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# Folk Psychology's Epistemic Credentials

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"Folk psychology is an empirical theory, an empirical theory among all the other empirical theories. As with every empirical theory we use, we suppose that folk psychology enables us to describe, explain, predict, and control a range of natural phenomena—specifically, it enables us to describe, explain, predict, and control animal, and, especially, human, behaviour. Now, because folk psychology is an empirical theory, we who use it could, in principle, replace it with a better theory of that range of phenomena, should one happen along. And, indeed, in the work of contemporary researchers we can discern the outlines of a better theory, a physiological theory of the brain continuous with our scientific theories of the rest of nature. Nonetheless, most probably neither we nor our descendents will reject folk psychology in favour of this other theory, even should the latter become fully developed; and, moreover, our refusal to give up folk psychology will not rest on simple obstinacy but rather on two very good reasons. On the one hand, the fact that another theory of the same range of phenomena is better than folk psychology doesn't in itself mean that folk psychology is a bad theory of that range of phenomena. Folk psychological descriptions and explanations answer to objective standards, and debate about whether the evidence for a psychological claim is sufficient to warrant that claim is always possible and usually fruitful. This means that folk psychology is an intersubjectively testable explanatory and predictive theory of some distinction; the emergence of a theory of greater distinction will not impugn its epistemic credentials. On the other hand, folk psychology is tremendously easy to use. What we would gain in precision by using a theory other than folk psychology would be offset by what we would lose in time and energy. From a pragmatic standpoint, then, we would be foolish to burden ourselves in our day to day tasks with a theory more cumbersome than folk psychology. All in all, then, folk psychology can supply us with true descriptions, good explanations, and accurate predictions; moreover, its descriptions, explanations, and predictions come to hand with an ease no other theory can match. There-

fore, we must conclude, folk psychology is, both likely and rightly, here to stay."

I mean in the preceding paragraph to present a view widely held in the philosophy of mind, a view held widely enough that it could be called the received view on the question of eliminative materialism.[1] While it is true that many philosophers worry that not all the connotations of the term "theory" fit folk psychology, only a few deny outright that folk psychology is a theory; to do so, it would seem, is to leave oneself unable to account for folk psychology's explanatory and predictive efficacy. It might, in fact, be to deny that folk psychological descriptions are at all empirical descriptions. Thus, most philosophers accept that folk psychology is a theory.[2] But, most agree, the claim that folk psychology is a theory implies that it could be replaced by another, very different sort of theory. Therefore, again, most accept that folk psychology can, in principle, be replaced.[3] Only a scant few philosophers, though, are prepared to maintain that folk psychology is so tolerant of falsehood, so circular or weak in explanation, and so inaccurate in prediction that, should a better theory be developed, we would be remiss not to banish folk psychology entirely from our thought and talk. This is why many philosophers are concerned to tame the wild claims made by eliminativists about folk psychology's shoddy epistemic credentials and to remind us of folk psychology's pragmatic strength. According to the received view, then, the denunciation of folk psychology proffered by eliminative materialists is not so much false as over-

1 Philosophers who espouse the received view include Terence Horgan and James Woodward, "Folk Psychology is Here to Stay," *Philosophical Review* 94 (1985); Jerry Fodor, "Fodor's Guide to Mental Representation: The Intelligent Auntie's Vade-Mecum," *Mind* (1985); and Daniel Dennett, "Mid-Term Examination: Compare and Contrast," *The Intentional Stance* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989). (Horgan and Woodward's and Fodor's papers are reprinted in John D. Greenwood, ed., *The Future of Folk Psychology: Intentionality and Cognitive Science* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991].)

2 Philosophers who do deny that folk psychology is a theory and who aren't merely quibbling over the word "theory" include Kathleen Wilkes, *Real People: Personal Identity without Thought Experiments* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988) and Mark Thornton, *Folk Psychology: An Introduction* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1989).

3 As William Ramsey, Stephen Stich, and Joseph Garon write, "Once it is granted that common-sense psychology is indeed a theory, we expect it will be conceded by almost everyone that the theory is a likely candidate for replacement." "Connectionism, Eliminativism, and the Future of Folk Psychology," in John D. Greenwood, ed., *The Future of Folk Psychology: Intentionality and Cognitive Science*, p. 97.

stated, the reforms they counsel not so much impossible as overambitious and unnecessary.

