



Folk Psychological Models and the Metaphysics of Belief. A Reply to Curry

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Received: 16 March 2022 / Revised: 17 August 2022 / Accepted: 21 August 2022 /
Published online: 16 September 2022
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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to show that Curry's recent defence of the interpretivist approach to beliefs is unsuccessful. Curry tries to argue that his version of interpretivism, which is based on the model-theoretic approach to folk-psychological attributions, is well-suited to resisting the epistemological argument that is directed at interpretivism. In this paper, I argue that even if Curry's defence is successful in this case, his theory does not have enough resources to solve the metaphysical problems of interpretivism. In particular, I argue that the model-theoretic version of interpretivism that Curry espouses does not explain the claim that beliefs are constituted by the process of attribution, which is central to the interpretivist project. In the final parts of the paper, I discuss the issue of the relation between interpretivism and other forms of the broadly superficial/deflationary approach to beliefs, especially dispositionalism. I contend that if one wants to adopt a superficial/deflationary approach, it is best not to adopt interpretivism as it is an unnecessarily complex and problematic version of this broad view.

Keywords propositional attitudes · folk psychology · interpretivism · deflationism · dispositionalism · mind-dependence

1 Introduction

The viability of the interpretivist proposal regarding the reality of beliefs and other propositional attitudes has raged for several decades and show no signs of abating. In my own recent critical piece (Poslajko 2020), I focused on a specific version of

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interpretivism which is based on the deflationary approach to existence; I argued that it does not provide an adequate account of epistemology and of the metaphysics of beliefs.

My criticism of interpretivism was, in turn, criticized by Curry (2021a), who claims that I disregarded an important version of interpretivism, namely the one that rests on the model-theoretic approach to folk psychology. His criticism of my position is part of his broader project of creating a viable form of interpretivism that is based on the model-theoretic approach to folk psychological attributions (see Curry 2020, 2021b). Curry claims that adopting this approach allows interpretivists to avoid problems that other versions of interpretivism were not able to solve, especially those concerning the epistemological status of belief attributions.

The aim of this paper is to show that Curry's defence of interpretivism fails because his version of this theory cannot deal with the metaphysical issue. I am going to argue that his theory cannot provide an adequate explanation of the relation of constitution which is supposed to obtain between interpretation and beliefs, and, consequently, that it cannot be said to fare better than other middle-ground approaches to the reality of beliefs.

The paper proceeds as follows. First, I briefly recap the basic tenets of interpretivism and my criticism of it. Second, I present how Curry tries to deal with the problems. Next, I try to show why his proposal does not adequately deal with the metaphysical concern, and I argue that the model-theoretic approach to folk-psychological attributions does not settle the crucial metaphysical questions. Then, I turn to the relativistic claims that Curry makes in order to see whether they can help us with the metaphysical concern. Finally, I offer some reflections on the status of the interpretivist proposal in the debates on the reality of beliefs.

2 Interpretivism and its problems

Interpretivism about beliefs and other propositional attitudes – presented by Dennett (1989, 1991) and Davidson (1970, 2001) and more recently espoused by Slors (2007), Mölder (2010), Eronen (2020), and Tollefsen (2015) – is one of those theories in the metaphysics of mind that tries to occupy a middle-ground position with regard to the reality of said mental states. It simultaneously tries to embrace the claim that beliefs exist (and thus denies Churchland's claim of eliminative materialism (Churchland, 1981)), but it denies they are real in the strong sense that is envisaged by the industrial-strength realism of Fodor (1985).

The novelty of the interpretivist approach to the existence of beliefs lies in its reversion of the usual order of explanation. The idea is that we should treat the practice of ascribing attitudes as a primitive fact, and the very existence of attitudes should be treated as somehow stemming from the fact that said practice takes place. So, to put it in crude terms, the success of the attribution practice is responsible for the fact that we have attitudes, not the other way around. This somehow counter-intuitive thought was thought to provide an alternative way of securing realism about attitudes without committing us to any implausible strong forms of the view which sees attitudes as being “in the head”.

