

Personhood and Rationality as an Attributional Property;
A Critique on David Lewis' Theory of Radical Interpretation
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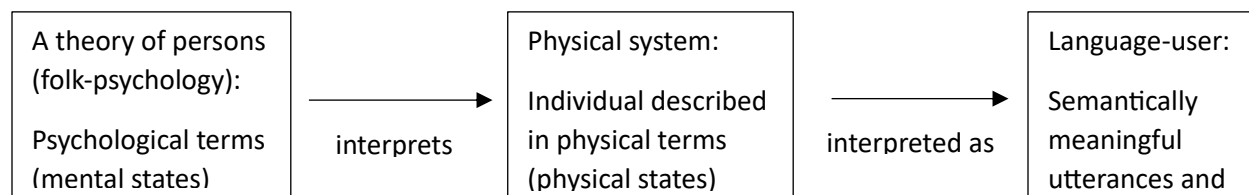
Karl: A line behind the bush!

What is it to take this utterance as meaningful?

What is it to take Karl as a language-user?

Radical interpretation

David Lewis: Attributing semantic contents to gestures and utterance is applying a theory of persons to the individual within certain constraints of theoretical principles, which is interpreting the physical system of the individual in terms of mental states with representational contents such as belief and desire.



Argument: To attribute personhood to a physical system is to treat the individual as a rational agent and that rationality is an attributional property, i.e., one is a rational agent in virtue of being treated as such by others.

Upshot: While the commitment to physicalism as an ontological thesis is undisputed, the conceptual level at which the attribution of personhood is practiced is irreducible to any physical condition.

Traditional Conception of Persons

- a subject of moral/legal rights and responsibilities
- rationality (ability to reason, follow rules *as rules*)—the intrinsic nature requisite for bearing moral/legal rights and responsibilities
 - In order to be responsible for one's actions, one must be able to make choices. The ability to reason is what enables one to make choices.

Two images of the world (Sellars)

The manifest image: the primary object is person.

Holistic

- Sensation (how things look): perceptual qualities, e.g., color pink
- Concepts (inferential): red, blue, green, normal conditions, natural light, etc.
 - In order to something to have a cognitive significance (it looks as such and so), it must be part of an inferential structure.

Normative

- Moral agency: responsible for following the rules of the standard conditions
- Epistemic agency: follows inferentially articulated rules in employing concepts

Wolf: To be responsible, one must be *sane*, i.e., must have the desire to recognize the patterns and features of the world and grasp appropriate ways of responding to them.

To be a moral agent, one must have the ability to exercise epistemic agency whose objective is to have one's perceptions and thoughts aligned with the world. Rationality is doing the right thing in respect to the standard conditions that are provided by the world (facts).

The scientific image (physicalism): the primary object is postulate.

Atomistic

- Imperceptible (why things look the way they do): postulated
- Parts (what things are made up of): particulars

*The scientific image cannot encompass the manifest image because atomism fails to accommodate normativity.

Lewisian Physicalism

The way Lewis sets up the problem of radical interpretation presupposes

- (a) Mental states are *prior to* linguistic practices;
- (b) The physical system is more *basic* than the psychological system.

I will take (a) for granted and explain how (b) is underwritten by the commitment to physicalism.

Explanatory

- Things (that exist in the actual world) are all essentially what physics says they are.
- The actual world consists only in things describable in physical terms.
- In the actual world, the fundamental relations/properties of objects coincide with the natural relations/properties describable in physical terms.

Reductive

- Psychophysical Identity Theory: a functionalist hypothesis that identifies mental states with some physical states in reference to their causal roles.
- e.g., the belief that it is raining outside and the neural state that causes one to bring umbrella
- What is describable in psychological terms is describable in physical terms.
- $(t_1 \rightarrow t_2) = ((o_1 \wedge \dots \wedge o_n) \rightarrow (o'_1 \wedge \dots \wedge o'_m))$

*The merits of physicalism

- (1) Physical systems are the most basic common denominator among different points of view. Mental states are private, but physical theories are testable by empirical methods.
- (2) Physicalism is ontologically parsimonious in explaining natural phenomena.

