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RETHINKING FOLK REALISM ABOUT BELIEFS

SUMMARY: Poślajko's *Unreal Beliefs* (2024) provides a lucid overview of competing ontological views on belief, and his minimal anti-realist proposal is well-argued and persuasive. This article calls into question a less central thesis of the book: that ordinary speakers see beliefs as concrete, real, internal causes of behaviour. I offer a plausible alternative explanation of why everyday discourse gives this impression. While endorsing Poślajko's core anti-realist insights, I show that folk attributions of belief arise from a communicative need to translate holistic, nonverbal mindreading into discrete linguistic units. This translation does not reflect a genuine ontological commitment; it simply facilitates the exchange of information about one's own and others' perspectives. Philosophical reconstruction then mistakes these linguistic shortcuts for evidence of folk realism, leading to a theoretical ontology that exceeds the minimal metaphysical stance of everyday speakers. By distinguishing between holistic mindreading, language-driven segmentation, and academic reification, I propose a stance aligned with minimal anti-realism that does not aim to decide the question so much as to move the burden of proof.

KEYWORDS: belief, folk psychology, anti-realism, mindreading, belief attribution.

1. Introduction

I read Krzysztof Poślajko's book *Unreal Beliefs* (2024) with great interest. In a clear and well-structured manner, the author systematises the various positions on the ontological status of beliefs and carves out a space for a compromise

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anti-realist approach that, in my view, holds strong appeal for those with a naturalistic outlook on the mind. Since I agree with Pośłajko on the fundamental issues, including his claim that beliefs are not real in the sense characterised in the book, I would like to draw attention to a less central point: the way Pośłajko interprets the implicit metaphysical assumptions embedded in folk psychology's concept of belief.

In Chapter 7, Pośłajko addresses a potential objection to his overall approach: if one accepts that belief properties are not natural, this does not necessarily make one an anti-realist. Instead, one might claim that beliefs are real but merely superficial, along the lines of Schwitzgebel's dispositionalism (2013) or Dennett's interpretationism (2009). If we also accept that the folk concept of belief is superficial, then folk psychology would be correct about beliefs, and there would be no need to adopt anti-realism. (Pośłajko, 2024, p. 116) To respond to this objection, Pośłajko seeks to show that folk speakers do treat beliefs as "concrete causes of behaviour". He argues that both ordinary language practice and psychological research support this view (Pośłajko, 2024, p. 118).

I agree with both Pośłajko's minimal anti-realism and his claim that folk psychology should not be eliminated. I also share his scepticism about treating the folk concept of belief as merely superficial. However, I argue that, at the same time, we are not obliged to accept the claim that the folk treat beliefs as "concrete causes of behaviour" or the conclusion that they are genuinely realists about beliefs. I aim to show that a different, non-realist reading of folk practice is sufficiently plausible.

My criticism is not rooted in suspicion of the folk commitment to mental causation. It is, rather, that we must be cautious in inferring robust ontological commitments from linguistic packaging and explanatory convenience. The folk need not be read as treating beliefs as real, concrete entities, even though the language of folk psychology, as philosophers reconstruct it, suggests otherwise. I explain how such a stance both differs from classical belief realism and escapes superficialism. I also show that adopting such a perspective does not necessarily undermine the minimalist anti-realism developed in Pośłajko's book.

2. Are We Realists About Beliefs?

What is beyond dispute is that we all assume people can believe and that believing has some causal connections with a person's behaviour and other mental states. We readily produce sentences like, "She quit smoking because she believed it was hurting her health," or "He turned left because he believed that the other road was closed". If you ask people, "Are beliefs real?" they will answer "Yes" without hesitation. It seems natural to interpret this as folk-belief realism, and such an interpretation appears to be widespread among philosophers. Pośłajko aligns with this trend in arguing that the folk notion of belief is "substantial, at least in the respect that, according to our folk notion, beliefs should be seen as concrete causes of behaviour" (Pośłajko, 2024, p. 118).

Curry (2018), following Ryle (1949), develops one line of objection to this view. He argues that explanations in terms of beliefs appeal to reasons rather than to causes of behaviour. From this perspective, people do not think of beliefs as genuine causes of behaviour; they use belief-talk to contextualise behaviour in terms of behavioural dispositions, that is, on a superficial level. Belief-talk is supposed to give “teleological explanations of actions and insights into the personalities of actors”, not to provide mechanistic explanations of behaviour (Curry, 2018, p. 20). Pośłajko disagrees with this position. He claims that, although some argue that folk-psychological explanations invoke reasons rather than causes, there is no substantive difference in how causal language functions in folk psychology compared to other explanatory domains and no credible alternative to the view that belief attributions often serve straightforward causal purposes (Pośłajko, 2024, p. 120).

