Folk Psychology and Proverb Knowledge as Common Knowledge in Decision-Making

MARION LEDWIG, LAS VEGAS

According to Horgan and Graham (1993, 293) folk psychology (FP) "includes notions like belief, desire, intention, action, and closely cognate notions; and the most fundamental principles or generalizations which common sense takes to be true of the ways such states interact with one another." Yet this statement still leaves unclear whether folk psychology is about common sense knowledge, namely what everyone knows and therefore what everyone has, or whether it is about common sense reasoning, namely the human ability to use common sense knowledge and therefore what everyone does (Elio 2002, 8, 14). Probably it is both, for according to folk psychology the folk (= everyone) seems to know how everyone reasons. If it were otherwise, how could one then explain the fact that people in fact explain and predict the behavior of their fellow humans. Moreover, Horgan and Graham (1993, 293) distinguish folk psychology from folksy psychology which "includes lots of Grandma's wisdom and poetry's delight that is not presupposed by our practice of attributing propositional attitudes and proffering FP explanations; perhaps includes much of what we commonly say and believe about, e. g., passions and character traits; and perhaps also includes much that is positively contradictory or incoherent (e. g., 'Out of sight, out of mind,' 'Absence makes the heart grow fonder')." Thus if folk psychology includes notions like belief and desire and fundamental principles which common sense takes to be true of the ways they interact with each other, then one can expect folk psychology to be common knowledge.

This is even relevant for game and decision theory, for if I have certain beliefs and desires, then according to folk psychology certain kinds of decisions should ensue according to the fundamental principles which one takes to be common sense of how beliefs and desires interact with each other. For example, if I very much desire chocolate chip ice cream now

and I believe that there is the best ice cream shop around the corner, then I should decide to buy a chocolate chip ice cream now given that nothing else speaks against me making this kind of decision now. In this respect it might be helpful to distinguish between common sense psychology (CSP) or folk psychology and scientific psychology (SP), for according to Wilkes (1993, 171) SP attempts to explain and predict generally, while CSP tries to explain and predict the particular. Hence in my opinion certain ceteris paribus clauses, like that nothing else speaks against me making this kind of decision now, are always implicit in the laws of common sense.

Wilkes (1993, 173) points out that these ceteris paribus clauses also explain the seeming contradictions in proverbs, like that "out of sight, out of mind" is true holding certain ceteris paribus clauses and that "absence makes the heart grow fonder" is true holding certain other ceteris paribus clauses. For example, the proverbs "gleich und gleich gesellt sich gern" (birds of a feather flock together) and "Gegensätze ziehen sich an" (opposites attract each other) can be explained as follows: if one's own genetic material is already very good, it makes sense to stay as close to it as possible by mating with someone who is very similar, while if one's own genetic material is not so good, it makes sense to get as far away from it as possible in order to improve the genetic makeup of one's children. Hence in my opinion Horgan and Graham's (1993) distinction between folk and folksy psychology is an artificial one, which has to be given up.

Against Wilkes' distinction between common sense psychology and scientific psychology speaks that one could even advocate in the case of Freudian analysis that scientific psychology tries to explain the particular, too. One just has to look at Freud's case studies like little Hans or the rat man. Of course, Freud tried to build his theories on these case studies and he therefore tried to explain and predict generally, yet there was also explanation in particular cases.

But can one expect proverbs to be common knowledge? According to Whiting (1932, 302) a proverb is "an expression which, owing its birth to the people, testifies to its origin in form and phrase. It expresses what is apparently a fundamental truth - that is, a truism - in homely language, often adorned, with alliteration and rhyme. It is usually short, but need not be; it is usually true, but need not be. Some proverbs have both a literal and a figurative meaning, either of which makes perfect sense; but more often

they have but one of the two. A proverb must be venerable; it must bear the sign of antiquity, and, since such signs may be counterfeited by a clever literary man, it should be attested in different places at different times. This last requirement we must often waive in dealing with very early literature, where the material at our disposal is incomplete." While this may still not attest so much to the common knowledge of a proverb, popular views of the proverb get summarized by Mieder (1985, 119) as follows: "A proverb is a short, generally known sentence of the folk which contains wisdom, truth, morals and traditional views in a metaphorical, fixed and memorizable form and which is handed down from generation to generation" and "A proverb is a short sentence of wisdom". Although Taylor (1931, 3, note 1) has expressed quite clearly that it is impossible to define proverbs, at least the folk doesn't seem to have problems in defining proverbs, and in Mieder's first definition the folk even makes clear that proverbs are considered to be common knowledge. Furthermore, Briggs (1985, 795) points out that at least with regard to New Mexican Spanish it is the elders who teach the children proverbs, so that they become common knowledge. Moreover, one can learn a proverb by means of several learning mechanisms, so that it doesn't seem to be such a problem to achieve proverb knowledge.

