

Ascribing Minds and Knowing What You Think

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In *Mind Ascribed* Bruno Mölder works out a powerful and subtle view according to which the ascription in mental states in folk psychology constitutes mental phenomena. I discuss two issues raised by his account. The first is the relation of the mind, so understood, to other phenomena, and in particular the sciences of the mind. If the mind is constituted by folk psychological ascription, can that ascription be constrained by the results of empirical investigation, or is folk psychology autonomous, if not a priori? Second, I suggest that the transparency view of introspection works very well as a supplement to the ascriptivist position.

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Mind Ascribed is a *tour de force*. It touches with great authority and expertise on an impressively wide range of topics in the philosophy of mind. One could wish it were an easier read (although, speaking as somebody who has apparently published his fair share of unwelcoming prose, I am reluctant to complain too much about that) and perhaps more clearly signposted, but it is a tremendous achievement: as well as setting out a very interesting and persuasive version of ascriptivism it has illuminating things to say about almost every topic in the philosophy of mind. I have few substantive criticisms of the positive account set out in *Mind Ascribed*,¹ and would prefer to take this opportunity to explore a couple of themes that occur within it and raise questions about the bigger picture. The first question I will raise is the relationship between what we call the mind and its underlying physical basis. These two phenomena are clearly distinguished within the book. On the conception Mölder presents, the mind is “constituted by common-sense psychology” (132) and the concepts of folk psychology are its medium of investigation. I will begin by wondering about the relationship between philosophy of mind, thought of as the investigation of the structure of folk psy-

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

chology, and what we might call philosophy of psychology, which is about the conceptual underpinnings of the science of the mind.

The second question I will raise is the one of self-knowledge. Chapter 9 of *Mind Ascribed* sketches a theory of self-knowledge based on self-ascription. I will suggest that a transparency account might be a better bet.

First, then, the relation between the concepts used in ascription and those employed by the sciences of the mind, Mölder thinks there are no such things as minds, but he is not an eliminativist. Eliminativists think that folk psychology and the sciences of the mind are in competition, and he does not. What's the competition? If you are an eliminativist, you think that folk psychology is in the business of explaining and predicting human behavior, and that science does a better job of that explanation and prediction. Churchland (1981) thought the relevant science was neuroscience, whereas Stich (1983) foresaw a future cognitive psychology based on syntactic, but not semantic, properties of mental states. But both agreed that the cognitive science of the future would elbow folk psychology off the stage, because it would do a far superior job of explanation and prediction, and connect with neighbouring sciences. Mölder's objections to eliminativism are scattered throughout the middle of the book, and I think it fair to say that he never quite faces head on the claim that eliminativism is theoretically preferable. However, I do think that there is quite a deep issue here, that goes to the heart of how we should think about the mind, and embraces other positions in the philosophy of mind as well.

Now, it is clear that Mölder rejects what I will call *the empirical commitment* held by many eliminativists, and other philosophers too, that (134) "an account of the nature of mental facts must uncover their functional essence." The empirical commitment assumes that when we talk about mental states we are, in albeit a very roundabout way, talking about the brain. The job of mental state talk is to fix reference (133). The underlying nature of the state is an empirical matter, so, as Mölder puts it, for these philosophers "the folk specification does not exhaust the nature of the mental" (134); the nature of the mental is a matter for science. It might be cognitive psychology rather than neuroscience that gets assigned the job, as in psychofunctionalism, but for human beings the relevant science will talk about what the brain is doing even if it does not use a neurological vocabulary.

But for Mölder the folk specification does exhaust the nature of the mental; folk psychology alone tells us what mental states are. The rejection of the empirical commitment is what sets Mölder's version of ascription apart from almost everything else in recent philosophy of mind. One way of putting the eliminativist's position is this: she accepts the empirical commitment, but thinks that the scientific account is likely to completely overturn folk

psychology. The psychofunctionalist also accepts it, but thinks that folk psychology has identified real mental activities, which will be given further elaboration by psychology, and turn out to be carried on in parts of the brain.