Without attempting to resolve their debate, I want to outline a different line of objection to the claim that people regard beliefs as concrete internal causes of behaviour, one that lies somewhat outside the exchange between Curry and Pośłajko. I agree with Pośłajko that the folk are realists about the mental: they do refer to mental states and processes by means of folk psychological language, and they genuinely believe that the mental sphere plays a causal role (which sets my position apart from dispositionalism and other forms of superficialism). At the same time, I question Pośłajko’s claim that the folk are belief-realists in the sense that they treat beliefs as “concrete causes” of behaviour. Such a stance requires countenancing the possibility that ordinary usage of folk-psychological vocabulary (e.g., “belief”) does not entail a metaphysical commitment to the concrete ontology that this framework appears to suggest. In the next section, I clarify and defend this possibility.

The arguments below should be read as exploring a live possibility rather than as establishing a consensus-defeating thesis. I aim to demonstrate that the question of whether the folk are realists about beliefs is far from settled and that there is conceptual space between folk realism and superficialism about beliefs that deserves consideration.

3. Three Levels of Folk Psychology

Many discussions on folk psychology begin by distinguishing between two concepts, or levels, of folk psychology (Dennett, 1989; Stich, Ravenscroft, 1994). To show that it is possible to hold a view on which ordinary people are not realists about beliefs without thereby casting them as superficialists, I will propose a more fine-grained distinction between different levels of folk psychology and argue that it is, at minimum, a plausible model. First, there are holistic, context-sensitive mindreading capacities that emerge prior to language acquisition. Second, folk-psychological discourse is employed to communicate about mental states, including beliefs, and this practice can give the impression of a robust realist commitment. Finally, philosophical reconstruction systematises

that appearance into an explicit theoretical framework with a realist ontology. To be clear, in introducing this distinction I am not claiming that there are three disjoint systems or methods for attributing minds. I take them to be three salient elements or aspects of a potentially unified capacity, each building on the previous one, and distinguishable only to a limited extent for conceptual and explanatory purposes.

3.1. Level 1: Mindreading as a Craft

At its most fundamental level, folk psychology is our basic ability to explain and predict others' mental states and behaviour, a craft, as Dennett puts it (1998). It integrates perceptual, affective, motivational, and contextual cues into an understanding of another's stance and appears to be automatic and universal, with evolutionary roots. There is no persuasive evidence that, at this level, we operate with theoretical concepts of folk psychology. In particular, there is no need to assume that we postulate beliefs as discrete, causally efficacious inner objects rather than more holistically understood informational states.

Positions such as Gallagher's (2006) interaction theory, Hutto and Myin's (2012) radical enactivism, and the broader 4E framework (Noë, 2004; Varela, Thompson, Rosch, 2017) have grown in influence by showing that social understanding emerges from embodied, embedded, enactive, and extended interactions rather than from the manipulation of isolated belief-tokens. Together, these accounts suggest that mindreading operates as a unified, context-sensitive capacity rather than through the attribution of "concrete" belief entities.

Cross-cultural evidence reinforces this holistic view: Strijbos and de Bruin (2013) report communities whose languages lack explicit terms for "belief" or "desire", yet whose members navigate social interactions effectively by integrating norms, roles, and embodied cues rather than by invoking propositional attitudes.

Developmental studies also support the conclusion that early mind-reading can be characterised as holistic and goal-centred, rather than dependent on the attribution of discrete belief and desire states. Classic findings show that infants encode others' behaviour in terms of goals, for example, by selectively representing the object toward which an actor repeatedly reaches, well before there is evidence that they parse psychology into separable propositional attitudes (Woodward, 1998). On what Gergely and Csibra (2003) call the teleological stance, by around 12 months, infants interpret actions as means to ends under situational constraints and evaluate efficiency without positing adult-like belief and desire representations. Even psychological interpretations of the false-belief task, which philosophers often cite as evidence for beliefs being fundamental elements of the early ontology of the mind, are often much more nuanced. Baillargeon, Scott, and He (2010) distinguish two subsystems of mindreading. On their account, Subsystem-1 enables infants to attribute two kinds of states to agents: motivational states, which specify the agent's motivation in the scene, and reality-congruent informational states, which specify what accurate information the

agent can gather through perception, memory, or inference. Subsystem-2, which becomes operational in the second year of life, extends this capacity by enabling infants to attribute reality-incongruent informational states to agents (Baillargeon, Scott, He, 2010, p. 111). Although the authors use the term “false beliefs”, their own description of SS2 indicates that the relevant attribution concerns the agent’s structured representation of the scene, rather than discrete propositional attitudes. This supports the more general point that even sophisticated forms of early mindreading need not be interpreted as involving beliefs understood as discrete, concrete entities.