In my view, interpretivism is best understood as a combination of at least three claims:

1. General realism about the mental: interpretivists accept the common-sense assumption that people (and perhaps other beings) possess contentful mental states such as beliefs (and desires and so on).
2. Rejection of strong realism: general realism as defined above should not lead us to the conception according to which beliefs or desires are some sort of concrete, fully mind-independent entities.
3. The constitutive character of interpretative practice: the common folk practice of ascribing mental states to oneself and other subjects is constitutive of mental states. The notion of “constitution” here is vague and many authors precisify it in many different ways, but the basic idea is that were it not for interpretative practice, there would indeed be no mental states.

Interpretivism has been subject to numerous criticisms. Some philosophers have thought it is a covert form of unacceptable mental fictionalism (see e.g. McCulloch 1990), while others considered it circular (see Kriegel 2010) or complained that it cannot provide an adequate account of the epistemology of beliefs (see e.g. Byrne 1998). In my paper, I provided an assessment (Poslajko 2020) of the most popular lines of criticism. With regard to the problem of fictionalism, I argued that the versions of interpretivism which accept a deflationary account of existence can easily flout this charge (a paradigmatic example of such a mix of interpretivism and deflationism can be found in Mölder 2010).

The epistemological worry (see Byrne 1998, Kriegel, 2010) is much harder to answer. In its simplest formulation, the argument runs as follows: because interpretivists claim that our attributions constitute our attitudes, they cannot explain the basic intuition that people can be mistaken when they attribute beliefs to themselves and others.

In its more precise form, the epistemological argument rests on the assumption that interpretivists are committed to the claim that attitudes are judgment-dependent. The claim of the judgment-dependence of beliefs is defined by the following formula:

“x believes that p iff if there were an appropriate interpreter, she would be disposed to attribute to x the belief that p” (this is a slight modification of the formulation of the judgement-dependence formula provided by Byrne 1998).

This formula is often taken to be the best expression of the basic interpretivist claim that beliefs are constituted by the process of interpretation. But, as Byrne (1998) and Kriegel (2010) observed, adopting this claim leads to problematic epistemological consequences. This is because interpretivists claim the subject that figures in the judgment-dependence formula is either the Ideal Interpreter (i.e., an extremely idealized version of ordinary interpreters) or an ordinary interpreter. If we opt for the first view, the postulated process becomes so disconnected from the ordinary process of interpretation that the theory becomes useless.

In the latter version, in which the interpreter is just an ordinary person, the interpretivist view becomes implausible as it cannot explain the basic fact that people can make mistakes when attributing beliefs. On this view, interpretivists are committed to

the claim that all claims that “*x* has a certain belief *p*” are true if and only if the belief *p* was attributed to them by a certain ordinary interpreter *s*. If this is true, then it is by definition impossible for *s* to be mistaken. But the common-sense intuition is that ordinary interpreters can and often are mistaken in their attributions. So, the second version of the judgment-dependence account is in stark conflict with common-sense.

As was noted in the previous paragraph, the epistemological argument against interpretivism relies on the assumption that it must be understood as a claim that concerns the judgment-dependence of beliefs. This is, however, not a necessary assumption as it is possible to formulate an interpretivist position without making this claim. One example of such a formulation can be found in Mölder (2010), but Curry also proposes such a formulation (which will be discussed shortly).

My problem with those forms of interpretivism which reject judgment-dependence is of a metaphysical nature. Once the proponent of interpretivism rejects the thesis of judgment-dependence, they face the challenge of explicating the claim that attitudes are somehow constituted by the process of interpretation. The judgment-dependence account offers a clear solution here: the relation of constitution is cashed out in terms of judgment-dependence. However, once one rejects judgment-dependence, it is not clear what is left of the intuition that beliefs are constituted and in what sense the resulting position is an interpretivist one. The worry is that if interpretivism rejects judgment-dependence, it sort of collapses into generic deflationism about the mental as it cannot retain its status as a position that is distinct from other middle-ground theories of beliefs (I will have more to say about the relation between these positions in the final section of the paper).

In the next sections, I will look at how Curry tries to deal with the issues at hand. I think that his position has sufficient resources to deal with the problem of the epistemology of mental states but is not capable of delivering a satisfying solution to the metaphysical problem.

