

# The expressive function of folk psychology

## A função expressiva da psicologia popular

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### ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to present a challenge to the received view in folk psychology. According to this challenge, the semantic assumption behind the received view, which considers that propositional attitude ascriptions are descriptions of the internal causally efficacious states underlying behavior, cannot account for the main function of reasons in terms of mental states.

**Keywords:** folk psychology, propositional attitudes ascriptions, reasons, expressivism, descriptivism.

### RESUMO

O objetivo deste artigo é apresentar um desafio à visão recebida na psicologia popular. De acordo com este desafio, a suposição semântica por trás da visão recebida, que considera que as proposições de atitude proposicional são descrições dos comportamentos subjacentes internos causalmente eficazes, não podem explicar a função principal de razões em termos de estados mentais.

**Palavras-chave:** psicologia popular, adscrição de atitudes proposicionais, razões, expressivismo, descritivismo.

## Introduction

Humans spend the majority of their time engaged in social situations carrying out cooperative projects and interacting with each other. This vast amount of interactions would not be possible without a particular kind of skill to deal with social situations. Traditionally, this social virtuosity is bound to the ability to understand agential actions through psychological concepts such as beliefs, desires, fears, hopes and numerous other mental terms (von Eckardt, 1994). This unique human capacity is known as mindreading, mentalizing, folk psychology, or theory of mind. *The received view* about social cognition, thus, claims that the ability of human beings to navigate the social world relies on their capacity to ascribe mental states (paradigmatically, propositional attitudes) for the purpose of understanding, explaining and predicting behavior. The primary goal

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of a mindreader is to reason about the role of these attitudes and states in bringing out a particular behavior (see Apperly, 2011, p. 4-5)<sup>2</sup>.

Questions concerning the emergence and functioning of folk psychology are some of the most central in the debates in cognitive sciences and philosophy of mind in recent decades. The basic focus of discussion on folk psychology has been the nature of the mechanism underlying the process of attribution of mental states to explain and predict behavior. In early debates, two polarizing views came to dominate the controversy. On the one hand, the theory-theory view defends the idea that mental state attributions are produced by a kind of theorization based on a systematic corpus of knowledge detailing the connections between perceptual inputs, internal states and behavioral outputs (Baron-Cohen, 1995; Gopnik and Meltzoff, 1997). On the other hand, simulation-theory contends that the process is carried out by different simulation mechanisms based on introspections or off-line sub-personal mechanisms (Goldman, 1989; Heal, 1996).<sup>3</sup>

In the last decade, a group of dissenters have spoken out against the received view (Andrews, 2012; Hutto, 2004; McGeer, 2007, 2015; Millikan, 2004; Strijbos and Bruin, 2012; Zawidzki, 2008, 2013). The main strategy of this *heterodox view* has been to undermine the centrality that the received view has assigned to mindreading; i.e., these scholars share their refusal of the idea that mindreading is the linchpin of social cognition. As Gallagher says: “[This new approach] rejects the supposition of universality in regard to mentalizing, either by theory or by simulation. Rather, mentalizing or mindreading are, at best, specialized abilities that are relatively rarely employed” (Gallagher, 2008, p. 165). Instead, propositional attitude ascriptions are taken to be a small part of a bigger set of regulative responses to failures of predictions. From this view, propositional attitude ascriptions appear in contexts where anticipatory capacities fail; when the target’s behavior violates the expectations of the attributer:

*we expect people to exhibit behavioral patterns similar to those they have shown in the past. Some people usually come to work on foot and on time, others drive or take the metro and often arrive late [...] We take these patterns into account, betting on their continuation when it is useful or necessary to do so. When we use belief-desire psychology, it is almost always for explanation after the fact, not for prediction. We may explain why John always has yogurt for breakfast by saying he must like it, but if he actually eats yogurt only for his health,*

*it won’t matter to our predictions (Millikan, 2004, p. 22).*

Rather than predictive or explanatory tools, propositional attitude ascriptions are tools for rationalizing or justifying behaviors, that is, showing that a course of action is normalized or accepted by certain norms that govern our social transactions. In other words, rather than an *epistemic function* to gain knowledge about internal states of subjects, propositional attitude ascriptions have a *social function* to exculpate or condemn courses of behavior.

