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BELIEFS ARE REAL(LY FOR SOCIAL ANIMALS)¹

SUMMARY: In *Unreal Beliefs*, Krzysztof Pośłajko argues that socially constructed beliefs exist but are not real. In this commentary, I argue that the grounds for taking socially constructed beliefs to exist are also grounds for taking them to be real (per Pośłajko's own definition of reality).

KEYWORDS: belief, realism, anti-realism, interpretivism, social construction.

1. Introduction: Why Buy Reality When You Can Get Existence for Free?

Krzysztof Pośłajko and I have previously exchanged arguments about the metaphysics of belief, with me (Curry, 2021a, 2023a) defending interpretivism against Pośłajko's (2020, 2023a) critiques. Until recently, the last two printed lines of that exchange read as follows:

So far as I can tell, there is no coherent metaphysics of belief that is superficial yet realist without also being a variety of interpretivism. Given that Pośłajko already joins me in thinking that some realist superficial metaphysics of belief or other must be true, I cordially invite him to celebrate—perhaps even participate in!—the union of dispositionalism with interpretivism. (Curry, 2023a, p. 2145)

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¹ Thanks to two anonymous reviewers and especially to Krzysztof Pośłajko. It is a pleasure to disagree so much with someone with whom I disagree so little.

The title of Pośłajko's new book, *Unreal Beliefs*, immediately makes it clear that I was too hasty in presuming that Pośłajko was committed to some form of realism about belief. In fact, Pośłajko (2024, pp. 112–113) argues that “belief realism is a bold and interesting hypothesis [which] does not have adequate empirical support”, and that betting against realism “is the safer option” given the present state of the empirical evidence. The contents of the book do go on to make it equally clear that I was right that Pośłajko and I share a great many relevant commitments. Pośłajko does join me in thinking that a superficial metaphysics of belief is true,² he joins me in thinking that the beliefs described by that metaphysics exist,³ he joins me in thinking that ascriptions of extant beliefs are true descriptive statements,⁴ and he joins me in thinking that those truly described extant beliefs are nonfictional.⁵ But he emphatically does not join me in thinking that they are real.

In what follows, I will do my best to explain why not, with special attention to Pośłajko's anticipation of the objection that I am indeed inclined to make—namely, that beliefs can be both real and socially constructed. I will then argue that Pośłajko's preemptive response to this objection fails. We have good reason to countenance the reality of beliefs (not in spite of but) in virtue of the social and metacognitive processes in relation to which they exist.

2. Pośłajko's General Argument Against Realism

Here are several cases of belief attribution, which will serve both as stage-setting examples of the phenomenon of interest and as fodder for the ensuing discussion:

YOU—Michael Jordan to Bryon Russell (paraphrased): “You think you can guard me. You're about to get your chance”.

I—Michael Jordan: “I've always believed that if you put in the work, the results will come”.

² This superficialism puts us both at odds with psychofunctionalists (e.g., Porot, Mandelbaum, 2022) and others who take beliefs to be deep cognitive kinds (e.g., Mugg, 2025), with the caveat that I (Curry, 2021b; 2023b) take my superficial account of what I call “attitudes of belief” to be compatible with various deep accounts of what I call “cognitive states of belief” (so long as the two kinds of belief phenomena are not conflated with each other). In this commentary, except where explicitly noted, I will use “belief” and “beliefs” to refer to attitudes of belief.

³ This commitment to the existence of beliefs puts us both at odds with eliminativists (e.g., Rosenberg, 2015).

⁴ This commitment to the claim that belief ascriptions are descriptive statements puts us both at odds with expressivists (e.g., Fernández Castro, 2023).

⁵ This nonfictionalism puts us both at odds with fictionalists (e.g., Parent, Toon, Demeter, 2026; for my arguments against fictionalism, see Curry, 2025a).

THEY—Alicja: “Jan and Lena think Poland will qualify for the World Cup”.

Y’ALL—Yankee: “Down here you lot think it’s bitterly cold when the temperature hits like 60 degrees” (Fahrenheit).

WE—yard sign: “In this house, we believe: black lives matter, women’s rights are human rights, no human is illegal, science is real, love is love, kindness is everything”. (I knew a guy who would vocally affirm these beliefs, like a mantra, whenever he came home and saw the sign in his front lawn).⁶

Posłajko’s view is that each of these belief ascriptions may well be true, and, if so, that the beliefs ascribed in each of these cases exist in the real world (as opposed to a fictional realm).⁷ Russell did believe he could guard Jordan, and Jor-

⁶ We Believe yard signs might reasonably be interpreted as expressing a group belief (ascribed to a group agent—We Who Live in This House—as opposed to each individual agent who is a member of the group in question—each person who lives in the house). Y’ALL might reasonably be interpreted the same way. Posłajko (2023b; 2025) has written insightfully about the (purported) phenomenon of group belief. Nevertheless, for the purposes of this commentary, I will ignore the possibility of group belief. My discussion will keep open two other possible interpretations. The declaration that We Believe may involve the attribution of belief to each individual member of the group (including the guy making the declaration). Or it may be a generic generalization (Leslie, Lerner, 2022)—it may be generically true of the members of the household, even though one rebelling teen does not actually believe. Likewise, the declaration in Y’ALL may involve the attribution of belief to each individual member of the group (which does not include the person making the declaration). Or, more likely, it involves a generic generalization about Southerners.

