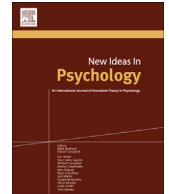




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Why apply causal reference to intentional concepts? A polemic with Michael and MacLeod

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ABSTRACT

The paper is a polemic with Michael and MacLeod's (2013) application of the causal account of reference to everyday intentional concepts. It starts with a critical examination of the motivation behind the authors' proposal: namely, that (1) many philosophical discussions, such as the eliminative materialism debate, presuppose descriptionism, and that (2) adopting the causal approach is likely to inform research into social cognition and philosophy of psychology. Claim (1) soon turns out to be unwarranted. It rests on an argument that conflates the notion of presupposition with that of acceptance, confuses causal/descriptionist accounts of reference with generous/stingy accounts, and, above all, involves an equivocation. This diagnosis is followed by an analysis of the conditions Michael and MacLeod impose on processes that fix the reference of intentional concepts as well as an examination of the assertion that the conditions are satisfied by gaze following, imitation, and emotional contagion. The conclusions are not encouraging, however. Since the conditions are vague and inadequate, gaze following, imitation and emotional contagion may very well play no role whatever in determining the reference of intentional concepts. Furthermore, the explanatory relevance of the causal account of reference to research into social cognition proves illusory, so it cannot provide a reason for choosing the causal approach over descriptionism. Thus, Michael and MacLeod's theory collapses and so does claim (2).

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In a recent article, John Michael and Miles MacLeod (2013) motivate their proposal of applying the causal account of reference to everyday intentional concepts by making the following claims:

- (1) Many philosophical discussions of everyday intentional concepts, such as those of attention, desire, belief and emotion, presuppose a descriptionist account of reference. This reliance is "most striking" (p. 213) in arguments for eliminative materialism.
- (2) Given the popularity of causal accounts of reference of various types of linguistic expressions, this widespread

commitment to descriptionism with regard to intentional concepts is both surprising and "anachronous" (p. 213).

- (3) Applying the causal account of reference to intentional concepts is likely to have important implications for research into social cognition as well as philosophy of psychology. For example, it might inform our understanding of conceptual development and shed new light on the eliminativism debate.

Despite consistent attacks on representationalism, these claims remain relatively uncontroversial. Indeed, I suppose most contemporary writers would accept them without serious reservations, even if acceptance of claim (3) might require further argument. Given the present intellectual climate, then, Michael and MacLeod are entirely justified in

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choosing claims (1)–(3) as grounds for developing their causal account of reference of intentional concepts.

What I am going to show in this paper is that claims (1)–(3) are probably false. My plan is as follows. In Section 1, I focus on claim (1). I argue that Michael and MacLeod's justification for it, which is based on Stich (1996), and Bishop and Stich (1998): (a) conflates the notion of presupposition with that of acceptance, (b) mistakes the difference between so-called stingy and generous accounts of reference for the difference between descriptionist and causal accounts, and (c) obscures an important equivocation. I conclude that, appearances to the contrary notwithstanding, eliminative materialism does not rely on the descriptionist conception of reference.

Naturally, this casts doubt on (3). Based on my reasoning in Section 1, the view that suggests itself is that applying the causal account to intentional concepts is more likely to inspire verbal disputes and conceptual confusions than shed light on philosophy of psychology or research into social cognition. In light of this, (2) must also be viewed with skepticism. Although reliance on descriptionism may be surprising, it would be rash to call it anachronistic.

Because my initial diagnosis may depend on some oversimplifying assumptions, the next step is to examine (3) by looking at Michael and MacLeod's application of the causal account of reference to intentional concepts (in Sections 2–5). Their project can be divided into three parts. In the first part, they propose three conditions that need to be satisfied in order for a process to fix the reference of an intentional concept. The intuition is that such processes “may stand in reliable causal relations with others' intentional states... and thereby fix reference to those states” (Michael & MacLeod, 2013, p. 219). In the second part, they examine three such processes, namely gaze following, behavioral mimicry, and emotional contagion, arguing that all three fulfill those conditions. The novelty of Michael and MacLeod's approach is that the reference fixers need not be perceptual processes, as in Millikan (2000), Laurence and Margolis (2002), and Prinz (2002) – they can also be bodily responses. In the third part, Michael and MacLeod describe the role of the reference fixers in conceptual development, highlighting why they believe the causal account of reference to be superior to descriptionism.