Certainly the received view is appealing. It speaks plain facts to those seductive, exhilarating visionaries who would confound us into rejecting what we should all recognize as true, and it does so without appealing dogmatically to common sense or indulging in anti-scientific a prioristic theorizing. Nonetheless, I maintain, the received view is founded on an error. To accept that folk psychology is a theory is, despite near unanimity among philosophers to the contrary, not at all to be required to accept that folk psychology is even potentially replaceable. Realizing this, we are compelled to draw a much stronger conclusion about the epistemic credentials and future prospects of folk psychology than we find in the received view, or at least so I contend in this paper.

Though it is a theory, folk psychology, I will argue, cannot in principle be eliminated from our ways of describing the world; thus, it cannot be replaced by another theory. The received view is mistaken in thinking it merely (extremely) unlikely that folk psychology will be replaced; folk psychology simply *cannot* be replaced whole-scale by another theory, even though that other theory might possess epistemic virtues and resources impossible for folk psychology to attain. But this is not to say that we are condemned to be in thrall to an inferior theory. Though there is a sense in which folk psychology must inevitably fail to meet the epistemic standards to which scientific theories are properly held, the reason folk psychology cannot be eliminated, I hope to show, points us in the direction of reasons for thinking its epistemic credentials are perfectly fine.

In what follows I present what I believe to be the best argument that folk psychological descriptions and explanations are grossly inferior to those that would be found in a completed neuro-physiological theory and should, therefore, be eliminated in favour of the latter. It is an argument that, I think, grants to eliminative materialism, at least that version found in Paul Churchland's work, every premise that it wants. I say why I think that, in face of this argument, the received view that we could, in good epistemic conscience, nonetheless refuse to abandon folk psychology is shallow. Then I give the argument that folk psychological descriptions, explanations, and understandings are in principle ineliminable from our descriptions, explanations, and understandings of the world generally. I conclude by formulating the reasons why the epistemic credentials of folk psychology are in good order. I begin by describing just what I am discussing when I discuss folk psychology.

## I

My concern in this paper is entirely with that part of folk psychology in which are found attributions of propositional attitudes, including both cognitive and pro- or affective attitudes. This is that part of folk psychology that licenses and governs our attributions to others and to ourselves of thoughts, beliefs, hopes, fears, realizations, desires, confusions—and on and on. It is the complex and subtle theory we use when we ascribe specific beliefs and desires to people, when we describe their movements as intentional actions, and when we explain or predict their actions by citing their beliefs and desires. We use this system, for instance, when we judge that Odette lied when she said "Vous savez que je ne suis pas fishing for compliments" to Mme Verdurin; and we use it when we explain why Odette lied—when we say what she hoped to accomplish through this lie—by proposing that Odette wanted to continue to receive compliments from Mme Verdurin and thought that by lying in this way she might achieve her end.

One part of folk psychology with which I am not dealing, then, is that part concerned with the sensations, feelings, and emotions people and other creatures experience (I am not dealing with it at least when our attributing these experiences to creatures does not require that we concurrently attribute to them thoughts or desires, either about the experiences themselves or as their causal basis). Another part I am leaving aside is that part by which we explain and predict behaviours through recourse to ideas about our subject's temperament or character. And I am also leaving aside lore about such things as how to get to sleep on a hot evening. These parts of folk psychology might indeed be eliminable; my argument is silent on this matter. What I am dealing with is the propositional attitude core of folk psychology.[4] Do those things we describe as beliefs really have the character we take them to have? Are those explanations and predictions based on ascriptions of propositional

4 Paul Churchland, among other eliminativists, is sometimes careless in his description of folk psychology. Churchland maintains that folk psychological descriptions can and should be eliminated in favour of entirely physical descriptions, but in his arguments he occasionally forgets that folk psychology is far from a single unified theoretical system. Much of it makes little or only heuristic use of propositional attitude talk. One criticism Churchland makes of folk psychology in *Matter and Consciousness* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1984), p. 45, is that it cannot answer the question what sleep is. True enough, perhaps, but it is hard to see the significance of this lacuna. Should folk psychological ideas about the nature and function of sleep be replaced, that part of folk psychology concerned with propositional attitudes will remain just as it was.

attitudes ever strong or accurate enough to constitute evidence that propositional attitudes exist? These are questions about that core, questions to which the eliminative materialist gives negative answers.

