Whither Normativity?

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Bruno Mölder's *Mind Ascribed* offers an important and impressive criticism of substantial naturalistic accounts of mental activity that predominate much recent philosophy of mind, as part of a defense of a relatively deflationary form of interpretivism. However, I suspect that Mölder has overly downplayed normative aspects of mental ascription, and that he could profitably enlist the work of those who take Sellars seriously to explain how the actual behavior of subjects of ascription can depart so dramatically from the norms of rationality to which they are properly held.

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1. To my mind, the animating thought behind interpretivism is something like the following: mental activity as such is best understood in terms of the activity of ascribers or attributors of mental states as they go about attempting to interpret the linguistic and otherwise intentional behavior of their subjects of interpretation. Davidson and Dennett are both widely and justly recognized for advancing distinct and influential interpretivist views, though as Bruno Mölder successfully shows in *Mind Ascribed* (2010)[1], their respective positions are not the only, nor perhaps even the best, ways of working out this basic interpretivist insight. So if one thought that those two figures exhaust the pantheon of pioneers staking claims in the interpretivist landscape, then one should heartily congratulate Mölder for successfully achieving his stated aim of "put[ting] interpretivism back on the map, that is, [of showing] that it is indeed a position that deserves to be taken seriously." (275) Now I would agree with Mölder's assessment of the viability of cultivating our understanding of mental activity in the fertile grounds of interpretivism (at least as I understand it), and so I would happily regard myself as one of his interpretivist neighbors. However, I am not altogether

[1] Unless indicated otherwise all references with just a page number will be to (Mölder 2010).

sure that he would feel comfortable tilling this fine interpretivist soil with the specific suite of tools I prefer to deploy. So in the fine spirit of neighborly cooperation, let me offer Mölder some of these implements from my particular philosophical toolkit. If he in turn declines to accept them, perhaps that only shows that we are not trying to put the land to the same beneficial use.

2. Mölder is an orthodox interpretivist in that he believes that "the study of the mind is the study of the concept of the mind." (132) According to his specific ascription theory, one's believing that *p* consists in one's being "canonically ascribable" as believing that *p* (170). He takes his account to be superior to Dennett's and Davidson's primarily because we do not need to assume that a subject will actually behave in a largely rational manner for it to qualify for Mölder as canonically interpretable. That is, canonically interpretable subjects may fail to live up to the norms to which interpreters legitimately take them to be beholden. The major task for Mölder is to show how that can be so.

3. One of the things that first struck me about Mölder's fine book is that while he devotes ample space to distinguishing his ascription theory from Dennett's account of belief via the intentional stance and Davidson's more stringent account of mental states arising from considerations of radical interpretation, there is but scant mention of Wilfrid Sellars.[2] I for one found this curious, for if Sellars is not to be located squarely within the interpretivist camp, then he is at least a very close fellow-traveler, and someone to whom Mölder can turn for inspiration. Recall that according to Sellars' celebrated "myth of Jones," we are instructed that so-called "inner" mental states are best understood on the model of overt linguistic acts. Indeed, Sellars takes thinking in its primary sense to *be* a form of linguistic activity, which can be done both out loud and in silence to oneself. We could, if we like (and contra Davidson), extend our account of mentality to encompass pre-linguistic "proto-thinking," but only against a primary notion of thinking out loud in words. So in learning a language, we do not come to attach strings of phonemes with preexisting ideas; we literally learn to think. Consequently, Sellars cautions us not to think of speech acts in a Gricean fashion as the expression of antecedently intelligible mental states. Instead, thinking is a matter of coming to be bound by norms of rationality and lexical use, which language trainers are in turn obliged to enforce in language-learners. This is why actual behavior can deviate spectacularly from rational norms, without thereby disqualifying a subject as a proper subject of interpretation. The subject has either not yet internalized the relevant norms in play, or is delib-

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[2] Sellars garners a passing reference to non-conceptual content toward the end of *Mind Ascribed* in Chapter 8 (254–5), but that is about all.

erately flouting them (and for the purpose of how we should subsequently react to the subject, it matters which of these options it is). Moreover, these norms of rationality might well be themselves subject to criticism and subsequent revision. There may as yet be future Jonesian geniuses, who teach us new vocabularies that elaborate our ways of speaking with and interpreting one another along profitable new dimensions.

4. Now if Mölder is receptive to such Sellarsian strains of thought, then I would quickly urge him to take aboard Sellars' account of the authority we grant to subjects' self-ascriptions of mental states in order to bolster his Chapter 9 account of self-knowledge. For if Sellars is correct in tying thought so closely to speech acts, then anyone with a grasp of the concept of belief, for instance, ought to understand (on the transparency front) that knowing one's mind is tantamount to knowing what one is inclined to say and (on the incorrigibility front) that a self-ascription of some belief would amount to a commitment to defend the content of that belief. In other words, I think Mölder would do well to recruit Sellars as an ally in his own ascriptivist, constitutive account of self-knowledge. Similarly, I would encourage Mölder to take a closer look at Sellars' notion of 'sense impressions,' which seem to share some features of Mölder's proto-content in his discussion of perception in Chapter 8.

