

## FOLK PSYCHOLOGY FROM THE STANDPOINT OF CONCEPTUAL ANALYSIS

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Before deciding what status should be given to folk psychology within scientific psychology, we must understand its linguistic peculiarities. To do that, we need to attend to research on the topic within the philosophical tradition known as "conceptual analysis." This research enables us to identify six respects in which folk psychological language can lead us astray, when used in a scientific context:

- (1) the creation of bogus abstract entities by the process of "nominalizing" predicates and other non-substantival parts of speech,
- (2) the persistent use of adjectives with evaluative (good/bad) connotations,
- (3) the systematic evaluation of the content of other people's cognitive attitudes and judgments from the standpoint of the speaker,
- (4) the distortion of causal accounts of human action by the demand for a single scapegoat on whom to pin the blame when things go wrong,
- (5) the use of the metaphor of linguistic control when explaining behavior that is not subject to that type of control,
- (6) the unavoidable use of simile when describing private experience.

## FOLK PSYCHOLOGY AS A LINGUISTIC UNIVERSAL

I begin with a large claim. Folk psychology, I maintain, is a linguistic universal. In every natural language which is currently spoken, in every ancient language and culture of which we have decipherable records, the same basic concepts, the same explanatory scheme, are deployed in the accounts that are given of the actions both of the speaker/writer and of other human beings. I take this fact, if it is a fact, to be a serious difficulty for, if not a decisive refutation of the 'eliminative materialist' position, as defended Nick Chater and Mike Oaksford [pp. 244-256 of the same volume].

In his classical exposition of eliminative materialism in his paper 'Mind-brain identity, privacy and categories', Richard Rorty (1965) compares what we are here calling 'folk psychology' to the beliefs in witches and witchcraft which were widespread in Christian Europe and in European colonies in America and elsewhere down to the end of the seventeenth century. Just as witchcraft beliefs became discredited as a consequence of the scientific revolution of the seventeenth century, so, Rorty argues, we may confidently expect folk psychology to be likewise discredited and abandoned in the light of contemporary discoveries in the neurosciences.

The weakness of this analogy is that it represents folk psychology as a system of supernatural beliefs. Examination of such belief systems shows, I believe, that their function is to fill significant gaps in the body of practical common sense knowledge which is required in order to communicate and deploy the technologies on which even a society of hunters and gatherers depends for its survival. Such significant gaps arise in areas of major human concern such as the causes of rainfall or the lack of it, natural [p. 265] disasters, the fortunes of war, and disease, both in the case of human beings and in the case of the plants and animals on which they depend. They arise because the causes of such events are not accessible to observation at the level of common sense with the result that common sense lacks the resources with which to effectively predict and control them.

Unlike the practical common sense knowledge the gaps in which they fill, supernatural beliefs are not tightly constrained by the contingencies which actually govern the phenomena they purport to predict and over which they purport to provide a measure of control. They are constrained only by

- (a) the need to give a spurious sense of comprehension and control over phenomena which, at the level of common sense, are beyond the reach of such comprehension and control,
- (b) the need to avoid obvious disconfirmation by the way things actually turn out, and
- (c) the need for "agreement in judgments" within the social group constituted by those who subscribe to the belief system in question.

The effect of these constraints is that supernatural belief systems, though they tend towards uniformity of belief within a given culture, vary widely from culture to culture, partly as result of differences between cultures in what are the significant gaps in the technology and associated practical knowledge for the particular culture, and partly for idiosyncratic reasons of history and geography. Practical common sense knowledge, by contrast, varies from culture to culture only to the extent that different cultures rely on different technologies to wrest a living from similar or different environments. There is no such variation from culture to culture in the technology used to predict and manage interpersonal human relations, the domain for which folk psychology supplies the

appropriate conceptual framework. Hence the universality of that branch of practical common sense knowledge which we are here calling 'folk psychology'.

Viewed from this perspective, the project of empirical science is to use the method of systematic observation and experiment to generate a well-grounded alternative to supernatural belief. Having been exposed artificially to the same kind rigorous shaping by the contingencies they specify as is common sense practical knowledge by generations of practical experience in the natural course of events, the belief systems generated by the application of scientific method enjoy the same kind of universal acceptance and the same right to be regarded as established knowledge. In addition to the practice of systematically submitting hypotheses to practical/experimental test, science succeeds where common sense is forced to give way to supernatural gap-filling by

- (a) using devices such as the telescope and microscope which extend observation beyond the limits of the observation available to common sense,
- (b) using precise and standardized measurement techniques, and
- (c) using mathematical formulae to describe and predict the results of exact measurement and the relation between one measure and another.

