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Clarifying the Point: A Brief Response to Sharrock and Coulter

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Abstract

This is a short response to a particular point made by our colleagues Wes Sharrock and Jeff Coulter (2004) in their otherwise convincing and devastating critique of the 'Theory of Mind' avatar of cognitivism. We think they have misunderstood what we once said about the use of 'mental predicates' and wish to clarify the point in question.

In a footnote to their recent paper in *Theory & Psychology*, 'ToM: A Critical Commentary', Wes Sharrock and Jeff Coulter begin a criticism of one of our papers (McHoul and Rapley, 2003) as follows:

McHoul and Rapley ... display only the narrowest of grasps on what Wittgenstein, for example, had to say about 'mental predicates': their central contention is that he denied that they were names standing for 'internal' referents. They then proceed to attack a doctrine they call 'Coulterism' (after one of us), which asserts that if such predicates are used *in certain non-referential ways*, then their users are 'misguided' (p. 519). (Sharrock and Coulter, 2004, p. 597; our emphasis)

On the first point: it is true that we confine ourselves to a particular aspect of Wittgenstein's complex position on mental predicates (and related psychological terms), namely that they do not work *referentially* – by which we mean that they do not map directly on to ghostly (i.e., empirically unavailable) internal mental states or processes. Yet, this *is* among the theses he does in fact hold; and it may even be the central and most radically distinct of his ideas about such matters. We also take it that this strong anti-cognitivist position on psychological terms (or something close thereunto) has been central to Coulter's own thinking since at least *Rethinking Cognitive Theory* (1983).

However, we do not characterise the position which we call 'Coulterism' (a well-meant shorthand for what ought properly to be called 'the strong Wittgensteinian position') as asserting that 'if such predicates are used *in certain non-referential ways*, then their users are "misguided"'. To ascribe this to *anyone* (let alone Coulter!) would be to characterise their position as a sheer logical contradiction. That is, if mental predicates (and the like) *cannot* be referential, then *non-referentiality* could not possibly be 'mistaken'. On the contrary, it would be the norm. A more careful inspection of our original paper will show that, by contrast, we characterise that position as asserting as follows: if a strong Wittgensteinian

holds, as he/she must, that mental predicates (and the like) *cannot* work referentially (in the above sense), then those persons, lay or professional, who *do* take them to be referential must be mistaken. This is a quite different proposition altogether and, we think, a reasonable summary of one of the consequences of radical anti-cognitivism.

It will be clear from our paper that we are very sympathetic to this position, but with a single caveat: when applied to *lay* (as opposed to social scientific) usage, it can at least imply an ironic treatment of such (lay) usage on the part of the professional analyst. One way out around this problem, called 'folk cognitivism' (Bilmes, 1992), is the main focus of our attack on the page of the paper that Sharrock and Coulter refer to. It is to 'folk cognitivism' (*not* to the strong Wittgensteinian thesis) that we bring James Taylor's mental Carolina and the rest, as the paper makes quite explicit.

On a final note, we do have an outright apology to make to Jeff concerning the paper in question. We had simply *forgotten* that he discussed the 'I just had a thought' data (originally from Sacks) in his *Rethinking Cognitive Theory* (1983, pp. 136-140). One of us happened, at the time we were working on the paper, to also be re-reading Sacks's *Aspects of the Sequential Organization of Conversation* (1970) for another project and came upon those materials which then seemed just right as an example of how the predicate 'having a thought' (in this case at least) was better accounted for non-referentially (again, in the above sense) and, instead, in terms of its accomplishment as (to use Sacks's term) an "'on topic" topic marker'. We should have remembered Jeff's analysis – albeit that it was published, as he reminds us, more than twenty years ago. However, our *description* of Sacks's analysis is, we still hold, quite accurate. If anything, our – again we emphasise – *description* of that analysis and pretty much everything else in the paper supports our own explicitly anti-cognitivist stance. To that extent, Sharrock and Coulter (p. 584) cannot possibly conclude that we believe that 'our language *is* mentalistic'.

References

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