5. However, those are but minor suggestions, which concern those latter portions of the book where Mölder has turned to tracing out the consequences of his view. The real action in *Mind Ascribed* is to be found in those early chapters in which Mölder devotes his energy to situating and distinguishing his ascription theory from what he sees as the major alternatives in naturalistic philosophy of mind. There the chief task is that of understanding the vexed relationship between mental activity and what Mölder calls "the natural basis." And here Mölder is trying to pull off the trick of being as noncommittal about the metaphysics of mentality as he can, while at the same time preserving, in the face of threats such as Kim's exclusion argument, the folk psychological intuition that mental states are somehow causally relevant. Roughly, Mölder's view is that so-called mental properties are "pleonastic" and that mental vocabulary is deflationary and gains its content primarily against the backdrop of the platitudes of folk psychology. By no means though, does that entail that the application conditions for such vocabulary (which we can, following Mölder, understand to be the possession conditions for mental states like belief) has no bearing at all on the applicability of more inflationary vocabulary which describes the natural basis. As he sees it, the major alternatives in the philosophy of mind—various forms of functionalism and identity theories—generally suffer on account of their failing to appreciate this deflationary, pleonastic nature of mental dis-

course. Their various attempts to reduce, define, or otherwise domesticate mental concepts amounts to the unwarranted inflation of mental properties.

6. There is very much to be admired in Mölder's detailed defense of his brand of interpretivism over its more naturalistic alternatives, and I profited immensely from trying to map Mölder's motivations and solutions onto my own parochial concerns. If he would afford me some proprietary understandings of the terms involved, I suspect I would even endorse many of his conclusions. And yet there is another curious feature about his work that I find both unsettling and telling: this is the account's downplaying of what I take to be the essentially *normative* dimension of mental states and their ascriptions. Indeed, the word 'normative' and its cognates are startlingly absent from vast tracts of the work (one major exception is Chapter 3.2, in which Mölder discusses Davidson's "norms" of rationality)! And yet it would seem that believers are essentially beings (or "systems," if you prefer Dennett's idiom) that we can judge to be *right or wrong* about the way things are (and on more or less defensible grounds), and intenders are essentially beings that we can judge as *succeeding or failing* to make the world fit their designs. Any so-called account of belief or intentional activity that fails to shoulder the burden of explaining just *why* we should regard mental activity as subject to such norms of success and correctness would be an account of intentionality in name only.

7. Overall, Mölder appears in places to acknowledge this essential normative dimension of the vocabulary of intentionality (see, e.g., 121 and 138). In the very first use of the term (71), he observes: "In addition [to a failure to account for the qualitative dimension of mental discourse], it does not follow from this that neural theories would preserve or replace the normative relations between mental states." Still, his explicit appeals to normativity are sparse, even disguised. This reluctance to lean on normativity is, of course, entirely consonant with Mölder's not enlisting Sellars as an immediate or natural ally. And I suspect it is deliberate, for like so many flying under the banner of philosophical naturalism, he seems queasy about appealing to normative concepts. Yet no matter how he might try to hide it, the ascription theory would seem to contain a background appeal to the norms of ascription placed upon interpreters (as do Davidson's and Dennett's accounts). As Mölder also recognizes (96), the discussion of canonical ascription in Chapter 5 could be read as offering a possible (though non-exhaustive, and maybe even non-eternal) catalog of such norms. For this reason I can well imagine that Mölder's position would not wholly satisfy those stalwart (and misguided) naturalistic philosophers wishing to banish any and all invocations of the normative. In fact, their anxieties over unexplained normativity strikes me to be the real worry behind the various charges of regress and

circularity traditionally raised against interpretivism. Moreover, invoking normative-talk also sheds light on the vexed issue of intrinsic or original intentionality. Teleo-semantic theories, for instance, might well capture a biological kind of normativity. Still, one might reasonably object that is just not right sort of normativity to appeal to in order to capture mental activity in particular. We generally refrain from attributing full-blooded mental activity to systems (such as many simple artifacts and organisms) that obliviously fail to acknowledge any responsibility for acting in accordance to the norms to which we take them to be beholden, at least through the adjustment of responses in the face of repeated "failures." For that reason, folk like Dretske have the sense that educable creatures, those that can be trained or that can train themselves, might exhibit a *sui generis* form of intentionality by implementing their own individually monitored selection procedures to help shape their responsive dispositions. Thus the question of intrinsic or original intentionality may be seen to be one of characterizing the correct *kind* of normativity requisite for bona-fide mental activity.[3] Those who shy away from trafficking in normative concepts are thus bound to find such a distinction a bit mysterious.

