

QUESTION-BEGGING PSYCHOLOGICAL EXPLANATIONS

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A widely acknowledged assumption made by many cognitive scientists is that whatever fundamental parts a psychology breaks its subjects into, "the smallest, or most fundamental or least sophisticated parts must not be supposed to perform tasks or follow procedures" that require attributing intentionally characterized abilities and activities to them.¹ What this means is that any adequate non-question-begging analysis of intentionally characterized abilities and activities must be one in which intentionally characterized abilities and activities are analyzed into something, none of whose parts have intentionally characterized abilities and activities attributed to them.² In what follows I will argue that there is nothing question-begging in a representationalist psychology that does not analyze intentionally characterized abilities and activities into something, none of whose parts have intentionally characterized abilities and activities attributed to them. I will conclude that the assumption that a non-question-begging psychology will be one that makes no (ultimate) appeal to unexplained intentionally characterized abilities and activities is false.

The first question to ask is why focus on representational psychology? Here I follow Daniel Dennett, Jerry Fodor and others in saying that the only psychology that could possibly succeed in explaining the complexities of intentionally characterized abilities and activities must posit internal representations.³ According to Dennett, this assumption "has been deemed obvious by just about everyone except the radical behaviorists. . . ."⁴ Nevertheless, an acceptance of this assumption seems to lead to a question-begging psychology. Briefly, the problem begins with the claim, attributed by Dennett to representationalism, that "nothing is intrinsically a representation of anything; something is a representation only for or to someone. . . ."⁵ Thus, if the representational character of representations must be made reference to in explaining intentionally characterized abilities and activities, another assumption Dennett attributes to representationalism, then it will be necessary to posit some internal interpreter of the representations—a

homunculus. However, because interpretation is an intentionally characterized activity, representationalism seems to face a dilemma. Either the intentionally characterized activity of homunculi will be explained by positing additional representations, or there is some explanation for the activity that does not require making reference to representations. In the first case, since something is a representation only for or to someone, additional interpreters—sub-homunculi—of the representations need to be posited. But these sub-homunculi are themselves interpreters of representations which require positing still more representations and their attendant homunculi ad indefinitum. In the second case, if intentionally characterized abilities and activities at some level can be explained without making use of representations, then the same sort of account could be extended to other levels making reference to representations at any level otiose. As Dennett says, in a non-question-begging psychological theory, "all the homunculi are ultimately discharged."⁶ Thus, representationalism is either question-begging because it never "discharges" intentionally characterized homunculi, or it is a theory having only instrumental value because representations are ultimately discharged.

If one accepts Dennett's claims about the assumptions that representationalism is committed to, then the way out of this dilemma is, I believe, to grasp its first horn. To this end it is useful to begin with Wittgenstein's claim in the *Philosophical Investigations* that ". . . there is a way of grasping [understanding] a rule which is not an interpretation, but which is exhibited in what we call 'obeying the rule' and 'going against it' in actual cases."⁷ This remark contrasts with his earlier view in *The Blue Book* that in any genuine instance of rule following, "the symbol of the rule forms part of the calculation."⁸ What Wittgenstein came to see was that this view leads to a vicious infinite regress. If to follow a rule requires applying a symbolic expression for it, then following a new rule will require an application of a symbolic expression of that new rule, and the question of whether the symbolic expression is being correctly followed will recur ad infinitum. Thus, Wittgenstein was led to the view that there is a way of grasping (understanding) a rule in which the action of following the rule does not require an interpretation of the rule.

In light of the above remarks, what the representationalist can say is that there is a way in which homunculi may have

intentionally characterized abilities and activities attributed to them that does not require positing simpler, more specialized homunculi with intentionally characterized abilities and activities. Just as there is a way of exhibiting the understanding of a rule in which the action of following the rule does not require an interpretation of the rule, so too a homunculus can exhibit its intentional character by responding to the stimuli that impinge on it and producing the appropriate behavioral response without that response having to be explained by positing representations. Thus, if one asks what it means to attribute an intentionally characterized ability or activity to a homunculus, two answers are possible. First, the homunculus may exhibit its intentional character by responding to the stimuli that impinge on it and producing the appropriate behavioral response without that response having to be explained by positing representations. Second, the homunculus may be decomposed into simpler, more specialized homunculi to whom intentionally characterized abilities and activities are attributed. In the first case, because no further homunculi are posited, the regress comes to an end. In the second case the regress continues and the representationalist is led to go on to account for the intentionally characterized abilities and activities of the posited simpler, more specialized homunculi. The regress threatened by the second case is avoided by the recognition that the decomposition ends with homunculi described by the first case.

