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Empathy, Mental Dispositions, and the Physicalist Challenge

KARSTEN STUEBER

In recent years, the subject of dispositions has become a topic of renewed philosophical interest leading to a sophisticated and wide-ranging debate. The philosophical environment has been much more receptive to the idea that dispositional terminology refers to real and irreducible properties that form part of the furniture of the universe; another sign that philosophy in the analytic tradition is no longer beholden to the empiricist framework from the beginning of the 20th century. Yet the debate about dispositions tends to stay on a very general level; trying to answer, for example, questions such as whether all dispositional terminology can be fully analyzed in terms of counterfactual conditionals and whether all dispositional properties are in need of a causal basis or whether they have an autonomous causal explanatory role to play. Given the general suspicion of dispositional terminology and dispositional properties within the empiricist framework taking such generalized perspective is certainly appropriate. Yet from this viewpoint, specific distinctions between different classes of dispositions are easily overlooked.¹ Friends of dispositions as irreducible elements of the universe have to respond to arguments intended to show that all dispositions have to be regarded as reducible, that they are nothing but lower order categorical properties, or that all dispositional statements are cognitively insignificant. Having in general saved dispositional properties from ontological extinction, however, does not necessarily allow us to save each and every type of a *prima facie* dispositional property from such fate. Particularly within the contemporary framework of physicalism, the ontological status of higher order dispositional properties, such as fragility, that objects possess because of a certain micro-physical structure is anything but certain.

In this article, I will discuss the physicalist challenge in regard to the particular domain of higher order dispositions that is delineated by our folk psychological vocabulary. As I will show, the general discussion about dispositions and their ontological legitimacy tends to take place firmly within the context of a physicalist conception of reality and a detached conception of

1 See also McKittrick's contribution to the anthology in this regard.

objectivity within the physical sciences. The domain of higher order dispositions referred to within the context of folk psychology is however significantly different because it, in contrast to the conceptual framework of the physical sciences, involves not merely the detached third person perspective but involves essentially the use of the first person perspective. For this reason, the ascriptions of mental states such as beliefs and desires should be conceived of as having a doubly dispositional character. Folk psychological predicates ascribe complex multi-track dispositional properties to other agents; since they ascribe higher order properties to people that are commonly associated with characteristic manifestation events in a variety of circumstances. Yet in contrast to ascriptions of physical dispositions such as fragility, the ascription of mental dispositions depends essentially on our empathic ability, that is, our ability for mental imitation and our capacity to re-enact another person's thought processes in our own mind.² And it is also for this reason that one is not epistemically justified in expecting that our folk psychological practice of explaining another person's behavior in terms of his reasons can be accounted for from the physicalist perspective. Once we reject the epistemic legitimacy of requiring a reductive account for our folk psychological practices, we also alleviate the eliminativist pressure on those very same practices. More positively expressed, I will attempt to argue that we should philosophically reckon with the possibility that certain features of reality are only accessible to creatures that share our empathic dispositions and our psychological constitution. Accordingly, we should regard our folk psychological practices as constituting an ontologically relatively autonomous and an epistemically special explanatory domain and practice.

1. Physicalism and its Ontological Challenge to Dispositions

For most of the 20th century the philosophical discussion about dispositions and the more specific discussion about mental properties have been closely linked. Arguments for and against the validity of dispositional terminology show at times a structural similarity to arguments first developed in the context of the philosophy of mind.³ As it is well known, it was Gilbert Ryle, with the publication of his seminal *The Concept of Mind*, who established the close connection between these topics of philosophical concerns. Ryle suggested a dispositional conception of mental terminology as a philosophical corrective

2 This is also the manner in which I will understand the concept of empathy in this article. For an overview of the history of the empathy concept and the plurality of its definition in the various philosophical and psychological disciplines and sub-disciplines see my 2008a and the introduction of my 2006.

3 See the later chapters in Mumford 1998.

to the “linguistically confused” Cartesian framework of thinking about the mind as the immaterial analogue to the body or as thinking about the mind as a ghost in the machine. Yet in conceiving of mentality in dispositional terms and in conceiving of dispositional statements in a certain manner, Ryle left mentality and dispositions in an ontologically precarious situation. For Ryle, dispositional statements are not fact-reporting statements. They “are neither reports of observed or observable, nor yet reports of unobserved or unobservable state of affairs.”⁴ Rather, they are mere inference tickets that justify our inferring one state of affair from another. If one would like to succinctly summarize Ryle’s position one is tempted to do so by saying that Ryle was doing away with the Ghost in the Machine via a dispositional analysis of mental terminology but that he was getting *nothing* in return. Minds do not seem to be anything in the world: Like causation within a Humean framework, minds have only to do with our ways of talking about the world.