3 Curry’s defence of interpretivism

Curry has presented his version of interpretivism in a series of papers (Curry, 2020, 2021a, b), in which he applies the model-theoretic approach to folk-psychological attributions to the conceptual framework of interpretivism. This is thought to enable a proponent of interpretivism to provide a coherent and plausible story about the epistemology of mental states and to make interpretivism compatible with a mature theory from cognitive sciences.

The basic idea of the model-based approach to folk-psychological attributions (see, e.g., Godfrey-Smith 2005, Maibom, 2009, Spaulding, 2018) is that when we attribute attitudes to others, we do so by construing an internal model of the other’s psychology and by assessing how well the subject in question fits this model. So, if I attribute a belief that *p* to person *S*, I do so by comparing person *S* with my internal model of someone who is a believer that *P*. Folk-psychological models can be seen as being roughly similar to scientific models, but the precise characterization of these models is not relevant to our purposes.

The model-based approach predicts that we have many models which we apply to a given case and which can be more or less general. Moreover, it says that a given subject might fit a given model more or less perfectly. These features can provide us with a more realistic epistemology of mental states' attributions than, say, orthodox versions of the theory-theory approach, as they make it possible to account for degrees in belief-ascriptions, etc.

In the model-based version of interpretivism, our attitudes are taken to be dependent not on the individual judgments in which interpreters ascribe attitudes but on the models that the interpreters use. As Curry puts it: “To have an attitude is to sufficiently fit a folk psychological model of somebody who has that attitude, whether or not one is accurately judged to sufficiently fit that model” Curry 2021a, p. 613).

It has to be admitted that a such-defined model-based version of interpretivism has enough resources to deal with the epistemological problem: it is possible, given this approach, to make sense of a situation in which an interpreter commits an error (even though the theory remains committed to the model-dependence claim). This is because the attributer might wrongly judge that a certain subject fits the model that the interpreter accepts. This is a welcome development, but the trouble does not end here: there is still the issue of the metaphysics of constitution.

4 The model-based view and the metaphysical problem

In this section I will look at how Curry tries to deal with the main metaphysical problem interpretivism faces, namely the question of what kind of relation of constitution obtains between attitudes and folk-psychological models. I will argue that his position fails to deliver a satisfying exposition of this relation: in my view, Curry's writings merely offer a label for it, namely “model-dependence”, but what is meant by this label far from clear.

To see why this is a problem, let us first note that the model-based approach, as a theory which aims to explain the mechanism of the process of attributing attitudes, is – at least in principle – neutral with regards to the question of the metaphysical status of attitudes. It would be possible to merge the model-theoretic approach to attributions of beliefs with various views on the metaphysical status of attitudes.

One could, for example, remain faithful to a strong version of realism about attitudes and have strong faith in there being beliefs that are understood as sentences in the mentalesse encoded in the metaphorical belief box yet still consider the model-approach to be a viable epistemology of attributions of third-person attitudes. Such a theorist might consider the folk-psychological models to be viable way of epistemically approximating “real attitudes”. On this (perhaps purely hypothetical) approach, the practice of applying folk-psychological models is just an imperfect way of trying to obtain knowledge of pre-existing and perfectly determinate internal states of minds.

On the other hand, one might imagine a position which combines an acceptance of the model-theoretic approach to attributions of attitudes with a sort of instrumentalist-fictionalist approach to the metaphysics of attitudes. On such a possible view, “ontologically speaking” there is nothing such as beliefs, but ascribing them to other

people (in the way described by the model theory of attribution) is quite a useful activity as it allows us to smoothly navigate social interactions and achieve many other pragmatic aims (for an exposition of usefulness-based mental fictionalism, see, e.g., Toon 2016). On this view, folk-psychological models do not describe anything in the robust sense of description, but the practice of applying these models is still deemed valid by the fictionalist.