In contrast Mölder says (145) that “mental (and other) terms have a meaning that is acquired when the language is acquired.” The worry here is that this line of thinking can be turned into a deeply unappealing position, according to which science cannot tell us anything about the mind. This is a position adopted by philosophers who think that philosophy of mind is purely *a priori*, such as Bennett and Hacker (2003). The idea here is that philosophy tells you the nature of concepts like memory or perception. Science investigates what brains do that enables us to see or remember, but it cannot tell us anything about memory or perception, because the nature of those processes is fixed by our ordinary terms.

There are certainly times when Mölder sounds like this; his assertion that mental terms have a meaning that is acquired when speakers learn the language is reminiscent of Bennett and Hacker’s insistence (2003, 213) that Damasio’s theory of emotion must be wrong because children do not use emotion terms in a way that fits with the theory. Damasio could say that is because the folk psychology of emotion is a poor guide to what emotion really is. Bennett and Hacker would just reject that as conceptually confused, as if one were to insist that the rules of chess are a poor guide to chess. The normal use of language just tells us the nature of emotions (or memory, or other mental phenomena) because it defines the relevant concepts.

I am unclear whether Mölder would take this line. It seems to fit with much of what he says, but it is committed to the view that science can teach us nothing about the mind, since our mastery of the language ensures that we know all about the mental already. This is not, I think, a happy place to end up, although it may be the result of deep philosophical instincts and not really something that can be settled by debate on grounds that both parties will accept.

However, the interpretive stance opens up another way to view these issues, which is Dennett’s. Dennett is obviously one of the presiding spirits in this book, and his own philosophy is certainly open to the idea that science can revise our understanding of the mental. At the same time, Dennett’s philosophy of mind is very much derived from Gilbert Ryle, who did think of mental properties as pleonastic in something like Mölder’s sense. This leads to an interesting philosophical system. For Dennett, the intentional stance discloses the conceptual structure of folk psychology, but science tells us what the mind is really like. Mölder reads Dennett (112) as giving us a metaphysical picture on which intentional patterns are pleonastic and lack the ontological status of the natural basis of the mind, which is the physio-

logy that makes cognition possible. I do not think this reading does justice to the eliminativist strand in Dennett, who thinks that science can tell us that we are sometimes just wrong in our thinking about the mind (e.g. Dennett 1981, xix–xx). Although philosophy might show us the structure of our mental concepts, it can also show us that we are wrong about the mind quite often, and when we broaden the scope of our investigations into the mind we will discover many phenomena for which we cannot sustain Mölder’s sharp distinction between folk psychology and the science of the mind’s material basis. The science often tells us that we are wrong about, for example, the way memory works.

I think Mölder misses this option for two reasons: first, he persistently thinks in terms of the “natural basis,” i.e., neuroscience. But there is plenty of psychology that is not committed to particular claims about the natural basis yet provides experimental evidence that confutes folk psychology; second, Mölder follows nearly all philosophical discussion in terms of seeing folk psychology as dominated by the concepts of beliefs and desire. But our repertoire of psychological concepts is much bigger and more varied than that. Most people who read this will have been raised in cultures that explain people’s behavior not just as a product of beliefs, desires, and other propositional attitudes but also in terms of, to take some simple examples, affective states like moods and emotions, as well as relatively enduring traits of character such as piety, bravery, intelligence, or sloth. Much of what we think about these phenomena is amenable to empirical refinement and correction.

To sum up: the interpretivist position seems compatible with an account of folk psychology on which it is open to empirical connection, even if we think of mental phenomena as pleonastic. The patterns ascribed are objective (117) and can be true or false, but if so, it seems that the concepts we use to ascribe the mind do make claims about what intentional phenomena are like. In that case, perhaps the evidentiary basis of ascription should be even wider than Mölder envisages in section 3.4, when he so helpfully extends the Dennettian account to insist (121) on “external sources of evidence”—perhaps even extending to experimental work that extends and corrects folk concepts?