Ryle’s claim that dispositions belong to non-factual discourse is hard to swallow.⁵ It seems to be a factual matter that some objects will actually dissolve in water and that others will not, as much as it is a factual difference between objects that some have a specific shape and others do not. Certain facts in the world do seem to make the claim that glass is fragile or that Peter is angry true or false. *Prima facie*, objects that have certain dispositions possess different properties than objects that do not have such dispositions. The real question then is whether there is a real and irreducible difference between so called dispositional properties and non-dispositional properties or whether it is merely a difference that concerns linguistic entities; that is, a distinction between dispositional and non-dispositional predicates.⁶

Traditionally, according to what is commonly referred to as *Eleatic Principle*, the test for the reality of a property has been whether or not its existence makes some kind of causal difference. If there is no difference in this regard between an object having a property P (like it having a specific mass) and it not having the property, then P cannot be regarded as objectively real. Ascribing it to an object does not depend on facts in the world, but its ascription is merely subjective and depends on the eyes of the beholder. Moreover, to address questions about the reality of specific properties, philosophers are well advised to analyze existing scientific practices. Ultimately, questions regarding the furniture of the universe are decided not by philosophical arm-chair considerations but in terms of whether or not a property has to be appealed to in our scientific investigation of the causal structure of the world, that is, whether or not it is appealed to in our causal explanatory practices

4 Ryle 1949, 125.

5 See the contribution by Scholz in this anthology and Mumford 1998, 22ff.

6 In this respect see also Heil 2003, chaps. 3 and 9.

based on our “final” theories of the world. Educated guesses about how such practices will look like are only possible in light of our existing scientific theories and our understanding of the historical progress of science.

For this very reason, Carl Hempel’s account of dispositional explanations falls short of saving the causal-explanatory role of dispositional properties. According to Hempel, dispositional explanations have the following form:

i was in a situation of kind S3.

i has property M.

(L) Any x with property M, will in a situation of kind S, behave in a manner R3.

i behaved in manner R3.⁷

Accordingly, dispositional explanations share most features that Hempel regards as crucial for an argument to constitute an explanation. Like any other explanation, they address certain kinds of epistemic desiderata in that they provide information that supplies a justification for our expecting the occurrence of a certain event, given the initial conditions. Dispositional explanations accomplish this task by telling us that a certain object has the tendency to manifest a certain type of behavior in certain circumstances. The shortcomings of Hempel’s conception of explanation are well known.⁸ Yet independent of these well known concerns, for our topic more important is the fact that nothing in Hempel’s defense of dispositional explanations allows us to answer the question of whether such explanatory schemes referring to dispositional properties are indeed sanctioned by our best scientific theories of the world or whether they are merely “folk” or “commonsensical” ways of talking about the world without any real ontological significance.

Even worse, serious doubts about the ontological status of higher order properties including dispositional properties such as beliefs and desires arise within the perspective of contemporary physicalism; a position that is best understood as the philosophical articulation of the underlying assumptions of a reductive scientific research program that was so successful in the last few centuries and promises to be so in the future. Physicalism as the philosophical articulation of our ongoing scientific practice is commonly understood as containing both ontological and epistemic commitments.⁹ Ontologically speaking, the physicalist views higher order macroscopic facts as being dependent or supervenient on basic micro-physical facts. As contemporary metaphysicians like to express it in a slogan: God only had to fix all the mi-

7 Hempel 1965, 462.

8 See Salmon 1989.

9 See for example J. Poland 1994. It is also part of Chalmers’ conception of physicalism and his argument for the claim that phenomenal consciousness cannot be accounted for within the physicalist framework. Hence physicalism must be false. See Chalmers 1997.

cro-physical facts in order to fix all the facts. Yet, since physicalism is best understood as articulating a reductive scientific practice its ontological commitment seems to entail a corresponding epistemic postulate that it is in principle possible to know the nature of this ontological dependency. Hence, physicalism commits us epistemically to accept the claim that it is in principle possible to explain how the interaction of lower order micro-physical properties gives rise to higher order properties. Accepting brute correlations or identities between macroscopic and micro-physical facts without any hope of ever finding out how and why certain microscopic facts give rise to macroscopic phenomena would not be consistent with viewing physicalism as the presupposition of a reductive scientific practice. It would seem to undermine the philosophical justification of the physicalist framework and reveal its metaphysics as mere materialistic dogma. To express it in another slogan: God had not only to fix all the physical or micro-physical facts in order to fix all fact, but he and anybody else would only have to know all the physical facts in order to know all the facts.

Given physicalism, the following worry arises, which has been the subject of an intense discussion in contemporary philosophy: If the existence of higher order properties depends on physical or micro-physical properties, then one could argue that their causal efficacy is nothing but the causal efficacy of the micro-physical properties they depend on. If higher order properties could be easily identified with lower order properties one would not have to be overly concerned about the question of whether such higher order properties really exist. Yet as it is well-known, mental properties such as beliefs and desires (and dispositional properties such as solubility in water or fragility) are multiply realizable and for that reason can not be identified with lower order properties. More generally, if one assumes with Prior, Pargetter, and Jackson¹⁰ that all dispositional properties are in need of a categorical basis, but claims (i) that dispositional properties cannot be identified with their basis, and (ii) that all the causal work is done on the lower level, then it seems that dispositional properties do not have any causal role to play. To express this worry in a slightly different fashion one could argue that knowledge that a particular object is fragile does not add anything over and above our knowledge of its micro-physical structure in allowing us to manipulate and intervene in the natural processes occurring in the world. Dispositional properties could then not be understood as being part of the ultimate furniture of the world. They have to be conceived of as linguistic fictions; as being linguistic categories created because it is convenient for us to speak, for ex-

10 E. Prior, R. Pargetter, and F. Jackson 1982.

ample, of the fragility of various objects. In reality, however, no natural property corresponds to our dispositional way of speaking.¹¹

