

Interpretivism without judgement-dependence

Devin Sanchez Curry

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Interpretivists about a mental phenomenon hold that it emerges only in relation to an interpretive activity, capacity, or scheme. For instance, interpretivism about belief is the view that to believe is to be aptly interpretable as believing—not because what somebody believes is necessarily epistemically accessible, but because an interpreter renders them a believer in the first place. Krzysztof Poslajko (2020) has approvingly reconstructed Alex Byrne’s (1998) dilemma for interpretivism about belief and the other so-called propositional attitudes. I will argue that due reflection on recent work on folk psychology undermines that dilemma.

On the first horn of Byrne’s dilemma, the interpretivist takes attitudes to emerge relative to an ideal interpreter. On the second horn, the interpretivist takes attitudes to emerge relative to individuals’ judgements. Poslajko argues that both horns are unacceptably pointy: “in the end, as Byrne correctly observes, the interpretivist must either idealize the interpreter to the point at which he loses any connection to the actual subjects who are engaged in real-life interpretation processes, or he must deny the possibility of errors in the attribution of mental states” (§6). To be an attractive metaphysics of the objects of folk psychology, interpretivism must relativize them to actual folk psychological practices. But Byrne and Poslajko contend that, in so doing, the interpretivist must commit to an absurdity by giving up on the idea that folks can be wrong about what people believe and desire.

Byrne and Poslajko are right that both of these horns are unacceptably pointy, but wrong that the interpretivist must be spared by one or the other. Interpretivists can viably reject the notion of an ideal (or even canonical) interpreter without taking on board the unacceptable epistemological consequences of allowing that attitudes are judgement-dependent. I am an interpretivist about many mental phenomena, including most attitudes, and I have argued (Curry 2020) that my fellow interpretivists Donald Davidson (2001), Daniel Dennett (1987), and Bruno Mölder (2010) are wrong to cast attitudes as existing relative to idealized normative standards of attitude ascription—and, relatedly, to divorce the metaphysics of attitudes from the messy details of actual folk psychological practices. I am not thereby doomed to render attitudes judgement-dependent. To see why, one need look no further than those messy details of actual folk psychological practices.

Looking at those practices, it is plain that there is a distinction to be drawn between how folks conceive of an attitude, on the one hand, and whether they accurately judge that somebody has an attitude, as folks conceive of it, on the other hand. All sorts of factors play into a judgement—an actual ascription of an attitude to an individual—that are irrelevant to the question of how the ascriber conceives of the attitude in question. Perhaps most saliently, ascribers almost always lack complete evidence about whether somebody sufficiently fits their conception to count as having the attitude.

Consider the case of George, who pretends to be an ethical vegetarian in a bid to impress his new boss, Nadia. Having heard George decry the treatment of factory farmed animals, and having observed him refusing to eat meat on several occasions, Nadia ascribes to George the belief that eating meat is wrong. In so doing, Nadia falsely assumes that George always refrains

from eating meat (not just in her company), and that his anti-factory-farming remarks were sincere. After all, she conceives of a belief in the wrongness of eating meat as comprising, *inter alia*, the propensities to forgo burgers and sincerely denounce factory farming. Nadia is making an error in judgement. Her conception of the relevant ethical vegetarian belief is not faulty. But George has tricked her into making a faulty inference about what he is usually like.

Other cases of folk psychological error are easy to conjure. Consider the fellow cyclops who misjudges Polyphemus as believing that nobody has wounded him (when, due to Odysseus's trickery, Polyphemus actually believes that somebody named Nobody has wounded him). Yet other cases involve ascriptions of attitudes other than belief, and do not stem from deception; consider any comedy of errors with a plot driven by the protagonist's honest misunderstanding about what (or whom) another character desires.

Recent work on the mechanics of folk psychology illuminates what is going on in these cases.¹ According to the model-theoretic approaches to folk psychology that have gained traction in recent years (Maibom 2003, 2009; Godfrey-Smith 2005; Spaulding 2018), interpreters construct and wield model psychological profiles of people in order to ascribe attitudes (and other traits) to those people. These models specify what people who have particular attitudes—and particular sets of attitudes—are like. Although folk psychological models have some nearly universally shared features (Malle 2008), the empirical evidence suggests that many of the details of how folks model attitudes vary across cultures and subcultures (Spaulding 2018), and perhaps even from interpreter to interpreter (Curry 2020). When folks ascribe an attitude, they judge that the person who is the target of that ascription sufficiently fits their idiosyncratic model of somebody with that attitude. The possibility of error arises due to the fact that folks are often mistaken about how well their targets fit their models.

Toward the end of his article, Poslajko poses a rhetorical question: “what is the sense of the notion of metaphysical dependency that is adopted by the proponent of interpretivism once the idea of judgement-dependence, in the sense which requires an actual interpretation to take place, is rejected?” (§7). Poslajko suggests that Mölder has no good answer to this question. But I have a good answer: the proponent of interpretivism can adopt model-dependence, which requires an actual interpreter and an actual interpretive scheme without requiring that an actual interpretation take place, as the sense in which attitudes are metaphysically dependent on interpretation. To have an attitude is to sufficiently fit a folk psychological model of somebody who has that attitude, whether or not one is accurately judged to sufficiently fit that model.

