

Folk Psychological Narratives

The Sociocultural Basis of Understanding Reasons

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Preface

The Cognitive Revolution . . . was intended to bring “mind” back into the human sciences after a long cold winter of objectivism. . . . Some critics, perhaps unkindly, argue that the new cognitive science, the child of the revolution, has gained its technical advantages at the price of de-humanising the very concept of mind it had sought to re-establish in psychology, and that it has thereby estranged much of psychology from the other human sciences and the humanities.

—Bruner, *Acts of Meaning*

Folk psychology is a philosopher’s label for the practice of making sense of intentional actions, minimally, by appeal to an agent’s motivating beliefs and desires.¹ It is the sort of thing one does, for example, when digesting Jane’s explanation of her late arrival at a meeting because she *mistakenly thought* it was being held in a different room. Taking our friend at her word (i.e., if we assume that she had genuinely *wanted* to attend the meeting on time), we will blame the content of her beliefs for the confusion on this occasion. This is something we do, and have the standing capacity to do, unthinkingly. We rely on it constantly.

Established wisdom has it that this workaday ability is something we inherited from our ancient ancestors. Proponents of the hotly debated dominant offerings for understanding folk psychology—known as *theory theory* and *simulation theory*—typically hold that our ancient cognitive endowment takes one of three forms. It is (1) a very special kind of subpersonal mechanism that literally contains the relevant mentalistic theory, (2) a basic starter theory that is modified by theory-formation mechanisms that fashion a mature theory of mind during ontogeny, or (3) a series of subpersonal mindreading mechanisms that enable direct manipulation of the relevant mental states themselves. To accept any of these views (or some hybrid combination of them) is to accept that our folk psychological abilities are essentially (or at least in important respects) a kind of biological inheritance.

That some such account must be true is encouraged by the apparent fact that, after a fairly stable pattern of staged development—though one that can be subject to specific delays—all normal human children of all cultures come to understand actions in terms of reasons using the same basic mentalistic framework and its conceptual ingredients. In other words, many believe that the human capacity to use mature folk psychology is a universal trait of our species. An important exception is those individuals who have autism. They exhibit a distinctive set of impairments—impairments that, *inter alia*, severely restrict their capacity to develop a folk psychological understanding, to the extent that they are able to do so at all. These considerations fuel the idea that such abilities must be written into the very fabric of our being: a gift from our evolutionary ancestors.

Against this idea, this book provides an elaborate defence of the claim that our capacity to understand intentional actions in terms of reasons has a decidedly sociocultural basis. It advances and explicates the hypothesis that children only come by the requisite framework for such understanding and master its practical application by being exposed to and engaging in a distinctive kind of narrative practice. I call this the Narrative Practice Hypothesis (NPH). Its core claim is that direct encounters with stories about persons who act for reasons—those supplied in interactive contexts by responsive caregivers—is the normal route through which children become familiar with both (1) the basic structure of folk psychology and (2) the norm-governed possibilities for wielding it in practice, thus learning both how and when to use it.

The overarching aim of this book is to introduce this possibility into the mix, thus breaking some new ground. My purpose is to make as strong case as is possible for the underexamined idea that our interpretative abilities may well be socioculturally grounded. This requires not only spelling out the positive contours of the NPH, which is the task of chapter 2, but also challenging certain widely held assumptions that might otherwise make it look like a less-than-serious contender for explaining the basis and origin of our mature folk psychological abilities. Consequently, apart from extolling the virtues of the NPH, a fair bit of space is given over to putting its dominant rivals under appropriate pressure. I make no apologies for this since overturning assumptions that prevent us from thinking clearly about important issues is a legitimate, indeed unavoidable, philosophical activity.

Equally, however, I want to engender a positive understanding of our capacities and practices. It helps to be clear about the status of the NPH in this regard. As I said, it marks out a section of, as yet, underexplored

conceptual space. It is inspired by the fact that certain types of narratives have precisely the right form and content to introduce children to folk psychology and explain their understanding of it over time. As a philosopher I do not see it as my job to fashion and supply straightforward empirical hypotheses. I regard the NPH not so much as conjecture but as a product of a kind of observational philosophy. Like its counterpart observational comedy, which can be funny or unfunny, this kind of philosophy too can be illuminating or unilluminating. My hope is, obviously, that the NPH is the former.