One could argue that as communication requires common concepts and common topics (Rescher 2000, 102), proverbs, which are used in communication and which indeed consist of common concepts and refer to common topics, are common knowledge because of that, too. Against this view may speak that communication is by nature a process of conveying information (Rescher 2000, 120), so that if one uses a proverb in communication, one communicates something new and not something common. Yet the words used in proverbs consist of common concepts and refer to common topics, so that something new is communicated by means of something common. If communication consisted completely of something new - not even using common concepts and referring to common topics - I don't see how anything could ever be successfully communicated. Hence proverbs and all kinds of common concepts and common topics can be considered to be common knowledge.

Yet as different cultures have different proverbs, this common knowledge is restricted to the culture one lives in. Honeck (1997, 73) reports that proverb use is disliked in speeches given at the United Nations, for their

translation might lead to many interpretation problems, like, for example, I have not the slightest clue what the English-speaking American culture has in mind with the proverb "All clocks are off" and therefore wouldn't have a clue how to translate this into my native German. And it seems very reasonable to assume that the Spanish-speaking American culture has other proverbs than the English-speaking one due to its Mexican influence. Hence although proverbs can be considered to be common knowledge, its influence with regard to decision and game theory is limited because of the cultural dependence of proverbs. That is, whereas one decision maker can base his decision on certain proverbs, another decision maker who belongs to another cultural group may not be able to use these same proverbs as decision guiding. For example, the Japanese proverb "Where there is no antagonist you cannot quarrel" might be used by a Japanese-speaking decision maker as a guide to deciding, but there is at least to my knowledge nothing comparable to that in German. Furthermore, even if somebody told me this proverb, I would have difficulties interpreting it. Does it mean that one should kill one's opponents, because in that way there will not be an antagonist anymore and therefore there will also not be any quarrel, or does it mean that one should not behave in such a way as to be evaluated as an antagonist, or does it even mean both of it? Or does it simply mean that one should evade one's antagonist? Zapf and Gross (2000, 31) for example report that the highest ranking advice victims of mobbing give for mobbing victims is to leave the situation. Yet whether this is the best advice for this situation and for all kinds of interpersonal conflict is still unclear. Hence I wouldn't even know how to use this proverb for making a decision.

If one wanted to figure out in a game what kind of decision the other decision maker or the other decision makers make, one should take into account what kind of proverbs the other decision maker or the other decision makers might use to base their decision on besides taking their other beliefs and wants into account. Furthermore, one shouldn't take it for granted, if the other decision maker or the other decision makers come from a different culture, that their decision might be based on similar proverb usage. Some people might object that we rarely use proverbs in decision-making processes, we rather use them for motivating ourselves or for justifying our actions; even if this should be the case, this doesn't pertain to the question whether we should use proverbs in decision-making and

whether it would be to our advantage to use proverbs for guiding us in our decisions. After all, why do we have this folk wisdom, if it is not good for anything? And why should it be just limited to motivating ourselves and justifying our actions?

Besides the fact that already Plato and Aristotle tried to define proverbs (Mieder 1993, 18) and besides the political abuse of proverbs in Nazi-Germany by Hitler and the whole regime (Mieder 1993, chapter 10) there are several famous people, like Bismarck, Lenin, Churchill, Roosevelt (Mieder 1993, 231), who used proverbs very often, or even propagated proverb use, like Benjamin Franklin (Mieder 1993, chapter 5). Also in the bible one finds many proverbs. So there must have been a reason why they did that. Besides the fact that using proverbs gives one authority - after all there are whole generations of proverb users behind oneself - there should be at least a grain of truth in these proverbs, too, and although over time some proverbs get out of fashion (Mieder 1993, 19), this might be mostly due to the fact that the circumstances have changed so much that the proverb cannot be used anymore. In the throwing away society of today the proverb "one stitch in time saves nine" where nobody stitches torn clothes anymore, but only buys new ones, it is understandable why people start having problems understanding this proverb. Yet one might argue that proverbs don't express truths, but rather proverbs represent the tradition of the respective culture in which the proverb is ingrained. Nevertheless one might be able to check whether the empirical content of proverbs is truth conducive. For example, one could really try to find out whether "An apple a day keeps the doctor away" is true.