The eliminativist with whom I am dealing, then, holds that the propositional attitude core of folk psychology is a radically bad theory, that the descriptions it licenses are false and its explanations and predictions are no good. Once a better theory comes along, folk psychology should be replaced by it.

If we are to take seriously the idea that the propositional attitude core of folk psychology is wrongheaded and should be replaced, we have, then, to take seriously the idea that there could be a speaker able to describe, explain, and predict states of affairs and occurrences in the world, but who describes no entity, including herself, as believing that A, desiring that B, intending to do c, intending to do it by doing d, and so on. This speaker has a linguistically formulated theory of the world, or a set of such theories, and uses it or them to explain and predict the course of events; but she possesses no folk psychological theory and, thus, possesses no resources for ascribing beliefs or desires to entities in the world. What reason, we must ask, do we have to take seriously the idea that there could be such a speaker?

## II

Eliminativists often seek initially to make plausible the idea that because it is a theory, folk psychology can, in principle, be replaced by another theory, by citing examples of historically popular theories through which people once viewed the world and that now are widely held to be obviously false. It was once just as common-sensical to see in certain happenings the influences of witches or of caloric as it is now to see in certain happenings the effects of beliefs and desires; thus, just as the theories that posited witches and caloric disappeared and took with them observations of witches and caloric, so, too, someday might the theory that posits beliefs and desires disappear and take with it observations or introspections of beliefs and desires. These examples serve to bring home the thesis that observation is dependent on theory and, thus, that observations can be changed by changing theories.

Of course, that observation is dependent on theory doesn't entail either that folk psychological observations are false or that folk psychological theory is eliminable. The best argument that folk psychology is false and the suggestion that, therefore, it should be replaced involves, I think, three plausible and widely accepted principles concerning psy-

chological explanation and the ontology of mind. These three principles, when brought together with some reasonable assumptions about the nature and prospects of physical science, seem to suggest that folk psychology lacks epistemic credentials, that real knowledge cannot be had of things so long as they are described using folk psychology's resources. These principles are: 1) There are no strict folk psychological laws; 2) There are no strict psycho-physical laws; 3) There are no mental events in addition to physical events (or, if one prefers, each individual mental event is an individual physical event). To accept these principles is to hold one or another form of non-reductive physicalism. The eliminative materialist argument that follows is meant to show that non-reductive physicalism is an unstable ontological position, and that if one holds on to the physicalism part of it, one must eventually concede that the propositional attitude core of folk psychology is an impoverished theory of the world waiting to be replaced.

The first principle is that there can be no folk psychological laws, no exceptionless empirical generalizations that contain folk psychological verbs such as "believes" or "desires." There are, of course, many folk psychological generalizations, but none can possess the rigour of strict physical laws. Reasons why there can be no folk psychological laws tend to hinge on the impossibility of removing all *ceteris paribus* clauses from psychological generalizations. In general, it is not always possible to know whether an agent has a particular reason or intention independently of knowing whether he or she has performed an action appropriate to that reason or intention. Thus, while the claim that a particular reason will cause an action of some particular kind only if the agent for whom it is a reason has no other reason that will override it appears at first glance to be a lawlike generalization, the fact that there can be no saying whether a reason will override another short of noting that it has in fact overriden it prevents this generalization from ever being sharpened into a law.[5]

Now if there are no empirical folk psychological laws, there can be no folk psychological explanations that take the form of covering law explanations. Covering law (or hypothetico-deductive) explanations are, of course, deductive arguments in which at least one lawlike sentence appears as a premise. If the explanatory argument is valid, a description of the event to be explained follows logically from the lawlike sentences together with sentences that describe events that preceded it. If the argument is sound and the lawlike sentence is a biconditional, then the event

5 Donald Davidson gives this argument in "Freedom to Act," *Essays on Actions and Events* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), pp. 76–80.

described in the conclusion has been explained as well as one could want, for its occurrence has been shown to be an instance of a universal regularity. Moreover, only through a covering law argument can its occurrence be shown to be such. Thus, because there are no psychological laws, so long as an event is described in psychological terms its occurrence cannot be shown to be an instance of a universal regularity.

