

Why dispositionalism needs interpretivism: a reply to Poslajko

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Abstract: *I have proposed wedding the theories of belief known as dispositionalism and interpretivism. Krzysztof Poslajko objects that dispositionalism does just fine on its own and, moreover, is better off without interpretivism’s metaphysical baggage. I argue that Poslajko is wrong: in order to secure a principled criterion for individuating beliefs, dispositionalism must either collapse into psychofunctionalism (or some other non-superficial theory) or accept interpretivism’s hand in marriage.*

In these pages, Krzysztof Poslajko (forthcoming) offers a thoughtful, wide-ranging critique of my interpretivism about belief. As Poslajko notes, interpretivism is a superficial theory of belief—a theory that refrains from analyzing the beliefs that people veridically attribute to each other in everyday life in terms of believers’ underlying psychofunctional states or neural mechanisms.¹ Instead, interpretivists hold that to believe is to be aptly interpretable as believing. I have proposed a marriage between interpretivism and another superficial theory of belief—dispositionalism—“after a long, sometimes uneasy courtship” (Curry 2021a, 613). Stated in full, my view is that 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.

Poslajko argues that although I am correct that this idiosyncratic version of interpretivism sidesteps an epistemological problem that haunted earlier versions, it is still haunted by the same old metaphysical problem: the problem of explaining how, precisely, interpretation is constitutive of belief. Poslajko then avers that in order to adequately address this metaphysical problem, interpretivism would have to take on unnecessary metaphysical baggage, which would make it inferior to a strictly simpler non-interpretivist dispositionalism. In setting out this objection, he states that an explanatorily adequate account of the metaphysics of interpretivism should

provide answers to at least two important questions. First, it should tell us whether attitudes modally depend on the process of interpretation (i.e., whether it is possible for attitudes to exist without there being interpreters). Second a sound interpretivist theory should shed at least some light on the epistemological status of the constitution claim [i.e., should explain how and why theorists ought to take beliefs to be metaphysically constituted in relation to interpretation]. (Poslajko forthcoming, §4)

¹ Throughout this reply, I use the term “beliefs” (and its cognates) to refer to what I have elsewhere termed “attitudes of belief”—the beliefs that people attribute to each other in everyday life—as opposed to “cognitive states of belief”—the beliefs that some cognitive scientists posit as cogs in cognitive systems—since I have defended interpretivism about attitudes of belief but not cognitive states of belief (and, indeed, have argued (in Curry 2021b; see also 2018; forthcoming) that one should be an interpretivist about attitudes of belief whether or not one takes cognitive states of belief to exist, and, if so, whatever one thinks about their metaphysics).

In this reply, I will directly answer both of Poslajko's questions, unpack the metaphysical commitments motivating my answers, and conclude that dispositionalism needs interpretivism if it is to remain a tenable superficial theory of belief.

First: yes, beliefs modally depend on interpretive models. It is not possible for beliefs to exist without there being interpreters wielding those models.²

Second: beliefs are constituted relative to—and thus modally depend on—interpretive models because beliefs cannot be individuated—and the dispositions they comprise cannot be specified—except in virtue of their relationship to those models.³

Now, in the last section of his paper, Poslajko (forthcoming, §5) explicitly rejects the claim that beliefs cannot be individuated except in relation to interpreters.⁴ He rightly points out that my model-theoretic approach to folk psychology is compatible with a wide range of theories of belief, most of which eschew the further claim that beliefs are metaphysically constituted in relation to folk psychological models. Among these possibilities are some (allegedly non-interpretivist) superficial theories of belief, and Poslajko suggests comparing their simple charms with interpretivism's metaphysical decadence. I will quote Poslajko's next paragraph in full, and then respond point by point.

Although Curry declares at one point that his aim is to develop a view which would “accommodate an edifying wedding of interpretivism with dispositionalism” (Curry 2021a, p. 613), in other places he is careful to distinguish his view from a purely dispositional one (see Curry 2021b). This is an important claim: although Curry-style interpretivism and dispositionalism share important similarities, they remain importantly distinct. Interpretivists are committed to claims of constitution, which are in no way necessary (or even welcome) for a dispositionalist. Nothing in the core of dispositionalist doctrine (as espoused historically by Ryle (1949) and more currently by Schwitzgebel (2002, 2013)) forces its proponents to adopt the view that beliefs and other attitudes are in any way dependent on the process of interpretation and ascription.