Acknowledging that mindreading as a craft does not have to rely on positing beliefs as concrete objects need not imply rejecting some version of theory-theory. One can still debate whether mindreading operates more like simulation, hypothesis testing, or model-building. However, even if we employ certain theoretical concepts prelinguistically and prereflectively, there is no evidence of metaphysical commitment to beliefs as discrete entities at this level.

3.2. Level 2: Folk Psychological Talk and Apparent Realism

At the second level, folk psychology includes categories, generalisations, and predictions that can be formulated in natural language with its fine-grained, socially shaped concepts. The linear, reifying structure of language, stemming from how we describe macroscopic physical objects and processes, necessarily constrains how we conceptualise minds. When we say, “he believes that they do not know he cheated”, we are putting into words something that could also be grasped nonverbally (even chimpanzees are at least to some extent capable of such conceptualisation; Hare, Call, Tomasello, 2001). In communicating such observations, we simplify the complex attribution of someone’s state and perspective into a single dimension. (After saying, “he thinks that they do not know he cheated”, we might, for example, mention his emotions in a subsequent sentence, giving the impression that these are two separate “entities” in the observed scene: a belief and an emotion. We package a richer, holistic understanding of someone’s perspective, their “informational states”, into the noun-and-clause structure our language provides.

However, saying that someone “believes”, “worries”, or “considers” is not the same as assuming that there is a concrete object: “a belief”, “a worry”, or “a consideration” inside that person. The fact that we use the noun “belief” need not carry more ontological weight than the fact that we use nouns like “marathon” or “observation”. These words refer not to concrete objects but to aspects of states people may be in. Thus, we have no difficulty speaking of degrees of belief, changes of belief, or even ascribing contradictory beliefs. We may refer to several similar beliefs someone has about something, but our belief talk never addresses the question of exactly how many beliefs a person has about a particular thing. Such indeterminacy in belief-attribution supports the view that Level 2 belief-talk does not carve the mind into discrete belief-objects. Rather, it trans-

lates a more fluid, holistic grasp of another person's perspective—the kind of understanding operative at Level 1—into the available linguistic form.

To be clear, this does not entail that our belief-attribution sentences are false. Rather, they are the best linguistically available approximations of the situation we are trying to describe, akin to, for example, meteorological statements. When we say, “Today is windy”, we refer to the actual state of the weather, not merely to its superficial manifestations (e.g., gusts on the cheek). We construct causal explanations such as “branches break because it is windy” or “I have a migraine because it is windy”, yet we do not thereby postulate a concrete causal entity called “windiness”, a concrete entity that is a cause of my suffering. “Windy” serves at least partially as a placeholder: a name for whatever there is that causes trees to move, my cheeks to feel cold, and my head to hurt.

The sentence “A windy day is a cause of my headache” may be true in much the same way to the sentence “My belief that I would lose my job is a cause of my headache”. I can say it without positing concrete objects such as windiness or beliefs interacting with branches or heads.

That we so readily invoke belief-talk to explain the behaviour of systems without human minds shows how natural these attributions are and reveals the role of “belief” as a convenient placeholder whose referent is ontologically underdetermined. When we say that a moth flies toward a bulb because it “believes” it is the moon, we are not positing a discrete inner object; we are gesturing at a structured constellation of informational relations and sensitivities that guides its behaviour. The same usage extends to large language models, where talk of “beliefs” tracks stable, action-guiding regularities without committing us to belief tokens in the underlying architecture. In both cases, the notion of belief tracks a system's holistic internal organisation rather than a concrete inner item. Its referent remains underdetermined. In the absence of pressure to take sides, most speakers are neither realists nor anti-realists about beliefs and simply leave the matter undecided.

At the second level, it may seem that the folk are realists about beliefs, but this is merely an artefact of the constraints of natural language, which is geared toward talking about macroscopic, discrete objects. As Dennett puts it, the beliefs and desires “are best viewed as abstracta—more like centres of gravity or vectors than as individualizable concrete states of a mechanism” (Dennett, 1998, p. 85). The burden of proof lies with anyone who claims that these linguistic units express genuine ontological commitments. Absent further evidence, I take it to be entirely possible that the folk are neither realists nor anti-realists about beliefs, at least until philosophers prompt them to take a stance.