The aim of this paper is to explore the possibility of a different strike against the standard view. Instead of questioning the centrality of mindreading, I shall question another basic assumption behind the received view: *folk psychological descriptivism*. According to folk psychological descriptivism (FP-descriptivism hereafter), propositional attitude ascriptions are descriptions of the psychological states underlying the behavior of the attributee. In order to make the case against this semantic assumption, I shall start from the heterodox idea that ascribing beliefs and desires are a type of justificatory tool that function as *reactive response* to puzzling behaviors. After that, I maintain that propositional attitude ascriptions possess an evaluative character; ascribing beliefs and desires is to ascribe different grades of responsibilities to a particular reason to exculpate or condemn the attributee’s behavior or speech acts. This evaluative function, I hold, is incompatible with the descriptive assumption behind the received view. Those arguments, I conclude, point to an alternative semantic approach to mental ascriptions: *Expressivism*. According to this view, propositional attitude verbs have an expressive meaning, that is, they function to regulate social agents’ actions by expressing different attitudes (responsibility, merit, conviction) to a particular content. Finally, I advance other possible virtues of expressivism for solving two classic problems in philosophy of mind.

## Folk psychological descriptivism

A visible idea in the different disputes concerning the nature of folk psychology is that the outputs of folk psychological capacities are descriptions of psychological states (Bartsch and Wellman, 1995, p. 4-5; Botterill, 1996, p. 115; Goldman, 2006, p. 100; Gopnik, 1996, p. 187; Gopnik and Meltzoff, 1997, p. 13-42; Leslie, 2000, p. 207-208; Leslie and Thaiss, 1992, p. 231; Perner, 1991, p. 38-40; Wellman 1990, p. 9-10). This idea is widely accepted in the debate concerning the nature and development of folk psychological mechanisms. All parts in the discussion seem to share this basic

<sup>2</sup> Certainly, the term ‘reasoning’ must be taken in a broad sense to include inferential or computational sub-personal processes that produce representational outputs (see Spaulding, 2015, p. 475-476, for a discussion). Thank you to an anonymous referee for calling my attention to this.

<sup>3</sup> In later developments, several authors tried to develop certain hybrid versions considering some combination of the processes (Caruthers, 2006; Goldman, 2006; Nichols and Stich, 2003).

model of what it is to ascribe a propositional attitude (see Apperly, 2011). According to this model, ascribing a propositional attitude is to describe or convey a psychological state. Paradigmatically, a relation (attitude) connecting an agent (I, you, she, he) with a proposition (e.g., it is raining; Berlin is the capital of Germany; the building is on fire). The primary goal of a mindreader is to reason about the role of these attitudes in bringing out a particular behavior. For instance, if I attribute to someone the belief that the building is on fire, I can predict her next action will be to run away from the building. Thus, engaging in such reasoning requires the mindreader to describe these psychological states causing behavior. For instance, in Gopnik and Meltzoff's (1997) discussions concerning the parallelisms between scientific practices and children's development of theory of mind, we can find several references to the practice of theorizing as one of finding descriptions or pictures of the phenomenon:

*Once, as children, we have engaged in the theorizing necessary to specify the features of our world, most of us most of the time may simply go on to the central evolutionary business of feeding and reproducing. But, we suggest, these powerful theorizing abilities continue to allow all of us some of the time and some of us, namely professional scientists, much of the time to continue to discover more and more about the world around us (Gopnik and Meltzoff, 1997, p. 20).*

The primary function of our cognitive development, including folk psychological development, is that it gives us a better understanding of the world outside ourselves.

This conception of propositional attitude ascriptions is a type of descriptivism. Descriptivism is a general semantic conception according to which the function of declarative sentences is to state facts, and sub-sentential expressions (names and predicates) denote, refer to or stand for objects, properties and relations in the world. This semantic conception is behind what Austin (1962) called the "descriptive fallacy" (see also Ryle, 1949, p. 56, 115; Belnap, 1990, p. 1). This fallacy is captured by what nowadays Chrisman (2007, p. 227) calls "the dogma of descriptivism in philosophical semantics, whereby it's assumed that since semantic content of indicative sentences is standardly given in terms of their truth-conditions, the characteristic function of all indicative sentences is to describe worldly objects, properties, and relations". This semantic dogma, I believe, underlies the propositional attitude ascription models behind the received view in folk psychology.

When the descriptivist dogma is applied to folk psychology, we have a conception of mental state ascriptions as descriptions or (meta)-representations of psychological states. For our purpose, they are descriptions that depict the real psychological states of the subject of attribution. So, we can

define *folk psychological descriptivism* as follows: Propositional attitude ascriptions describe or stand for particular psychological entities (beliefs, desires, hopes) causally connected to behaviors and perceptions. Paradigmatically, propositional attitude ascriptions describe an attitude-relation (denoted by the psychological verb) which connects an agent (denoted by the name of the attributee or pronouns) to a content (denoted by the that-clause).