I am not sure, in the end, where Mölder comes down on these matters—does he believe in the a priori insulation of philosophy of mind, or does he think that the conceptual structure of folk psychology is limned by philosophy but still open to empirical revision?

Let me turn now to self-knowledge. As Mölder notes, this is where interpretative theories of the mental can seem to depart most strongly from ordinary intuitions, which seem to hold that “each of us has immediate and

authoritative access to their own mental states” (257). His response is an interesting theory on which subpersonal processes trigger self-ascription (9.5) which is self-ascribable by the subject just in case it is “canonically” self-ascribable according to the theory set out in the book. But the notion of triggering is obscure—why should a subpersonal mechanism trigger a self-ascription? One traditional view is that there is a dedicated self-ascription system that detects what is going on in the mind through a kind of inner perception, but that requires the existence of a mind, in the strong sense that Mölder denies. What is needed is a picture according to which a range of mechanisms, none of which is a dedicated introspective device, makes self-ascriptions possible. I think what Moran (2001) calls a transparency account will fit the bill, and in fact is a natural complement to an ascriptivist view.

In its simplest form the transparency theory holds that when I avow my belief that *p*, I am merely asserting that *p* is true. The key claim is that in many cases of what philosophers usually call introspection—in the sense of my finding out what I believe about something, or what I want—I am not looking into my mind but considering the world. Gareth Evans (1982, section 7.4) gave it what has become the most influential formulation of the theory, although his treatment was only a sketch. (Moran (2001) developed the view in sophisticated ways that speak to moral psychology). The crucial implication of the transparency view for the constitution of the mind is that introspection requires no special method, modality or mental apparatus. It just uses the cognitive machinery of ordinary reasoning about the world, including folk psychology. What is distinctive about this view is that it is a theory of introspection that does not involve anything that, on the face of it, looks like introspecting. There is neither inner sense nor scanning of an internal psychological milieu.

But what does the transparency view commit us to and how does introspection go on without an inner sense? Evans fostered a great deal of skepticism when he seemed to say that introspection involves asking yourself a question (Evans 1982, 225):

If someone asks me ‘Do you think there is going to be a third world war?’ I must attend, in answering him, to precisely the same outward phenomena as I would attend to if I were answering the question ‘Will there be a third world war?’ I get myself in a position to answer the question whether I believe that *p* by putting into operation whatever procedure I have for answering the question whether *p*.

But notice that Evans does not actually say that you ask yourself a question whenever you work out what you believe. He actually says that you use the same procedures that you would use if you were asked a question; that is, the procedures involved in working out what you believe. The situation is this:

when I report the belief that *p*, I do so as the result of the same process that results in my asserting that *p*. The simplest way to put this is that I report my belief that *p* whenever I am in a position to say that *p* is true (or in a position to assert *p* with some degree of confidence). I can get into that position by wondering how to answer a question about whether *p* is true, or a question about whether I believe that it is true. But there does not have to be a unique way in which I always get into position to say whether *p* is true. There are many ways of thinking about the world and hence no one procedure that we run to figure out the facts. But there are always some procedures that you run when you decide whether *p* is true—anything from doing a controlled experiment to consulting your horoscope in the paper—and you run one of those procedures when you decide whether you believe *p* to be true.

So, Evans (1982, 225–226) says that whenever I am in a position to assert that *p* I am ipso facto in a position to assert that I believe that *p*, and he uses the idea of answering a question as a way to make the crucial point, viz. that in introspection we do not look inwards, but outwards, towards the world. What is essential in Evans' theory is not that you must ask yourself a question in order to get into that position (in fact he never says that you must); it is that when you introspect you are not using an "inward glance" but an outward one you are thinking about the world. Evans is concerned with this wider capacity to figure things out. When he talks of putting oneself in a position to answer a question, he is thinking of our abilities to deliberate about the world. There is no looking inward to work out what I believe, just perception of the world and deliberation about it.