But besides these technical innovations, there is another respect in which scientific method improves on common sense which is of particular importance in relation to the present topic. This is the substitution of a more objective perspective for the anthropocentrism which is characteristic of common sense, a perspective from which things are viewed, in Spinoza's words, *sub specie aeternitatis*.

We have seen that practical common sense knowledge is shaped by the actual behavior-consequence relations which obtain in the environment and which it specifies. These behavior-consequence relations or "contingencies", to use B. F. Skinner's term, are causal relations. But they are causal relations viewed from a particular perspective, from the perspective of a human agent trying to master a hostile environment. It is this anthropocentric perspective which is rejected and replaced by the more objective perspective of science. Two well known examples of the scientific repudiation of anthropocentrism are

- (1) the rejection of common sense talk about the 'rising' and 'setting' of the sun, the moon and those planets visible to the naked eye in favor of an interpretation of those events in terms of the rotation of the earth on its axis, the rotation of the moon around the earth and the rotation of the planets around the sun, and
- (2) the abandonment of the common sense contrast between human beings and animals in favor of the conception of *homo sapiens* as one among many species of mammal.

## FOLK PSYCHOLOGY AND CONCEPTUAL ANALYSIS

If, as I have argued, folk psychology is a form of practical common sense knowledge, rather than supernatural infilling, it follows that it has been shaped over thousands of years of intimate contact with the contingencies involved in the prediction [p. 266] and management of human interpersonal relations. This means that, on the one hand it contains a unique reservoir of knowledge concerning the causal relations governing human behavior which no scientific psychology can afford to ignore. Viewed from the perspective of science, on the other hand, its perspective on those causal relations is severely distorted by its exclusively anthropocentric and, when applied to the behavior of animals, anthropomorphic assumptions. It is distorted not only by parochial human assumptions, such as the assumption that behavior is controlled by self-directed talk on the part of the agent, but also by the role played by this conceptual scheme in the way language is used in the management of human affairs.

If this is correct, in order to make use of the insights into the mechanisms controlling behavior which folk psychology contains, we need some way of separating the scientifically important wheat from the anthropocentric chaff. In order to do this, I maintain, we need to call on the resources of a technique for elucidating the meaning of words and expressions in natural language known as 'conceptual analysis.'

Conceptual analysis is a way of making explicit the intuitive understanding which a fluent speaker/listener of a human natural language has of the words she uses and hears. It does this by studying the kinds of sentence in which such words can and cannot meaningfully occur and the kinds of context in which the resulting sentences can and cannot be meaningfully uttered. Its ultimate source is Frege's (1884/1950) contention that the meaning of a word is the contribution it makes to the meaning of the those sentences in which it occurs which are sufficiently well formed to be intelligible to the average listener. It first appeared in Wittgenstein's (1953; 1958) later writings where it is referred to as "a grammatical investigation." Properly so-called conceptual analysis was a product of the 'ordinary language' school of analytic philosophy which flourished at Oxford in the years immediately following the end of World War II. Its most important exponents were Gilbert Ryle,

John Austin, my own philosophy tutor, Paul Grice, and the only leading member of the group who is still alive, Sir Peter Strawson.