A possible objection to this characterization is that descriptivism is a semantic conception of natural language expressions, while the outputs of mindreading mechanisms are mental (meta-representational) states. However, FP-descriptivism applies to different semantic bearers. In fact, it is not unusual to find expressions such as "state-descriptions" (Botterill, 1996) or "descriptions of psychological states" (Leslie, 2000) as referring to the outputs of mindreading mechanisms. In any case, the importance of characterizing descriptivism is to provide an approximation to a particular understanding of the function that ascriptions and mental concepts play in our social interactions. In this sense, the interest of the definition is to distinguish functionally descriptive-states or sentences from action-guiding states or sentences which do not carry information about the world, i.e., states or sentences which provide evaluations by giving action-guiding information (Charlow, 2014, 2015; Lewis, 1979) that specifies particular behavioral patterns.

In light of this, the argument I offer in this paper will make the case for the idea that propositional attitudes ascriptions possess an action-guiding component. That is, mental states ascriptions are not descriptions of private psychological states, but evaluations concerning certain responsibilities and commitments toward a particular content.

## Folk Psychology: Mindreading or social cover?

This section will argue that the main function of propositional attitude ascriptions, justification, is incompatible with FP-descriptivism. An important premise of this argument considers that the primary propositional function is justificatory. This implies aligning myself with the heterodox view I characterized in the "Introduction". In order to make my case, I shall present some of the motivations behind the idea that propositional attitude ascriptions are not as pervasive as is supposed by the received view; i.e., they are usually restricted to contexts of justification and elucidation of counter-normative behavior. After that, I claim that this function of ascriptions is evaluative, and thus incompatible with descriptivism.

### Prediction without mentalizing

The primary argumentative strategy against the received view consists in undermining the centrality of prop-



ositional attitude ascriptions in both prediction and explanation. Concerning prediction, the received view has to deal with *the tractability problem* (Zawidzki, 2008, 2013), i.e., the impossibility of propositional attitude ascriptions to produce reliable predictions. In principle, a particular course of action is compatible with possessing many different mental states. This implies that our mind has to deal with a high degree of indeterminacy to predict a given behavior:

*Human interactions are too complex to succumb to folk psychological prediction because human decision-making is usually strategic: to predict what other agents will do on the basis of accurate mental state ascriptions, agents would have to take into account what other agents think that they will do, what other agents think that they think others will do, etc. Such an intractable spiral of higher orders of intentionality would inevitably swamp interpreters seeking to predict behavior on the basis of mental state ascriptions. Humans also usually pursue outcomes that are defined in terms of the motives and other mental states of their fellows. This makes preferences inherently unstable. Because the process of making and enacting a decision may reveal or even change others' mental states, preferred outcomes change as one pursues them (Zawidzki, 2008, p. 145).*

Giving this grade of under-determinacy, attributing a set of mental states to anticipate a course of behavior is an intractable enterprise. A pair belief/desire is consistent with many different situations and actions. Thus, anticipations regarding beliefs and desires would produce systematic failures of prediction. This problem is more pressing if one considers the holism of the mental. Even if we can attribute a more or less accurate attribution of desires and beliefs to an agent, there is a high probability that the agent has other mental states (preferences, emotions, etc.) that inhibit the action we anticipate. Thus, we have reasons to discard belief and desire ascriptions as the reliable anticipatory capacity supposed by the received view.

Secondly, the research in social psychology does not speak in favor of the received view. As Andrews (2012) argues, empirical psychology demonstrates that rather than relying on propositional attribution, our predictive capacities seem to be driven by what agents ought to do according to norms concerning situations, stereotypes and social rules. For instance, we categorize people according to social roles or gender and exploit the information regarding this categorization in order to produce expectations (Greenwald *et al.*, 2009; Olivola and Todorov, 2010; Clement and Krueger, 2002). Female infants are expected to be more vulnerable in some situations than male infants, and we tend to associate different roles with each gender (Golombok and Fivush, 1994). Then, we

exploit what Kalish and Lawson (2008) have called “deontic relations”: information about what a person should do or be like depending on this category. Stereotypes are one of those normative structures that police our interactions. It deserves mention that those social categories are not based on inductively inferred knowledge. We do not treat males and females differently because of differences in behavior; we treat them as we do because we assume they should behave according to gender category. Other sources for anticipation rely on social norms: civic standards, etiquette rules, traffic norms, cultural norms, and so on. These norms facilitate our interactions by enabling people to anticipate what others will do on the basis of what they should do according to them. Maibom explains this point as follows:

*Consider how people behave in restaurants. What the person who waits on guests does, he does qua waiter; his desire to take somebody's order is a function of him seeing himself as a waiter and is quite independent of his personal desires and preferences generally. When, perusing the menu, the other person sees him approaching, she infers that he is coming to take her order, but to do so she need only understand that this is what waiters do with customers and that he is a waiter and she is a customer. What he, personally, desires is irrelevant to the customer's prediction of what he will do and what she ought to do and vice versa (Maibom, 2007, p. 568).*

Cultural norms regulate our social interactions, so we expect people to behave according to them. This information can be exploited to produce predictions about others' behavior without postulating any mental entity.

