Traditionally folk psychology is understood as our ability to predict and explain the behavior of other people by attributing intentional states (beliefs, desires, etc.) to them. Debates about the status of folk psychology have been going on for decades. On the one end of the spectrum we find Paul Churchland who argues that folk psychology is inadequate as an empirical theory and ought to be rejected. He suspects that a completed neuroscience of the future will have no room for the current folk-psychological entities (Churchland, 1981). Defending some kind of middle ground is Daniel Dennet. He holds that we can describe the behavior of creatures using some kind intentional folk psychology but remains skeptical about the possibility to map the events of folk psychology in a straightforward way onto the events of sub-personal level cognitive neuroscience (Dennet, 1987). Finally, on the other end of the spectrum we find Jerry Fodor who has tried to explain the success of folk psychology through a "realist" view of mental representations (Fodor, 1981, 1992) and Alvin Goldman who considers folk psychology as a part of scientific psychology (Goldman, 1993). Further, there are the familiar debates about the status of folk psychology as either a theory (Morton, 1980) or as a simulation (Gordon, 1986) or as a hybrid of both (Stich & Nichols, 1992).

Anyone who expected that Folk Psychology Re-Assessed would attempt to re-evaluate these debates is in for a surprise. Hutto and Radcliffe point out that "all chapters in this volume are devoted to challenging the mainstream view of folk psychology in some way" (p.5). This challenge is based on the conviction that the attribution to propositional attitudes to others and the third person prediction and explanation of behavior provide a too narrow (and possibly misleading) framework for explaining all aspects of social understanding. What is missing is an account of the "interactional and embodied engagement with other people... [and a consideration]... that folk psychology operates mostly in second-personal and not in third personal contexts" (p.4). The volume is comprised of three thematic parts: Part I (Emotion, Perception, and Interaction), Part II (Reasons, Norms, Narratives and Institutions) and Part III (The Fragmentation of Folk Psychology). The authors of the first part attempt to show that an adequate account of all facets of folk psychology can be given when phenomenology (we perceive another’s experience in his expression) replaces abstract theorizing (we attribute mental states to ourselves and to others). Further, the focus should move from the interpretive abilities of socially isolated individuals to the patterns of affective relatedness between people. It is pointed out that third person accounts of others can result in treating that person as an object whereas the second person perspective
Overall Folk Psychology Re-Assessed contributes some interesting angles to the mainstream folk-psychology debate. Whether or not these contributions are novel is at least questionable. As pointed out by some of the authors, phenomenology has a rich tradition going back at least to Brentano (1874), Husserl (1913), Heidegger (1927), Merleau-Ponty (1945) and Sartre (1943). It is probably correct that a narrow analytical account of folk psychology is insufficient. But a charitable interpretation of Dennett's (1987) physical, design, and intentional stance can account for much more than simplistic belief-desire psychology and has applications for non-human intentionality. Further, the request to appreciate the situatedness of agents is not new. A rich feminist literature deals specifically with this topic. Besides, we need to keep in mind that while an account of the brain states of individuals alone might be 'too thin' to explain the full range of our social interaction such an account is still wanting. Finally, the charge that beliefs and desires are merely 'peg-words' for a range of different psychological states is effectively not answered. In addition folk psychology correctly understood will supply shared norms of conduct and thus contribute to interpersonal understanding and coordination. We should not attempt to interpret the contents of individual brains (as done in the third person perspective) but, instead, apply a form of 'sociophilosophy', which situates ourselves and others as participants of social interactions. The authors of the final part emphasize the heterogeneity of folk psychology. If we widen the scope from belief-desire psychology to include the full range of social interaction we might also be able to apply folk psychology to non-human species. Because folk psychology refers to a diverse bundle of abilities it is questionable that one unitary account of it can be found. And, essentially it might turn out that 'folk psychology' is an ambiguous philosophical position that obscures the nature and the scope of the phenomena it attempts to explain. The editors emphasize their conviction that belief and desire psychology is neither ubiquitous nor fundamental but needs to be supplemented by an understanding of various other abilities and social understanding. They stress that 'the many issues raised here suggest that recent debates concerning folk psychology, theory theory and simulation theory have been too restrictive in scope and that a more encompassing approach to the topic of interpersonal understanding, interaction and coordination is required' (p.19).

Bibliography


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