For reasons which have more to do with the philosopher's reluctance to be drawn into what was becoming an empirical investigation of matters of linguistic fact than with any demonstration that its conclusions are unsound, ordinary language philosophy and with it conceptual analysis have fallen out of favor amongst philosophers in recent years. For the psychologist the idea that conceptual analysis is a branch of empirical linguistics should be a recommendation. In a recent paper (Place, 1992) I have argued that conceptual analysis is an empirical sociolinguistic investigation of the norms and conventions governing the construction and use of intelligible sentences in any natural language or technical code in which the investigator is fluent. It relies on what I regard as the only satisfactory methodology for demonstrating the existence of a social norm, the ethnomethodological experiment (Garfinkel, 1962). As I construe it, the ethnomethodological experiment is way of getting round the difficulty that statistical studies of the incidence of a particular variety of social behavior fail to distinguish between behavior which has a low natural frequency of occurrence whose incidence is enhanced by sanctions favoring it, and behavior which has a high natural frequency of occurrence whose incidence is reduced by sanctions designed to discourage it. It demonstrates the existence of a social convention by flouting the convention and observing the consternation that results. As applied by the conceptual analyst to the linguistic conventions involved in the construction of intelligible sentences, it takes the form of a thought experiment in which the analyst invites the reader, *qua* fluent speaker of the language, to share the consternation provoked by a sentence in which a particular convention is flouted, showing in other words that the resulting sentence is nonsensical, absurd, unintelligible.

## **SORTING THE SCIENTIFICALLY IMPORTANT WHEAT FROM THE SCIENTIFICALLY IRRELEVANT CHAFF**

I have already suggested that the importance of conceptual analysis for the purposes of scientific psychology is that it provides a way of distinguishing between those aspects of folk psychology which reflect the nature of the actual psychological processes and capacities involved in the control of human behavior and those which are mere artifacts of the linguistic devices used to depict those processes and capacities or which reflect the anthropocentric preoccupations of the human agent. A full treatment of this topic would require [p. 267]

- (1) a detailed description of how the methodology of conceptual analysis is applied to the language of folk psychology,
- (2) an analysis of those features of such language which are artifacts of the method of linguistic representation or the anthropocentric perspective, and
- (3) an analysis of those features which reflect and provide us with information about the nature of the underlying psychological processes and capacities.

In this paper I attempt only the second of these projects. In the case of the first project, for an appreciation of what conceptual analysis looks like when applied to the language of folk psychology, I cannot do better than refer the reader to Ryle's classical study in his book *The Concept of Mind* (Ryle, 1949). Although almost half a century has elapsed since its publication, many of its lessons have either never been learned or, if they have, have long been forgotten. It is true that, as Medlin (1967) has argued, Ryle's work suffers from a deplorable lack of understanding of and sympathy for the scientific enterprise, both in general and in the fields of psychology and neuroscience in particular. What is needed, therefore, is a reworking of Ryle's linguistic data in a way which both reflects more recent developments in conceptual analysis (e.g., those associated with the problem of intentionality) and linguistics (e.g., transformational grammar) and, at the same time, adopts a more positive attitude to science and scientific psychology.

As to the positive contribution which, in my view, conceptual analysis can make to our understanding of psychological processes and capacities, that is for the future, something that will emerge only when the artifacts of linguistic representation and the anthropocentric perspective have been cleared away or suitably discounted.<sup>1</sup> However, once these impediments have been cleared away, it is my belief that important insights into the way behavior is in fact organized and controlled can be derived from a study of

- (a) mental activity verbs, particularly those which Ryle (1949) refers to as "heed concepts" (Cf. Place, 1954),

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<sup>1</sup> The writer has made two hitherto unpublished attempts (Place, 1988; 1991) to construct a link between conclusions derived from the conceptual analysis of folk psychological language and Broadbent's "information-flow diagram for the organism" (Broadbent, 1958, Figure 7, p. 299), as revised in his *Decision and Stress* (Broadbent, 1971, pp. 7-16). Though these links are, I believe, still valid, their diagrammatic representation has been overtaken by more recent developments in the rapidly evolving fields of neuropsychology, artificial intelligence and cognitive science.

- (b) locutions in which a mental state or mental event verb, such as 'expect,' 'remember,' 'imagine,' 'learn,' 'see,' 'hear,' 'recognize' or 'notice,' takes as its grammatical object a noun phrase describing an object or event, thereby escaping the metaphor of the linguistic control of behavior which is introduced whenever the grammatical object is an embedded sentence in indirect reported speech, and
- (c) the complex and subtle language of feeling and emotion.

In what follows I shall describe six features which are revealed by the application to it of conceptual analysis and other empirical approaches to the study of meaning, such as Osgood's (Osgood, Suci and Tannenbaum, 1957) "semantic differential," all of which obscure the important contribution which the study of folk psychology can make to psychological science and render it, at least in its unreformed state, unsuitable as the language of psychological theory. In each case I shall try to indicate how the feature in question arises either from the peculiarities of our ordinary linguistic representations of psychological reality or from the anthropocentric concerns of human speakers/agents, and why and to what extent this feature disqualifies folk psychological language for use in a scientific context.