Within the philosophical discussion about dispositions there have been a variety of argumentative strategies utilized in order to respond to the general ontological challenge to dispositional properties. It has been argued that not all dispositions are in need of a categorical basis;¹² that the strict distinction between categorical and dispositional properties cannot be philosophically maintained;¹³ that dispositional categories such as the category of a power is ontologically basic;¹⁴ and that the fundamental level as it is described by contemporary physics itself contains reference to dispositional properties.¹⁵ Taken together, these various strategies undermine the physicalist challenge to dispositions by suggesting that the basic ontological level of the universe cannot be rationally conceived of without reference to dispositions, as at least one of its irreducible elements. Here I will not comment on the ultimate success of the various arguments to save dispositions from ontological extinction. For my purposes, it is more important to point out that the above strategies do not save higher order dispositional properties, particularly higher order mental properties. Having such higher order dispositional properties requires a specific physical basis. As we all know, we need a well-functioning brain to have mental states and capacities. Consequently, one would still have to worry about the objective reality of such properties, since their supposedly causal efficacy seems to be nothing but the causal efficacy of lower order physical properties. In the end, the above mentioned strategies to ontologically safeguard dispositions allow us merely to infer that some dispositional properties are not higher-order and that they have to be accepted among the basic elements of the universe.

Whereas one can live easily with the recognition that no real property might correspond to a dispositional predicate such as fragility, higher order mental predicates that are at the core of our folk psychological practices, like the concepts of beliefs and desires, are not so easily done away with. Our ethical and legal practices, for instance, depend centrally on the notion of responsible agency and it is hard to conceive of how such notion can be understood without concepts like beliefs and desires. Certainly no notion currently used in the physical sciences seems to come close to play that role. It is

11 In the philosophy of mind this argument is well known as the causal explanatory exclusion argument best articulated by Jaegwon Kim. See Kim 1998a and Stueber 2005 for a critical discussion and more precise articulation of this argument.

12 McKittrick 2003.

13 Heil 2003.

14 Mumford, this anthology.

15 See for example Hüttemann in this anthology.

for this reason that the debate about the ontological status of mental states has been so intense in current philosophy of mind.

However, merely wanting to save mental properties does not constitute a sufficient reason for holding onto the folk psychological framework and for regarding it as ontologically sound, especially if one is inclined, as I am, to accept the ontological framework of physicalism. In the following, I will try to alleviate the physicalist challenge to mental dispositions by providing a more fine-grained analysis of the relationship between the ontological and the epistemic commitments associated with the physicalist framework. I would like to suggest that there is a specific reason to reject the epistemic postulate of physicalism insofar as mental properties accepted within the folk psychological perspective are concerned, even if one admits the ontological priority of the physical. I would like to suggest that the ontological and epistemic commitments of physicalism come apart for properties that are identifiable only within a particular conceptual framework that is constituted by or centrally involves at least some epistemic capacities that do not have their equivalent in the physical sciences. Physicalism as an ontological thesis is compatible with the view that certain conceptual repertoires used for explanatory purposes and certain properties identified with the help of these repertoires are accessible only to creatures that share the physical and psychological constitution of normal functioning human beings. This does not imply that there are any non-physical facts; it just means that certain facts are only accessible to organisms with a specific physical and psychological constitution. For other creatures such facts are epistemically inaccessible.

In this respect, there exist an essential epistemic contrast between the perspective of the physical sciences and the perspective of folk psychology. In contrast to the physical sciences, our folk psychological practice is centrally tied to the first person perspective and our empathic abilities; that is, our ability for mental imitation and our capacity to reenact another person's thought processes in our own mind. For that very reason, one is also not justified in expecting that properties, identified within the conceptual domain of such a practice, can be accounted for from the perspective of the physical sciences that abstracts from such genuine human capacities, even if everything depends ontologically on the interaction among physical entities and properties identified within those theoretical practices.

2. Mental Dispositions and the Function of Empathy

Within the context of analytic philosophy, one has mostly assumed that our folk psychological practices are on par with other scientific practices in that the folk psychological vocabulary is used in order to predict and explain hu-

man behavior. Consequently, the respect that philosophers and scientist have shown toward folk psychology and its ontological assumptions has been closely associated with their judgments of whether or not the folk psychological framework is adequate for a rigorous scientific investigation of human behavior. Scientific behaviorists like Watson and Skinner adopted eliminativist attitudes towards folk psychology because the behaviorist framework promised to be able to account for human behavior without appealing to inner mental states. Since the cognitive revolution within psychology, the fate of mental states assumed to exist within folk psychology appears to be much brighter.¹⁶ More recently, however, eliminativist attitudes towards folk psychology have again become prominent in the context of connectionist accounts of mental capacities and have been forcefully articulated by Paul Churchland.¹⁷

One has therefore assumed that folk psychology, like the physical sciences, has to be understood as an epistemic enterprise that is ideally adopted from the “perspective of nowhere,” to use Nagel’s term, or from the *detached perspective*. Science in general is conceived of as being committed to standards of objectivity that are allowing us to overcome the subjective limitations of the human mind leading to well-known biases and other inferential shortcomings. Only in this manner can we expect that we are able to describe the world as it really is and not merely as we think it to be. The scientific perspective is a perspective that does not depend on us humans sharing a common psychological structure of the mind. Rather, it is a perspective that could be shared even by Martian scientists interested in exploring the structure of the world: It is a perspective accessible to any reasoner committed to the normative ideals of rationality regardless of how such reasoning is actually realized and embodied in the physical world.