⁷ This is to say, using Posłajko’s terminology, that the operative contents of belief attributions are often veridical. Following Haslanger (2012), Posłajko (2024, p. 132) distinguishes between the “manifest and operative concepts” of belief at play in belief attributions. Manifest concepts are what we think we mean by words. Operative concepts are how we actually use words. Posłajko argues that folks employ a manifest concept of beliefs as deep cognitive kinds, but that they also employ an operative concept of belief that is compatible with beliefs being superficial. This particular nuance in Posłajko’s view complicates his intimations (pp. 119–122) that (a) he and I (along with other realist “superficial theorists”) offer incompatible accounts of folk psychology and that (b) “there is a significant theoretical conflict between the way the superficial theories conceptualize beliefs and the way we conceive of this category in our folk schema” (p. 122). Posłajko’s distinction between manifest and operative concepts as applied to belief attribution bears strong similarities to Dennett’s (1991) distinction between folk theory and folk craft (which Posłajko himself later invokes in a slightly different context; 2024, p. 149). Since I have always stressed that my denial that folks construe beliefs as inner causes applies only to folk craft and not folk theory (e.g., Curry, 2018, p. 853)—and thus only to operative concepts and not manifest concepts—it is not clear that Posłajko and I have any deep disagreement on that score. Similarly, if superficial theories narrowly target beliefs *as attributed in folk craft*, and folk craft functions mainly via operative concepts (whereas

dan does believe that good results follow hard work. Jan and Lena do believe Poland will qualify, Southerners do believe it is cold outside when Yankees are still wearing shorts, and the members of the relevant household do believe in equality, science, and kindness. Nevertheless, Pośłajko argues that we have no good reason to accept the reality of these truth-aptly ascribed, extant beliefs. It may be true that each member of the household believes that women's rights are human rights. If so, then their beliefs that women's rights are human rights exist. Nevertheless, according to Pośłajko, their beliefs that women's rights are human rights are not real.

Pośłajko's anti-realism is grounded in a technical definition of reality. He defines reality in terms of naturalness (which is in turn to be understood along the lines of David Lewis's distinction between natural and non-natural properties; Lewis, 1983), and identifies realism about belief with the thesis that beliefs are causally relevant natural kinds that are explanatorily linked to more metaphysically fundamental properties.⁸ The basic idea is that the world (and its properties) described by fundamental physics is perfectly natural and hence indisputably real. ("Science is real", if you like). Everything that exists but that is not part of a complete fundamental physical description of the world is less than perfectly natural. However, some nonfundamental properties of the world are way *more* natural than others, by virtue of being members of natural kinds (i.e., kinds of properties that share objective similarities with one another) that play roles in causal explanations and which, in turn, "might be somehow explained (rather than strictly defined) by their relation to more fundamental" properties (Pośłajko, 2024, p. 60). So naturalness is a graded metaproperty. For a property to be real, on Pośłajko's account, is for it to be "reasonably natural" (p. 48): reasonably objectively similar to other properties of the same kind, reasonably causally explanatory, and reasonably well explained by its relation to more fundamental properties.

Pośłajko advocates a "mild anti-realism" about belief because he thinks there is ample reason to doubt that beliefs are reasonably natural: ample reason to doubt that beliefs are natural kinds (since there are reasons to doubt that there are deep commonalities between all of the believers in any particular proposition), ample reason to doubt that beliefs have causal powers (or that they are "genuine, ineliminable, higher-level causes"; Pośłajko, 2024, p. 59), and ample reason to doubt that beliefs can be explained by their relation to more fundamental proper-

folk theory hinges on manifest concepts), then there need be no significant theoretical conflict between the way superficial theories conceptualize beliefs and the way we (folks) conceive of beliefs in our (crafty) folk schemas, even if Pośłajko is right (as he may well be) that most folks also sometimes employ a manifest concept that casts beliefs as deep causes of behavior.

⁸ As Pośłajko (2024, p. 45) notes, Lewis did not himself define reality in terms of naturalness; nor did he identify natural properties with natural kinds. So, while Pośłajko more or less faithfully adopts Lewis's account of natural properties, he also puts that account to new work.

ties (since there are reasons to doubt that the representational content of beliefs can be explained in terms of underlying physical properties). By Pośłajko's lights, the fact that Jan and Lena both believe that Poland will qualify for the World Cup might tell us very little about what else they have in common; Jan and Lena's apparently relevant behaviors (cheering, betting, making travel plans) are not best explained as having been causally produced by their belief that Poland will qualify for the World Cup; and the fact that Jan and Lena's beliefs are both about Poland's World Cup chances is not well explained by more fundamental facts about the functioning of their brains or cognitive systems.