Phenomenologically, at least, one is not often conscious of deliberating when one introspects—in many cases, if you ask me whether I believe something is true, I just can tell you straight away. The transparency theory, as set out above, assimilates introspection to deliberation, and looks like it can only handle cases of attitudes formed in the present. So what am I doing, on the transparency account, when I report a standing belief? Answer: I am using memory. I often do not deliberate about whether it is true that *p*, I just remember it.

As Peacocke (1999, 216) says, "coming to self ascribe a belief on the basis of deliverances of stored information is a special case of the use of Evans's procedure, rather than any kind of a rival to it." Peacocke, who first saw that the proposal about memory is straight out of Evans, is interested in self-knowledge. This leads him to think of the core case as one in which I retrieve a memory and make a judgment on that basis, which I then assert. I am not thinking chiefly about knowledge in this paper, but the processes by which we self-ascribe the attitudes. Gordon has more recently become more explicit on this point: "an ascent routine allows a speaker to self-ascribe a

given propositional attitude by redeploying the process that generates a corresponding lower level utterance” (Gordon 2007, 151). The talk about levels of utterance is not well chosen, perhaps, since it still seems to tie the ascent routine too closely to self-report. But the basic idea is that there is no appeal, in explaining how we self-ascribe attitudes, to any cognitive processes beyond the ones normally involved in the fixation of the attitudes in the first place.

Alongside the picture of introspection-as-deliberation we can put a picture of introspection-as-remembering, and this is entirely in keeping with what Evans says. When I report a belief or desire, on Evans’ view, I go through the procedure for forming that belief or desire. Now, there are some things that I have believed or wanted for a long time. To report those beliefs and desires, I run, as I generally do, the procedure I have for checking the world, but in this case the procedure has been done already and its results are in my memory. Checking the world, in this case, involves remembering what I think is true. Retrieval from memory is the relevant belief forming procedure, so, in introspection, that is what I do: I take a content from memory storage—say in episodic or semantic memory—and put it in working memory. Evans’ key insight is obscured by the way he develops it. He develops it, as I said, in terms of deliberation and perception, but the key insight is broader; in reporting whether you believe or desire that *p*, what you are doing is the mental operation, whatever it is, that you would do if you were just reporting that *p* or stating that you find *p* desirable.

I have said that the core of the transparency view is the claim that introspection involves no special machinery or operations, just the operation of normal knowledge-gathering and reasoning machinery. That is, there is no introspective system or device in the mind; there is just our normal cognitive machinery being put to a special use. There is no need to posit a special system. Lyons (1983) argued this, and the idea goes back, in a different vein, to Ryle (1949, 167–181). I think, by the way, that Ryle is an underappreciated forerunner of the ascriptivist view—I have already noted his influence on Dennett. Ryle argues that what we call ‘introspection’ is probably just a name for the activity of self-examination rather than the name of a faculty. Introspection *qua* faculty of obtaining knowledge about one’s own mental states is a philosophical posit, rather than a piece of folk psychology. The problem that it is supposed to solve is a holdover from a Cartesian picture of the mind as an inner realm of certainty. The philosophical concept of introspection was retained, and survived to bother philosophy of mind, even as the Cartesian picture became less credible.

To sum up, then, I think that we can argue as follows; the ascriptivist view that Mölder develops thinks that mental properties are just pleonas-

tic, but of course does not deny that people can perceive the world, think about it and remember it. The transparency view says that what we call introspection is just a matter of using that ordinary machinery—it takes the subpersonal mechanisms that let us get around in the world and uses their outputs in distinctive ways. This view is a natural partner to views that deny the existence of the mind as a natural category, because it does away with the Cartesian picture of the mind as an object that needs an inner sense to investigate it. This proposal, I think, is right in the spirit of Mölder's account.

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