Finally, humans anticipate others' behavior through the circumstances in which the action is performed (Heider, 1958). Some of the norms regulating our behavior attend to general standards of rationality. By assuming agents are rational, we anticipate their actions depending on how they should behave in accordance with the circumstances. Traditionally, this capacity has been understood in terms of beliefs and desires (Dennett, 1987). However, as Zawidzki claims:

*Such interpretative competence does not require speculating about concrete, unobservable causes of behavior or appreciating that these causes are full-blown propositional attitudes, that is, states with content represented via individually variable modes of presentation and holistically constrained influence on behavior. It requires only a sensitivity to certain abstract properties of bouts of behavior, namely, that they aim at specific goals and constitute the most rational means to those goals given environmental constraints (Zawidzki, 2013, p. 15).*

We can generate expectations about others' actions without taking into consideration the inner states of our targets. Of course, these empirical results do not present a problem for the received view, but they do impose important restrictions on its explanatory scope.

Summing up, we have reasons to think that belief and desire ascriptions do not play the important role in prediction the received view has supposed. Rather than describing mental states for the sake of prediction, humans seem to anticipate others' actions by assuming they will follow certain rational and social norms. In other words, we exploit social heuristics concerning normative standards about how social creatures ought to behave.

### *Explanation as a form of justification*

Now, the question is whether or not propositional attitude ascriptions play a pervasive role in explanation. Note that according to FP-descriptivism, failures of anticipation must be taken as failures in the process of interpretation, that is, failures in the postulates of ascriptions or the information of the context. Given that, one may expect the attributers to react by revising the process, for instance, replacing the mental state postulated previously by a more accurate one. When people behave in such a way as to contravene our expectations, we must have failed somehow in our descriptions of the states or inferential processes. The metaphor of the scientist is especially illuminating in this case. As a scientist who fails to anticipate the results of an experiment, a folk psychologist can fail in her ascriptions, in considering the variables involved (contextual information) or in the inferential process.

The problem with this picture is that humans do not always react to failures of anticipation in this way. Our reactive responses do not just include explanations; we respond to failures of anticipation by deploying other restorative strategies: sanctioning the behavior, asking for reasons, or excusing the target's behavior. This point has been strongly emphasized by several authors (Andrews, 2015; McGeer, 2007, 2015; Zawidzki, 2013). For instance, McGeer says:

*In my view, what is most noteworthy in these cases is the fact that folk psychologists have, as part of their overall competence, myriad techniques for identifying, excusing, blaming, accepting responsibility, apologizing and otherwise restoring confidence in the efficacy of the normative structures that govern the behavior of individuals who ought to be explicable and predictable using the techniques of folk psychology, even though sometimes they are not, in other words, folk psychologists treat lapses of rationality, not just as "surd spots" in an explanatory/predictive theory, but as reasons to take some kind of remedial or restorative action (2007, p. 142).*

Rather than exhibiting failures of the interpreter to describe the accurate inner causes of the behavior, our profiles of responses show that we take those failures as anomalies in the interpreters' capacity to deal with the social situation. At least in some cases, it is the target who is failing to do what she ought to. Explaining the behavior is not the unique response we exercise when our expectation fails. A terrible reminder of those regulative practices is the type of responses that society deploys to make others conform to gender or ethnic norms (micro-inequities). For instance, as the Chilean rapper Ana Tijoux comments in an interview for feminist magazine *Pikara*: "It never ceases to amaze me that they still ask me who takes care of my children when I go on tour. This is a question they do not make to men who are fathers" (Bouza, 2015). Stereotypes generate certain expectations as normalized behaviors, ways of thinking and feeling and, in general, a set of oughts to which the person must conform due to being categorized in a particular way.