For the purposes of this commentary, I will not quibble with Pośłajko's technical definition of reality in terms of (Lewisian) naturalness. Nor will I object to his skepticism about the project of naturalizing intentionality by explaining the contents of beliefs in terms of more fundamental, non-semantic properties of believers (but see Footnote 17 below). Moreover, I am happy to admit that beliefs are not producing causes, especially in the senses that concern Pośłajko: they are not "internal, causally active states that bear [non-derived] semantic content" (2024, p. 183).⁹ And, finally, I will not argue that there are deep intrinsic (i.e., non-relational) commonalities between all of the believers in any particular proposition. I will, nevertheless, argue that Pośłajko should countenance beliefs as reasonably natural and thus real. My strategy will be to shift our focus from believers to belief attributors.

According to interpretivists like myself, beliefs are not really for believers; real beliefs are for belief attributors. Beliefs are (relational) natural kinds, not because of deep intrinsic commonalities between believers, but because believers are veridically interpreted *as believers* by belief attributors in objectively similar ways. Beliefs are causally relevant, despite lacking causal powers, because they play causal-explanatory functions as objects in the social environments of belief attributors. (Or, in first-personal cases like Michael Jordan self-ascribing the belief that hard work pays off, as objects of metacognition). And beliefs are well-explained, not solely by their relations to more fundamental properties of the brains or cognitive systems of believers, but also by their relations to more fundamental properties of the brains or cognitive systems of belief attributors.

The relevant similarity between Jan and Lena is that they both behave, think, and feel in ways that fit how Alicja—the belief attributor—models the belief that Poland will qualify for the World Cup. And this shared belief of Jan and Lena's functions to help Alicja predict, explain, evaluate, and attempt to shape Jan and Lena's future actions, thoughts, and feelings—their sports betting, their thought that it is okay if they decline Alicja's invitation to watch this Sunday's match on her big TV since there will be more opportunities come summer, their bewildered disappointment when Poland fails to qualify. Jan and Lena's belief has the potential to pay huge dividends for Alicja—metaphorical dividends insofar as

⁹ As Pośłajko readily allows (p. 59), beliefs are undeniably causes in some weaker senses of "causation" (Curry, 2018, p. 852).

veridically attributing the belief helps her navigate her friendship with them, and more literal dividends when she decides to place a bet on Saturday (with Jan and Lena’s own enterprising bookie) about whether Jan and Lena will each independently place bets on the same team winning on Sunday. Finally, the intentionality of Jan and Lena’s beliefs—the fact that their beliefs are *about* Poland’s World Cup chances—is explained by the fact that Alicja represents them as believing that Poland will qualify for the World Cup.

I will unpack this set of claims in Section 4. But Pośłajko has already anticipated the main thrust of my strategy. So I will first discuss his preemptive parry in Section 3.

3. Pośłajko’s Particular Argument Against Social Constructionist Realism

Towards the end of his book, Pośłajko considers “possible charges” that might be brought against his mild anti-realism. The last charge he considers, in Chapter 8 Section 6 (2024, pp. 159–163), is that the social construction of beliefs is compatible with their being natural kinds—and hence with their reality. My main aim in this commentary is to make that possible charge actual. In Section 4, I am going to argue that beliefs are real, socially constructed natural kinds. Before getting there, however, it is worth examining Pośłajko’s preemptive attempt to evade my charge in detail.

Pośłajko recognizes two related features of socially constructed kinds that provide good reason to think they are also natural kinds. First, natural kinds—including socially constructed ones like money—are projectible: they figure in surprising empirical generalizations. Second, the reason that natural kinds figure in surprising empirical generalizations is that there are robust causal links among their properties, and between their properties and other properties of the world—as per either Boyd’s (1991) homeostatic property cluster theory or Khalidi’s (2013) more structurally flexible simple causal theory. In the case of socially constructed natural kinds like money, many of these causal links may be forged through processes of social construction. If beliefs are socially constructed natural kinds, then the causal links between their properties that render them projectible are plausibly due to the folk psychological processes (including practices of belief modelling and attribution) in relation to which they are constructed.

It is worth noting that Pośłajko recognizes these features of socially constructed natural kinds with a caveat, “for the sake of the discussion”. Before doing so, he favorably cites Amie Thomasson “for an account of human kinds which seems to preclude the possibility of them being natural” (2024, p. 161). Thomasson argues in the cited article that some socially constructed kinds—artifactual and institutional kinds, which depend for their existence on “certain people accepting principles *about the nature of the kind itself*”¹⁰—“do not

¹⁰ Given the nuances of Pośłajko’s view—and in particular his distinction between manifest and operative concepts of belief (Footnote 7 above)—it is not at all clear that

meet the realist paradigm of entities entirely independent of us for their existence and essence” (2003, p. 605). Given the particular type of realist paradigm that is Thomasson’s exclusive focus, according to which natural kinds necessarily (a) could exist even if there were no mental states and (b) are individuated by boundaries that are not imposed on the world by human concepts (p. 582), natural kindhood and artifactual/institutional kindhood do seem difficult to square. Strikingly, though, the definition of realism that Pośłajko develops at length in *Unreal Beliefs* does not obviously belong to the type of realist paradigm that concerns Thomasson. Pośłajko’s Lewisian account of naturalness/reality is silent on the question of whether the boundaries of natural kinds could be imposed on the world by human concepts, as well as on the question of whether natural kinds could rely on mental states for their existence. On Pośłajko’s account, if a kind is projectible, causally explanatory, and well explained by its relation to more fundamental kinds, then it is reasonably natural and thus real. It would seem undermotivated for Pośłajko to tack on the provision that the kind must be mind-independent (in the specific senses that concern Thomasson) solely in order to stave off the possibility of socially constructed natural kinds that otherwise meet each of Pośłajko’s criteria. It would seem much more in keeping with Pośłajko’s account to allow—and not only for the sake of discussion—that kinds can be both socially constructed and real.