I have called the philosophical conception of folk psychology that conceives of folk psychology as being committed to or adopted from such a detached perspective the *detached conception of folk psychology*. It is a conception of folk psychology that has dominated philosophy of mind in the 20th century. It has been most memorably articulated by Wilfrid Sellars with his myth of Genius Jones, who from a behaviorist basis develops an explanatory framework postulating inner mental states in order to provide a systematic and explanatory account of observed human behavior.¹⁸

16 See however the skeptical voice of Stephen Stich 1983 in this context.

17 For example Churchland 1989.

18 W. Sellars 1963. For a discussion see Stueber 2006, chap. 1. While the detached conception of folk psychology certainly has been dominant throughout the 20th century, this is not to say that other positions were not articulated. Particularly the phenomenological and hermeneutic traditions have to be mentioned in this context. For a brief survey see the introduction of my 2006 and the first sections of my 2008a.

More recently, voices have grown stronger that challenge the assumption that folk psychology should be compared to standard scientific practices. These voices challenge the claim that prediction and explanation are the primary purposes of folk psychology. They suggest that the primary purpose of folk psychology is instead related to our practical and ethical concerns.¹⁹ Here, I do not have the space to sufficiently address all of the arguments articulated in favor of this revisionary view of folk psychology. Suffice it to say that I regard our folk psychological conception of other agents as acting because of their mental states – their beliefs, desires, and intentions – as being central for our viewing them as agents who can be blamed, praised, and with whom we can socially bond. The fact that folk psychology is central for our ethical practices does not contradict the view that folk psychology has to be understood as a causal explanatory practice of accounting for a person's behavior. Indeed only under the presupposition that beliefs and desires and so on play a role in our causal-explanatory account of human behavior does it also make sense to view an agent as a person who is responsible for his behavior. That is, only as long as we can understand an agent as having acted because of his reasons does it make sense to view his external behavior as something that originates in him in a manner that allows us to praise or blame him for his actions.

Accordingly, I tend to agree with the view that folk psychology is on par with other scientific practices in being a causal explanatory practice. Yet I disagree with the orthodox account of folk psychology according to which it is an explanatory practice that is adopted from the detached perspective of the physical sciences. Rather, I view folk psychology as an explanatory practice that is adopted from what I call the *engaged perspective*, from a perspective that does not abstract from our uniquely human capacities, particularly the human capacity for empathy. It is an explanatory practice that can only be accessed from a human point of view and not from the point of nowhere. Organisms that do not share our psychology will not fully grasp the point of our folk psychological practices. Unlike the physical sciences folk psychology is a causal explanatory framework with a particular human touch.²⁰

19 For some recent voices in this regard see Hutto and Ratcliffe 2007, particularly the articles by Andrews, Knobe, Ratcliffe, and Morton. I discuss this claim as argued for by Knobe in my "The Ethical Dimension of Folk Psychology?," *Inquiry* (forthcoming 2009).

20 This does not imply that we cannot sensibly extend our folk psychological scheme to account for animal behavior. I will not address this complex issue in this article. Ordinarily we do seem to extend out folk psychological framework to animals and it would count against my conception of folk psychology if I would deny the possibility of such extension in an a priori manner. I however would suggest that we can apply folk psychology in this manner because we do share basic psychological mechanisms with some species in the animal kingdom, particularly primates. Some primates do seem to share some basic capacity for empathy, for example. For an interesting discussion see DeWaal 2006.

My understanding of folk psychology as an engaged practice in the above sense has two components: First, our perceptual encounter with the world is not one-dimensional in that we do not primarily perceive the world as consisting of one type of entities that differ only in their physical characteristics and in the complexity of behavior that they show. Indeed this has been the common assumption among various philosophical accounts of how we acquire knowledge of other minds. According to this assumption, we access mental states of other people always indirectly. Our access is mediated by various inferential mechanisms using either analogical reasoning as the Cartesians suggest or theoretical principles, as theory theorists suggest. Yet the assumption that we encounter the external world in a perceptually one-dimensional manner has to be regarded as a philosophical fiction. Human beings do not encounter the world in this manner and infer only indirectly that some physical things also have minds because of the complexity of their observed behavior. Rather, we perceptually encounter the world in already distinguishing between mere physical objects and creatures that are more like us. As recent neuro-scientific research establishing the existence of so called mirror neurons has shown, our perception of the observation of other human beings engages very different neurobiological systems than the observation of inanimate objects. In observing another person's bodily movements and his facial expressions associated with emotions such as sadness, fear, or disgust similar neurons are activated in us that are normally are activated when we execute the same bodily movement or when we feel those emotions. As neuroscientists like to express it, there exists a significant overlap in the activation of neurons underlying the execution and the observation of bodily movements and of facial expressions associated with specific emotions. From the neurobiological perspective, the perceptual encounter of other human beings has to be understood as an inner resonance phenomenon, as a form of inner imitation. In light of Theodor Lipps's view of empathy as a form of inner imitation, I refer to those resonance mechanisms as mechanisms of basic empathy. They allow us to understand another human being's movement as a goal directed movement (as being directed towards the cup) and they allow us to read another person's facial features as expressing certain emotions and feelings. From the very beginning, human beings relate to other people in a very different fashion than to physical objects. This does not imply that infants already understand other minds and other persons in a conceptually sophisticated manner. Rather one should conceive of the level of basic empathy as allowing the infant to grasp the movement of another as goal directed in the same manner that his own action could be directed towards that cup, that is as something that can practically imitated by him; that he is disposed to imitate in certain circumstances, or that he himself could do. In providing us with mechanisms of basic empathy, nature in my opinion has endowed us

with “perceptual similarity spaces” that make the development of the conceptual framework of folk psychology possible in that it allows us to practically grasp that the other person is “minded” like us; a similarity that then can be further explored and specified in a conceptually more fine-grained manner by acquiring the conceptual scheme of folk psychology. It provides us with an intersubjective basis for our natural exploration of the mind in that it allows us to grasp that the other person is feeling something that we ourselves can feel when we are taught that he is feeling sad. On the most basic level then the attribution of mental states to another person – such as attribution of emotions based on the observation of facial expressions or the attributions of goal-directedness based on the observations of movements of the other bodies – is not merely an attribution of mental dispositions from the detached perspective. Rather, it is an attribution from the engaged perspective in that, when I perceptually encounter the other person face to face, it directly resonates with me.²¹