¹ When Poslajko discusses the literature on folk psychology, he misleadingly claims that “all the major contenders in the mind-reading debate ... namely the theory-theory approach, the simulation theory and the phenomenological view, see propositional attitudes as having a sort of tracking epistemology in the sense that our cognitive efforts are trying to be correct descriptions of mental reality. As different as these theories are, they all assume that when we attribute mental states to others, we are in the business of trying to discover what the mental states of the other are” (§6). For one thing, Poslajko does not mention model-theoretic approaches, which have become a major contender. He also overstates the extent to which there is a consensus assumption of the epistemological goals of mental state attribution. An increasingly influential strand of the folk psychology literature is dedicated to arguing that mental state attribution serves a wide variety of non-epistemological normative and regulatory goals (Morton 2003; McGeer 2007; Andrews 2012; Zawidzki 2013; Bohl 2015; Spaulding 2018; Curry 2020, forthcoming).

An advantage of this model-theoretic approach is that it accommodates an edifying wedding of interpretivism with dispositionalism (after a long, sometimes uneasy courtship). Dispositionalists about a mental phenomenon hold that it comprises propensities to behave, think, and feel in particular manners (Ryle 1949; Baker 1995; Schwitzgebel 2013). For instance, dispositionalism about belief is the view that to believe is to have an appropriate pattern of behavioral, cognitive, and phenomenal dispositions. Dispositionalists rightly argue that folk psychological interpreters model beliefs as comprising patterns of dispositions (Schwitzgebel 2002; Curry 2018). Thus, sufficiently fitting a folk psychological model is tantamount to being disposed to act, react, think, and feel accordingly, and model-theoretic interpretivists are ipso facto dispositionalists. To be aptly interpretable as believing—and therefore, per interpretivism, to believe—is to possess a pattern of dispositions that a folk psychological model associates with the belief in question.²

Unlike the quasi-Mölderian view dismissed by Poslajko, this view is a genuine version of interpretivism according to which “attitudes are [metaphysically] dependent on interpretation” (§7). For the model-theoretic interpretivist, possessing dispositions is never in and of itself sufficient for possessing an attitude. A pattern of dispositions metaphysically emerges as an attitude only in relation to a pattern-detector’s model (Curry 2020: 910–911, 920–925). No actual judgement need take place, but neither does possible ascribability suffice. Instead, an actual interpreter must have an actual working conception of what folks who possess the attitude in question are like.³

To return to our case: George’s (lack of) belief does not emerge relative to Nadia’s (erroneous) judgment about what he believes. It emerges relative to Nadia’s model of somebody-who-believes-in-the-wrongness-of-eating-meat. George’s beliefs are model-dependent, not judgement-dependent, and model-dependence leaves ample room for error. To wit, Nadia misjudges what George believes because she mistakenly infers that he sufficiently fits her model of somebody-who-believes-in-the-wrongness-of-eating-meat. That model, on which the modelled belief metaphysically depends, centrally includes the dispositions to refrain from eating meat (even when alone) and to be sincere in decrying factory farming. George lacks those

² Poslajko (§4) briefly discusses Schwitzgebel’s dispositionalism without recognizing this potential marriage with interpretivism. Interpretivists must be dispositionalists, given how interpreters construe beliefs. By my lights, anti-reductionist dispositionalists ought to be interpretivists too: they hold that to believe is to have an appropriate pattern of dispositions, and how interpreters model beliefs is the best—maybe the sole viable—non-reductionist candidate for what makes a pattern of dispositions appropriate.

³ In conversation, philosophers sometimes object to interpretivism by claiming that human beings (or our phylogenetic ancestors) had to have evolved beliefs before we could evolve interpretive capacities; thus, beliefs must exist independent of interpretive capacities. I think objectors find this argument compelling because, in imagining pre-interpretive humans, they fail to bracket their own interpretive capacities. Of course it is perfectly imaginable that pre-interpretive humans had beliefs—relative to the folk psychological models brought to bear by those doing the imagining. It is even plausible that they had to have had some such beliefs in order to become interpreters (though, due to mindshaping processes (Zawidzki 2013), the evolutionary story is likely more complex than this premise lets on). However, bracketing the imaginer’s own folk psychological capacities, it is also perfectly imaginable that pre-interpretive humans merely had dispositions, and that patterns of these dispositions emerged as beliefs only once practices of interpretation evolved.

dispositions, and thus does not sufficiently fit Nadia's model, and thus does not believe. Nadia's judgement that he does believe, which is based on misleading evidence about George's propensities, is irrelevant when it comes to metaphysical dependence.

Much more needs to be said in exposition and defense of this model-theoretic variety of interpretivism; I argue for it at greater length elsewhere (Curry 2018, 2020, forthcoming). Here, I aim only to assert that it is a genuine version of interpretivism, since it relativizes folk psychological attitudes to interpretative schemes, and that it does so without falling prey to either horn of Byrne's dilemma.

There is an oft-neglected lesson to be drawn regarding how to go about studying the manifest image. Inquirers who wish to understand the mind-dependent features of the world—including the interpretation-dependent features of minds themselves—must take into account the (various, complex, and contingent) mechanics of mind-dependence. Poslajko demonstrates that if a philosopher is dedicated to constructing a pure speculative metaphysics of the objects of folk psychology without relying on a scientifically informed theory of folk psychology itself, then interpretivism appears hopeless. So much the worse for purity in metaphysics.

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