Both these combinations of views might seem artificial, cumbersome, and not entirely plausible, but they are not inconsistent, which means that there is no direct implication from the model-based theory of folk-psychological ascriptions to a metaphysical account of attitudes. Curry complains that pure metaphysics which does not take scientifically informed theories into account is a futile endeavour; on the other hand, simply deferring to scientifically respectable theories does not provide us with good metaphysics. In particular, a scientifically respectable theory of how we ascribe beliefs does not necessitate any metaphysics of beliefs. If we want to have a sound metaphysical account of beliefs, we must, well, do metaphysics, and this involves explaining basic metaphysical relations, which is – as I should argue in what follows – what lacks in Curry’s account, despite his attempts to elucidate his metaphysics.

The problem is the following: the notion of model-dependence, as it was presented by Curry, does not adequately illuminate the putative relation of constitution. But providing such a non-trivial account is a requirement of any successful interpretivist project. The required explanation should, in my view, provide answers to at least two important questions. First, it should tell us whether attitudes modally depend on the process of interpretation (i.e., whether it is possible for attitudes to exist without there being interpreters). Second, a sound interpretivist theory should shed at least some light on the epistemological status of the constitution claim. Curry offers two attempts at explicating the constitution claim; however, as I will presently argue, they are unsuccessful.

Curry’s first and perhaps more important attempt to explain the idea of model-dependence is based on the idea that truth values of belief ascriptions depend on the model used by the interpreter. For example, in his (Curry2020) he discusses a case of a parishioner about whom the “young priest” and “middle-aged deacon” disagree regarding the best interpretation of her state of mind. Their disagreement concerns whether she should be ascribed the belief that that Jesus rose from the dead. The assumption of this thought experiment is that both attributers have the same body of knowledge but differ in their assumptions regarding how to best ascribe such beliefs. In such a case, according to Curry “it might be that the deacon and priest both attribute belief veridically” (Curry, 2020 p. 907).

Generalizing from this example, it might be said that in cases in which the evidence is equally well available to the interpreters but the internal models used by the interpreters differ, the consequence of Curry’s approach is that all such interpreters might truly ascribe beliefs to a given subject. (This does not invalidate the previous observation that it is possible to account for errors in this approach). In this way, the truth of the ascriptions of beliefs becomes relative to the interpreters’ models.

I want to neither deny nor endorse the claim that such relativization obtains. However, in what follows I am going to argue that Curry’s mere claim that the truth of belief ascriptions depends on the interpreters’ models neither entails nor explains

the claim that attitudes are constituted. This is important because if my negative appraisal is correct, then one of the central tenets of Curry's theory proves to be the insufficient characteristics of the metaphysical status of beliefs.

My main claim is that the idea that there is a sort of truth-relativism with regard to ascriptions of beliefs (regardless of the merits of this idea) does not have to lead to the view that attitudes are in any substantial sense constituted. The general idea of truth-relativism has recently been proposed in many different forms and many different domains of application. Some of these areas of application are such that it would be hard to claim that the subject of discourse in these areas is constituted (in a substantial sense).

Let us consider one of the examples that MacFarlane (2014) uses in his broad discussion of truth-relativism, namely the case of tense statements. The truth of such statements is, on this view, relative to the context of assessment. However, in this case the relativist approach is underscored by the branching-time-like metaphysics of time and modality, and such a metaphysical view does not entail that facts about tenses and modalities are in any interesting way metaphysically dependent on subjects appraising facts about futures and possibilities.

Thus, relativism does not necessarily entail any claims of mind-dependence or constitution. As the example of MacFarlane's view shows, you can be relativist about X-statements and not accept any claims about the constitution or mind-dependence of X-facts. This is true even if in many cases relativism goes naturally with some sort of dependence/constitution intuition (one example might be the case of aesthetic properties, which can be intuitively taken to be mind-dependent). But just one example of a discourse which is truth-relative and does not exhibit any sort of dependence is enough to prove that the bare claim of truth-relativism does not entail the claim of dependence.