### *Nominalization and the Generation of Abstract Objects*

A feature of folk psychology which has generated conceptual confusion since the time of Plato is the invariable use of predicate expressions in the form of a verb or a copula-plus-adjective combination to characterize the mental processes, events and states of an individual identified by the subject term. When they are incorporated into a scientific theory, the syntax of natural language sentences drives these predicates into argument places, such as the subject and direct object positions, which are normally reserved for what Aristotle calls "substances," things like material objects and living organisms. In order to occupy these positions in the sentence these predicates have to be 'nominalized,' i.e., converted into a noun which is then taken to stand for an abstract object, as in the case of the 'faculties' of perception, imagination, memory, motivation, etc. Since it is a feature of natural language in general, rather than of folk psychology in particular, and since it is often a convenient shorthand which saves a great deal of circumlocution, the nominalization of predicate expressions is not something which a scientific psychology could hope to eliminate altogether. The most that can be hoped for is that psychologists be aware of what they are doing when they use these noun phrases and check back every now and then to the sentences in which the expression occurs as a verb phrase, so as to [p. 268] make sure that what we say in the nominalized form is not an absurdity when expressed as a predicate.

### *The Evaluative Factor*

Folk psychology is deeply infected with terms whose meaning is distinguished only by the evaluation of the characteristic as desirable or undesirable, as in the case of 'intelligent' (good), 'cunning' (bad), 'young' (good), 'immature,' 'childish' (bad), 'outstanding,' (good), 'abnormal' (bad), etc. This is a phenomenon which was drawn to the attention of psychologists, not through conceptual analysis, but through the work of Osgood *et al.* (1957) on the semantic differential. From their factor analysis of subjects' ratings of a list of stimulus nouns on a series of bi-polar scales constructed by pairing a list of adjectives with their opposites the first factor to emerge was "clearly identifiable as *evaluative* by listing the scales which have high loadings on it." (p. 36) It is hardly surprising that common sense should be pre-occupied with classifying contingencies according to whether they are advantageous or disadvantageous, friendly or hostile, relative to the interests of the individual concerned. Nor is it surprising that such evaluations should be thought incompatible with scientific objectivity. The fact that value judgments are part of the data and explanatory resources of both psychology and the social sciences generally has sometimes been advanced as grounds for exempting these disciplines from the demands of scientific objectivity in this respect; but there seems to be no rational justification for that view. Though it is not restricted to folk psychology, evaluation is a feature of common sense, not of language in general as is nominalization. There is, therefore, no reason why it should not be eliminated in order to achieve an entirely objective descriptive account for the purposes of science; and if it can be eliminated for these purposes, then it should be. That, of course, is a value judgment; but it is a metascientific value judgment, not a scientific description.

### *Assigning a Truth Value to the Content of Other People's Cognitive Attitudes*

A similarly anthropocentric feature which is peculiar to folk psychology is the systematic evaluation of the content of other people's cognitive attitudes and judgments from the standpoint of the speaker. This is illustrated by the

fact, well known to conceptual analysts<sup>2</sup> and only now being painfully rediscovered by other philosophers, that the difference between saying *Joe knows it is going to rain* and *Joe thinks it is going to rain* does not entail any difference in Joe's state of mind in the two cases. In saying *Joe knows it is going to rain*, the speaker endorses Joe's opinion as the correct view. In saying *Joe thinks it is going to rain*, she allows that Joe may be mistaken. Once this point is appreciated, we are compelled to confront what to many psychologists is the uncomfortable conclusion that there is, to say the least, a very big question mark over the propriety of using the verb 'know', its derivatives and other verbs of cognitive achievement drawn from folk psychology in a scientific context.

### *The Need for a Scapegoat: The Myth of the Single Cause and the Freedom of the Will*

The theory of the causation of behavior embedded within folk psychology is distorted by the need (intelligible in terms of the psychology of the anger response to frustration and aversive stimulation) to pin the blame when anything goes wrong on a particular individual. This results in a reluctance to allow that causes in general and the causes of behavior in particular are multiple, and an insistence on the freedom of the human will and human responsibility, the doctrine that the individual is the sole cause of his or her actions. This is one part of the critique of folk psychology from the scientific standpoint which psychologists of all persuasions have been most ready to take on board. Unfortunately, they have not always appreciated the strength of the scientific case against right-wing libertarianism.