The question, then, is whether folk psychological processes do construct beliefs such that those beliefs go on to play a distinctive role in the causal nexus of the world (rendering them projectible). As Pośłajko notes, the mindshaping hypothesis, which has become increasingly influential in the literature on social cognition over the last decade (Zawidzki, Tison, 2025), suggests an affirmative answer to this question. According to the mindshaping hypothesis, social practices of imitation, pedagogy, norm-enforcement, and storytelling allow people to coordinate with each other largely by shaping how everybody behaves, thinks, and feels. These mindshaping practices are well-understood as processes of social construction (Curry, 2025b; Westfall, 2025). As Pośłajko himself glosses the hypothesis, “mental states, including beliefs, are socio-culturally created by the processes of their attribution” (2024, p. 161). And these socially constructed beliefs do apparently go on to play a distinctive role in the causal nexus of the world (rendering them projectible), since mindshaped people are more predictable and intelligible (and thus more effective coordinators).

socially constructed beliefs do depend for their existence on people “accepting principles about the nature of the kind itself”. After all, Pośłajko (wisely) takes the beliefs that exist to be captured by operative concepts, not manifest concepts—but it is only the latter that obviously rely on the explicit (“declarative”, in Thomasson’s terminology) acceptance of principles about the nature of belief. So Thomasson’s argument may be quite irrelevant to Pośłajko’s concerns, even putting aside the difference between their definitions of realism that I spell out in the main text. As Thomasson points out, “although the above results do apply to artifactual and institutional kinds, it should not be inferred that the same follows for all ordinary, social, or (partially) mind-dependent objects” (2003, p. 605).

Posłajko thinks this last move is too fast. His argument on this score—which turns out to be his sole argument against the thesis that beliefs are socially constructed natural kinds (his nod to Thomasson notwithstanding)—is worth quoting at some length.

In order to justify the idea that a certain social kind *X* is a natural one, we must show some proof of the claim that the people/objects to which the category *X* is ascribed share important projectible properties and are a good target for inductive generalizations. It is not enough to show that the people who do the process of ascription share important properties and that the process of ascription itself can be naturalistically explained [...].

In our case, what would be needed is a story about what properties are shared by beliefs as a general category, and by people to whom we ascribe a belief with a specific content. Only by providing such a story could we claim to have positive reasons to think that beliefs are socially constructed natural kinds. However, this kind of evidence is precisely what we are lacking, and this claim was argued for in Chapter 6 Section 1 [where Posłajko argues that beliefs are probably not natural kinds since there are no objective similarities between all believers in any particular proposition]. It is not that we know that there are no generalizations about beliefs; instead, we lack evidence to think that there are any, and this lack of evidence might be taken to support the view that beliefs should not, at the present moment, be conceptualized as being natural kinds. Obviously, this need not be true about mindreading [i.e., belief attribution], mindshaping, mindreaders and mindshapers: there might be important empirical discoveries about these processes and people who attribute mental states. (Posłajko, 2024, pp. 161–162)

Posłajko grants, in other words, that belief *attribution* processes might well be natural kinds, since the mindshaping hypothesis suggests that they play an important causal role in shaping how people behave. But the causal potency of belief attribution does not guarantee the reality of belief. (After all, accusations of witchhood are causally potent—they cause women to be burned at the stake—even though witches are not real). If all of the predictive and explanatory power of folk psychology can be explained in terms of the causal influences of belief attribution (and other mindshaping practices), then the fact that the social construction of belief makes people more effective coordinators simply does not entail that beliefs are real. For socially constructed beliefs to be real (and not merely extant), they would have to themselves play distinctive causal roles (and thus be projectible). And, Posłajko says, we have no good reason to think they are.

But in Chapter 6, where Posłajko argues for that claim—that we have no good reason to think beliefs play distinctive causal roles—he is not yet considering the question of whether beliefs are *socially constructed* natural kinds. He does not entertain that possibility at any length until Chapter 8. In Chapter 6, he is still considering the question of whether beliefs are non-constructed cognitive kinds—psychofunctional and representational kinds à la Quilty-Dunn and Mandelbaum (2018), for instance. His argument against considering beliefs to be real cognitive kinds rests on the claims that, “importantly, there seems to be no con-

vergence in the criteria for detecting beliefs” across the cognitive sciences and that “the category of belief (as defined in cognitive psychology) seems to play many distinct theoretical roles” (Posłajko, 2024, p. 96). He concludes Chapter 6 Section 1 as follows:

To sum up, the reasons to claim that the category of belief is a cognitive natural kind seem to be outweighed by arguments to the effect that it is not. The best interpretation of the evidence we have in this respect is to consider this category as just one of the many possible ways of categorizing the human mental sphere and that we should have no presumption that by using it we are referring to any joint in cognitive nature. The preferred alternative to the idea that beliefs constitute a natural kind seems to be the view that they constitute a human kind. The claim has been recently put forward by, for example, Dewhurst (2017), according to whom the “belief” kind should be treated as, in a way, socially constructed and not necessarily matching the deep cognitive ontology. In my opinion, such a view corresponds nicely with the idea that belief properties are non-natural, in Lewis’s sense, which is the central claim of the minimal non-realist view I develop in this book (but see Chapter 8 Section 6 for an important objection to the idea that construction goes hand in hand with rejection of realism). (Posłajko, 2024, p. 97)

Chapter 8 Section 6 is, of course, where Posłajko presents the argument against beliefs being socially constructed natural kinds quoted at length above. In that argument, he punts the central move—denying that there is any reason to think that there are projectible, causally linked properties shared by beliefs and believers—back to Chapter 6 Section 1. But in Chapter 6 Section 1 he is interrogating the idea that beliefs exist as cognitive kinds, within a “deep cognitive ontology”, rather than as socially constructed kinds. As such, in Chapter 6, he is focused on examining (and finding wanting) claims about the causal roles that beliefs play as cogs in cognitive systems. Upon acknowledging the possibility of belief being a socially constructed but nevertheless natural kind—which is the possibility of a kind of belief that, if it plays any distinctive causal role at all, presumably plays a quite different causal role than beliefs considered as theoretical posits in cognitive science—Posłajko refers the reader to Chapter 8 Section 6. Unfortunately, as we have seen, Chapter 8 offers no new arguments against the causal relevance of the socially constructed kind of the belief in particular. It just sends the reader back to Chapter 6.

In sum, there is a lacuna in Posłajko’s argument against the socially constructed reality of beliefs. Nevertheless, at this juncture in the dialectic, Posłajko is likely to recommend mild anti-realism all the same: if we have no good reason to think that socially constructed beliefs are causally relevant and projectible, then the absence of a good argument for anti-realism might not be enough to take the leap and countenance beliefs’ reality. So, in Section 4, I will argue that we do have good reason to think that socially constructed beliefs are causally relevant and projectible in manners that allow them to meet all three of Posłajko’s criteria for reality.

4. Interpretivist Realism Defended

As I have argued elsewhere (Curry, 2021b), an interpretivist approach to countenancing beliefs as social constructs suggests that beliefs are superficial patterns of dispositions that are individuated in terms of the functional roles they play in belief attributors' social environments rather than the functional roles they play in believers' cognitive systems. Pośłajko is, as we have seen, content to allow that beliefs exist qua socially constructed superficial patterns of dispositions. The question is whether they are real. And that depends on whether they are projectible, causally explanatory, and themselves explained in terms of more fundamental properties.

As Pośłajko rightly points out, to answer those questions in the affirmative, "it is not enough to show that the people who do the process of ascription share important properties and that the process of ascription itself can be naturalistically explained" (2024, p. 162). Belief attribution capacities may be projectible, causally potent natural kinds insofar as they really do help belief attributors predict, explain, judge, and shape people. But witch accusation capacities are likewise projectible, causally potent natural kinds insofar as they really do help accusers burn poor women at the stake. That does not mean witches are real.

There is, however, a crucial difference between witches and beliefs: witches do not exist. The major problem with including witches in one's realist ontology is not that their magic falls short of being causally potent enough to qualify as natural and hence real. The problem is that magic does not exist. Beliefs do exist, even by Pośłajko's anti-realist lights. Whereas witch accusations are never veridical, belief attributions are sometimes veridical (and sometimes not).¹¹ When they are veridical, it is because the attributed beliefs exist: the believer genuinely does take the world to be the way the belief attributor represents them as taking the world to be. Bryon Russell genuinely does think he can guard MJ. His behavior on the basketball court is more readily predictable, explainable, evaluable, and manipulable in light of that belief. To belabor the simple but pivotal contrast: nobody is a witch; nobody's behavior is more readily predictable, explainable, evaluable, and manipulable in light of their magical powers. (Though, regrettably, many people's behavior is more readily predictable, explainable, evaluable, and manipulable in light of their *belief in* magical powers).

