

Précis of *Mind Ascribed*

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The broader aim of *Mind Ascribed*¹ is to demonstrate that interpretivism, even though it is often put down, is a serious contender as a general account of the mind. A narrower aim is to present, defend and further develop a specific version of interpretivism: the ascription theory.

The first chapter of the book introduces some basic notions like ‘mind’ and ‘content’ and outlines the background assumptions of the theory concerning truth and meaning. Crucially, the concept of mind is understood through the lens of folk psychology and an interpretivist position is put forward about the mind thus understood. An important distinction is made between representational content and the possession of content. To account for the content is in the first instance to attempt to solve the problem of intentionality, that is, to explain how intentional states could be about the world. To account for the possession of content, by contrast, is to explain what it takes to have states with content, and this is where the focus of *Mind Ascribed* lies. More generally, the book concentrates upon accounts that purport to tell us what it is to possess mental properties.

The book consists of three parts. The first part “Towards interpretivism” aims to make room for the interpretivist approach by criticising the main alternative metaphysical positions, and it introduces the major current forms of interpretivism. The second part, titled “Elaborating and defending the ascription theory”, presents the essentials of the ascription theory and provides a reply to the main objections traditionally directed against interpretivism. The third part “Extending the view” shows the viability of the approach by applying it to such topics as mental causation, perception and self-knowledge.

The second chapter begins with the introduction of the overall metaphysical framework for the whole book. The cornerstone of this framework is the distinction between the inflationary and deflationary notion of a property. Properties in the inflationary sense are presumed to characterize how objects really are, independently of how we choose to describe them. Prop-

¹ Mölder, B. (2010). *Mind Ascribed: An Elaboration and Defence of Interpretivism*, John Benjamins, Amsterdam.

erties in the deflationary sense are description-dependent. To say that an object has a certain property in the deflationary sense amounts to nothing more than saying that a certain predicate applies to this object. Using Stephen Schiffer's term, I call properties in the deflationary sense 'pleonastic properties', and more generally all deflationary entities 'pleonastic entities'. What there are in the world, are then called 'natural entities' or the 'natural basis' of the ascription of pleonastic properties. It is argued that most accounts of the mind do not require inflationary mental entities, and if they do, as in the case of role functionalism, separate objections to it are developed. Among the accounts of the mind-body relationship that are critically analysed and rejected in the course of the chapter are various supervenience claims, token and type identity theories as well as role and realiser functionalism. An exception is the global supervenience of pleonastic mental properties on the whole natural world. The ascription theory is compatible with this, but this is not much more informative than saying that the theory is broadly naturalistic. The upshot of the discussion in chapter 2 is that the mental does not present ontological worries in any substantial sense. There is only the task of explaining the pleonastic mental properties, and progress on this front can be made by concentrating on the meaning and the application conditions of mental terms.

Chapter 3 introduces interpretivism as a position in the philosophy of mind. Taken broadly, it is the view that interpretation plays a crucial role in what it takes to have mental properties. There are various ways to construe the interpretivist view, depending on the role of interpretation in the possession of mental states. At one extreme it could take the form of a *revelationism* that sees interpretation as a helpful but ultimately dispensable guide to independently existing mental states. At the other extreme lies *pure ascriptivism* that takes the issue of whether one has a particular mental state as purely a matter of interpretation. Between these extremes lies *intermediate interpretivism*: interpretation is constitutive of the possession of mental states in the sense that it cannot be eliminated from the full account of the latter, but at the same time there are objective standards and facts constraining the interpretation. The main part of the chapter outlines and analyses the accounts of Donald Davidson and Daniel Dennett, both of whom can be seen as towering figures on the interpretivist landscape. I also draw out some of the major respects in which my approach departs from theirs. For instance, I do not assume that interpretation requires that its objects are rational. My approach enlarges the admissible sources of evidence for interpretation, and thus, in contrast with Davidson, my project is not a form of radical interpretation. In addition, the ascription theory does not attempt to give a general account of meaning. Instead it presumes that words such as mental state terms and

the words used to specify mental contents have commonly shared meanings. What fixes those meanings is to be explained by a substantial theory of meaning, which should complement the ascription theory.

Chapter 4 opens the second part of the book. The second part is dedicated to my specific version of interpretivism: the ascription theory. This chapter clarifies the role of folk psychology in our understanding of the mental and delineates what commitments the ascription theory has with regard to folk psychology. In short, folk psychology is seen as providing the principles that guide the application of mental terms. This, however, does not entail a commitment to problematic common-sense functionalism: the view that the meanings of mental terms are fixed by the functional roles that these terms play in the folk theory. The chapter also discusses the reference of mental terms and rejects the strategy of construing questions concerning the reality and status of mental states in reference-theoretic terms.

