BELIEF ATTRIBUTION IN SCIENCE: FOLK PSYCHOLOGY UNDER THEORETICAL STRESS*

ABSTRACT. Some eliminativists have predicted that a developed neuroscience will eradicate the principles and theoretical kinds (belief, desire, etc.) implicit in our ordinary practices of mental state attribution. Prevailing defenses of common-sense psychology infer its basic integrity from its familiarity and instrumental success in everyday social commerce. Such common-sense defenses charge that eliminativist arguments are self-defeating in their folk psychological appeal to the belief that eliminativism is true. I argue that eliminativism is untouched by this simple charge of inconsistency, and introduce a different dialectical strategy for arguing against the eliminativist. In keeping with the naturalistic trend in the sociology and philosophy of science, I show that neuroscientists routinely rely on folk psychological procedures of intentional state attribution in applying epistemically reliable standards of scientific evaluation. These scientific contexts place ordinary procedures of attribution under greater stress, producing evidence of folk psychological success that is less equivocal than the evidence in mundane settings. Therefore, the dependence of science on folk psychology, when combined with an independently plausible explanatory constraint on reduction and an independently motivated notion of theoretical stress, allows us to reconstitute the charge of (neurophilic) eliminativist inconsistency in a more sophisticated form.

1. INTRODUCTION

Why has common-sense psychology, perhaps alone among folk theories, survived the development of modern science? Some eliminativists have claimed that the common-sense theory which explains intelligent behavior by the ascription of the familiar propositional attitudes of belief and desire, though false, survives by default; its familiarity represents the peculiar grip a folk theory can have on common sense when no plausible competing theories are available. In time, it is said, our plebian understanding of intelligent behavior will be revealed by established and emerging natural sciences as a horribly mistaken explanatory scheme. I think this gloomy prognosis for common-sense psychology is not only premature, but disconfirmed by the available evidence. Modern science, our most impressive cooperative intellectual achievement, owes its development and continued success in part to the epistemically reliable role that intentional state attribution plays among scientists in the methodology of scientific theory testing. I shall argue that, when...
combined with a plausible explanatory constraint on reduction and an appropriate notion of theoretical stress, the powerful epistemic function of intentional state attribution among scientists strongly suggests that any reduction of folk psychology is likely to require only modest revision, rather than radical elimination, of the laws and kinds of folk psychology.

The confirmation of folk psychology by scientific methodology is best understood as an instance of the reliable practice of theory conjunction. This procedure is familiar. Scientists routinely conjoin two or more theories in the practice of theory testing. For example, immunological experiments invoke affiliated portions of membrane biology (and biochemistry) that describe the effects of various ‘transport antibiotics’ on the permeability of certain kinds of cell membranes. As a collateral theory, membrane biology is quite secure; it has been multiply applied, locally integrated, and jointly tested with theories whose epistemic reliability is even more certain than its own. Since the falsity of (part of) the collateral theory would ultimately result in, and thus be traceable from, the predictive and explanatory failures of immunological theory, membrane biology in this case is tested under conditions of theoretical stress.

Folk psychology, like membrane biology in the case above, is tacitly tested (by conjunction) in the predictive and explanatory contexts of developed scientific theories; in particular, the neuroscientific theory favored by eliminativists, such as Paul Churchland and Patricia Smith Churchland, to replace folk psychology depends, like other developed sciences, on folk psychological procedures of intentional state attribution under conditions of theoretical stress. Therefore, neurophilic eliminativists are, in a certain respect, in a position of theoretical inconsistency when they state both that folk psychology is a ‘radically false theory’ and that neuroscience is the candidate eliminating theory.

At the same time, this theoretical defense of realism about propositional attitude psychology has a considerable advantage over mere common-sense appeals to its familiarity and unique availability. Presumably some theories have survived because they are approximately true, and others just because they are so familiar. But when an extant theory which is familiar is also the only one available in that domain, we need some way of distinguishing its truth from its mere familiarity, if we are to adjudicate the dispute between the realist and the elimina-