8. So I would urge Mölder to avail himself more liberally and explicitly to what he mentions in a passing footnote (138) as "the normative import of mental state possession." For one thing, normativity helps to shed light on the otherwise peculiar status of the platitudes of folk psychology. As Mölder recognizes, these platitudes breathe life into mental concepts. However, we can think of the so-called laws of folk-psychology not so much as empirically verified generalizations but as normative principles guiding our enforcement of rational norms. Rather than laws of nature, they are more akin to proven laws of conduct. Once again, that is why we should emphasize potential rather than actual rationality in any account of intrepretation. While Dennett might emphasize predictability via the intentional stance to be the hallmark of the mental, we do not need to think that the prediction and explanation of behavior is the primary purpose of intentional ascription. We are interested in what other people think, largely because we want to use them as sources of information, or because we want to know what to do with them—specifically, to determine the degree to which they warrant praise or blame. As often as not, cases in which we really want to know what subjects are thinking turn out to be ones in which they *have not done* as we *expected* them to. The fact that proper subjects of interpretation will regularly do as

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[3] Dennett, of course, eschews such a project of characterizing distinct kinds of intentionality, while Davidson notoriously argues that only an explicit, linguistic acknowledgement of a norm of truth qualifies one as a genuine believer. For further discussion, see (Beisecker 2006)

we expect, may be because they are capable of being, and generally have been, trained or otherwise conditioned to do as they ought. That is, actual rationality is not so much a presupposition of our interpretive practices as it is its product. On this view, then, Dennett's criterion for appropriate mental ascription—predictability via the intentional stance–is a natural outcome of the shaping of subjects' dispositions to the relevant norms (which again might be somewhat fluid and contingent, not timeless and universal).

9. The fact that belief ascription is such a normative affair would partly explain why Mölder finds the vocabulary of such ascription so pleonastic and somewhat removed from empirical commitment at the level of the natural basis. At the end of section 36 in *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind*, Sellars famously claims that in attributing intentional states, we are not giving a subject an empirical characterization so much as we are "placing it in the logical space of reasons" (de Vries and Triplett 2000, 248). That is, it is not the function of such ascriptions (merely) to describe subjects; its purpose also is to situate those subjects in what folk like Brandom (1994, 158) like to call "the game of giving and asking for reasons." That the vocabulary of intentional ascription serves this additional function, which overshadows any descriptive one that it might also have, is of course the central motivation behind recent "neopragmatist" or expressivist unpackings of such vocabulary.[4] And insofar as they maintain that the primary function of intentional vocabulary is largely non-referential and non-descriptive, the chief virtue of such views is that they can largely sidestep questions about the metaphysical status of intentionality or what beliefs "really" are. My point is that Mölder comes mighty close to this form of expressivism when he assures us (70) that he "do[es] not assume that folk-psychological talk carries ontological commitments" and moreover, his particular form of metaphysical quietism begins to sound like neopragmatism when he further tells us (133) that "if the mental has no deep nature apart from what is involved in our *practice* with mental concepts, then the account of such *practice* would also provide an account of the mental." Given world enough and time, I bet that I could find a claim expressing a remarkably similar sentiment within the pages of *Making it Explicit*.[5]

10. Interpretivist views such as Sellars' are sometimes called "normative functionalisms."[6] Since Mölder limits his understanding of functional

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[4] Observe that since such expressivist views are careful to show how such vocabulary can nevertheless be assertive and so participate in our reason-giving practices, they would qualify as a *cognitive* form of expressivism, which would elude Mölder's characterization and dismissal of non-cognitive expressivisms on 259.

[5] Not that I would especially look forward to such a task!

[6] See the collection of essays Patrick J. Reider has put together on the *Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective* (Reider 2013).

role to those given in terms of causal relations, normative functionalism is a form of common-sense functionalism that does not appear much on Mölder's radar (for example, see his characterizations of functionalism on 61 and 134). Like other forms of functional analysis, normative functionalists attempt to characterize some target phenomenon, not in terms of its so-called intrinsic features, but rather in terms of its upstream "inputs" and its downstream "outputs." However, unlike more familiar causal role functionalisms, functionalisms of this alternate stripe conceive of the relevant inputs and outputs in broadly normative terms. That is, they attempt to understand the phenomenon in question in terms of how it is influenced by, and how it in turn influences patterns of proprieties, obligations, and permissions (or commitments and entitlements, to deploy Robert Brandom's preferred idiom).