3.3. Level 3: Philosophical Reconstruction

At this third level, we philosophers and cognitive scientists take folk belief-talk at face value and reify beliefs as theoretical entities. It is only at this level that the grammar of language, combined with the powerful and, in my view,

partly justified impression that people routinely posit invisible “forces” governing human behaviour in everyday practice, leads us to metaphysical conclusions. When we encounter everyday statements such as “Her beliefs made her act like this”, we infer that folk speakers regard beliefs as postulated inner causal objects akin to theoretical objects in science. Although this reconstruction can be useful within academic discourse, there is no reason to assume that it reflects how ordinary speakers conceptualise their own or others’ mental lives. We construct our scientific (philosophical, psychological) ontology of the mind by drawing on the concepts of folk psychology—as they have developed in broadly Western cultures. We formulate and test hypotheses, and then interpret the results within this conceptual framework (for example, by seeking arguments for or against the claim that nonhuman primates attribute beliefs to their conspecifics). Our scientific picture of folk psychology is realist, a stance rightly challenged by philosophers such as Posłajko, who argues against it so effectively in his book that there is no need for me to repeat the argument here. What matters is that, unless philosophers or psychologists attempt to portray and systematise folk psychology in a realist way, ordinary people do not seem to treat these categories as seriously or as rigidly.

4. Success Argument Revisited

If we consider the three-level model of folk psychology as plausible, it casts a somewhat different light on, for example, the success argument. Posłajko reconstructs it as follows (2024, p. 148):

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

Therefore, beliefs are real.

In my view, this argument rests on a fallacy of equivocation. Folk psychology is indeed predictively successful as a practice (Level 1), but “beliefs” become posits of folk psychology only once they are framed in linguistic form and then also reconstructed philosophically (Levels 2 and 3). In this latter sense, folk psychology is not genuinely predictively successful; over the past hundred years, we have been unable to derive reliable psychological laws—or even stable generalisations—on its basis. Nisbett and Wilson’s classic studies (1977) provide compelling evidence that people struggle even to explain their behaviour in terms of their professed beliefs. Our actual competence lies in participating in a community in which we continuously construct and adjust fluid models of one another’s minds or, more broadly, mental states. We only occasionally attempt to capture those models in language, enabling us to communicate and coordinate, but when we do, our descriptions remain partial and approximate.

Posłajko's reply to this argument is, in some respect, similar to mine. He distinguishes between folk psychology as a craft and folk psychology as a theory (following Dennett, 1987). Unlike the account proposed here, however, he continues to attribute to the folk a realist stance about belief, whereas I take the equivocation to lie in the very concept of belief itself.

Someone who adopts anti-realism about beliefs while viewing the folk as naive realists faces the challenge of explaining how it is possible that folk-psychological concepts, if they do not reflect the metaphysical reality of the mind, can nonetheless underlie our explanatory success in understanding it. However, if we reject the idea that the so-called concepts of folk psychology, that is, the conceptual framework reconstructed from the language we use, play a significant role in that success, the problem dissolves.

5. Is This Superficialism?

The position sketched here does not endorse a superficialist reduction of folk belief-talk. In my view, folk mindreading genuinely involves attributing inner states or processes to agents rather than merely labelling surface patterns. I also do not think that the folk are fictionalists about mental states such as beliefs. Non-philosophers are neither full-blown realists nor anti-realists about beliefs. However, I take them to be realists about minds and mental states understood holistically. When people engage in belief-talk, they presuppose genuine inner causes of behaviour, yet without any specific ontological commitment to beliefs as discrete entities. While Posłajko claims there is "a significant mismatch between the folk concept of belief and the 'metaphysical reality' of beliefs" (Posłajko, 2024, p. 154), I disagree. There is no significant gap between folk belief-talk and mental reality; instead, the fundamental mismatch exists between philosophical interpretations of folk belief-talk (Level 3) and the minimal metaphysical commitments that the folk might hold.

While I agree that "beliefs" function as linguistic shorthand, partial, constrained representations of deeper attributions, I do not think the folk build their theory of mind on mere behaviour and dispositions. In other words, beliefs in folk psychology are neither robust internal objects nor mere superficial dispositions; they are language-driven labels for subtler categorisations and inferences about others' minds.