I have indeed been careful to distinguish my view from a purely dispositional one. But I have done so while arguing that the latter is unviable—unless it allows itself to become impure by either collapsing into a non-superficial theory of belief or coupling with interpretivism. (I will

² I make this answer explicit in Curry (2021b, §4)—see, for instance, the passage that Poslajko (forthcoming, §4) himself quotes—and argue against a common intuition to the contrary in Curry (2021a, fn 3).

³ This claim about the individuation of beliefs is mentioned in Curry (2021a, fn 2), is a central thesis of Curry (2021b, see especially §3.3), and is explored further in Curry (2020, §3) and (forthcoming, §5), and most acutely throughout Curry (2022).

⁴ In this section, Poslajko also ascribes to me the view that “whether a given subject has a given belief in some cases is objectively [or “metaphysically”] indeterminate” (forthcoming, §5). But I have never committed to that view. Instead, I have argued (in Curry 2020, §§4 & 5; 2021b, §4) that even when belief is *intersubjectively* indeterminate, it is usually (perhaps always) objectively determinate. The objective facts-of-the-matter are simply fixed in relation to each relevant interpretive perspective: the parishioner objectively believes one thing in relation to the priest, and objectively believes a different thing in relation to the deacon.

unpack that argument momentarily.) In any case, Ryle and Schwitzgebel are not proponents of the purely dispositional view that I have argued is unviable.⁵ On the contrary, Ryle and Schwitzgebel are proponents of impure versions of dispositionalism that are already in bed with interpretivism. Indeed, as I will now argue, the claim that beliefs are constituted relative to folk psychological models is in fact a necessary ingredient in any viable dispositionalism (whether it is welcome or not).

Consider Schwitzgebel's (2002, 253) definition of belief, which Poslajko cites: "to believe that P, on the view I am proposing, is nothing more than to match to an appropriate degree and in appropriate respects the dispositional stereotype for believing that P." A dispositional stereotype for believing is just a variety of interpretive model of belief, "typically grounded in folk psychology" (Schwitzgebel 2013, 75), that sets out the phenomenal, cognitive, and behavioral dispositions stereotypically associated with the belief in question.⁶ Schwitzgebel does not merely nod to folk psychological models as tools people use to detect beliefs. His central, definitional claim is that beliefs are nothing more than ways of matching folk psychological models (or, occasionally, more specialized interpretive models). If they are nothing more than ways of matching an interpretation scheme, then beliefs could not exist in the absence of such an interpretation scheme.

Poslajko is wrong that nothing in the core of dispositionalist doctrine in the Ryle/Schwitzgebel tradition forces its proponents to adopt the view that beliefs are dependent on interpretation.⁷ For it is not an accident that Schwitzgebel's well worked out theory bakes in a metaphysical relationship between beliefs and interpretive schemes. In its most general formulation, dispositionalism is the theory that to believe is to have the appropriate dispositions. There is nothing obviously interpretivist about the theory thus stated. But the obvious question to ask about dispositionalism is: what makes particular dispositions appropriate? The dispositionalist must provide some principled criterion for individuating beliefs: for determining which beliefs comprise which dispositions, for determining how those (often intrinsically disunified) dispositions are grouped together into a unified pattern, and for determining what makes a pattern of dispositions a *belief* at all. And the chosen criterion must settle these matters in a manner that explains how people with diverse dispositional profiles can nevertheless all share the same belief.⁸

⁵ Jackson and Pettit (1990) are the archetypical proponents of the theory critiqued in Curry (2021b, §3.3). For what it is worth, I have nowhere used the term "pure dispositionalism"; I have followed Jackson and Pettit in calling the relevant theory "pure functionalism" or "commonsense functionalism." (It is also sometimes called "analytic functionalism" in the literature.) But it does not matter what we call it: as I argue in the main text, the view is (a) not Schwitzgebel's preferred variety of dispositionalism and (b) untenable as a superficial theory of belief.

⁶ I've discussed this interpretivist commitment of Schwitzgebel's in Curry (2020, §3.1) and (2022, §4).