Chapter 5 propounds the ascription theory. It is an account of what it takes to possess mental states with contents and its essential idea is that for one to have a mental state s with content p is for this state (with content) to be ascribable to one according to a certain non-trivial standard. An ascription that meets this standard is a *canonical* ascription. Accordingly, the possession condition for a mental state is that it is canonically ascribable. The ascription of mental states is based on evidence from the following sources: the subject's behaviour, the environmental stimuli affecting the subject, other mental states ascribable to the subject, and the subject's personal background. A canonical ascription is an ascription that meets the following two conditions: 1) it approximates maximum coherence with the sources of evidence; and 2) if the ascription were in fact made, it would not require revision. The second clause is needed in order to relax the canonicity standard so that ordinary people could meet it; for otherwise, only the ideal interpreter could make canonical ascriptions.

The chapter also outlines the stance of the ascription theory with regard to the uncodifiability and the indeterminacy of the mental: the account embraces the former, but rejects the latter.

What about the various objections to interpretivism that have led many to reject the approach? Chapter 6 subjects the most common objections to close scrutiny and responds to them from the point of view of the ascription theory. These include the worry that the account is circular and involves a vicious regress, or that it is both too liberal and chauvinist about the range of beings and systems which could have mental states. In addition, there are both the concern that the approach makes having mental states observer-dependent and the concern that the approach fails to do justice to intrinsic intentionality. These too are either eased or dispelled.

That the ascription theory can reply to common objections against interpretivism constitute an indirect case for the position. A direct argument for intermediate interpretivism is presented in the second half of the chapter. The argument relies upon the assumption that mental states are recognition-dependent entities and the fact that mental states are couched in folk psychological terms.

The third part of the book engages with applications of the ascription theory. Chapter 7 places the issue of mental causation under examination. Its aim is to account for mental causation in a way that would permit a causal role for mental states without construing them as internal states with causal powers. The account adapts Frank Jackson's and Philip Pettit's distinction between causal efficacy and causal relevance. It is only inflationary or natural entities that can be causally efficacious. Given that all mental entities are pleonastic, they cannot have causal efficacy, but they can be causally relevant. That is, they can play a causal role in a "light" sense of causation: i.e. any successful explanation or prediction in mental terms suggests the existence of causally efficacious processes in the natural basis. This is quite consistent with interpretivism because the suggestion is not about any specific efficacious processes. It is just that the canonical ascriptions of mental causes implicate that something causally efficacious occurs in the brain.

Perception is importantly different from beliefs and other propositional attitudes. Chapter 8 attempts to extend the ascriptionist approach to perceptual states and their contents, thereby showing that the account can recognise the specificity of perception, at least as far as vision is concerned. The other modalities of perception are not considered in the chapter separately, but it is assumed that they do not pose principled difficulties for interpretivism either. The topics examined in this chapter include the factivity of perception, non-conceptual content and the phenomenal aspects of experience. Factivity gives rise to one necessary condition for the canonical ascription of factive perceptual states: namely, that the relevant fact obtains. Non-conceptual content is a useful notion for the purpose of making sense of the following case: sometimes we want to say that a subject has mental states with contents such that the subject does not possess the concepts used to characterise the content. It is argued that the ascription theory can accommodate such cases if they are understood in terms of what contents are ascribable to one. The phenomenal features of experience are conceived as stemming from what it is like to have certain brain processes. It is suggested that the peculiar properties of experience (such as continuousness and ineffability) are a result of the presentational format of certain brain processes. By definition, this part of experience is not fully captured by any ascription, and hence the having of this aspect of experience, just like the having of brain

processes, is not ascription-dependent. At the same time, it is possible to situate the phenomenal features of experience, thus understood, in relation to the ascription theory, and this is done in the last section of Chapter 8.

How could an interpretivist make sense of self-knowledge? In particular, does interpretivism contain resources that suffice to explain the first-person authority that lies beneath the intuitive difference between knowing one's own minds and the minds of others? Chapter 9 presents a model of self-knowledge, which is compatible with the ascription theory and which provides a reliabilist basis for the folk presumption of first-person authority. Why do the folk presume that people are right about their minds? Why do we assume that if one says that one has a certain mental state, then one has it? The answer is that one's self-ascriptions normally match with what is canonically ascribable to one. This follows from the nature of subpersonal processes. Specifically, the brain is a kind of system that generates actions in response to environmental stimuli, given the context of one's personal idiosyncrasies. As a result, these actions turn out to be broadly congruent with the environment, with one's previous and concurrent reactions as well as with one's personal background. One's self-ascriptions (including verbal reports of one's mental states) are also among such coherent actions. Since canonical ascription aims at a coherent interpretation of the subject in light of the same sort of information, the match between the canonical ascriptions and actual self-ascriptions is not miraculous at all. In that respect, the coherence is not something merely imputed in the interpretation, but has a basis in the natural processes of the brain-environment interaction. Of course, as with all mechanisms, they can sometimes go wrong, and in those cases, the self-ascriptions fail to meet the canonicity standard.

This short overview could only identify the main topics and introduce the very basics of the ideas developed in *Mind Ascribed*. It goes without saying that the full arguments, the further elaborations and the necessary references can be found in the book itself.

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