Curry (2020) explicitly distances himself from MacFarlane's assessment-sensitivity model of relativism; instead, he opts for Boghossian's definition. This definition goes as follows: "the relativist about a given domain, D, purports to have discovered that the truths of D involve an unexpected relation to a parameter" (Boghossian, 2006, p. 13). Adoption of this definition and rejection of MacFarlane's approach might seem to deflect the charge raised in the previous paragraphs, but it leads to some further worries. Some of these worries were voiced by Boghossian himself, who uses this definition to discredit rather than to promote relativism. He notices, for example, that such a definition leaves it unclear whether the relativization obtains at the level of the content of the proposition expressed, or at the level of the truth conditions. In my view, this worry stems from the most important and more general issue that plagues such a characterization of relativism (especially in the context of the present debate), namely that it has a broad, programmatic character. Such a definition might be useful when one wants to discuss the consequences of relativism on a broad spectrum, as is Boghossian's aim, but it does not help much when we try to understand how beliefs are supposed to be dependent on the ascription process. Crucially, this definition leaves the nature of the "unexpected relation" completely unspecified. In our case, the "unexpected relation" would link the truth of belief-attributions to interpreters' models, but precisely what Curry's account is not telling us is what the nature of this relation is.

It could, in principle, be possible to combine truth-relativism about belief-attributions with model-dependence; however, in order to do so we would have to be provided with a more detailed description of both the postulated semantics of belief-attributions and with a detailed metaphysical theory which would explain why such relativization obtains.

Another attempt to explain the notion of constitution was presented by Curry in his (Curry 2021b), where he claims that attitudes, conceptualized as distinct from internal cognitive states, are “ecological properties”, i.e., properties that exist only as objects’ relations to their surroundings. For example, the property of being nutritious exists only as a relational one: there is no such thing as an object being nutritious “in itself” – an object is only nutritious for a given organism.

According to Curry, beliefs should also be seen as ecological properties in the sense that they exist only in relation to the models of the interpreters who attribute them. As Curry puts it: “there are no attitudes of belief without (at least historical) belief attributors. Attitudes of belief are for belief attributors – they exist in order to be grasped by creatures like us” Curry 2021b, p. 23).

This way of framing the main interpretivist insight is interesting, but in my view it still does not provide a satisfying metaphysical explanation of the relation that links attributors and beliefs. At worst, the ecological property claim is just restating the main claim of interpretivism that attitudes exist only with relation to interpreters, but it does so without any substantial explication of the nature of this relation. At best, this claim can be seen as providing certain illustrative analogies to other relational ecological properties, such as colour properties or the property of being nutritious. Analogies are obviously important in philosophy, but making analogies is not enough if we lack a developed theory.

Most importantly, these analogies give rise to crucial yet unanswered questions. Let’s take the property of being nutritious, which Curry considers to be a central example of an ecological property: one might naturally suppose that the property of being nutritious is a priori modally dependent on the existence of organisms for which objects are nutritious. It seems to be “prima facie a priori” that without there being organisms that are capable of getting some sort of nutrients from their environment, nothing could possibly count as being nutritious. That such a dependence obtains seem to be somehow implicitly given in the very content of the concept of “being nutritious” (for reasons of space, I will not get into a detailed description of the notion of apriority here, but I mean something roughly along the lines of the proposal of, e.g., Smith 1994).

It is definitely far from obvious that belief properties are a priori modally dependent on the existence of interpreters. Interpretivism, as the history of the reception of this position shows, is a theory which cannot claim of itself to be intuitively compelling. Neither the folk nor philosophers of mind consider that the claim that attitudes are dependent on attributors is obvious. Far from it: for many, the default view is the Fodorian-style approach in which people “just have beliefs in their heads”.

Curry (in his Curry 2018) has argued that the idea that the folk construe beliefs as inner causes (which lies at the heart of strong realism) is a misguided reading of the way the craft of mindreading actually works. For Curry, the best way to interpret this practice is a broadly dispositionalist one. His arguments for this claim would

require more careful scrutiny than can be offered here, but let me note that even if these arguments were indeed correct, it would not mean that a strong form of belief-realism is conceptually misguided. Such a claim of conceptual incoherence would be extremely hard to justify. Even Curry himself admits that many of the folk subscribe, on a “theoretical level”, to a mechanical/causal view of the role of beliefs. What he aims to show is that such an approach is not sufficiently justified. This is, however, not enough to show that both realist philosophers and realistically minded ordinary people are guilty of denying a priori truths about beliefs.