The above observations do not imply that mental states do not ontologically depend on certain physical properties or the physical structure of the brain. Yet they should make us more careful of how exactly we conceive of the relationship between the ontological and epistemic components of physicalism. It should make us suspicious of claims articulated particularly in the contemporary discussion of consciousness that physicalism as an ontological thesis also implies that the application conditions of all concepts can be fully defined from the perspective of the physical sciences as Chalmers and Jackson claim.²² Based on this assumption, Chalmers argues that physicalism has to be false because it is conceivable that creatures that are physically like us in all respects lack phenomenal states. Certainly, if one is given all the information about a person’s brain described from the detached third person perspective without encountering that person face to face, one is without doubt able to conceive of that person as not feeling anything. Yet if I am right, this fact does not prove the falsity of physicalism as an ontological thesis. Rather, the fact that folk psychological concepts – including phenomenal concepts – cannot be fully accounted for from the perspective of the physical sciences can be explicated in light of the fact that only folk psychology is an engaged practice in the above sense. Accordingly, some folk psychological concepts are primarily learned in the face to face encounter with another human being; not by theoretically registering the exact contraction of facial or bodily muscles but by activating mechanisms of basic empathy. Asking us to conceive of

21 For my philosophical interpretation of mirror neurons in regard to the debate between simulation theory and theory theory see also my 2006 chaps. 3 and 4. For a summary of the scientific results on mirror neurons see particularly the recent books by Rizzolatti and Sinigaglia 2008 and Iacoboni 2008, a book written in a more popular style.

22 Chalmers 1997 and Chalmers and Jackson 2001.

the possibility that a person might be a zombie, while providing us only with the information that he cannot be distinguished from us within the perspective of the physical sciences, is asking us to adopt a detached perspective. Hence, the so called conceivability argument against physicalism asks us to take a perspective that abstracts from our own capacities of basic empathy that are normally central for the application of some of our folk-psychological concepts. From that perspective, we indeed have to wonder whether other people are zombies; that is, people without any feelings and emotions. Yet, given the above considerations, the detached view does not reflect normal linguistic competency of every folk-psychological concept. Assuming such competency, the right question to ask is not whether we can, from a detached perspective, conceive of somebody as lacking certain psychological states. We have to ask instead whether we can imagine him or her lacking such states assuming that we were confronted with him or her in a perceptual encounter in the physical world. If we confront our physical replica in this manner, we do not have any reason not to ascribe normal mentality including phenomenal states to our physical replica, since it is to be assumed that the observation of their physical expressions and movements resonates with us. All of this is compatible with physicalism as an ontological thesis. Physicalism understood in this manner does not imply that all of the concepts, which a human being as a specifically structured physical organism uses, have application conditions that can be fully accounted from the detached perspective of the physical sciences. Physicalism also does not imply that all of our concepts are accessible to all creatures capable of comprehending the physical sciences, even if they lack a human being's psychological capacity of empathy.²³

Nevertheless, I would admit that not all of our folk psychological concepts are closely tied to mirror neurons and considerations about mirror neurons do not easily generalize to folk psychology as a whole.²⁴ Nothing that I have said so far implies that the fully developed explanatory practice of folk psychology is not committed to the same standards of objectivity as the physical sciences, even if its perceptual basis has to be regarded as being dif-

23 It seems to me that Wittgenstein expresses a very similar sentiment in the following aphorism: "But can't I imagine that the people around me are automata, lack consciousness, even though they behave in the same way as usual? – If I can imagine it now – alone in my room – I see people with fixed looks (as in trance) going about their business – the idea is perhaps a little uncanny. But just try to keep hold of this idea in the midst of your ordinary intercourse with others, in the street, say! Say to yourself for example: "The children over there are mere automata; all their liveliness is mere automatism." And you will either find these words becoming quite meaningless; or you will produce in yourself some kind of uncanny feeling, or something of the sort." (Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* § 420)

24 In this respect I would disagree with Iacoboni, who gives the impression in his 2008 that mirror neurons are the only mechanisms for human intersubjectivity and our understanding of other minds.

ferent than the perceptual basis of the physical sciences. Furthermore nothing I have suggested so far seems to indicate that Genius Jones lacking our system of mirror neurons could not learn to use most of our folk psychological system for the explanation of human agency, particularly insofar as explanations in terms of beliefs and desires are concerned.²⁵ Given his knowledge of human neurobiology he might even be able to explain how our perceptual basis of the application of some of our folk psychological concepts differs from his own. The argument so far has thus only limited value because the attribution of mental states like beliefs and more complex emotions like guilt do not seem to activate our mirror neuron systems. Yet even those more complex forms of mental state attributions work, or so I am prepared to argue, only as long as the attribution to other agents “resonates” with the understanding of our own agency from the first person perspective. The argument for this claim, however, does not depend on knowledge of neurobiological mechanisms underlying our capacity for “reading” other minds. It depends on the fundamental fact that in our folk psychological practices we conceive of beliefs and desires not merely as inner mental causes but as an agent’s reasons for acting. Attributions of mental states to an agent are regarded to describe the parameters within which an agent conceives of his relation to the world and in light of which he deliberates about his actions. In this sense, the notion of rational agency is at the center of our fully developed folk psychological practice. Rational agents do not necessarily act for good reasons, or reasons that are above reproach, but they act in light of beliefs and desires that they regard as reasons for doing what they doing; that is, they act because something can be said for their action from their perspective.