### *The Myth of Universal Linguistic Control*

Folk psychology is deeply infected with the often counterfactual assumption or, as it sometimes is, the blatant fiction that behavior is controlled by the agent's self-directed talk. This fiction of the linguistic control of behavior is manifested in the widespread practice whereby the 'content' of a psychological state is characterized by means of an embedded *oratio obliqua* sentence (i.e., a quotation of what the agent might be expected to say) in the [p. 269] direct object position after a psychological verb. Sentences which are said by philosophers to ascribe a 'propositional attitude' to an agent are of this kind. Unless you believe with Fodor (1975) that both animal and human behavior are controlled by what he calls "the language of thought", explaining the behavior of an animal by quoting what it might say, if it only it could talk, must be regarded as a gross anthropomorphism, wholly unacceptable in a scientific theory. Even in the case of the behavior of adult humans, this way of talking greatly exaggerates the extent to which behavior is subject to linguistic control, while creating a biologically unacceptable gulf between human and animal behavior. It is these considerations, I suggest, which justify the behaviorists repudiation of what they describe as the 'mentalism' of folk psychology. The alternatives they have proposed thus far may leave something to be desired; but that an alternative is needed is difficult to gainsay. The eliminative materialist's proposal that we should rely on neuroscience to provide us with an alternative language is not satisfactory, in my view. Folk psychology operates at a much more molar level of analysis than that of the neuron and its synapses where neuroscience is at home. If both folk psychology and behaviorism are dismissed, there are no conceptual resources with which to describe the properties of a simple neural network, let alone a system as complex as the avian or mammalian brain.

### *The Use of Simile in Phenomenological Descriptions of Private Experience*

Descriptions of the so-called 'phenomenological properties' of private experiences, i.e., those properties which the subject ascribes to her experiences which are over and above the thoughts and emotional reactions they provoke, take the form of a simile: 'It was as if \_\_\_\_\_ were the case.' Though unavoidable, similes such as this are deeply alien to standard scientific conceptions of how descriptions of events should be constructed. This, however, I regard as the least damaging of the criticisms of folk psychology we have considered. This is because phenomenological descriptions of private experience do not, contrary to popular belief, provide either the data or the concepts on the basis of which folk psychological explanations of behavior are constructed. Their only apparent function in everyday life, apart from that of soliciting sympathy for the speaker's predicament and making an application for the exemption from normal obligations provided by admission to what Parsons (1951)

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<sup>2</sup> That you cannot say that someone knows something, if what they claim to know is false has been known to philosophers, since it was first pointed out by Plato in the *Theaitetos*. But the full significance of this discovery was not appreciated until Ryle (1949) pointed out that the primary function of what we are here calling 'folk psychology' is to enable us to talk about *other people* rather than to talk about ourselves. For in the first person case, the difference between *I know* and *I believe* is indeed a psychological distinction, a matter of the strength of the speaker's conviction of the truth and defensibility of the statement which the phrase introduces.

calls the "sick role", is to allow the listener to imagine to some extent what it must have been like to have had the experience which the speaker is describing. From the standpoint of scientific psychology they would seem to provide a kind of 'inside view' of some, as yet unidentified, part of the process in the brain which is controlling the behavior of the speaker. But because they remain unidentified, we can only speculate as to what part they play in the control of behavior. From the standpoint of the neuropsychologist, the fact that all descriptions of private experience take the form of a simile is only a small part of the wider problem of how to integrate evidence from the verbal utterances of the self-reporting subject with the expanding body of anatomical, physiological, biochemical and objective behavioral evidence. Indeed, as I argued in my paper 'Is consciousness a brain process?' (Place 1956), once we recognize that phenomenological descriptions invariably take the form of a simile,

"We realize that there is nothing that the introspecting subject says about his conscious experiences which is inconsistent with anything the physiologist might want to say about the brain processes which cause him to describe the environment and his consciousness of that environment in the way he does." (p. 50)

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