Of course, this does not in itself mean that psychological explanations are not genuine explanations. After all, lawlike sentences and, thus, covering law explanations are available only in the hardest of sciences (if indeed they are available anywhere). Most explanatory arguments, within science as well as without it, employ generalizations, not laws, and the terms they contain are dispositional, not structural. Furthermore, because generalizations make use of vague quantitative terms such as "often," "usually," or "sufficiently," explanatory arguments that rely on generalizations cannot be deductively valid. Most explanations, this is to say, show the events they are supposed to explain to be instances of more or less rough regularities, not precise and universal ones. But this is not a reason to think that as a class explanations that do not fit the covering law model provide us with an understanding of things that is less than respectable epistemically, for it remains true that we are able, to a significant degree, to predict and control happenings in our environment because of the understanding everyday explanations afford us of that environment. That there are no psychological laws by itself means, at most, that psychological explanation cannot aspire to be explanation of the very best kind, not that it isn't explanation at all.

Not only, though, are there no psychological laws—according to the second principle, neither are there psycho-physical laws. This, of course, follows directly from the claim that folk psychological predicates can appear in no laws at all, but there are arguments for specifically this second principle as well. For a generalization to provide firm support for counterfactuals and for it to be projectible, its various terms must all answer to the same principles of application. Psycho-physical generalizations, however, draw upon two very different pools of terms. The application of psychological terms is governed by the need to find the objects to which those terms are applied in the main rational; the application of physical terms is not governed by such a need. Thus, generalizations that draw on both pools can never be more than softly supportive of counterfactuals, weakly projectible.[6] To observe that psychological

6 Donald Davidson gives this argument in "Mental Events," *Essays on Actions and Events*, pp. 223–225.

terms and physical terms answer to different principles of application is to note a particular way in which the concepts of folk psychology are orthogonal to the concepts of physical science.[7] The upshot is that psychological properties are not reducible to—or, simply, are not—physical properties.

Because there are no psycho-physical laws, we can neither evaluate psychological claims on non-psychological grounds nor explain how, using only physical terms, psychological explanations succeed when they do. Even if somehow a person knew everything she could possibly know about the world described physically, she still could not have judged that in Odette's act of denying she was fishing for compliments, Odette was in fact fishing for compliments—though that judgment was warranted on psychological grounds.

These two principles, it would seem, together give us excellent reason for reevaluating the idea that psychological description and explanation affords us insight into the ways of the world. On the one hand, given the first principle, psychological explanation cannot approach the standard of the best physical explanations, for psychological explanations, unlike physical explanations, can never be deductive-nomological explanations. On the other hand, given the second principle, we can neither get from physical understanding to psychological understanding nor explain psychological understanding using the resources of physical theory. The unimpressive explanations of folk psychology, this means, lack even the small merit principled association with impressive explanations would bestow on them.

Defenders of folk psychology might here want to propose that the fact that we cannot go from purely physical descriptions and explanations to psychological ones speaks only to the distinctiveness of psychological understanding, not to its poverty. But what, we must first ask, is psychological understanding supposed to be an understanding of? According to the third principle, mental events, the events that psychological descriptions purport to describe, are physical events. Or, perhaps we should say, *if* there are any psychological events, they are physical events (there are no events in addition to physical events). If this principle is true, then psychological understanding is directed toward the very same events as is physical understanding. Now let us assume, as probably most of us are willing to do, that where there is

7 Paul Churchland insists on this conclusion, that the propositional attitude part of folk psychology will prove irreducible to better theories, no less than Davidson does. See Churchland, "Eliminative Materialism and the Propositional Attitudes," *Journal of Philosophy* LXXVIII, No. 2 (February 1981), p. 67.

causality there is law. Given this assumption, we can conclude not only that any event causally explained in psychological terms can be explained in physical terms, but also, once we know the law covering it, that it can be *better* explained in physical terms. Therefore, it would seem, the fact that we cannot go from physical descriptions and explanations to psychological ones does, after all, speak to the epistemic poverty of psychological understanding. Non-reductive physicalism, it turns out, once pressure is applied to the three principles that define it, collapses into eliminative materialism.