⁷ Ryle (1949), for his part, relied on the logic of commonsense belief talk to serve as the interpretive scheme that unveils which determinable dispositions are identical to which beliefs.

⁸ Schwitzgebel (2002) especially stresses the role of dispositional stereotypes in explaining how people with particular dispositional profiles can be understood as "in-between believing" — neither fully believing nor not believing. I've stressed the desideratum of explaining how people (and animals) with very different dispositions can fully — and not merely in-between — believe the same thing (Curry 2022; forthcoming).

That is where Schwitzgebel's dispositional stereotypes—and attendant commitment to interpretivism—come into play: for Schwitzgebel, the appropriate dispositions for any given belief are just those dispositions that show up in the dispositional stereotype for that belief, the dispositional stereotype supplies the structure according to which dispositions are grouped together into unified patterns, and a pattern of dispositions is a belief just in virtue of its fit with that dispositional stereotype. People with diverse dispositional profiles can all share the same belief insofar as they each sufficiently fit the same stereotype (even when they each fit it to different degrees and in different respects).

Could some other, non-interpretivist criterion suffice for individuation? Well, many philosophers are inclined to posit a single (though perhaps distributed) neural process or psychofunctional state—what I have called a “cognitive state of belief” (2021b)—that underlies all of the appropriate dispositions for any given belief. But the theory that ‘to believe is to have the dispositions that arise from a particular cognitive state’ collapses into the theory that ‘to believe is to occupy that cognitive state.’ If it were to adopt this sort of criterion, dispositionalism would cease to be a superficial theory of belief at all—and thus, trivially, could not support Poslajko's claim that it is a simpler superficial theory of belief than interpretivism. Indeed, I have argued at length (in Curry 2021b, §3.3; 2022, §3) that if dispositionalism is to remain superficial (rather than collapsing into psychofunctionalism), then the mixture with interpretivism that is already baked into Schwitzgebel's account is its only viable route to securing a principled criterion of individuation.⁹

In a recent series of papers, Poslajko (2020, 2021, 2022) makes it plain that he, like me, wants to resist reduction and hold on to a superficial theory of belief.¹⁰ The central contention of this reply is that in the absence of a viable alternative, non-interpretivist criterion for individuating beliefs (and the dispositions they comprise)—which Poslajko has not offered—any superficial theory must countenance beliefs as being modally dependent on folk psychological models in relation to which they are constituted.¹¹

⁹ Another candidate criterion is teleofunctional: patterns of dispositions might constitute beliefs insofar as they play the purposes that evolution or development have selected beliefs to play. I have discussed this possibility at length in Curry (2021b, §4), arguing that teleofunctionalists about belief should be interpretivists as well. For present purposes, it is worth adding that teleofunctionalism is at least as metaphysically extravagant (and mysterious, since it renders historical facts constitutive of present beliefs) as interpretivism—so a teleofunctional dispositionalism is not obviously more parsimonious than an interpretivist dispositionalism. And insofar as I am right that teleofunctional dispositionalists should be interpretivists too, it is strictly less parsimonious.

¹⁰ I have argued against reduction in Curry (2021b, §§3–4); see also the final two paragraphs of Curry (2021c, §4).

¹¹ There are versions of dispositionalism articulated in the literature that (unlike Schwitzgebel's) make no explicit appeal to folk psychology. For example, Ruth Barcan Marcus influentially argued that “x believes that S just in case under certain *agent-centered circumstances* including x's desires and needs as well as *external circumstances*, x is disposed to act as if S, that actual or non-actual state of affairs, obtains” (1990: 140). Marcus's definition is a fine way of initially glossing the nature of belief, but it does not provide a precise criterion for individuating beliefs (or picking out the particular dispositions they comprise), much less for explaining how believers can have some of the dispositions associated with a particular belief but

That is a mouthful, and on first encounter it may sound awfully metaphysically mysterious. But the analogy between belief and nutritiousness serves to illustrate that there is nothing mysterious about this kind of relativism.¹² The nutritiousness of a peach is partly constituted by peach eaters' digestive systems—in the sense that the peach would not be nutritious if those digestive systems didn't exist, even though (we can pretend, ignoring the coevolutionary history of peaches and peach eaters) it would have all the same chemical ingredients. Why? Because there is no principled reason to call chemical ingredients “nutrients” except in light of their relationship to digestive systems.