To be fair, Pośłajko does not draw the analogy between belief attribution and witch accusation. Instead, he draws an analogy with debates about the metaphysics of race, writing that

¹¹ Veridicality was the subject of Pośłajko's (2020) initial critique of interpretivism, as well as my initial reply to Pośłajko (Curry, 2021a), in which I explain how (according to my version of interpretivism) belief attribution can often fail to be veridical even though beliefs are constituted in relation to attributors' models. In brief, an attributor can be mistaken about their target possessing dispositions that sufficiently fit the attributor's model of belief.

if one wanted to claim that races are socially constructed natural kinds, one would have to provide positive reasons that the people being racialized share important properties and that we can make surprising empirical generalizations about them. It would simply not do if we tried to show this by pointing to the fact that people who racialize others share some important properties and that there is an important naturalistic story about the origins of the racialization process. (Posłajko, 2024, p. 162)

Posłajko is right about this. For instance, as Kareem Khalifa and Richard Lauer have argued, the fact that the social sciences make surprising empirical generalizations using race-concepts does not provide evidence for social constructionist realism about race, since the causal-explanatory success of race-concepts is just as well accounted for by the anti-realist view that “some groups are racialized, but races do not exist” (2021, p. 9). But note that the standard anti-realist accounts on offer in the literature on the metaphysics of race (Appiah, 1985; Fields, Fields, 2012; Glasgow, 2009) are accounts on which races do not even exist, not accounts on which races exist but merely are not natural or real. If racialization can exhaustively explain all of the surprising empirical generalizations that use race concepts, then we are not merely left with doubts about the naturalness of race: we are left without any good reason to take race to exist at all.

By contrast, Posłajko grants that we have plenty good reason to take beliefs to exist. It is true that Bryon Russell thinks he can guard Jordan, and it is false that Greg Ostertag thinks he can guard Jordan. Why? Because Russell’s belief exists (qua superficial pattern of dispositions) whereas Ostertag lacks any sufficiently similar pattern of dispositions. So there is something there—an extant belief—to do extra causal work in the case of belief attribution, whereas there is nothing there—no extant witchcraft or racial essence—to do extra causal work in the cases of witch accusation or racialization (assuming anti-realism about race is true). Does that extant belief do *enough* causal work, over and above the causal work done by the belief attribution alone, to qualify as real?

I reckon it does. I do not have knockdown proof. Airtight evidence of causality is notoriously evasive in the social sciences, and this is an empirical, paradigmatically social scientific question (or set of three questions) if ever there was one. Insofar as Posłajko is dedicated to his stance that, in the absence of strong scientific evidence of projectability, we should lean towards anti-realism, it is possible that nothing I have to say can persuade him. For my own part, though, I am far from persuaded that it is sensible to lean anti-realist by default. After all, belief attributors do very often have good reasons for attributing belief, and those reasons very often seem to be predicated on their being able to track something real about believers.

Beliefs play a diversity of epistemic and symbolic functional roles for belief attributors: they function to help belief attributors describe, predict, explain, contextualize, evaluate, regulate, and manage impressions of believers’ behav-

ioral and mental lives.¹² In order to play many (though perhaps not all) of these roles, it sure seems to be crucially important whether the belief attribution is veridical. Alicja will not be able to predict Jan and Lena's betting behavior if she is wrong that they believe Poland will qualify for the World Cup. If she is right about what they believe, then her predictions will be much more accurate. A belief veridically attributed to oneself, meanwhile, will often lead to action on the basis of that belief. Michael Jordan putting in the work may not be directly causally produced by his belief that hard work pays off, but an extra trip to the gym is very likely to be spurred by his self-knowledge that that is what he truly believes. The guy who displays his We Believe yard sign will not successfully signal the political identities of his housemates—and will not be able to leverage those political identities to strengthen the social bonds between them—if he is wrong to presume that they share his feminist and anti-racist commitments. If his belief attributions are veridical, however, then his yard sign might help generate the solidarity he is seeking, especially when paired with the attribution of opposing beliefs to an out-group. The Yankee's attribution of the belief that 60°F is cold to an out-group might similarly serve to accentuate differences.¹³ Alternatively, though, the Yankee's veridical belief ascription might serve to help him better appreciate the perspectives that his Southern acquaintances genuinely have, bridging the personal and cultural divide between them. If so, his social success will not be adequately explained by his act of belief attribution alone; it will have been caused in large part by the fact that he got the Southerners' beliefs right. In that case, as in the case where Alicja gets rich by predicting how Jan and Lena will bet, as well as the case where Jordan becomes the best basketball player in the world, the beliefs themselves—qua patterns of dispositions that render

¹² The labels “epistemic” and “symbolic” as used here come from Evan Westra (2023), who suggests that they apply to two distinct concepts of belief. When belief attributors want to predict, explain, or contextualize behavior, or simply want to keep track of what others take to be true, they use the epistemic concept of belief (and typically speak of what people “think”). When belief attributors want to signal social identities or enforce social norms, they use the symbolic concept of belief (and typically speak of what people “believe”). I am not convinced that these epistemic and symbolic functions should be thought of dichotomously—I suspect that almost every belief attribution serves both epistemic and symbolic functions (weighted differently)—so in the main text I write of epistemic and symbolic functional roles played by beliefs rather than epistemic and symbolic concepts of belief *per se*.