That said, the NPH has interesting empirical implications that deserve investigation. But marshaling such data and putting it to the full test (that is, by attempting to falsify the proposal) is not the purpose of this book. My aim is rather to prepare the ground for its acceptance mainly by revealing the limitations and bankruptcy of its rivals and discrediting certain popular suppositions that might stand in the way of taking it seriously.

For example, in chapter 1, I set the stage for the appearance of the NPH by challenging the all-too-common assumption that the primary function of folk psychology is to enable us to carry off third-person predictions of the behaviors of others by adopting a speculative stance. Undeniably, the actions of others sometimes cry out for explanation, but in all such cases, when making sense of these, what we are seeking is a narrative that fills in or fleshes out the relevant details of that person's story. This is the very heart and soul of folk psychological understanding. Hence, I call the narratives that do this kind of work *folk psychological narratives*. The practice of supplying or constructing them *just is* that of explicating and explaining action in terms of reasons. Folk psychology is, by my lights, in essence, a distinctive kind of narrative practice.

The crucial point is that folk psychological narratives come in both third-person and second-person varieties. Moreover, the success or otherwise of such explanations depends, in the main, on who is doing the telling—that is, who produces the account. Although we often attempt to generate such accounts on behalf of others “at a remove,” by calling on simulative or theoretical heuristics, the fact is that even when this speculative activity is well supported it is quite unlikely to succeed in hitting on the right explanation. The likelihood of success in such endeavors is more or less inversely proportional to need.

In contrast, although not foolproof, by far the best and most reliable means of obtaining a true understanding of why another acted is to get the relevant story directly from the horse's mouth. The activity is familiar enough. Such accounts are typically delivered—indeed, fashioned—in the

course of ordinary dialogue and conversation. It is because of this that they are usually sensitive to a questioner's precise explanatory needs and requirements. The nature of such engagements is complex and deserves greater attention than it has received to date, but that too is not my focus in this work. A primary ambition of the first chapter is to draw attention to the banal truism that second-person deliveries of these folk psychological narratives are not only commonplace but they also do much of the heavy lifting in enabling us to make sense of the actions of others in daily life—that is, when there is a genuine need to do so.

After supplying reasons for thinking that our sophisticated folk psychological understanding is essentially narrative, I introduce the NPH in chapter 2. The basic claim is a developmental one: that we acquire our capacity to understand intentional actions using a framework incorporating the central propositional attitudes of belief and desire through participating in a unique kind of narrative practice as children—that of engaging with stories about protagonists who act for reasons. It is through scaffolded encounters with stories of the appropriate kind that children learn how the core propositional attitudes behave with respect to one another and other standard mental partners.

Serving as exemplars and complex objects of joint attention, these folk psychological narratives familiarize children with the normal settings and standard consequences of taking specific actions. But deriving an understanding of folk psychology from these is nothing like learning a rigid set of rules about what rational agents tend to do in various circumstances. Learning how to deploy the framework of everyday psychology requires the development of a very special and flexible kind of skill, one that can only be acquired by seeing reasons in action against a rich backdrop of possibilities. Folk psychological narratives provide precisely the right sort of training set for this. For in such stories the core mentalistic framework—consisting of the rules for the interaction of the various attitudes—remains constant. However, other important features vary. Thus children learn the important differences that the content of the attitudes make to understanding action, as well as the contributions made by a person's character, history, and larger projects. In this way, encounters with stories of the appropriate kind foster an understanding of the subtleties and nuances needed for making sense of intentional actions in terms of a person's reasons. By repeated exposure to such narratives, children become familiar with both the forms and norms of folk psychology.

This is not a passive process. Children must be guided through it by caregivers. Moreover, to reap the benefits just described, they must call on a range of basic interpersonal skills and exercise their imaginations in

relevant ways. And even this is not enough. They must also have a prior and independent (even if somewhat tentative) grasp of the core propositional attitudes. There is good evidence that younger children have just this kind of practical understanding and this raft of abilities. But having all this does not presuppose or constitute having “theory of mind” or any equivalent mindreading capacity.

