Why believe in beliefs?

Mark H. Bickhard

Department of Cognitive Science, Lehigh University, Bethlehem, PA 18015.
mark@bickhard.name   http://www.bickhard.ws/

Abstract: A central pillar of Carpendale & Lewis's (C&L's) argument is Wittgenstein's later work on language. I suggest that this support is not as strong as might be wished, and offer an alternative approach to their conclusion that language learning, especially of folk psychology, involves a socially embedded constructivism.

Two intertwined issues are the focus here: What is the status of belief talk? And how do children learn this "folk psychology" way of talking and functioning in the world? I would like to suggest some problems with a core set of arguments in Carpendale & Lewis's (C&L's) target article, and offer an alternative but convergent perspective on children's learning of folk psychology.

C&L's discussion turns on Wittgenstein's later discussions and arguments concerning language and language learning, and is therefore only as strong as those discussions and arguments. But there are reasons for concern here. First, Wittgenstein was appropriately concerned with the normativities of language, with the "grammar" of language.[1] However, his account of that normativity fails. His discussions in *Philosophical Investigations* (Wittgenstein 1958) and previous works regarding ever more complex language games and the forms of life that these might participate in, do not provide an account of normative emergence – complexity *per se* does not generate normativity – and leave readers with a "brute" normativity (Bickhard 2003; Shankar 1996; Summerfield 1996). This is not an adequate account of normativity, and that casts doubt on other aspects of Wittgenstein's account of language.

The private language argument, in particular, turns precisely on normativity as emerging only in the realm of the social. But this ignores, for example, the normativities of *individuals'* epistemological and representational relations with the world, including the social world, and including, in particular, the language games individuals are involved in. Wittgenstein slighted issues of epistemology until his last work, *On Certainty* (1969), and even then approached it solely from within a language framework. His failure to account for prelanguage normativities (and the normativities of prelinguistic animals, including human infants) constitutes a major deficiency.

An additional problem with Wittgenstein's approach, at least as generally interpreted, lies in his account of the learning of words for mental phenomena, such as belief. "Inner processes require outer criteria" is an oft-repeated slogan. There is clearly a sense in which this is correct: Something in the social interaction must be involved in the learning of any word. But what is the (normative) epistemological relationship between the individual (toddler) and those criteria? What is it that is being learned regarding, say, "belief"? A standard interpretation is that a complex nonmonotonic language game of criteria is being learned, one in which some criteria support the use of the term, while others, if present, may defeat that use, as when noticing that someone engaged in street theater defeats the primary criteria that they seem to be in pain. As this illustrates, however, that such learning must take place *in terms of* such criteria, slides into the assumption that what is learned must be *constituted out of* such criteria (however complex that constitution may be). This is not valid: If some internal *constructive* process is ongoing, and external (social) criteria serve as selections on that process, then what is learned – constructed – need not be constituted out of those criteria at all. That we must learn *from* criteria, does not entail that criteria are *what* we must learn.[2] The knowledge of how to "make it" as a frog is not *constituted out of* the survivals, deaths, and reproductions that were selected among the evolutionary constructions involved.

"Learning language as learning names," which C&L (not to mention Wittgenstein) so rightly criticize, is in even worse condition, however: There is nothing unitary, no coherent kind of matter of fact, for belief talk to refer to. The argument here is the (extended) frame problem. I believe that large trucks can hurt me; I believe that trucks with stripes can hurt me; so can trucks with polka dots; and so on. There is an unbounded number of "beliefs" that I have, that anyone has, about trucks and their capacity to harm, as well as about almost everything else. Many of these beliefs are ones that I may have never thought of before, and yet they describe accurately what I believe. But there are too many of them to "fit" into a bounded skull, and too many of them to be learned by a toddler in a bounded time span (Bickhard 2001). Whatever else it does, belief talk cannot always or primarily refer to individuated beliefs. This I take to be convergent with C&L's arguments. Note that the point holds regardless of the role of external criteria in the learning process.

What is belief talk, then? The central suggestion is that folk psychology, belief talk especially, is involved in making, breaking, discussing, evaluating, and so on, the epistemic claims and commitments that people make with each other, including those that others make with third parties, as well as those that each individual may be involved in directly (Bickhard 1998). Hence, if I claim, or if I behave in a way that presupposes, something to be true in the world, then I have a commitment to answer challenges to that presuppositional belief, perhaps by supporting the belief involved, or by supporting my legitimacy in that belief even if it turns out to be false, and so on. Most importantly, I do not have to have any explicit representational belief that the world is not made of Brie cheese in order to presuppose it, and, hence, to "believe" it. Therefore, I do not have to have any individuated inner process nor any individuated criterial learning in order to have such a belief. This belief is not likely to encounter challenges, but my general belief that "figures of authority are malevolent" might, and yet it too need not involve individuated processes or learning. It too can have the ontology solely of a presupposition of the way I live in the world.

In this view, belief talk and, by extension, folk psychology talk in general cannot be learned as a naming game or as a mere internalization of social practices. It must be constructively learned as a form of coordination of modes of commitment and modes of explanation for the presuppositions of our interactions with each other and with the world.

NOTES
1. "Normativity" is used here in the philosophical sense of involving the possibility of being bad or wrong. It includes such oppositions as functional-dysfunctional, true-false, correct-incorrect, and so on. Regarding Wittgenstein and language, see, for example, Glock (1996) and Shankar (1996).

2. It is an empiricist assumption that it *must* be so constituted. In contrast, *any* action-based model of representation forces learning to be a constructivist process: The environment cannot impress successful action systems into an otherwise passive mind (Bickhard & Campbell 1989).