Likewise, beliefs are partly constituted by belief attributors' models—in the sense that people would not be believers except in relation to those models, even though (we can pretend, ignoring the coevolutionary history of believers and belief attributors) they would have the same dispositions. Why? Because there is no principled reason to call sets of dispositions “beliefs”—and, indeed, no reason to take the relevant dispositions to form salient sets at all—except in light of their relationship to folk psychological models.

Per superficial theories, belief is not a (non-interpretive-relative) natural kind. There is no guarantee of substantial underlying unity among the dispositions grouped together by belief attributors. Interpreters (plausibly) merely fix the referent of “fructose” when they use it to refer to fructose, the ketonic simple sugar found in peaches. But interpreters do not merely fix the referent of “belief”; interpreters provide the metaphysical glue that bonds disparate cognitive, behavioral, and phenomenal dispositions into salient kinds: into *beliefs*.¹³ They also provide the framework relative to which people with diverse dispositional profiles can nevertheless all share

lack others. Marcus thus provides no way of dealing with puzzling cases of “in-between belief” (Schwitzgebel 2002), diverse “styles of belief” (Curry 2022), or intersubjective indeterminacy about what somebody believes (Curry 2020). As I note in Curry (2022, §3), deep theories like psychofunctionalism have ample resources for individuating beliefs, relating them to dispositions, and solving these puzzles. In contrast, so far as I know, interpretivism supplies the only principled means by which a dispositionalism can individuate beliefs (and specify the particular dispositions they comprise) without collapsing into a non-superficial theory of belief. And, as the articles already cited in this footnote explain, relativizing beliefs to folk psychological models solves (or dissolves) the puzzles about the individuation of belief that simple dispositionalisms like Marcus's are otherwise wholly unequipped to handle.

¹² This nutrition analogy (from Curry 2021b) is what prompted Poslajko (forthcoming, §4) to ask his first question answered above, concerning modal dependence. I trust that this retelling, taken in light of the preceding discussion of how interpretivism supplies dispositionalism with a principled way of individuating beliefs, makes it clear in what sense I take nutritiousness and belief to be analogous. (The analogy is imperfect, as all analogies are.)

¹³ I do not hereby mean to deny Daniel Dennett's claim that beliefs are real patterns. Instead, I mean to emphasize, with Dennett, that while the real patterns of dispositions that constitute beliefs “are objective—they are *there* to be detected,” they nonetheless “are not *out there* entirely independent of us, since they are patterns composed partly of our own ‘subjective’ reactions to what is out there; they are the patterns made to order for our narcissistic concerns” (Dennett 1987, 39). Human cognitive systems give rise to countless—all real, although mostly utterly uninteresting—patterns of dispositions, some more intrinsically unified than others. Which of those patterns are unified in a new way—via their individuation as *beliefs*—depends on their relationship to folk psychological models. I've unpacked this point in Curry (2020, §2; 2021b, §3; 2022, §§3–4).

the same belief (Curry 2022). Again, there is no mystery here. Similar interpretive relationships transform diverse metal discs, colored pieces of paper, and entries in digital ledgers into the same currency. They bond disparate people, buildings, books, scientific instruments, events, traditions, rules, contracts, missions, and mascots into institutions appositely named “universities”.

Poslajko writes that “what the interpretivist needs to do is to develop a persuasive and coherent metaphysical account of the relation of constitution in a manner which would eschew the problems which plague the judgement-dependence approach” (forthcoming, §5). I could not agree more—and I will not pretend that I have already worked out all of the kinks in interpretivism’s metaphysics. But I reject the implication that this puts interpretivism at a disadvantage when pitted against the purportedly simpler metaphysics of dispositionalism, since, if my arguments have been good, dispositionalism either collapses into psychofunctionalism (or some other non-superficial theory of belief) or sneaks interpretivism in through its bedroom window.

I, for one, think the two views should stop sneaking around. Poslajko has not shown just cause why they may not be lawfully wed. Moreover, his objection to the necessity of adding interpretivism to dispositionalism fails. 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 Poslajko 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.

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