Establishing all of this is the burden of chapters 3 to 7. Achieving it requires a rather long detour in which prenarrative, and indeed, prelinguistic modes of social understanding and response are examined and explicated. I begin this in chapter 3, by supplying reasons for thinking that nonverbal responding, quite generally, only involves the having of intentional—but not propositional—attitudes. Distinguishing these two types of attitudes is absolutely vital, but this is not often done in the existing literature. I therefore provide a detailed account of intentional attitudes in terms of a thoroughly noncognitivist, nonrepresentationalist understanding of intentionality—one that regards embodied, enactive modes of responding as basic and sees symbolic thinking as the preserve of those beings that have appropriately mastered certain sophisticated linguistic constructions and practices. This matters because only those that have achieved the latter are in a position to have and to understand bona fide propositional attitudes.

With respect to those in the former class, which includes nonverbal animals and preverbal infants, I argue that they are intentionally directed at aspects of their environment in ways that neither involve nor implicate truth-conditional content. As such, basic intentionality is neither to be modeled in semantic terms nor understood as a property of content-bearing mental states or representations.

This position is motivated by a rejection of the standard naturalized theories of content on offer—a rejection prompted by an exposé of misguided thinking about the nature of informational content and how it is (allegedly) acquired. Thus in what may appear to be a deflationary maneuver I argue that the nature of basic intentional directedness is best understood in biosemiotic terms. (Crudely, biosemiotics is what you get when you subtract the semantics from biosemantics.) In essence, accordingly, although organisms must be informationally sensitive to specific worldly offerings, this sensitivity does not involve the acquisition or manipulation of encoded informational content as, for example, modularist accounts of perception would have it.

Chapter 4 takes this idea a step further, showing that a minimalist understanding of nonverbal thinking—that is, one that does not posit the existence of propositional attitudes but only intentional attitudes—can

account for even the most sophisticated of nonlinguistic activities. This chapter therefore sets out to meet a recent challenge laid down by Bermúdez. Ultimately, the minimalist proposal is put to the test by giving due consideration to what would have been required in order to fuel the kind of consequent-sensitive instrumental thinking exhibited by our hominid forebearers—that is, protological reasoning capacities of the sort that they would have needed in order to fashion the kinds of complex tools that populated the middle Palaeolithic. I argue that imaginatively extended but nevertheless perceptually based modes of responding would have sufficed for this and that despite their sophistication, these feats of our ancient ancestors do not imply that they were capable of propositional thinking.

Chapter 5 builds on this conclusion and rejects the proposal that, at root, cognition depends on having an in-built, symbolic “language of thought.” Against this, I defend the idea that the only true language of propositional thought is natural language. Concomitantly, possessing genuine content-involving propositional attitudes requires mastery of complex linguistic forms and practices.

With all this in hand, I return in chapter 6 to the question of how best to understand our primary nonverbal interactions. It is proposed that such engagements, as typified by emotional interactions, involve a special kind of sensitivity and responsiveness to one another’s intentional attitudes, as expressed in bodily ways. This involves neither the manipulation of propositional attitudes nor any understanding of them. It is not rightly characterized as a form of “mind” or even “body” reading. Embodied responsiveness of this kind, which is in some cases extended by imitative and imaginative abilities, better explains what fuels our unprincipled interpersonal engagements than does the postulation of mindreading abilities involving propositional attitudes. This verdict applies, I argue, even to rudimentary forms of nonverbal joint attention.

Chapter 7 is devoted to saying how, in the human case, our natural responsiveness to other minds develops in stages as we master language. This process, which depends on children exercising their abilities in specific kinds of socially scaffolded activities, provides them with their first, tentative practical grasp of desires and beliefs as propositional attitudes. In this way children come into possession of all the pieces needed for playing the understanding-action-in-terms-of-reasons game before they can actually play it. What they are missing in their early years, prior to the relevant narrative encounters, is not the components needed to play this game: they lack knowledge of the basic rules for doing so.

This brings the reader full circle. For in order to continue the story, something like the NPH is needed. Therefore what might at first appear to be an abrupt and unexpected departure into discussions about the root nature of intentionality and basic social responsiveness for several chapters turns out to have great tactical importance.

This labor is worthwhile for another reason since it deals with the likely background worry that the NPH may be circular. We can call this the “narrative competency objection.” At its core is the thought that if children are only able to acquire folk psychological skills by being exposed to “stories involving characters who act for reasons,” then this must surely presuppose the very capacity that participating in such narrative practices is meant to explain—that is, “theory of mind” abilities. After all, it is not as if the narrative competence in question is of a *general* variety. Thus it would seem that in order to engage fruitfully with such stories at all, children must already have precisely the sort of understanding that such encounters are conjectured to engender. I deny this: a basic competency with the relevant narratives rests on having a range of abilities, including sophisticated imaginative and cocognitive abilities and a practical grasp of the attitudes, but, even taken together, these do not add up to having a “theory of mind.” Young children come to the table with some basic practical knowledge and a range of intersubjective capacities and skills that fall just short of genuine folk psychological understanding.