While Wittgenstein's remarks may be suggestive, more needs to be said about what it means to say that homunculi may respond to the stimuli that impinge on them and produce the appropriate behavioral response without the response having to be explained by positing representations. Turning again to the *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein says that ". . . 'obeying a rule' is a practice. And to think one is obeying a rule is not to obey a rule."⁹ As G. P. Baker and P. M. S. Hacker note, if obeying a rule was not something done within the context of a practice, then "how we understand a rule would not be exhibited in action."¹⁰ Here the point is that because "[F]ollowing a rule is a human activity"¹¹ and human activities derive their character from the practices in which they are embedded,¹² then any application of the concept 'following a rule' must presuppose the context of a practice. If the background practice was removed, the rules embedded in the practice would lose their meaning.

Thus, whether or not the exhibition of the understanding of a rule involves interpretation, the exhibition of an understood rule is something that can only be done within the context of a practice.¹³

Returning to the case of homunculi to whom intentionally characterized abilities and activities have been attributed, suppose one grants that it is possible for such homunculi to exhibit intentionally characterized abilities and activities without it being necessary to posit representations that account for those abilities and activities. What Wittgenstein's remarks about rule following suggest is that any exhibition of intentionally characterized abilities and activities by homunculi can occur only within the context of a particular set of practices. Accordingly, the representationalist is led to ask two different questions:

(1) When does a sentient creature's pattern of behavior warrant attributing intentionally characterized abilities and activities to it?

(2) Given that a sentient creature's behavior warrants attributing intentionally characterized abilities and activities to it, why explain these abilities and activities by positing representations and their attendant intentionally characterized homunculi?

With respect to the first question, Wittgenstein's discussion of the conditions necessary for (proper) attributions of pain,¹⁴ and his remark that a dog cannot simulate pain because "the surroundings which are necessary for this behavior to be real simulation are missing"¹⁵ are suggestive. What they suggest is that the first question can be answered only by looking at the sentient creature's role within a particular social practice. In particular, just as it is only against the backdrop of some particular language-game that questions of rule following can be meaningfully asked in the first place, so too the question of when the behavior of a sentient creature warrants attributing intentionally characterized abilities and activities to it can be answered only relative to the practices of a particular community in which attributions of intentionally characterized abilities and activities are made. This means that no one can unilaterally understand what it means for an instance of behavior to warrant the attribution of intentionally characterized abilities and activities except by

reference to the authority of securable communal assent on the matter. Relative to the first question, it follows that the pattern of behavior exhibited by a sentient creature warrants attributing intentionally characterized abilities and activities to the creature only if the behavior of the creature is such that the community making attributions of intentionally characterized abilities and activities accepts the behavior of the creature to be of such a sort that the attribution of intentionally characterized abilities and activities is warranted.¹⁶ A sentient creature whose behaviors do not, in enough cases, accord in the relevant ways with those of the community will not be a creature to whom intentionally characterized abilities and activities will be attributed by the community.

Given that within the context of the ordinary practices of sentient creatures it is often proper to attribute to them intentionally characterized abilities and activities, why explain those abilities and activities by positing representations and their attendant intentionally characterized homunculi? This is what the second question asks. It is important to emphasize that the representationalist making use of the ideas of Wittgenstein does not attribute intentionally characterized abilities and activities to sentient creatures because he or she has somehow found homunculi to whom intentionally characterized abilities and activities are attributed. This is backwards. Instead, because the behavior of the sentient creature is such that, within the community of which the representationalist is a member, the behavior warrants attributing intentionally characterized abilities and activities, the representationalist explains those abilities and activities by positing representations and their attendant intentionally characterized homunculi.

What the foregoing discussion suggests is that the representationalist's answer to the second question is that the most plausible explanations of the intentionally characterized abilities and activities of sentient creatures that capture all the common sense psychological generalizations wanted are explanations that posit teams of homunculi to whom intentionally characterized abilities and activities are attributed. Following Dennett, the idea is that teams of such homunculi are posited in order to make as much sense as possible of the attributions of intentionally characterized abilities and activities warranted by the community making such attributions.¹⁷ In other words, what the representa-

tionalist is interested in are constitutive questions about intentionally characterized abilities and activities; viz. what sorts of representations and attendant homuncular sub-structures must be posited in order to warrant attributing to the sentient creature a set of intentionally characterized abilities and activities largely coherent and consistent by the standards of the representationalist's community. Notice that the positing of representations and their attendant homunculi is an empirical issue. If it turns out that non-representational explanations better allow us to make sense of the intentionally characterized abilities and activities attributed to sentient creatures, then representationalism will, in that instance, be abandoned.