Understanding beliefs and desires as reasons for which a person acts does require more than mere knowledge of general principles of how beliefs and desires in general interact in order to produce a certain kind of behavior. It is exactly in this respect that our folk psychological practices differ from the physical sciences. This feature of folk psychological explanations is best illustrated by belief-desire explanations that somehow fail to have their normal explanatory potential. Take for example the case of a rather unusual behavior of a professor talking about the irreducibility of mental disposition: He suddenly takes out a gun and shoots the person who has just entered the room. Pointing out that he just had a desire to kill the next person coming into the room and that he believes that this could be accomplished by shooting him, does not sufficiently explain why he did what he did. In contrast, pointing to the belief that there is a beer in the fridge and to the desire to drink a beer

25 I would however argue that Genius Jones would not be able to fully use folk psychological concepts for self reports, at least not in a manner that satisfies what is commonly called the univocality constraint; that is, mental terms in first person reports and third person reports have the same meaning. For an argument in this respect see my 2006, chap.4.

normally provides an explanation for that person's behavior of going to the fridge. Significantly, the difference in the explanatory potential between these two accounts cannot be explicated in terms of general principles that according to the theory theory position are at the foundation of all of our explanatory practices: Both explanations seem to make use of the same principle; that is, that if somebody desires *x* and believes that *A*-ing is a means of achieving *x* then, *ceteris paribus*, he will do *A*.²⁶ Rather, the difference between those cases has to do with the fact that only in the second case can we fully understand why such beliefs and desires could be somebody's reasons for acting in this particular manner. They could be his reasons because I can easily understand how they could be my reasons for getting a beer from the fridge. But we are puzzled in the first case because we are unable to understand analogously the cited beliefs and desires as reasons for acting and are therefore inclined to doubt the explanatory value of the offered account.

The difficulty has to do with the fact that we do not know anything about the agent's other beliefs and desires. Thoughts can be understood as reasons for acting only in the context of other relevant thoughts. Normally we presuppose (rightly or wrongly) that other people share our beliefs and so on. In understanding the belief that a class with a certain professor provides an easy *A* as a reason for a person to take the class we presuppose that the person has similar beliefs about the adopted grading system (that an *A* is the highest grade); that it is very important to get good grades, that it is more important for example than having to work hard and so on. For that very reason, we also understand easily how a belief about beer can be part of a reason to get the beer (we would however have difficulty understanding that behavior if we know that somebody thinks that the use of alcohol is a mortal sin). In the first case, however, given our moral values and our knowledge about the legal repercussions of such action, we think that the agent had overwhelming reasons for acting very differently. This does not mean that we never will be able to understand how those beliefs and desires could be a person's reasons for his rather unusual behavior. Maybe if we are told that the person grew up in a very different culture, that this killing was an honor killing, that he knows which person would enter the lecture hall and so on, then we might be able to understand how somebody might act in this manner for those reasons.

26 To clarify my position briefly: I do object to the theory theory position as an account of the underlying psychological mechanisms of our folk psychological practices. I do not think that theory theorists have succeeded in showing that theoretical inferences utilizing knowledge of folk psychological principles are centrally involved on the causal level. Yet I accept that implicit reference to generalizations is central for the epistemic justification of explanations. Nevertheless, I argue that such use of generalizations do not make reenactive empathy superfluous even in the epistemic context of justification. See my 2006, chap.5 and my 2008b.

It is worth emphasizing that we are able to do so only because, provided the information about relevant differences between us and the subject, we are able to put ourselves in his shoes and consider the situation from his perspective. His beliefs and desires are thus grasped as his reasons because given those beliefs and desires (and given his other thoughts about the world) I would have also acted in this manner in this situation. I thus can understand his beliefs and desires and so on as his reasons because I can reenact those beliefs and desires through my imaginative capacities as mental states that could be my reasons for acting; that is through the use of what I call reenactive empathy. Most importantly, such reenactment of another person's thoughts as his reasons in my own mind, or what I also call the use of reenactive empathy, is absolutely essential for understanding thoughts as reasons. As I have pointed out, understanding thoughts as reasons requires us to conceive of them as holistically "fitting" in with an agent's other beliefs and desires in the relevant manner in a specific context. In particular, it requires figuring out which of his many other thoughts are relevant for consideration in a specific situation in order for a specific belief-desire pair to be a reason for acting. Obviously, in trying to account for beer-getting-behavior all alcohol related thoughts would be *prima facie* relevant to consider; less relevant seem to be thoughts about drugs and their medical efficacy. Yet one could imagine that even those thoughts are relevant in a different context where one's doctor has described beer as a medical cure for an ailment. What is more, as the so called frame problem in cognitive science has demonstrated, no general theory of relevance does seem to exist that allows us to decide which thoughts are relevant to consider in specific contexts.²⁷ Our only option for practically solving this problem is by imaginatively putting ourselves in a particular situation, by engaging those thoughts in our own mind and by using them as a basis for our own deliberative encounter with the world.