¹³ For this particular, otherizing symbolic purpose, it is admittedly not obvious that veridicality is indispensable (for roughly the same reason that it is not obvious that veridicality is indispensable in the case of racialization). But it cannot hurt! Indeed, I suspect that the causal roles played by veridical out-group belief attributions are quite distinct from the causal roles played by non-veridical out-group belief attributions, since the former plausibly unlock predictive and explanatory power that the latter cannot.

belief attributions veridical—are doing significant causal-explanatory work in helping belief attributors achieve their goals.¹⁴

If (a standard version of) anti-realism is the correct metaphysics of race, then the relevance of veridicality marks a significant difference between belief attribution and racialization. If anti-realism about race is true, then races do not exist, racialization is never veridical, and the (non)veridicality of racialization is of no causal-explanatory importance. Anti-realists about race are thus well-positioned to explain the causal-explanatory power of race-concepts solely in terms of the properties of racializers, without needing to pay any heed to the properties of the racialized.¹⁵ But by (rightly!) refusing to deny the existence of beliefs, Pośłajko severely limits the relevance of his analogy to racialization. Belief attributions are often veridical, and their veridicality is of causal-explanatory importance. Pośłajko is thus not well-positioned to explain the causal-explanatory power of belief attribution solely in terms of the properties of belief attributors, without needing to pay any heed to the properties of believers. On the contrary, in order to adequately capture the causal links between veridical belief attributions and the further actions they license, Pośłajko must pay heed to the properties of believers—the beliefs—that make those belief attributions veridical.

So I think Pośłajko should countenance the reality of beliefs as socially constructed natural kinds. He should turn his back on mild anti-realism and embrace the realist marriage of dispositionalism and interpretivism after all. As I have put the view,

to believe is to live—roughly, to be disposed to act, react, think, and feel—in a pattern that fits an actual belief attributor’s interpretive model of how somebody would tend to act, react, think, and feel if they took the world to be some particular way. (Curry, 2023a, p. 2139)

For a property to be real (per Pośłajko’s definition) is for it to be reasonably natural: reasonably objectively similar to other properties of the same kind, reasonably causally explanatory, and reasonably well explained by its relation to more fundamental properties. In order to motivate his mild anti-realism, Pośłajko notes that beliefs are neither *intrinsically* objectively similar to each other nor

¹⁴ I take these examples of veridicality mattering to motivate an account of beliefs as natural kinds at least on Khalidi’s (2013) simple causal theory of natural kinds. I take it to be an interesting open question whether beliefs also meet the more stringent criteria for natural kindhood set by Boyd’s (1991) homeostatic property cluster theory. I suspect they do, since the near-universality (and apparently cross-culturally stable aspects) of belief attribution practices lead me to suspect that mindshaping serves as a mechanism for the requisite homeostasis. But making good on that suspicion would require further work.

¹⁵ If, on the other hand, there is good reason (as I suppose there may be) to think racialization is like belief attribution (and unlike witch accusation) in needing to be veridical to function as it does actually function in human social life—and thus to causally explain everything that it does causally explain—then that is reason to reject anti-realism and accept a realist social constructionism about race.

intrinsically causally explanatory. But if my interpretivism is on the right track, then this emphasis on the intrinsic properties of beliefs is neither here nor there. Rather, per interpretivism, beliefs are real since they are reasonably objectively similar to each other in virtue of each fitting a belief attributor's model, and reasonably causally explanatory in virtue of the causal-explanatory roles they play in belief attributors' social environments. These are ineliminably relational—non-intrinsic—similarities and causal roles. But there is nothing in Pośłajko's account of reality that prohibits reasonably natural (as opposed to perfectly natural) properties from being relational.¹⁶

Consider an analogy with poison. Going by Pośłajko's account of reality, I would judge that poison does not merely exist—it is a real natural kind. Why? Not because of an intrinsic chemical property that the various poisons all share in common. The hodgepodge set of chemical formulas that describe the various substances that each really are poisons might seem totally arbitrary from the perspective of the chemist. But the set of poisons is not arbitrary, certainly not from the perspectives of the medical practitioner or the assassin. Rather, poison is real because poisons are reasonably objectively similar to each other in virtue of being harmful or lethal to organisms, and reasonably causally explanatory in virtue of the causal-explanatory roles they play in organisms' environments. These too are ineliminably relational—non-intrinsic—similarities and causal roles. That relationality does nothing to make me doubt poison's reality. (Indeed, I would strongly recommend against anyone doubting the causal relevance of poison).

Highlighting that beliefs exist in relation to belief attributors—like poisons exist in relation to vulnerable organisms—also sheds light on how beliefs meet Pośłajko's third criterion: explicability in terms of more fundamental properties. Real beliefs—extant patterns of dispositions that fit interpreters' models of belief—will plausibly be adequately explained by scientific research into two sets of plainly more fundamental properties: the subpersonal cognitive capacities of believers, on the one hand, and the subpersonal cognitive capacities of belief attributors, on the other hand. (Compare: poisons are adequately explained by scientific research into the chemical properties of poisonous substances, on the one hand, and the physiology of vulnerable organisms, on the other hand). The

¹⁶ Pośłajko might be thought to prohibit relational properties from being reasonably natural via his invocation of Thomasson (discussed above), along with his repeated (2024, pp. 45, 83–84, 134) suggestion that Chomsky's (2000) anti-realism about desks and cities (as well as beliefs) is similar in spirit to his approach. (Chomsky is a proponent of the variety of mind-independence-centric realist paradigm that concerns Thomasson). However, I do not think Chomsky's line of reasoning fits Pośłajko's Lewisian framework as neatly as Pośłajko suggests—the three criteria for naturalness strike me as perfectly compatible with mind-independent phenomena being (reasonably) natural. In any event, I think Chomsky is mistaken. Desks and cities are real. They are relationally real—desks and cities are similar to one another, and causally explanatory, only in relation to people who use them as work surfaces and complex social institutions (respectively)—but they are no less real for that. (I am at one and in one right now!).