Partisans of the received view would at this point mention the intersubjective character and predictive successes of folk psychology. These, though, can be explained by the fact that we were all similarly trained in folk psychology and that what we see as its successes are artifacts of our reliance on it. In light of the consequences of taking seriously the three principles discussed above, we need better reasons for thinking folk psychology epistemically respectable than the received view offers.

## III

The conclusion of the above argument is that psychological understanding, despite its objective character and our belief that it allows us to make our way around in the world with some degree of success, is not in the end an entirely epistemically respectable form of understanding. Now if one would draw this conclusion, one would also, it seems, be inclined to make a practical proposal. One would be inclined, that is, to propose that we eliminate folk psychological description from our thought and talk about the world. We should, one would continue, if we want to understand the world as well as we are capable of understanding it, speak only the language of neurophysiology and other sciences.

Indeed, if the argument given above is sound, there would seem to be little to say against this proposal. What reason could one possibly have to retain a defective system of description and explanation when a superior one is within one's reach? The received view's optimism about folk psychology's prospects rests on no firm foundation.

Clearly, however, nothing can come of this eliminativist proposal unless in the first place it is *possible* to give up folk psychology. Our first question, then, must be whether psychological description *can* be eliminated from our thought and talk about the world. Is it truly possible, at least in principle if not in practice, for there to be an agent who is able to

describe and explain things in a physical vocabulary, but who never ascribes beliefs or desires to things? Both eliminative materialists and partisans of the received view agree that it is. The eliminativist proposal that we give up propositional attitude talk, once the neuro-scientific millennium arrives, fails, though, as we will see, because we must give a negative answer to this question. In fact, it is not possible for an agent to make do without psychological idioms; an agent must, in principle, be able to use psychological idioms if he or she is to command any idioms at all. We have reason to think, that is, that it is impossible for an agent to understand any event, even under an entirely physical description, unless he or she is a competent interpreter of the mental states, described as mental states, of other agents. The argument to this conclusion is fairly straightforward. A little more complicated are the reasons for accepting its central premise.

The argument for the claim that in order to have knowledge of physical events one must be a competent interpreter of the mental states of others begins with the premise that to know what an uttered indicative sentence means is, most often if not always, to know under what conditions it is true. For instance, one who knows what Étienne's sentence, "Le bateau traverse un touffe de nénuphars," means knows it is true if and only if the boat is passing through a clump of water lilies. Clearly, then, one who understands a sentence possesses the concepts of truth and falsity. But to possess the concepts of truth and falsity one must also possess the concepts of belief, desire, and at least some other propositional attitudes, the very concepts that are at issue. These concepts all belong together: one cannot understand what it is for a sentence to be true without knowing what it is for a sentence to be believed, and vice versa. Therefore, no agent can understand even a non-psychological indicative sentence and, thus, no agent can have propositional knowledge of the world unless he or she possesses psychological concepts—unless, that is to say, he or she is able to determine what agents think and desire, described, using psychological terms, as thoughts and desires.

The central premise of this argument is, plainly enough, that an agent cannot have the concepts of truth and falsity and, thus, the ability to understand a sentence without also having the concept of belief. To defend this premise we must consider how one is able to interpret sentences or, in other words, what one must know if one is to assign truth conditions to them.

Now it is clear that if one is able to interpret any one sentence Étienne produces, one is able to interpret a great many of Étienne's sentences.

The meaning of a sentence depends on the meanings of its parts, and one's understanding of a part of a sentence is not to be distinguished from one's understanding of the roles that that part plays in many other sentences. For instance, Étienne's word "nénuphars," an element in the sentence we considered above, means what it does because of its role in such of Étienne's sentences as "Les nénuphars fleurissent au printemps," and "L'étang est couvert de nénuphars"—we know, that is, that Étienne's word "nénuphars" means water lilies because of the contribution it makes to these and other sentences. Thus, again, if we were unable to interpret a great many other sentences Étienne speaks, we would be unable to interpret the particular sentence in question.