I do not have any ambition here to settle the question of what is a priori about the concept of belief; rather, I want to bring attention to the fact that Curry’s view does not provide us with clear answers to the questions of whether beliefs are modally dependent on the existence of their attributors or, if they are, whether this dependence is known a priori or a posteriori. A well-developed account of the putative relation of constitution of beliefs by interpreters should provide answers to such questions.

To sum up: Curry’s exposition of interpretivism does not contain definite answers to important metaphysical issues. For this reason, his view falls prey to the metaphysical objection against interpretivism which I developed in my earlier paper (Aposlajko 2020), which stated that any version of interpretivism that rejects the idea of judgment-dependence is not able (perhaps yet) provide a satisfying account of the notion of constitution. What’s more, the lack of such a satisfying explanation of constitution gives us a strong reason to suppose that interpretivism is not preferable to simpler forms of middle-ground positions regarding the existence of attitudes.

5 Interpretivism, dispositionalism, deflationism, and all that

My argument from the previous section, if correct, shows (perhaps only) that there is an important gap in Curry’s view. I did not offer, however, any suggestion to the effect that this gap is in principle irreparable. And for good reason: I suspect it might be possible to “fix” interpretivism by making it more metaphysically determinate.

The fundamental question is, however, would it be worth it? Even if one could make interpretivism a coherent and complete metaphysical theory, the validity and usefulness of such a theory could be questioned. The reason is simple: such a sophisticated version of interpretivism that is filled in with all the metaphysical details would most probably turn out to be an unnecessarily complex account of the status of attitudes.

We might make this worry more intelligible if we compared interpretivism to other theories that try to occupy the middle-ground position in the debate about the reality of beliefs, most importantly (neo-)dispositionalism and general deflationism about beliefs.

Although Curry declares at one point that his aim is to develop a view which would “accommodate an edifying wedding of interpretivism with dispositionalism” (Curry 2021a, p. 613), in other places he is careful to distinguish his view from a purely dispositional one (see Curry 2021b). This is an important claim: although Curry-style interpretivism and dispositionalism share important similarities, they remain importantly distinct. Interpretivists are committed to claims of constitution,

which are in no way necessary (or even welcome) for a dispositionalist. Nothing in the core of dispositionalist doctrine (as espoused historically by Ryle (1949) and more currently by Schwitzgebel (2002, 2013)) forces its proponents to adopt the view that beliefs and other attitudes are in any way dependent on the process of interpretation and ascription.

On my view, both interpretivism and dispositionalism might be treated as versions of a general deflationary/superficial approach to beliefs and other attitudes. Central to this broad family of views are two commitments: first, that beliefs and other attitudes are something “superficial” as beliefs are something that “lay on the surface”. This means we do not need to make any commitments about the internal structures of humans in order to truly ascribe such states. Second, these views are committed to a certain form of indeterminacy in ascriptions of attitudes: according to the proponents of the broadly deflationary/superficial view, it is perfectly acceptable that whether a given subject has a given belief in some cases is objectively indeterminate.

Interpretivism is committed to both these claims, but it adds to them a problematic component in the form of the claim about attitudes being constituted by the process of interpretation. In my view, this addition is an unnecessary complication which makes the interpretivist version of the general deflationary/superficial approach far less palatable than the original generic dish.

There are valuable theoretical insights in both the original formulations of interpretivism and in Curry’s reinvention of this view. However, the superficial approach’s sympathizers would be best off if they tried to import these insights into a metaphysically simpler version of the general view. We can find two plausible claims in Curry’s writings: the first is that the correct approach to beliefs should be compatible with the model-based approach to attributions of folk-psychological attitudes (as this approach is empirically plausible). The second is that we should allow objective indeterminacy in belief-attributions that result from the differences between models.

Neither of these intuitions forces us, in my view, to adopt the constitution view. We might stick to a simple version of superficialism and try to work out how to import them. In the case of the model-based view, this import of intuitions seems to be relatively straightforward: as I tried to argue in the previous section, the model approach is in itself compatible with a variety of views in the metaphysics of beliefs. This means it could also be squared with just about any version of the superficial approach.