11. Normative functionalists tend not to share the philosophical naturalist's anxieties over the metaphysical status of mentality and mental causation that drives much so-called naturalistic or materialist philosophy of mind. For that reason, I imagine Mölder would find a congenial audience among their ranks, and I think of his view as a form of normative functionalism that gives pride of place to interpretive statuses. However, normative functionalists have long been repudiated on their naturalistic credentials. The cost of pitching matters in a wholly normative, non-naturalistic manner opens oneself up to the charge of a certain "frictionless spinning in a void." Insofar as the normative functionalist is silent about implementation details, then it might well seem like magic how creatures thoroughly subject to scientific laws are able to realize the interesting sorts of norm-governed activity the normative functionalist is seeking to characterize.

12. That is, there remains a genuine concern about explaining how a suitably complex chunk of the material world could possibly also be subject to mental ascription. As Dretske famously put it, this is the task of explaining how to "bake a mental cake using only physical yeast and flour" (or, rather, that of writing down the recipe for such a performance) (Dretske 1988, xi). This task, which is of course related to the engineering ambition that drives artificial intelligence research, would seem to be met by giving in suitably naturalistic vocabulary a description that would be *sufficient* for the application of mental vocabulary. However, we must be very careful here not to construe this as a call to reduce or to define the mental in terms of the material. While the good naturalistic project is that of giving *sufficient* conditions for the appropriate application of mental terms, definitions (and conceptual analysis more generally) will also include *necessary* conditions as well, which can in turn (following Dummett) be understood as the downstream *consequences* of applying those terms. The Sellars passage alluded to above points

out that the major consequences (and primary purpose) of such application concern positioning the interpreted subject in the logical space of reasons. And the central insight behind interpretivism, is that these consequences are best couched in a normative idiom, including (as Mölder fully recognizes on 77), the language of interpretation and understanding that gives this vocabulary its reason for being.

13. The crucial point is that while there are good philosophical and engineering reasons to seek sufficient conditions for the applicability of mental terms in a constrained, "naturalistically respectable" vocabulary, we should not on that account think that necessary conditions (or consequences of concept application) must also be couched in such a constrained vocabulary. The problem with so much naturalistic philosophy of mind is that it fails to appreciate that necessary conditions for mentality (e.g., consequences of belief possession, or what Mölder calls "constitutive" conditions) are best given in normative, and not paradigmatically naturalistic, terms. The basic trouble with (type) identity theories is that, like identity statements generally, they issue two-way inference tickets, which can illegitimately carry one from a mental description to a specific material realization. Causal-role functionalisms attempt to block those illegitimate inferences by issuing only one-way inference tickets from specific material realizers fitting certain causal profiles to mental descriptions. Such accounts offer more abstract characterizations of sufficient conditions for the applicability of mental terms. But insofar as they are silent about the normative dimensions of the application of such vocabulary, seeking instead to define the mental entirely in terms of causal roles, they are, as Mölder tells us (138), irretrievably "incomplete" and far too reductionist in spirit. Mölder's complaint that identity theories and causal role functionalisms illegitimately "inflate" mental vocabulary seems to me to be registering much the same criticism.

14. Nevertheless, there are passages where I suspect Mölder's appreciation of this point is not as complete as one might like. For instance, he should not be so quick to endorse folk like Baker when they make incautious statements like "having certain kinds of brain states may be a necessary condition for having a belief." (66) At best, having such brain states is a necessary condition of our having beliefs, given a commitment to materialism and certain empirical facts about us, which are couched in materialistic terms. Baker's error is one of mistaking a necessary condition for what Mackie called an "INUS condition": an insufficient but necessary portion of a sufficient but unnecessary condition. The specification of such conditions is indeed important for engineering and implementation concerns. It is significant to know that for us, thinking requires a brain. But as Mölder so rightly recognizes over and over again, it would be a mistake to think that having a brain

is a central feature of one's analysis of the mental as such. Brain states "drop out of the picture" and do not guide actual interpretation. (70)

15. Once again, the game that is worth playing is that of specifying in suitably intelligible vocabulary a blueprint for constructing something that would meet design specifications or targets best specified in intentional or mental terms. Now it might be that we have not yet developed a vocabulary on the material side that is adequate to this task, and—particularly in the case of the so-called qualitative dimensions of mentality—perhaps we never will. Still, there is no reason whatsoever why either of these vocabularies— the material on the one hand, and the normatively-freighted mental on the other—need to be wholly understood or analyzed in terms of the other.

16. In a nutshell, I have been suggesting that Mölder has, perhaps unwittingly, set up shop mighty close to a colony of left-wing Sellarsians, and that he might profitably enlist their aid. At the same time, however, I wonder whether that is where he really wants to be, and how willing he would be to take on their peculiar (to some) trappings and vestments, and participate in their strange (to some) incantations.

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