These reflections, though, point to a basic problem about the interpretation of speech. We have seen that in order to understand a particular sentence an interpreter must understand its component parts, but we have also said that in order to understand its component parts that interpreter must understand many other sentences. How, then, can an interpreter even begin to come to understand a speaker's sentences? How can she assign truth conditions to a speaker's sentences on the basis of the meanings of their parts if knowing the meanings of their parts requires that she already know their truth conditions? It is the concept of belief that provides the solution to this problem, that makes it possible to interpret the sentences speakers speak, inscribe, or sign. An interpreter can come to understand a speaker's language because she can ascribe to him true beliefs about his environment before she knows his language; then, guided by these provisional ascriptions, she can begin to correlate sounds he makes with items in that environment. Thus, we find, in order to come to have the knowledge of his words required in order to understand Étienne's sentences, an interpreter must make extensive use of the concept of holding a sentence true—of the concept, that is to say, of believing.[8]

## IV

There are two ways in which the argument of Section III might be thought to beg the question against the idea that psychological idioms can be eliminated from our thought and talk.

1) Many folk psychological terms were used in describing the interpreter's situation and task. Was the thesis that the psychological

8 This argument is Donald Davidson's, from "Belief and the Basis of Meaning," *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984).

can be eliminated formulated in such a way that it simply refutes itself? An interpreter is to *understand* Étienne's sentences: is the argument merely that to understand anything just is to have (true) beliefs about it? This would be like the argument that one cannot deny that living things possess a vital spirit because in order to deny anything one must be living, and to be living just is to possess a vital spirit.

It is true that we described the interpreter's task as that of understanding Étienne's sentences. In the absence of an alternative vocabulary we had no choice. But this is not in itself to beg the question against eliminativism. The suggestion that psychological idioms be eliminated from thought and talk about the world is not the suggestion that thoughts, those particular events themselves, each individual one itself, be eliminated, only that events that we presently call thoughts need never be *described* as thoughts. We are discussing our cognizing of sentences, of indicative sentences free of folk psychological terms; and we can use "understanding" as a place-holder for whatever crew of ways of describing our cognizing them the eliminativist thinks we should adopt. One would beg the question by *assuming* that the concept of whatever it is that "understanding" is standing in for cannot be understood apart from the concept of belief. The question of the tenability of anti-vitalism is begged in the above example since it is just assumed there that one cannot understand the concept of living apart from the concept of possessing a vital spirit. What we needed to do in our argument, then, if we were not to beg the question against eliminativism, was to *show* that the concept of understanding a sentence, whatever the eliminativist holds should be made of it, cannot be understood apart from the concept of belief understood in the ordinary way. This is just what we did. We demonstrated that an interpreter could not develop an understanding of the components of Étienne's sentences without ascribing sentences held true, that is, beliefs (described as beliefs), to Étienne.[9]

2) We assumed in the argument of the last section that to know the meaning of a speaker's indicative sentence is, at least for the most part, to know its truth conditions. Isn't this straightaway to take a mentalistic view of meaning and, thus, to beg the question against the idea that mental idioms can be eliminated?

Now for this complaint to be well founded, clearly there would have to be an account of linguistic meaning that dispenses entirely with the

9 Churchland has complained that arguments against his proposal are often like arguments against anti-vitalism. See "Eliminative Materialism and the Propositional Attitudes," pp. 88–89, and *Matter and Consciousness*, p. 48.

idea that understanding sentences involves understanding their truth conditions, for one needs to have something one could offer as an alternative to truth-conditional accounts. This alternative account would, indeed, have to fail entirely to draw on the concept of belief. Otherwise there would be no question to beg. Yet it is not easy to say how an account of linguistic meaning could avoid using the notion of truth conditions altogether. Consider, for instance, the historically popular proposal that sentences be viewed as complex signals, and that their meanings be taken to reside in the effects they, as signals, typically have on behaviour. Surely, though, only a few sentences, if any at all, are matched directly with a set of typical behaviours. Actually, our response to a sentence is usually explained by what we take it to mean (and what we take the speaker to have intended to do by uttering a sentence with that meaning), given the particular plans, intentions, designs, and desires we happened to have when we heard it. But this implies that the behavioural response to a sentence is mediated by, and does not give, our understanding of its meaning. To take up the slack between sentence and response one might find useful the notion of truth conditions; but one's account would then no longer be non-truth conditional. It would seem, then, that so long as one realizes that uttered sentences do not act on hearers in a way analogous to that in which pheromones act on ants, one will find it difficult not to appeal to the idea that to know what a sentence means is, at least most often, to know under what conditions it is true.