At this point an obvious question arises. If homunculi are attributed intentionally characterized abilities and activities, and if attributions of intentionally characterized abilities and activities require participation in a community in which the attributions are made, does this mean that the representationalist must talk about a community of homunculi that sanction the attribution of intentionally characterized abilities and activities to homunculi? I hope that the answer to this is no, because the idea of a community of homunculi who make attributions of intentionally characterized abilities and activities is jejune. Instead, I believe that the representationalist can say that the community life of the sentient creature to whom intentionally characterized abilities and activities have been attributed provides the necessary social context for attributions of intentionally characterized abilities and activities to the posited homunculi.¹⁸ Recall that representations and their attendant homunculi are posited in order to make as much sense as possible of the personal level intentionally characterized abilities and activities attributed to sentient creatures by the community making such attributions. Thus, the representationalist starts out with personal level attributions of intentionally characterized abilities and activities, and then attributes to homunculi only those intentionally characterized abilities and activities necessary to make sense of the personal level intentionally characterized abilities and activities. In effect, the representationalist is saying that the intentionality of the intentionally characterized abilities and activities attributed to posited homunculi is derivative; it is derivative of personal level attributions of intentionally characterized abilities and activities that representations and their attendant homunculi are posited to explain. As a

result, it is not necessary for the representationalist to talk about a community of homunculi that sanction the attribution of intentionally characterized abilities and activities to homunculi. Instead, the intentionally characterized abilities and activities of homunculi are best construed as abilities and activities that may be identified and located in virtue of the corporate individual's role "in the social space of a historically functioning culture . . ."¹⁹

Let me now try to bring some of the strands of my account together. What I've suggested is that intentional characterizations are always relative to a community in which intentional attributions are made.²⁰ Attributions of intentionally characterized abilities and activities require a social context for them to make any sense at all. What personal level intentionally characterized abilities and activities are attributed will be constrained by the representationalist's goal: to make as much sense as possible, within the community-intentional realm, of the behavior of sentient creatures. Once personal level intentionally characterized abilities and activities have been attributed to the sentient creature, the representationalist next asks the question: Does it help in making as much sense as possible of the intentional behavior of the sentient creature to posit representations and their attendant intentionally characterized homunculi? If so, then the representationalist will posit these representations and their attendant homunculi. As was the case for personal level attributions of intentionally characterized abilities and activities, what intentionally characterized abilities and activities are attributed to the posited homunculi will be constrained by the representationalist's goal of making as much sense as possible, relative to her or his community, of the sentient creature's intentional behavior.

But now, what of the intentionally characterized abilities and activities of the posited homunculi? Here the representationalist must ask whether decomposing these homunculi into simpler, more specialized homunculi to whom intentionally characterized abilities and activities are attributed will help in making sense, within the intentional realm, of the sentient creature's intentional behavior? If the answer is yes, then the homunculi ought to be decomposed. If the answer is no, then the homunculi ought not be decomposed. In the latter case the intentionalist psychological justifications for positing still further representa-

tions and their attendant homunculi have been exhausted.²¹ The regress has reached the stage where, rather than continuing the decompositional analysis, the representationalist may say that this is simply how the sentient creature behaves (perhaps due to training, perhaps due to biology, perhaps due to both). The homunculi at this level may be said to exhibit their intentional characteristics in a manner that does not require positing representations. At each stage, the question of whether decomposition ought to occur is an empirical one.

Here two questions naturally suggest themselves. First, whether the decomposition stops at the first level, or some later level, isn't it the case that, because the posited homunculi have intentionally characterized abilities and activities, the decomposition must go on? Second, if the decomposition stops, doesn't the representational theory turn out to be a question-begging theory? The answer to the first question has already been given. Even though intentionally characterized abilities and activities are attributed to the posited homunculi, this does not require additional decomposition. This is the moral of recognizing that not all instances of understanding (grasping; following) a rule require interpretation.²² The decomposition stops when "an ungrounded way of acting"²³ has been reached. The idea is not that the homunculi cannot be further decomposed, but that nothing of interest is gained for the intentionalist psychologist in continuing the decomposition.²⁴ As Wittgenstein says, what has been reached is a "psychological, not a logical terminus"²⁵ where, rather than continuing the decompositional analysis, the representationalist can say that this is simply how the sentient creature behaves.

What then of the objection that representationalism is question begging? This objection depends upon the supposition that any non-question begging explanation of an intentionally characterized ability or activity must be one that explains the intentional in terms of the non-intentional. However, this supposition conflates at least three different kinds of explanation²⁶

- (a) Explanations of high-level intentionally characterized abilities and activities in terms of lower-level, intentionally characterized abilities and activities.
- (b) Explanations of intentionally characterized abilities

and activities in terms of non-intentionally characterized abilities and activities.