Of course, providing explanations is an important part of those restorative responses, but they are bound to the elucidation of counter-normative behavior as well. As Andrews puts it:

*Given an understanding of norms in a society, and the ability to recognize and sanction violations, there developed a need to understand actions that violated the norms. Explanations for norm-violating behavior that didn't cite a person's reasons either led to excluding the individual (e.g., "He fled because he is crazy, so let's stop sharing meat with him"), or they failed to satisfy those who demand an explanation. This need to have a satisfactory reason for the behavior of one's companions is what drives the need to develop another sort of explanation, namely reason explanations. There is a significant benefit to being able to explain behavior that violates norms, because explanations of the right sort can also serve to justify behavior (Andrews, 2009, p. 445).*

In contexts where social understanding is governed by norms, it makes sense to have the possibility of justifying behavior and making it understandable in order to avoid public sanctions. Reason explanations are also a possible reactive response when our behavior is perceived as anomalous or when we are encouraged to exculpate ourselves.

When someone questions our actions or speech acts, when someone asks us for our reasons to act or notices our incongruences, we provide different reasons to exculpate our actions. On other occasions, we attempt to exculpate others for something they did, or we try to find a reason to condemn their behavior because we consider it immoral or inappropriate. In general, providing reasons is a tool for social cover when facing the possibility that our actions could be open to sanction. Propositional attitude ascriptions are reasons used

as reactive responses<sup>4</sup> as well. For instance, one may need to appeal to propositional attitudes when someone questions our actions: “Why are you not dressed yet?” “I thought it was earlier” or “Why did you get up so early?” “I want to go running before going to my class”. Other situations that demand the use of propositional attitude ascriptions are those contexts in which someone notices our errors and we need to excuse the mistake: “I came late because I thought the film started at six”; “He believed that he could do a better job”. In other situations, we want to indicate our degree or lack of support concerning an assertion to anticipate possible negative reactions: “Propaganda of the deed, I believe, is a fair political action”; “Socialism, Chávez believed, is the best solution for Latin-America”. Other times, we want to do the opposite, for instance, reacting to a possible disagreement with a challenging tone (“I believe in evolution”). In any case, all these examples share the basic function of reacting to possible indications of violations of social norms, that is, the possibility that a certain course of action is contravening a norm.

In fact, in a recent empirical study, Korman and Malle (2016) have shown that people offer many more reasons in terms of mental states when they face puzzling actions in contrast to ordinary actions. In these experiments, a group of participants were presented with situations where behaviors were “puzzling with respect to social perceivers’ prior knowledge and expectancies about behavior in general” (Korman and Malle, 2016, p. 3), in contrast to another group which was presented with ordinary behaviors. Although both groups provided a similar number of explanations, the group presented with puzzling behavior tended to provide more reason explanations (in contrast to trait or causal explanations) and mental state explanations than the other. This seems to support the idea that reason explanations in general and mental state attribution in particular are reactive responses to anomalous behavior, those behaviors that contravene the normative standards governing social situations.

Another way to observe that propositional attitudes are reasons governed by normative structures that help us to normalize behavior is that they are not always acceptable in social circumstances. Reasons are not always permissible given social standards (Tanney, 2013). Suppose a firefighter is ready to run into a burning building, but she flies out of the building. Now, imagine we ask the firefighter why she fled. She answers that she wanted something to eat, and so left the building. Consider how awkward we would find this answer. As Tanney notes:

*we would reject this as an explanation on the grounds that it does not make sense. Suppose she says that it makes perfect sense to her why she would drop everything – even put lives at risk – because she wanted*

*something to eat. We just do not understand what it is like for her when she wants something. Indeed, she is right: we do not understand (Tanney, 2013, p. 143-144).*

The reason why such an explanation would not make sense to us is because according to our standards, saving people from fire is more valuable than eating. Propositional attitude ascriptions are governed by standards of normalization.

In order to justify or condemn a pattern of behavior, we need to consider the subject responsible for his actions. In this sense, those uses of ascriptions have an evaluative function. In those contexts, when we ascribe a propositional attitude we are burdening the subject with the responsibility or credit derived from undertaking the content. Those uses of propositional attitude ascriptions can only play the role of justifying or condemning a particular behavior insofar as they have the function of assessing the subject as someone committed to what is followed from the content. FP-descriptivism presupposes that mental verbs describe the psychological states of the attributees. However, considering attributions as descriptions of psychological states does not capture the action-guiding component of the reason. Notice that this does not mean that our ascriptions do not have descriptive uses. However, my point of contention is that ascriptions of propositional attitude in a folk psychological situation, like those mentioned above, are paradigmatically used with evaluative purposes. In those circumstances, using a reason that includes a propositional attitude involves a specification of how to evaluate the agent. In particular, her position toward the reason and specification about the behavioral responses of the agent. For instance, when someone says “the firefighter came into the building because he thought there was someone inside”, we are making the firefighter responsible for the content (there was someone inside) in order to justify the action. As I claimed in the section “Folk psychological descriptivism”, the type of action-guiding information specified by the ascriptions seems to differ from the type of information provided by descriptive-states or expressions. In general, the function of these propositional attitudes is required in cases where we need to explore responsibilities, degrees of approval, convictions and, in general, when we adopt an evaluative stance towards the behavior of our interpretee. This evaluative stance does not seem to be captured by FP-descriptivism.