## V

Let us now return to the question of the epistemic credentials of folk psychological understanding. Can we ever genuinely understand empirical phenomena by ascribing beliefs, desires, and intentions to creatures? Or must folk psychological understanding always be less than genuine? According to the argument of Section II, folk psychological understanding is, in principle, unable to aspire to the condition of the understandings of things as found at least in contemporary physics. Even so, according to the argument of Section III, since no interpreter of sentences, and, thus, no one with scientific knowledge, could be without the concepts of belief and desire, psychological concepts and methods of investigating the world cannot, in principle, be eliminated. Thus we know that the eliminativist hope of thoroughly reforming our language and outlook is vain. But can we discover in the ineliminability of folk psychology anything that will help us with our original problem, the problem of folk psychology's epistemic credentials? If not, we might

have to rest content with the result that we cannot do without folk psychology, even as doing with it supplies us with no real insight into the ways of the world. Can we, that is, in light of the argument of Section II, discover any reason to think that psychological understanding is truly understanding?

We have determined that we could have no way to distinguish between true and false descriptions of the world, even purely physical descriptions, or between claims backed by solid evidence and claims not so backed, if we lacked the concepts of belief, thought, desire, reason, and so on. Having such concepts is not, of course, to be distinguished from having the ability to employ them correctly, to measure up to some standards in our use of them. One who commands folk psychological concepts will not, for instance, ascribe much blatant irrationality to a subject, at least not when she is unable to account for that irrationality by properly ascribing further beliefs and desires to that subject. Now the thesis that folk psychological understanding is not genuine understanding is supported in the first place by the important insight that though one correctly applies to objects and events the principles of some theory and, thereby, produces a description that measures up to the standards internal to that theory, one's description might nonetheless be false. Thus, for instance, while those who think there are witches might marshal evidence for and against the idea that some particular person is a witch, correct each others' errors in evaluating that evidence, and, finally, through this research and debate, come to agree that indeed she is a witch, actually, of course, she isn't, for no one is. How can we know, then, that most often when we use psychological concepts correctly—when, that is, our use of them meets standards internal to the practice of psychological description and explanation—we are also describing truly things in the world?

We can know that the correct use of psychological concepts regularly produces true descriptions of the world and epistemically respectable explanations of events in it simply by reflecting on what we have said make psychological description and explanation ineliminable. Without psychological description there could be no language and, thus, no linguistically couched beliefs about anything: there could be no investigating, no explaining, no theorizing, no arguing, and no agreeing or disagreeing with others. But so long as there *is* investigation and agreement, standards must exist by which investigators can evaluate evidence and adjudicate conflicts about what to believe. These standards are necessarily internal to folk psychology—they are the standards by which we determine what is reasonable to believe or want, the standards by

which we determine what counts as good evidence for what. This means that our general standards of good reasons for believing and wanting can be neither understood nor employed apart from our practices of interpreting minds as minds and describing actions as actions.

We could not, we have seen, fashion a true description of anything at all, material or mental, unless we could correctly, according to our actual standards, describe behaviour as intentional, as caused by beliefs and desires. Therefore, we cannot suppose there could be a general distinction between correctly fashioned psychological descriptions and true descriptions. (Any particular correctly fashioned description might be false, but not every correctly fashioned description could be false.) But the distinction between the correctly fashioned and the true is the very distinction that needs to be in place if we are to challenge the epistemic respectability of psychological description and explanation. If, then, we cannot question whether for the most part our correctly fashioned understandings of minds are truly understandings without, in the process, undermining our presumption that sometimes our understandings of things described as physical are truly understandings, then our understanding of things when described in the vocabulary of propositional attitudes must indeed be epistemically respectable. Even standards of scientific reasoning are themselves, we must conclude, answerable to folk psychological standards.[10]

## VI

There are two ways in which the argument of Section V might be criticised.