6. Austere Conceptions of Folk Psychology

The position advanced here may be seen as falling under the category of approaches that emphasise the austere character of folk psychology (Horgan, 1993), at least in the part where I agree that the structure of folk-psychological language is not supposed to correspond to any actual "architecture" guiding our modelling of others' minds and behaviour. However, there is a difference in that proponents of austere approaches still seem to assume that beliefs are "functionally discrete"

states that play distinct causal roles in explaining behaviour (Bogdan, 1993). By contrast, I maintain that genuine mindreading does not depend on ascribing functionally discrete beliefs, even though our language later imposes this category. More interesting from my point of view Gauker's proposal (2021), which treats attributing beliefs as a fundamentally communicative act. Gauker challenges the idea that we use belief-talk to predict behaviour: most real-world predictions arise rather from induction, social norms, or demonstrated skills, not from attributing specific beliefs. He also defends some form of belief-realism: beliefs are real only insofar as they are governed by objective normative rules (akin to money or promises), but not as causal, propositional "inner objects". This is also the point at which Posłajko disagrees with him (Posłajko, 2024, p. 154).

Gauker's position emphasises different aspects of the problem from my approach. However, some of his insights can help explain why the belief-concept in folk psychology remains firmly entrenched even if (1) beliefs are not real in Posłajko's sense and (2) ordinary people are not belief realists. At Level 1, people possess nonverbal mindreading skills that model others' perspectives holistically without segmenting their mental lives into discrete beliefs. At Level 2, belief-talk serves primarily as a communicative act, asserting or commanding on another's behalf, rather than as a straightforward explanatory or predictive tool. This rich communicative role reinforces and stabilises the folk concept of "belief", giving it a practical force in everyday interaction despite the absence of any literal, architecturally distinct belief states. In other words, the power of belief language in folk psychology stems not from cognitive architecture but from its indispensability in conveying information, corroborating testimony, and coordinating social action.

Posłajko sees austere accounts as implying that "it is the philosophers who went astray in their interpretation of the folk discourse" (Posłajko, 2024, p. 154), a sentiment I wholeheartedly share. He adds that if austere theorists "deny that the idea of mental causation is involved in our folk conception of belief, they might be accused of underestimating the strength of the folk commitments" (p. 155). I disagree: in my opinion, philosophers rather overestimate those commitments. There is no reason to assume that people base their predictions about behaviour on the postulation of concrete, discrete entities as folk-psychological language suggests.

7. Conclusion

I have argued that the folk do not necessarily treat beliefs as discrete, concrete causes of behaviour. Instead, I have sketched an alternative, three-level model of capacities underlying the folk ontology of belief. From this perspective, mindreading relies, at least for the most part, on modelling a person's broader perspective in a way independent of linguistic categories (Level 1). Language forces us to break our mental ascriptions into discrete chunks, including what we call beliefs; however, it does not compel us to adopt a realist ontology of beliefs

(Level 2). Philosophers and psychologists then reify this language, postulating beliefs as theoretical objects (Level 3), but that move does not reflect any genuine folk commitment. Recognising these three levels allows us to interpret apparent folk belief realism as an artefact of grammar and theory rather than an authentic stance.

Like Pośłajko, I do not offer these arguments as a “master argument” against folk belief realism; rather, my goal is to demonstrate that claims that the folk are belief-realists “lack adequate support” (Pośłajko, 2024, p. 112). My argument is intended to shift the burden of proof. I have sketched an account of the folk ontology of beliefs, which, in my view, is a sufficiently plausible alternative to Pośłajko’s view. It thereby obliges advocates of folk belief realism, who take ordinary interpretation to involve commitment to discrete inner belief entities, to supply fuller and more careful justification.

I do not rule out the possibility that the question of whether the folk are realists about beliefs may yield an empirical answer. However, conventional experimental-philosophy surveys would likely impose a philosophical conceptual framework on participants either during the experiment or when interpreting the results. Any conclusive research would, therefore, demand greater methodological creativity. Whatever studies we may consider, the burden of proof lies with those who assert that the folk are belief-realists, not with those who contend that ordinary language users make no explicit ontological commitments when speaking of beliefs.

Pośłajko’s minimal anti-realism serves as a helpful corrective, warning philosophers not to fall under the deceptive spell of ordinary language. However, this therapy must go deeper: it should also caution philosophers against developing a scientific concept of belief that exceeds anything folk speakers are committed to. In other words, we should not look down on ordinary people as if they were hopelessly trapped in belief realism. Perhaps, unlike us philosophers, they have never been there.

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