

A penny is your thoughts? Reflections on a Wittgensteinian proposal

Abstract:

Although in fundamental agreement with Carpendale & Lewis' position, we discuss a potential source of confusion regarding the socially constituted nature of mental states. Drawing from recent work by Kusch (1997, 1999), we argue, more specifically, that mental states are instances of "artificial kinds," and so, stand between the more common classificatory extremes of "the natural" and "the social."

Most of us, we suspect, labor under the impression that our thoughts are private and that even if "Big Brother" scrutinizes other aspects of our lives, at least our *mental* lives are safe from prying eyes. To be told otherwise—that is, to hear on good authority that our minds are not the private sanctuaries we have always imagined them to be—would be unsettling. Although this was not our own first reaction to Carpendale & Lewis' (C&L's) broad proposal regarding the socially constructed nature of the mind, we argue here that perhaps it should have been. In their treatment of the debate concerning the relative contribution of social versus individual processes in development, C&L effectively 'out' the often closeted "individualistic" assumptions underlying much of the present day smart-talk about children's understanding of mind and, in the bargain, usher in a set of perhaps even more radical claims. That is, Orwellian threats notwithstanding, we suggest something even more insidious is afoot in C&L's proposal, not the least of which is that our mental lives may never be quite so "private" again.

Perhaps one of the more controversial claims that C&L make in this regard turns on the so-called "contents" of the mind (mental states such as beliefs and intentions) and their relation to human action. In rejecting the "causal psychological view of the mind" that posits mental states as hidden causal "entities" driving behavior, C&L effectively claim that our language about mental states has fooled us all and that, in fact, "there are no such contents." All of this seems quite hard to swallow. Nevertheless, C&L's position is not without support. Although borrowing ostensibly from Wittgenstein to develop their alternative view, C&L might just as easily have taken a page

from Dewey (see, for e.g., his 1912 essay, "What are states of mind?"), who similarly argued that "psychical" states are the result of "retrospectively" re-framing our broader activities and experiences—what he calls "organic reactions"—and, as such, "are neither antecedents nor concomitants, in a separate realm of existence...but are the very qualities of these reactions" (Dewey, 1979/1912, p. 36). The upshot of this view, as expressed in more current philosophical circles, is that "our psychological classifications are constitutive of our mental states and events" (Kusch, 1997, p. 18; see also Taylor, 1985), or phrased more polemically, that our private thoughts are in fact "social institutions" (see Kusch, 1999, pp. 321-368).

Much of what is polemical here, however, follows from a somewhat different classification issue. The culprit in this case is the traditional bimodal scheme of classifying things as *either* natural *or* social kinds. As the logic in this scheme would have it, if natural kinds refer to *real* things in the world, then by default social kinds must refer to made-up things, or worse, to nothing at all. Mental states, in this either-or classificatory system, must either be seen then to somehow cut the mind-brain at its natural joints or amount to mere "mythical posits." C&L, as well as many others who might otherwise agree with their assessment, are likely to be dissatisfied with these two options. Thankfully, there are other, more rewarding, ways to divide the spoils.

In addition to—or more precisely, in between—such natural and social kinds are what some philosophers have come to call "human" (Hacking, 1992) or "artificial" (Kusch, 1997, 1999) kinds. To be clear, insofar as each kind involves a self-referential component, they

are all in some sense socially constructed. Still, the degree of self-referentiality differs in important ways for each. At one end of this continuum, there are social kinds that are entirely created, sustained, and enforced by our collective actions without making any kind of reference beyond such activity. That is, they admit no “alter-reference” that, as Kusch (1997) explains, “refers away from itself toward individuals in the physical world, individuals that exist independently of the reference” (p. 17). The other anchor point—natural kinds like mountains and rivers—possess these independent characteristics, though even here some collective agreement is necessary in order to establish the criteria by which we meaningfully sort them. Finally, and falling in between these extremes, there are artificial or human kinds that possess such an alter-reference, much like natural kinds, but that are also similar to their social counterparts in that they do not exist apart from human classifying and meaning-making activities—in fact, human activities are what bring them into physical existence in the first place.

Importantly, then, artificial kinds are no less real than any other humanly constructed or manufactured object. More central to our purposes here, however, is not so much what they are, but what they sometimes become. That is, artificial or human kinds are sometimes prone to a reification process by which the constructive, or socially constituted, element is overlooked or even forgotten. Kusch (1997) claims that this is the case, for instance, with money: “‘to be money’ is easily thought of as being an intrinsic, non-social property of certain metal discs” (p. 3). Although it would hardly seem to require a philosopher to demonstrate this is a mistake, a related error is often made when it comes to understanding mental states. Like money, mental states are an instance of an artificial or human kind, and not coincidentally, are “easily thought of as being intrinsic, non-social properties of certain entities called selves or minds” (Kusch, 1997, p. 3).

Viewing mental states as human or artificial kinds (rather than natural or social), and acknowledging this tendency toward reification, clearly fits with the Wittgensteinian proposal on offer by C&L and, we argue, helps to further bridge what C&L call “the impasse between individual and social perspectives on social

understanding.” It does so, we claim (and here is our main point), without at the same time drawing us toward the enculturation view that C&L rightly warn us against, and without whittling away at the contribution of individual agency in the construction of mental life.

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