1) Eliminativists, among others, are sceptical of the idea that human understanding, to say nothing of the understanding of the world achieved by speechless animals, is always or even ever importantly a linguistic affair. Most cognition is devoted to perception, to processing information gleaned through our senses. At the level of linguistic description we are often unaware of that of which we are perfectly aware at the level of perception. Drawing upon this fact, eliminativists envision forms

10 The argument of this section has been given in brief by Donald Davidson: "Psychological concepts, I have been arguing, cannot be reduced, even nomologically, to others. But they are essential to our understanding of the rest. We cannot conceive a language without psychological terms or expressions—there would be no way to translate it into our language." "Reply to Solomon," appended to "Psychology as Philosophy," *Essays on Actions and Events*, pp. 243–244.

of human life in which our information processing capacities are greatly expanded while—perhaps because—our reliance on language is attenuated.[11] Thus, eliminativists should not be impressed with an argument that proceeds from what must be the case if we are to speak and understand sentences.

This criticism is a *non sequitur*. The eliminativist position challenged in Section V is that a certain theory of the world, folk psychology, is epistemically unsound; because it is epistemically unsound, eliminativists propose, we should abandon it. The position challenged is not, then, the position that *all* linguistically formulated theories of the world are corrupt or otherwise unsound and, thus, that we should abandon speaking altogether. Perhaps we would be better off were a post-linguistic world—a world in which there is no description or explanation at all—to come to be our own;[12] but this is irrelevant to the question whether linguistically formulated scientific theories could exist without folk psychology. What the eliminativist needs to show is that there could be speakers who, using theories perhaps superior to ours but bereft of folk psychology, manage to be correct about things that we, using folk psychology, must inevitably get wrong.

2) Because the arguments of Section III and V are a prioristic, they are anti-scientific, shortsighted, and reactionary.

This objection is, I think, more an expression of temperament than a sketch of a good argument. The arguments in question are, indeed, non-empirical *a priori* arguments, and they attempt to draw a line around the possible. Perhaps, from a particular aesthetic perspective, it would have been better to have left imagination free to wander. But how does the non-empirical character of these arguments make them even anti-empirical, let alone unsound? Those who reject the above arguments as a prioristic need to say just what is wrong with these specific *a priori* arguments, and not just to characterize them as *a priori*.

11 See the final two of the three scenarios of the world after the neuro-physiological revolution that Paul Churchland describes in "Eliminative Materialism and the Propositional Attitudes," pp. 84–90.

12 Churchland imagines a post-linguistic world in the third scenario he describes in "Eliminative Materialism and the Propositional Attitudes," pp. 87–88. People communicate with each other through artificial commissures between their brains. It is important to note that their brains are no more discussing matters among themselves than our own two hemispheres ever are. The proposal that we eliminate language and propositional attitudes themselves (the proposal that we stop thinking in words and stop talking) is very different from the proposal that we eliminate a theory about language and propositional attitudes.

## VII

Definitive of what I have called the received view on the question of the epistemic credentials of folk psychology's propositional attitude core are two claims: 1) folk psychology could, in principle, be replaced by an epistemically better theory should one happen along; 2) that folk psychology is relatively successful and easy to use would give us good reason to continue to use it even in the presence of an epistemically better theory. Eliminativists, I have said, are quite properly scornful of the second claim. The received view is shallow precisely because it would be foolish to cling to folk psychology in face of a better theory that can replace it.

However, the first claim, a claim that eliminativists endorse, is also false, or so I have argued. Sentences, whether about minds or bodies, can be understood only by those who possess folk psychological concepts. Thus, folk psychology cannot be replaced so long as we continue to speak. This does not mean that folk psychology is not a theory; it is. But it is an ineliminable theory—at least in the sense that should it go, so, too, would all other theories. According to most physicalists, though, folk psychology is concerned to describe, explain, and predict a subset of the very same objects and events physical theory is concerned to describe, explain, and predict; moreover, there is an important sense in which physical theory can succeed at these tasks better than folk psychology can. Nonetheless, the epistemic credentials of folk psychology are in good order. No wedge can in general be driven between claims correctly made in light of folk psychology's methods and standards and claims that are true; this, in turn, means that it is through folk psychology alone that epistemic standards generally are vouchsafed. Folk psychological understanding is distinct from physical understanding not because it deals with different objects, as ontological dualists maintain, but simply because it is a different system of lore about those objects; but it is a system of lore without which no other could exist.[13]

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