One last caveat, I claim only that reenactive empathy is essential for understanding how certain thoughts could function as reasons for a certain action. I do not maintain that empathy is on its own capable of deciding among a variety of plausible interpretive hypotheses, which account for an agent's behavior in terms of very different reasons. Empathy on its own is not able to decisively say whether the agent acted for those or other thoughts as his reasons. Such decisions have to be made in light of further evidence regarding which belief attribution and so on is more plausible given the social context and the personal biography of the agents. Yet empathy is always involved in establishing interpretive hypotheses as hypotheses that have to be

27 Within the context of the contemporary theory of mind debate, it was particularly Jane Heal who argued for simulation theory in this manner. It constitutes what I call the argument from the contextuality of thoughts as reasons. I also argue for empathy using the argument from the essential indexicality of thoughts as reasons. See Stueber 2006, 152 ff.

taken seriously because only in this manner can we understand an agent's thoughts as potential reasons for acting.²⁸

To summarize this section, I take the above considerations to have established the following points: Within the context of folk psychology, explanations in terms of beliefs and desires play a central role, even though not the only role.²⁹ Explanations in terms of beliefs and desires can develop their full explanatory potential only if they can be understood as reasons for acting. Understanding reasons for acting requires the use of our empathic capacities to reenact thoughts in our own mind and imaginatively take another person's point of view. Given the epistemic centrality of empathy, particularly reenactive empathy, for folk psychology, our practice of attributing mental dispositions to other agents is very different from the attribution of other properties within the physical sciences. In contrast to the physical sciences, the full explanatory value of the attribution of mental dispositions can be grasped only in the context of our empathic capacities; or our disposition to engage with, resonate with, and imitate the mental life of other agents. For that very reason, I am tempted to speak of the doubly dispositional character of the attribution of mental properties to other agents. It attributes a tendency towards action to the other person in light of a uniquely human disposition of empathy. More pointedly, I am tempted to speak of beliefs and desire as empathic dispositions.

3. Folk Psychology and Physicalism: Some Suggestions for Thinking about the Autonomy of Folk Psychology

Yet, what does the above argument about the centrality of empathy in folk psychology mean for the physicalist challenge toward higher order mental dispositions? I have already indicated in the last section – focusing on the folk psychological concepts that are tied to mechanisms of basic empathy – that it should lead us to be very careful in understanding the relationship between the ontological and epistemic components of physicalism. One should not expect that one can fully account for the application conditions of folk psychological concepts from the perspective of the detached perspective of the physical sciences, even if one accepts physicalism as an ontological thesis. In addition, the recognition of the centrality of reenactive empathy for folk psychology has implications for conceiving of folk psychology as an autonomous explanatory practice and for alleviating the eliminativist challenge. Given the

²⁸ See Stueber 2008b in this regard.

²⁹ If one feels the need for an empirical justification of this claim see Malle 2004. For an emphasis on other explanatory strategies besides belief/desire explanations see Andrews 2008.

fact that our physical theorizing is adopted from a detached perspective and does not engage our empathic capacities, there is no reason to assume that the explanatory game played in the physical sciences is in competition with our folk psychological practices or that it is able to fully absorb our folk psychological practice.³⁰ Given its epistemic uniqueness it is thus to be expected that folk psychology will survive the advance of knowledge in the physical sciences since the knowledge game of the physical sciences is defined by very different rules. Since, as I said before, the existence of properties depends on their being appealed to in our final explanatory practices, one is tempted to conclude that dispositional mental properties exist, even if higher order dispositional properties such as fragility do not.

Nevertheless, contemporary philosophers of mind might not be easily persuaded that the above suggestions have any bearing on the ontological significance of our folk psychological practices. They might be tempted to conclude that my argument at most proves that we are likely to continue to engage in folk psychological talk for the purpose of bonding with each other, not that it has any independent causal explanatory value in comparison with the explanations of the physical sciences. In particular, they are probably tempted to make that point by emphasizing some similarities between my strategy of countering physicalism and Davidson's suggestion that "mental and physical predicates are not made for each other."³¹ Like Davidson I also emphasize the centrality of rational agency in our folk psychological practices, even though in contrast to Davidson I argue for this essential difference by pointing to the central involvement of empathy in our understanding of rational agency, rather than by emphasizing its normative character. Davidson in my opinion does not sufficiently recognize the first personal or egocentric character of our interpretive practices and conceives of interpretation too much as a form of theory construction from the third person perspective.³² Despite those differences, one could however argue that my suggestion about the explanatory autonomy of folk psychology shares the same philosophical problems associated with Davidson's position of anomalous monism. It is the general consensus in the philosophical community that Davidson is unable to save mental causation from the physicalist challenge because he is unable to explain how an event causes another event qua mental event. It seems that

30 Furthermore, if one assumes that no law-like correlation between intentional states like belief and desires and properties that play an explanatory role in the physical sciences is to be found, given content externalism; it can also not be assumed that our folk psychological practice can be adopted merely in terminology sanctioned by the physical sciences.