The claim that belief ascriptions are objectively indeterminate is not, *pace* Curry (see especially Curry 2021b, Sect.3.3.), a sufficient reason to adopt interpretivism instead of simple dispositionalism. For example, Schwitzgebel’s version of dispositionalism is explicitly committed to the idea of there being in-between beliefs (see Schwitzgebel 2013), namely states which are correctly classified as neither beliefs nor non-beliefs. According to Curry, the necessity of adding the interpretivist ingredient to the broadly dispositionalist view stems from the idea that beliefs are relative to interpreters’ models. But this is a theoretical conclusion, and not a given. What is agreed upon by both dispositionalists and interpretivists is that ascriptions of beliefs are in many cases metaphysically indeterminate, and in several situations it is impossible to say which of the different ascriptions is the “right” one. But this indeterminacy does not lead, in itself, to the claim that beliefs are “metaphysically

dependent” on interpretation, and that the truth of their ascription is genuinely relative to the interpreters’ models. The relativistic claim is a philosophical interpretation of the phenomenon of indeterminacy, and this means that it should be assessed on theoretical grounds. The aim of this paper is to show that the theoretical grounds of relativism-cum-interpretivism are a bit shaky. There seems to be no problem with adopting the modest claim that in certain cases the ascriptions are neither objectively true nor false, and that in such cases users of different folk-psychological models are justified in ascribing beliefs in accordance with their models. But to claim that these models determine the relative truth of belief ascriptions is something that requires much more theoretical ground than we are offered by Curry.

A different possible reason to add the interpretivist ingredient to the general dispositionalist view is suggested by Curry in (Curry2022), where he points to the phenomenon that very different behavioral dispositions might justifiably lead us to attribute the same attitudes to different individual persons (e.g., we might justifiably attribute racist beliefs to a person who presents a “paternalistic” version of racism and to one who presents a “crass and hateful” variety, even though these attitudes would present themselves by very different behavior). For Curry, this shows that the “general-purpose” dispositional stereotypes that are postulated by Schwitzgebel-style dispositionalism must be supplemented by an account that appeals to the models held by individual interpreters. The claim that “ordinary” dispositionalism is unable to accommodate this phenomenon is debatable, but even if we grant that there is indeed such a lacuna in the “pure” dispositionalist view, it does not support the idea that individual attitudes are metaphysically constituted by individual models. Much more argumentative work is needed to show that such a strong metaphysical claim is indeed the best way to accommodate this fact.

It should be admitted that serious work would be needed to show how pure dispositionalism can explain the phenomena of objective indeterminacy and individual differences in presenting attitudes. But does this mean that interpretivism is on a par with pure dispositionalism (and other versions of middle-ground approaches) as all these theories have certain important pieces missing? Some might think so, but I think that the problems that the interpretivist faces are of a more serious nature. What the interpretivist needs to do is to develop a persuasive and coherent metaphysical account of the relation of constitution in a manner which would eschew the problems which plagued the judgement-dependence approach.

The proponent of non-relativistic dispositionalism must present a way to import the claims of the model approach and of objective indeterminacy into their general deflationary view. To show how this would work in detail is also not any easy task. The programmatic remarks I have made here are certainly not enough. Still, I believe that the task that a dispositionalist faces is a more modest one. Moreover, in my opinion this task should be seen as preferable to the project of raising interpretivism from the dead, as the metaphysics of dispositionalism seems to be far simpler.

All in all, although Curry’s defense of interpretivism is certainly an important theoretical improvement, it fails to provide a clear exposition of the central metaphysical tenets of interpretivism. This does not necessarily mean that interpretivism is an entirely dead project, but as things stand now we lack a fully satisfying formulation of it.

Acknowledgements I am grateful to Katarzyna Kijania-Placek, Leopold Hess, Jan Rostek, Pawel Banas, Szymon Sapalski, and DS Curry for their comments.

Funding Information This work was supported by Polish National Agency for Academic Exchange under Grant No. PPI/APM/2018/1/00022.

Statements The author has no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose.

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