## Reasons, facts and evaluation

Before I present the expressivist alternative, let me consider a possible objection to the argument I have presented thus far. Consider that someone accepts that propositional attitude ascriptions involve evaluations, but argues that there are other types of reason explanations with the same evalua-

<sup>4</sup> Other paradigmatic uses of normative concepts as reactive responses are truth attributions (see Ramsey, 1991 [1927], p. 12; Frápolli 2013, p. 79) or ascriptions of irrationality (Hayward, 2017).



tive component, which do not involve propositional attitudes. Thus, what distinguishes propositional attitude ascriptions is not their evaluative character but their reference to inner psychological states of the subject.

An important part of our explanations does not require us to make reference to propositional attitudes. These reasons are factive (Strijbos and de Bruin, 2012, 2013), that is, they are reasons of the type “S performs the action because of P” where P states facts and values enabling or entitling the behavior. For instance, we say that Mary ran away because the building was on fire, or that Anthony went out to have a real espresso. Although these reasons do not appeal to mental states, they introduce the evaluative component specified before; we evaluate a person by introducing a fact that plays a role in the justification of the behavior. Those facts entitle or support the action on the basis of certain standards (Bruner, 1990; Hutto, 2004; Strijbos and de Bruin, 2012). Elucidating and normalizing behaviors implies attending to non-obvious events and circumstances that make the behavior normal. Reasons fill in the missing details or help to appreciate the circumstances surrounding the action in order to explain it. These explanations involve pointing out and tracking the relevant events that normalize the target’s behavior, without explicit reference to her inner states.

Having said that, one may buy into the idea that both factive and mental reasons introduce the same evaluative component; but exploiting the disanalogy between factive reasons and reasons in terms of propositional attitude in order to argue that the difference lies in the descriptions of psychological facts of the propositional attitude ascriptions. In other words, while the evaluative function is shared by all types of reasons, the distinction between factive and mental reasons resides in the description of the inner psychological reality of the subject.

What this objection does not take into account is that providing a folk psychological explanation is to evaluate a person as acknowledging the situation and what is behaviorally connected with it. In a sense, we are giving a special status to this person; we are considering what she must do as a social creature with certain duties and commitments. But this does not require that we appeal to her mental profile or describe her internal states. Human anticipatory and explanatory capacities do not require describing propositional attitudes or psychological states of the target. This normalizing strategy does not require describing mental states, rather than evaluating the subject as someone responsible for the action and who acknowledges the normative connection between the situation and the action she performed.

What is special about ascribing propositional attitudes, in contrast to factive reasons, is the degree of specificity concerning the evaluation. Consider the following examples:

- (1) *Why did he refuse dessert? He’s been gaining weight.*
- (1’) *Why did he refuse dessert? He thinks that he has been gaining weight.*

(2) *Why is she taking the car to work? Because she is late.*

(2’) *Why is she taking the car to work? Because she believes that she is late.*

(3) *Why did Ben call Anne? They would get back together.*

(3’) *Why did Ben call Anne? He hoped they would get back together.*

(4) *Why did she go to the coffee shop? To have an espresso.*

(4’) *Why did she go to the coffee shop? She wanted to have an espresso.*

When contrasting (1–4) with (1’–4’), the difference between the explanations seems to lie in how specific they are about the commitments undertaken by the evaluation. For instance, by uttering (1), the attributer assesses the target as being responsible for gaining weight, which counts as a reason to support the behavior. On the contrary, by uttering (1’), the attributer is being more specific; he is indicating that it is only the attributee who is responsible for those commitments. This allows the attributer to remain neutral with respect to the acceptance of the fact that the target is gaining weight. This is the reason why it would be weird to say “He’s been gaining weight but I am not sure”. But it would make sense to say “He thinks he is gaining weight but I am not sure”. Factive reasons are a default form of knowledge attribution (Gordon, 2000; Strijbos and de Bruin, 2013); they presuppose that the subject shares the same knowledge of facts about the world the attributee is considering. A similar claim may be supported concerning the other examples. Propositional attitude verbs – such as “guess”, “suppose”, “know”, “want” – manifest the attributer’s evaluation concerning the attributee’s position regarding the content. That is, different degrees of approval, disapproval, conviction or other attitudes towards the reason accounting for the behavior of the agent. The reason why we introduce mental verbs instead of using factive reasons is to be more specific concerning the commitments. But the point is that what makes reasons in terms of propositional attitudes distinctive is not that they describe the inner psychological reality of the subject, but the specifications concerning the evaluation.