After introducing the NPH and demonstrating its logical and empirical adequacy, I put its prominent rivals to the test and find them wanting. In chapters 8 and 9, I critically examine the existing alternatives, which can be divided into two main types. On the one hand, there are theories that posit the existence of native mindreading capacities or devices. (These come in both theory theory (TT) or simulation theory (ST) varieties.) On the other hand, there is the hypothesis that each child constructs his or her mentalistic theory by engaging in scientific activity during ontogeny. On close scrutiny it turns out that none of these proposals has the credible resources for explaining the basis of our folk psychological abilities since none of them can account for our acquisition of the concept of belief. This being the case they all fail a fundamental test of adequacy. Worse still, in lacking such an account, they are unable to explain the source or basis of the mature folk psychological *structure*. Certainly, they have nothing to offer on this front that is remotely as satisfying as the explanation espoused by the NPH. If my arguments in these chapters prove sound, they provide compelling abductive grounds for favoring the latter over its current competitors.

To remove other potential barriers to the acceptance of the NPH, in chapter 10, I consider and discredit three standard but ill-considered motivating considerations that are often cited as reasons for believing that folk psychology must be some kind of ancient endowment rather than a late-developing socioculturally acquired skill. These are that (1) the normal learning environments of children are too impoverished to explain how they could possibly acquire their folk psychological skills and understanding, (2) folk psychology appears to be universal in our species (and hence must be built in), and (3) the best explanation of the failure of certain autistic individuals on “false-belief” tasks is that they suffer from “mindblindness” brought on by malfunctions in biologically inherited metarepresentational mechanisms.

After showing that these claims are either straightforwardly false or harmless (once properly modified), I turn to one final challenge. In the final two chapters, I say something about what our true phylogenetic inheritance—our ancient endowment—might really amount to. In reviewing the evidence from primatology and cognitive archaeology, I cast serious doubt on the familiar claim that our immediate ancestors must have had mature “theory of mind” abilities—a view that is given credence by the popular but mistaken thought that their remarkable technical and social achievements would have been impossible otherwise.

Recent evidence strongly suggests that our closest living cousins, the chimpanzees, lack metarepresentational mindreading abilities. Despite this, they are capable of entering into quite sophisticated intersubjective engagements with one another. As a consequence, some researchers have postulated that these great apes must have “theory of behavior,” a “weak” theory of mind, or unprincipled “mindreading” abilities. I doubt that any of these conjectures are true. If I am right, chimpanzees are not making contentful predictions or explanations of any kind.

Whether or not one accepts this, the limits of chimpanzee intersubjective abilities are now well established, and they fall a long way short of full-fledged “theory of mind” abilities. Hence, those abilities and any putative mechanisms that might sponsor them must have been selected for at a later point in human prehistory—at some time during the Pleistocene, when the hominids reigned.

Yet, despite its popularity, this hypothesis turns out to be not very plausible when reviewed closely in light of the evidence of cognitive archaeology. A much more promising and parsimonious explanation of the relevant capacities of our hominid forerunners is that they had powerful mimetic abilities; these best account for their unique forms of inter-

personal engagement, including those norm-engendering activities that paved the way for the development of language.

This is good news for my account, for if true, not only does this Mimetic Ability Hypothesis (MAH) show that there is simply no *need* to postulate ancient mindreading abilities, it also utterly defuses the “narrative competency” objection mentioned earlier. It provides an alternative and credible explanation of how and why modern humans come equipped with the basic abilities needed for engaging with and appreciating folk psychological narratives.

In all, there is good reason to think that our true biological endowment does not include native mindreading mechanisms of any “folk psychological” variety. We have little choice but to look to sociocultural practices in order to understand how we acquire our sophisticated skills in making sense of the intentional actions of persons—actions that are performed for reasons of their own. As chapter 12 emphasizes, the development of this sort of understanding would have been late-emerging in our prehistory and intersubjectively grounded in certain complex and very public narrative practices.

