representationalist picture Western cultures have inherited from philosophical discourse. The same seems to hold for the picture that our folk psychological explanations are causalist in nature. For example, Henrich (2016, p. 129) suggests that: "(t)he pressure for an acceptable, clear, and explicit reason for doing things is merely a social norm common in Western populations, which creates the illusion (among Westerners) that humans generally do things based on explicit causal models and clear reasons. They often do not."

Such observations raise the question: which aspects of folk psychology are actually in need of revision? Is it the practice itself, or might it be merely the representationalist, causalist inheritance that can be found in some Western practices? I want to defend the latter claim. All in all, the idea that beliefs are causally efficacious internal mental states might have to be seen as a background dogma in Western analytic philosophy (Strijbos & de Bruin 2013). As mentioned, Posłajko is well aware of this work, and actually uses evidence on cultural variation himself to support his position that the properties of belief are non-natural (pp. 96-97). My point is that such evidence *also* raises doubts about his own claim that the folk have mistaken assumptions about the metaphysics of believing. Instead, I want to claim that the folk are doing fine: folk psychological practices are multifaceted and fluid phenomena that serve a wide variety of goals and that are governed by a wide variety of norms (Curry 2020; McGeer 2007, 2020). As mentioned in the previous section, Posłajko is correct in pointing out that certain Western folk psychological practices seem influenced by representationalist and causalist intuitions. But this doesn't mean that 'the Western folk' commit to causalism. Therefore, the fact that causalist intuitions might be philosophically objectionable doesn't show that there is anything wrong with folk psychological practices. What it does show is that there is something wrong with the

philosophical positions that gave rise to causalist intuitions: the ones in trouble might thus be the philosophers themselves.

4. Conclusions

To summarize, Posłajko has made a convincing case for the idea that beliefs are not real, and at the same time can be said to exist because the application criteria for the term 'belief' are superficial. However, if the folk are not mistaken, according to his own requirements (pp. 116-117) this is a problem for his anti-realist case. After all, Posłajko claims that anti-realism involves the claim that the folk are somehow mistaken about the reality of mental states. In the introduction I already raised some doubts regarding this criterion, but if we follow Posłajko here then my claim that 'the folk are doing fine' might have the implication that Posłajko's position becomes a lot closer to the kind of deflationary realism defended by neo-Ryleans and some interpretivists (pp. 37-38).

However, a maybe unexpected bonus is that Posłajko's book makes a highly convincing case for revisionism about causalism in the philosophy of mind: philosophers embracing the position that beliefs are causally effective representational states *are* in trouble. Even though the philosophy of mind as a discipline has become much more diverse and dynamic over the last decades, the representationalist-causalist framework is still highly influential, and classic notions like the language of thought hypothesis seem to experience a revival in the cognitive sciences (Kazanina & Poeppel 2023; Quilty-Dunn et al. 2023). What Posłajko's solid arguments therefore call for, in my view, is not so much conceptual engineering of folk psychological discourse, but renewed philosophical debate about the metaphysics of mind.

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