The purpose of Section 2 is to understand the distinction between descriptionist and causal accounts of reference as applied to concepts rather than linguistic expressions, for, oddly enough, Michael and MacLeod discuss only the latter.

Section 3 focuses on the conditions Michael and MacLeod place on possible reference fixers. Roughly speaking, a process may fix the reference of an intentional concept if it (i) precedes the emergence of the concept, (ii) lasts long enough to sustain causal interaction with others' intentional states, and (iii) the cognitive system treats it as a source of information about others' intentional states. Besides containing some initial critical remarks about conditions (i)–(iii), Section 3 also suggests that, despite rich empirical evidence the authors bring to bear on the issue, it remains unclear why gaze following or behavioral mimicry should play an essential role in determining the reference of everyday intentional concepts.

Section 4 discusses the peculiarities of the authors' use of the terms “behavioral mimicry/imitation” and

“emotional contagion”. The resulting equivocations, together with an ambiguity in Michael and MacLeod's condition (iii) on reference-fixing, are shown to cast doubt on the claim that the mechanisms of behavioral mimicry and emotional contagion are implicated in fixing the reference of everyday intentional concepts.

Section 5 contains a more general criticism. Namely, that the causal account of reference, as applied to intentional concepts, seems no better than its descriptionist rival, so even if Michael and MacLeod can defend their proposal against my previous arguments, it is hard to see why they would want to do that in the first place. I close with some methodological remarks (Section 6).

1. Presuppositions, descriptionism and eliminative materialism

Let's start with the basics. There seems to be a clear difference between asserting that someone accepts a particular account of reference and asserting that a particular claim, theory, debate or argument *assumes* or *presupposes* such an account. The former amounts to making a factual statement that can be confirmed or disconfirmed by performing an analysis of the person's pronouncements. In simple cases, the matter can be settled by asking the person involved and waiting for a reply. The latter, on the other hand, amounts to maintaining that the claim, theory, debate or argument in question is true or makes sense *only if* a particular account of reference is correct. Justifying this latter kind of claim is usually quite demanding.

Given that Michael and MacLeod's aim is to convince us that an argument for eliminative materialism *presupposes* a descriptionist view of reference, their treatment is remarkably succinct (Michael & MacLeod, 2013, p. 214):

[Eliminativists maintain that] intentional concepts are defined by a folk theory of mind that is likely to be false, and they are therefore likely to be non-referring. But, as Mallon et al. (2009) have noted (see also Lycan 1988; Cummins 1991; Schouten and De Jong 1998), this argument only works in conjunction with the implicit claim that reference is fixed by descriptions.

But how do we know that the eliminativist's argument “only works in conjunction with” a descriptionist account of reference? Indeed, does it really?¹ By following the chain of references that starts with Mallon, Machery, Nichols, and Stich (2009), one soon learns that this presupposition claim may have been inspired by Lycan (1988), but it received its present formulation in Stich (1996), and Bishop and Stich

¹ There is a reading of this argument that makes the presupposition claim justified and, indeed, trivial. On this reading, asserting that “intentional concepts are defined by a folk theory of mind” is taken to be equivalent to adopting descriptionism. In such a case, however, there would be nothing implicit about the argument's reliance on descriptionism, and the conclusion would be unilluminating. This is why, in what follows, I interpret the phrase “are defined by a folk theory of mind” in a neutral manner, according to which the definitions of the concepts in question can contain rigid designators (as in, say, “fear is whatever internal state that causes *this* type of facial expression”).

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