- (c) Explanations of high-level non-intentionally characterized abilities and activities in terms of lower-level, non-intentionally characterized abilities and activities.

It's true that if one recognizes only explanations of the form (b) or (c), then explanations of form (a) are question begging. Put differently, if one assumes that the only way that intentionally characterized abilities and activities could be genuinely explanatory is in virtue of the absorbability of intentional psychology into some non-intentional science, then representational explanations of the sort I have proposed are not genuinely explanatory. However, this is where to draw a second moral from the writings of Wittgenstein. The goal of intentional psychology is to make as much sense as possible of intentionally characterized abilities and activities, not to offer explanations of non-intentionally characterized abilities and activities. Because the representationalist is offering explanations within the intentional realm, explanations of form (a) are not question begging. To suppose otherwise is tantamount to saying that explanations of form (c) are question begging because they explain high-level non-intentionally characterized abilities and activities in terms of low-level non-intentionally characterized abilities and activities. But this seems to be the wrong conclusion to draw. Rather, we should say that as long as the explanations are explanations of non-intentionally characterized abilities and activities, then explanations of form (c) are perfectly appropriate, and *mutatis mutandis*, that explanations of form (a) are also perfectly appropriate. Thus, in recognizing that the language games of intentional psychology and of non-intentional sciences are different, we may say that the claim that explanations of form (a) are question begging ought to be resisted.

So, finally, what can be said about psychological explanations? A couple things, I believe. First, the sort of explanations that my version of representationalism makes use of need not be causal explanations. This does not mean that actions have no causes, nor does it mean that we do not make reference to intentionally characterized abilities and activities in the explanation of actions. However, just because reference is made to intentionally characterized abilities and activities in the explana-

tion of actions, it does not follow that intentionally characterized abilities and activities explain those actions because they are the causes of them. Psychological explanations explain by allowing the inquirer to make as much sense as possible, relative to the conceptual framework of the inquirer, of the intentionally characterized abilities and activities of the subject studied. Does this mean that psychological explanations will never be causal explanations? The answer to this question is, I believe, unknown. Because psychological explanations depend upon a specification of the interests of community making the explanations, then it is possible that some psychological explanations will be causal. Which psychological explanations may turn out to be causal will depend upon an empirically discovered answer to the question: Are there psychological predicates that pick out natural kinds? If there are such predicates, then at least some part of common-sense psychology can be absorbed into a non-intentional science and the psychological explanations belonging to this part of intentional psychology will be causal. In contrast, if there are no such predicates²⁷, then no part of intentional psychology can be absorbed into a non-intentional science and no psychological explanations will be causal. In either case, what is important is that intentional psychology and non-intentional science are not in competition with each other. By recognizing the context dependence of psychological explanations, we are permitted to recognize the value of non-question-begging psychological explanations that are not causal explanations, and are neither eliminable in favor of nor reducible to non-intentional explanations.

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NOTES

- ¹Dennett, 1981, p. 83.
- ²Dennett, 1981, p. 89.
- ³Dennett, 1981, p. 119.
- ⁴Dennett, 1981, p. 119.
- ⁵Dennett, 1981, p. 122.
- ⁶Dennett, 1981, p. 124; my emphasis.
- ⁷Wittgenstein, 1979: § 201.
- ⁸Wittgenstein, 1969a, p. 13.
- ⁹Wittgenstein, 1979: § 202.
- ¹⁰Baker and Hacker, p. 124.
- ¹¹Wittgenstein, 1978: VI, § 29.
- ¹²Wittgenstein, 1972, p. 2.
- ¹³Wittgenstein, 1969b: § 229.
- ¹⁴Wittgenstein, 1979: §§ 281ff.
- ¹⁵Wittgenstein, 1979: § 259.
- ¹⁶Wittgenstein, 1969b: §§ 140, 281, 610. Also see Wittgenstein, 1970: § 534.
- ¹⁷Dennett, 1989, p. 91.
- ¹⁸Wittgenstein, 1979, II, p. 178.
- ¹⁹Margolis, 1991, p. 254.

²⁰Wittgenstein, 1979: §§ 482, 483.

²¹Wittgenstein, 1979: § 217.

²²Wittgenstein, 1979: § 201.

²³Wittgenstein, 1972: § 110.

²⁴Wittgenstein, 1970: § 234.

²⁵Wittgenstein, 1970: § 231. Also see Budd, 1989, pp. 43ff.

²⁶Rorty, p. 163, seems to conflate explanations of type (a) and (b).

²⁷As suggested by Wittgenstein, 1970: §§ 608ff. Also see Wittgenstein, 1979, p. 180e.