In a nutshell, reason explanations are regularly used as tools to justify or condemn particular patterns of behavior when they contravene a norm or deviate from a normal pattern. They can fulfill this function in social situations because they are evaluations, that is, they indicate some merit, credit or responsibility of the subject toward a content. Propositional attitude verbs function as tools to allow greater specification about the evaluation. They introduce information about how the subject must guide her behavior according to the evaluation. This action-guiding information is substantially different from the descriptive information about the world that descriptive expressions introduce. Thus, FP-descriptivism cannot account for what we do in our social circumstances by deploying propositional attitude ascriptions.

## The expressivist solution

Now, we are well positioned to understand the semantic challenge that the received view must face. If propositional attitude notions are evaluative concepts we use (paradigmatically) in justificatory contexts, our ascriptions cannot be mere descriptions of internal psychological states. The problem is not only that the received view has wrongly considered our folk psychological practice to be an epistemic enterprise, but also that it has confused the nature of the concepts we exercise in our social practices. Our mental vocabulary does not describe psychological entities; on the contrary, it provides guides or injunctions about how to evaluate an agent, specifying her level of responsibility, conviction or merit toward the reason. This evaluative function is manifested in the practical aspect of the ascriptions. Assessing someone implies that we expect a particular behavioral profile given the position of merit or responsibility the assessor attributes to her. That is why evaluative vocabulary has a unique connection with action. As Strandberg claims in relation to moral vocabulary, it “enables us to regulate one another’s behaviour... [it] is generally utilized to get us to act, or to get us to refrain from acting, in certain ways so as to adjust our various actions in relation to one another” (2012, p. 89). Similarly, propositional attitude verbs have the capacity of adjusting and regulating our actions as derivate from its evaluative function.

The considerations of the previous paragraphs speak in favor of an *expressivist view*<sup>5</sup> about propositional attitude ascriptions. We can characterize expressivism as defending two claims<sup>6</sup>: (1) propositional attitude verbs do not describe or denote any entity, relation or property; (2) propositional attitude verbs express or voice attributee’s position regarding responsibility, convictions or merit toward a particular content. In the arena of social situations, this is translated into expressing the attributee’s commitment to acting according to (or defending) a particular reason that otherwise normalizes the pattern of behavior of the target. Rather than a scientist, folk psychologists are as lawyers who advocate on behalf of their client to avoid public sanction, or as a prosecutor who attempts to find a way to condemn her (Zawidzki, forthcoming). Paradigmatically, ascribing beliefs and desires is practiced in the contexts of excusing, justifying or condemning counter-normative behaviors, solving disputes or voicing others. In those contexts, it makes sense to have the capacity of indicating to our interlocutor which responsibilities or merits we must attribute in order to exculpate or condemn those behaviors.

Expressivism seems to be useful in order to account for the semantic challenge expressed above. If propositional attitude ascriptions are types of reasons to normalize and justify

actions, there must be a distinctive feature of mentalizing that distinguishes it from factive reasons. This feature, I have attempted to argue, is an evaluative function. We use belief and desire ascriptions to attribute responsibilities and merits to others in order to condemn or justify their behavior. However, this is incompatible with a descriptive semantic. Evaluating implies that one expresses an accepting attitude toward a set of norms, not only to denote world entities. Thus, the expressivist alternative is a more plausible account for the evaluative aspect. Furthermore, insofar as the received view relies on the idea that we are describing the causally efficacious events underlying agents’ action, expressivism aligns with the alternatives to the received view that undermine the role of mental ascriptions in explanation.

## Concluding remarks: Future research

Human abilities in tackling social situations are diverse. We exploit different heuristics to explain, predict and make sense to each other. The received view has failed to appreciate this diversity and it has assumed that our ascriptions of mental states are the linchpin of social cognition. However, if the heterodox view is right, our ascriptions only emerge in the context of justification and rationalization of counter-normative patterns of action. This observation not only presents an important restriction to the use of mindreading; it also reflects a deeper problem for the received view: the incompatibility of its semantic assumption with the primary function of propositional attitude ascriptions. In this sense, expressivism concerning ascriptions presents a better understanding of their evaluative character. Nonetheless, I would like to place expressivism on a safer footing by sketching some of its virtues beyond the scope of this essay. In particular, I want to highlight how expressivism concerning folk psychology could be cashed out to approach two classic problems in philosophy of mind: the ontological load of folk psychology and under-determinacy of ascriptions.