The puzzle: What is one doing in applying a theory of persons? If what one is doing is explaining or understanding a phenomenon in psychological terms, isn't he going backward by applying a less natural (or fundamental) framework to what has already been understood in more natural terms?

One is doing at most one of these three:

- (i) A theory of persons is not an explanation at all; what one is doing is something other than describing, understanding, or attributing properties to an individual;
- (ii) A theory of persons is applied to an individual described in pre-scientific terms; it is a middle step to devising a more natural theory such as neuroscience;
- (iii) A theory of persons provides a distinctive way of explaining or understanding an individual than a more natural(istic) way.

I reject (i) and (ii). Therefore, I think that (iii) is true.

Strong physicalism (type)—eliminates the manifest image (folk-psychology) altogether.

Weak physicalism (token)—cannot account for a theory of persons' distinctive way of explaining or understanding phenomena; e.g., clocktower vs. clocktower manager.

Rationality as an Attributional Property

Two approaches to conceptual analysis

- Metaphysical approach: necessary and sufficient conditions for being *X*
- Stance approach: what it is to take (or what is the point of taking) something to be *X*

What it is to take something to be a person is to treat the individual as a moral agent, as to whom it is appropriate to hold reactive (rather than objective) attitudes.

The application of the concept of personhood reflects this attitude held by others in treating an individual as a person. These attitudinal components are what constitute the upholding of the image of the world in which the primary object is person.

Example: basketball player vs. soccer player vs. non-participant

Brandom (inferentialism)

- (1) Beliefs/judgments (propositional attitudes) are doxastic/assertional commitments.
- (2) To have commitments is to have a deontic status.
- (3) Deontic statuses are conferred by others; e.g., a piece of metal as a coin.
- (4) What it is to be a person (to be attributed with rationality, the capacity to form accurate conceptions of the world) is to be given a deontic status by others.

Conclusion

The application of a theory of persons (the attribution of rationality)—the adoption of the manifest image—interprets the physical system by embodying a specific way of treating the individual. In its framework, the individual is taken to be capable of being committed to the correctness of some standard of evaluations. By explaining phenomena (ostensive patterns of behaviors) in this way, one explains *why* someone does what he does: the person is explained as to whom it is appropriate to ascribe agency, or first-person perspectives that are requisite for reasoning; one is in the position to *get things right* only if it is conceivable for him to *get things wrong*, which presupposes the possibility that things could *look* to him in a certain way while they are otherwise. This way of explanation enables the observer to interact with the others by asking for compensation or penalization for offenses. Compared to physics, folk-psychology is a *non-natural* explanation in the sense that it posits a being that is not part of the world.

Objection #1: Couldn't normativity be reduced to regularity?

Response: Regularity cannot accommodate normativity because how things ought to be is not the same as how things are.

Objection #2: What is the difference between thermometers/clocktowers and humans?

Response: Thermometers/clocktowers are proxies, subject to rules in virtue of their managers who treat them as being subject to norms (ought-to-be). Humans are not only treated as being subject to norms, but also as capable of having themselves subject to norms (ought-to-do).

Pragmatics of Attributing Personhood

- What is the relationship between the scientific and the manifest image?
- What is the ground for drawing an isomorphic mapping between the physical and the psychological system where there can be multiple ways of interpreting causation?

The relationship between the two images is rather dynamic in the sense that the attribution of rationality is itself a pragmatic matter. As such, the subject of personhood is not fixed, but fluid.

Bernard Williams

- The state of nature—each individual is limited in his access to information: uncertainty.
- It would be convenient if there are others who are in positions that have access to the information unavailable to the individual (positional advantage).
- Treating the information source as a person rather than a machine allows one to treat the system to be capable of self-correction rather than to be constantly managed, conditioned, or trained.

Eg., Deep Brain Stimulation, DBS (Timothy Brown)