31 Davidson 1980, 218.

32 Moreover, Davidson conceives of rationality as a notion that is defined by the principles of our best theories of rational inferences such as logic and probability theory. Any violation from those norms regardless of the reasons or causes of such violation would then count as a form of irrationality. For a different and contextualist understanding of rationality see Stueber 2006, chap.2.

within the Davidsonian framework all the causal work is being done on the physical level.³³ Given these worries, the physicalist challenge to the ontological status of higher order mental properties does not seem to be met. One still could be convinced that folk psychology is not a genuine causal explanatory practice, even if, for whatever pragmatic, aesthetic, or ethical/social reasons, we continue to talk about each other within its conceptual framework. From a causal-explanatory point of view, folk psychology thus would share the fate of theories like the humor theory of disease, which was eliminated by the advance of the medical sciences.

Yet the physicalist challenge presupposes that folk psychological explanations explain the same type of events as physical explanations and it presupposes that they explain it causally in the same manner as physical explanations. Only under this assumption does it make sense to presuppose that various explanatory practices are in competition with each other and that one can compare their explanatory value. At a minimum, however the considerations in the second section of this paper imply that at least one of these assumptions is false. Folk psychology is a very different explanatory practice, or so one could argue, than the explanatory practices in the physical sciences because they are epistemically very differently structured. What counts as an explanation within this framework depends on our empathic capacities. It is for reasons like these that one might be tempted to follow Kim and Dray who suggest that folk psychological practices make use of notions of rational necessity and rational causation rather than notions of natural causation and “natural necessity” as the physical sciences.³⁴ They do not causally explain behavior in the same sense of causation as the physical sciences. Rather, they show it to be caused in the sense of it being rationally compelling behavior, given an agent’s reasons for acting. Moreover, Kim suggests that folk psychological explanation explain “intentions and decisions” rather than physical actions.³⁵ For this very reason, folk psychology is not an explanatory practice that is in epistemic competition with the explanatory practices of the physical sciences in the same manner that we do not conceive of the New England Patriots to be in competition with the New York Yankees or Manchester United. To regard *x* to be in competition with *y*, requires minimally that *x* and *y* are playing according to same rules. Consequently, we should not regard our folk psychological practices to be reductively explicable by the physical sciences.

33 In this respect see the various articles (particularly the one by Kim) in Heil and Mele 1993. For my take on Davidson’s anomalous monism see the first sections of my 2005 and 1997.

34 Dray 1957 and Kim 1984 and 1998b.

35 Kim 1984, 319.

Even though I have sympathies for the claim that our folk psychological practices are causal explanatory in a different sense of causation than the physical sciences, I am not in favor of bifurcating our notion of causation for the following reasons:

- i.) Rational agents are embodied agents who interact in and with the physical world because of their decisions and actions.
- ii.) The notion causation is in my opinion closely tied to our ability to intervene with the world.³⁶ Mental states like beliefs and desires are parameters that we know how to manipulate in order to change the behavior of various agents. Our educational institutions depend on such knowledge. In the same manner, knowledge of the physical sciences provides us with causal knowledge; that is, knowledge that allows us to intervene in the world by manipulating some of its parameters.
- iii.) An agent's ability to make sense of his behavior in terms of reasons is an ability that seems to be central to his normal functioning as a human being. The inability to give at least some account of what we are doing and why we are doing it (why I am for example sitting in front of the computer writing those lines) would have to count as a severe case of mental deficiency.³⁷

Given (i.) – (iii.) we do not seem to be justified in suggesting that folk psychological practices are using a notion of causation that is radically different from the notion appealed to in the physical sciences. I thus do not interpret the fact that our folk psychological practice differs epistemically from the physical sciences as suggesting that we use a different notion of causation in both explanatory practices. Rather I interpret it as suggesting that only folk psychology allows us to access some causally relevant properties of natural organism that are structured like us; properties that are however not accessible and definable from the detached perspective of the physical sciences. This view is in my opinion even more plausible if one recognizes – as I have also argued for in more detail elsewhere³⁸ – that folk psychological practices are practices that have a slightly different explanandum than the physical movements of agents as described by the physical sciences. They describe the interaction of physical organisms in wider historical and social environments, which can only be described in terms of categories that radically criss-cross the categories of the physical sciences and that makes essential use of our folk psychological notions. Indeed the conceptual repertoire of folk psychology allows us to situate an agent within his wider environment and allows us to

36 See also Woodward 2003 in this respect.

37 See Stueber 2006, 45-46.

38 Stueber 2005.

understand his actions as rational responses to the demands of the environment as he conceives of it and that he finds himself in. As the argument in this article has revealed, the explanatory domain of folk psychology is, for this reason, circumscribed by our epistemic capacity of empathy. It is an explanatory domain that contains an irreducibly ego-centric moment; in which each investigator has to treat the object of investigation as a creature like himself; as a creature whose feelings, emotions, and reasons resonate in him. Rather than excluding this moment of subjectivity from our investigation of the world as is the case in the detached conception of the physical sciences, we should embrace it and philosophically recognize it as an essential element for the investigation of the world, or at least some aspects of it. In this sense one should follow an old advice of Aristotle and choose the ideal of objectivity according to its appropriateness for the specific domain of investigation. Otherwise one falls into the trap of a new idol, the ideal of false objectivity and the claim that the detached perspective of objectivity is adequate for all pursuits of knowledge in all domains of inquiry. Granted all of the above, the fact that the central categories of our folk psychological practices refer to what I have termed empathic dispositions, also allows us to philosophically safeguard those higher order dispositions from ontological extinction.

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