In the philosophical areas in which expressivism is a renowned contender, its main credential is the capacity of explaining the role of certain vocabularies without undertaking strong ontological commitments. Ethical expressivism, for instance, is usually presented as a semantic solution to the controversy concerning the existence of *sui generis* moral facts (Chrisman, 2007). In this sense, I would like to provide a superficial view of how expressivism about folk psychology could put forward a similar move in the debate concerning the ontological commitment of our ascriptions.

<sup>5</sup> Expressivist views have been successfully defended in several philosophical fields. For instance, meta-ethics (Gibbard, 2003) or meta-epistemology (Chrisman, 2007; Field, 2009). However, the expressivist views about folk psychology are not very common in the literature (see Boghossian, 1990, for an exception).

<sup>6</sup> For a minimal characterization of expressivism and an insightful analysis of those two claims, see Frapolli and Villanueva (2012).



During the eighties, Churchland (1981) presented several important arguments to favor *Eliminative Materialism*, according to which our common-sense understanding of the mind is deeply mistaken. From this view, our mental vocabulary refers to theoretical entities postulated to understand each other, but neurosciences and neuropsychology prove them to be wrong. Thus, we should substitute our folk psychological vocabulary for the vocabulary of neuroscience. Eliminative materialism contrasts with two views. On the one hand, intentional realism (Fodor, 1987) holds that our folk psychological vocabulary refers to real functional states implemented in the brain. From this perspective, our folk psychological concepts reflect more or less accurate descriptions of the mental states and processes underlying our behavior. On the other hand, one may consider that our common-sense conception of the mind is a useful instrument for prediction and explanation without assuming ontological commitments about the nature of the states to which our mental concepts refer (Dennett, 1987).

Now, expressivism may put forward the strategy of undermining the descriptivist assumption behind the three positions. Note that the expressivist view supposes to save some intuitions behind the controversy without being committed to any particular ontological position. Considering propositional attitude ascriptions as non-descriptive avoids undertaking any particular position (realist, mild-realist or fictionalist) with regard to the ontology of our ascriptions. Thus, expressivism seems to dissolve the problem of the ontology without loss of explanatory power. In other words, dropping the descriptivist assumption behind eliminativism, realism and fictionalism, allows us to dissolve the ontological debate and maintain the importance and autonomy of our folk psychological vocabulary.

Furthermore, expressivism is well situated to account for what is sometimes called the problem of under-determination of folk psychological ascriptions (Dennett, 1978, 1987; Hutto, 2013). On several occasions, our folk psychological ascriptions “fail to yield clear, stable verdicts about which beliefs and desires to attribute to a person” (Dennett, 1987, p. 29). This under-determinacy is particularly apparent in contexts where two interpreters disagree about a particular ascription. For example, Dennett invites us to consider the case of Sam, an art critic who has promoted the paintings of his son. In principle, there are two possible interpretations of the situation: “(a) Sam does not believe the paintings are any good, but out of loyalty and love he does this to help his son, or (b) Sam’s love for his son has blinded him to the faults of the paintings, and he actually believes they are good” (Dennett, 1978, p. 39). Frequently, those disagreements persist despite the evidence regarding the circumstances of the attribution being clear for all parts. In other words, there are not facts that determine the truth of the attribution (Dennett, 1978). Dennett considers this under-determinacy as an argument in

favor of his ontological position, according to which propositional attitude ascriptions refers to mild-real entities.<sup>7</sup>

In light of this, expressivism starts with the idea that attributions are evaluative in nature. Two attributers can disagree about whether or not an agent believes or desires something because they have different evaluative aims or different norms under which they evaluate the target. This would explain why a disagreement concerning two interpretations can persist even when the two participants in the debate recognize the same facts (Field, 2009). Even when both speakers are in agreement about the relevant facts and they recognize that from different standards different attributions follow, they can still disagree because they resist abandoning their supportive attitude to the norm (coherence/credibility). Thus, belief attributions have an action-guiding component supporting standards of attribution. The source of disagreement is not a worldly aspect we describe; rather, it is an evaluative attitude component that the speaker indicates with the attribution. Of course, an expressivist treatment of these two problems requires further elaboration. However, this is sufficient to prompt us to consider the potential of expressivism as serious contender to the semantic of our propositional attitude ascriptions and its consequences for philosophy of mind.

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<sup>7</sup> Dennett’s mild-realism is quite controversial. As a clarification, he compares the ontological status of mental states with that of centers of gravity or opportunities (Dennett, 1991).

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