underlying psychology of believers—in tandem with broader mindshaping processes—will explain how believers come to have the relevant dispositions. And the underlying psychology of belief attributors—in tandem with broader mindshaping processes—will explain how the relevant patterns of dispositions come to be modelled as beliefs. On this interpretivist picture, the intentionality of beliefs is also derived from belief attributors' models, rather than from the underlying cognitive states of believers that generate the dispositions that make up their beliefs. Russell's belief is about guarding Jordan because it is represented as having that intentional content by the belief attributor (whether that be Jordan, Russell himself, or anybody else positioned to make the ascription).¹⁷

Why not instead say, with Pośłajko, that these more fundamental properties—the cognitive capacities of believers and belief attributors—are real, whereas beliefs themselves, being less fundamental, are not? Because beliefs, like poisons, are projectible and play causal-explanatory roles that are not well captured at the more fundamental level of analysis. We have already seen why attention to belief attribution alone (without regard for veridicality) does not suffice to account for the causal-explanatory roles played by extant beliefs. Moreover, in his Chapter 6 argument for mild anti-realism, Pośłajko accidentally draws attention to another reason that beliefs should be countenanced as real relational properties. If the cognitive kinds underpinning beliefs are not reasonably objectively similar to each other, as Pośłajko argues that they are not, then the objective similarities that veridically attributed beliefs do share in common—for example, the fact that they all count as beliefs and play the same functional roles in the social environments of belief attributors—must be similarities they boast qua socially constructed beliefs. The deeper, more explanatorily fundamental kinds lack the projectability and causal links that the superficial kind boasts—and which qualify the superficial kind as real.

Pośłajko writes that “belief attributions might be true but they add very little to our understanding of what is really, ‘on a fundamental level’, going on within the subjects” (2024, p. 66). I agree. That is not their job. Poison attributions add very little to our understanding of what is really, “on a fundamental level”, going on within chemical substances. Poison is nevertheless real because poison attributions (when veridical) tell us a great deal about what will go on if we ingest the chemical substance in question. Similarly, belief attributions tell us who takes the world to be one way and not another. This adds very little to our understanding of what is really, “on a fundamental level”, going on with those people. But it can be extremely helpful when we desire—as humans often do—to distinguish

¹⁷ I should admit straight away that this picture pushes off rather than solving the issues with naturalizing intentionality that worry Pośłajko, since I am assuming that belief attribution capacities are representational capacities. Nevertheless, pushing off the issue is enough for present purposes, since it allows me to highlight how beliefs fulfill Pośłajko's third criterion by being explainable in terms of more fundamental cognitive capacities. All the better that I can do so without having to tackle the problem of intentionality. (I would like to do other things with my life).

between the believers and the non-believers. It behooves Jordan to know who thinks they can guard him and who is afraid to try. (He will cross Russell up a few times to chip away at that belief, but he will also call many pick and rolls in order to get Ostertag, who emphatically does *not* believe he can guard Jordan, switched onto him). Alicja may not be tracking a deep intrinsic similarity between Jan and Lena; nevertheless, if she is interested in making a big wager—not on the outcome of a soccer match, but on what Jan and Lena are going to bet will be the outcome of a soccer match—then she would rightly balk at Poślajko's assertion that "attributing beliefs adds little to our predictive abilities". The Yankee will strengthen his friendship with his Southern guests when he brings extra sweaters to the cookout on the basis of his veridical ascription of their belief that 60°F is cold. Their beliefs are plenty real for him. And that is reality enough, since social (and self-reflective) animals like him are whom beliefs are really for.

5. Conclusion

So far as I could tell before reading Poślajko's book, there is no coherent metaphysics of belief that is superficial yet realist without also being a variety of interpretivism. So far as I can tell now, there is no plausible metaphysics of belief that is ontologically committed to the existence of beliefs without also being a variety of realism. Given that Poślajko already joins me in thinking that beliefs exist, and that some superficial metaphysics of belief or other must be true, I cordially invite him to celebrate—perhaps even officiate!—the union of dispositionalism with interpretivism in the service of realism.

Poślajko is well-qualified to officiate. The account of realism qua (reasonable) naturalism at the heart of *Unreal Beliefs* does provide a compelling basis for doubting the reality of the cognitive states of belief posited by psychofunctionalists and other cognitive scientists. But it simultaneously provides a compelling basis for accepting the reality—the projectability, causal-explanatory relevance, and reductive explainability—of the sorts of (socially constructed) beliefs that people ascribe to each other in everyday life. Since those are the beliefs that Poślajko already countenances as existing, my simple recommendation is that he convert to realism about the beliefs that exist. I am happy to join him in being an anti-realist about any and all beliefs that do not exist.

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