One might object that not in all kinds of cultures proverbs might be of any use, for in fast changing cultures proverbs might very soon become out of date. But one might reply in such cultures proverbs wouldn't have evolved in the first place anyway. Furthermore, one might object with increasing globalization proverb usage might get extinct, too, for one would soon find out that other people have problems understanding the proverbs which one uses, besides the difficulty of translating them to the respective languages. Yet whether this really happens is an empirical question, which is not for me to decide. Moreover, nevertheless the decision maker himself might be able to use his proverbs for decision-making. One might object that one shouldn't use proverbs for decision-making, because proverbs are

nothing but stereotypes. Nevertheless, while proverbs take on certain linguistic forms by means of rhymes, metaphors, and such, stereotypes usually get expressed in all kinds of ways, so there is a way of distinguishing proverbs from stereotypes. Hence different kinds of common knowledge, like folk psychology and proverb knowledge, could be used for decision-making even in 1-person games against nature, so that common knowledge could play quite a considerable role in decision and game theory. Moreover, proverbs and also rules of thumb could be considered as problem-solving heuristics that are fast and frugal, which seem particularly effective in environments that offer limited time and uncertain information for making decisions (Elio 2002, 28; Elster 1999). Furthermore, in decision situations which one encounters very often or repeatedly (like for example when to get up every morning), it seems to be efficient to use rules of thumb or proverb knowledge to make a fast decision (for example by means of the proverb "the early bird catches the worm"). Additionally, some rules of thumb are even proverbs like "never change a winning team" and "if it ain't broke, don't fix it".

Yet in games with several decision makers from different cultures it seems problematical to consider proverb knowledge to be common knowledge. And although folk psychology has been around for thousands of years (Gordon 1995, 71), it is not quite clear to me whether all laws of folk psychology really hold universally, so that even folk psychology couldn't be used in games with several decision makers from different cultures. Finally, as knowing doesn't entail predicting (Ledwig 2002/2003), common knowledge in the form of folk psychology and proverb knowledge is of no help in predicting the other's persons play in game theory (and also one's own decision in decision theory) and hence to make a rational decision in a game (or in a decision problem) oneself.

A more general objection is: to conceive folk psychology and also proverbs as forms of common knowledge seems to stretch our traditional concept of knowledge as true justified belief very much. Yet this also depends on what we consider to be a good justification. For not only evidential reasons, but also consistency and pragmatic reasons might offer a good justification (Ledwig 2006, chapters 1 and 2). Moreover, with regard to medical proverbs like "If you would live forever, you must wash milk from your liver", we are now in a better position to evaluate whether these prov-

erbs are true or not. Furthermore, whether folk psychology turns out to be true is still a debated issue. Tucker (2004, 25) mentions that one can define knowledge not only as justified true belief, but also as true belief that was got by a reliable process or like Dretske (1981, 86) as belief caused or sustained by information. And if one considers proverb knowledge to be knowledge which has proven itself to be true because it has worked many times and/or over many generations, then one can consider this to be a reliable process. Moreover, this knowledge could have sustained itself by more and more confirmation, which then might be considered as other pieces of information. So even if folk psychology and proverb knowledge don't qualify as true justified beliefs, they might be considered as true beliefs got by a reliable process and as beliefs caused or sustained by information.

REFERENCES

Briggs, C. 1985 "The Pragmatics of Proverb Performances in New Mexican Spanish", *American Anthropologist*, 87, 793-810.

Dretske, F. 1981 *Knowledge and the Flow of Information*, Cambridge: MIT Press.

Elio, R. 2002 "Issues in Commonsense Reasoning and Rationality", in R. Elio (ed.), *Common Sense, Reasoning, & Rationality*, New York: Oxford University Press, 3-36.

Elster, J. 1999 *Alchemies of the Mind: Rationality and the Emotions*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Gordon, R. 1995 "Folk Psychology as Simulation", in M. Davies and T. Stone (eds.), *Folk Psychology: The Theory of Mind Debate*, Oxford: Blackwell, 60-73.

Honeck, R. 1997 *A Proverb in Mind: The Cognitive Science of Proverbial Wit and Wisdom*, Mahwah: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Horgan, T. and Graham, G. 1993 "In Defense of Southern Fundamentalism", in S. Christensen and D. Turner (eds.), *Folk Psychology and the Philosophy of Mind*, Hillsdale: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 288-311.

Ledwig, M. 2002/2003 "Deliberation, Prediction, and Knowledge", *Conceptus*, XXXV, 75-101.

- 2006 *Emotions: their Rationality and Consistency*, New York: Peter Lang.

Mieder, W. 1985 "Popular Views of the Proverb", *Proverbium: Yearbook of International Proverb Scholarship*, 2, 109-144.

- 1993 *Proverbs are Never out of Season: Popular Wisdom in the Modern Age*, New York: Oxford University Press.

Rescher, N. 2000 *Process Philosophy: A Survey of Basic Issues*, Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press.

Taylor, A. 1931 *The Proverb*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Tucker, A. 2004 *Our Knowledge of the Past: A Philosophy of Historiography*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Whiting, B. 1932 "The Nature of the Proverb", *Harvard Studies and Notes in Philology and Literature*, 14, 273-307.

Wilkes, K. 1993 "The Relationship Between Scientific Psychology and Common Sense Psychology", in S. Christensen and D. Turner (eds.), *Folk Psychology and the Philosophy of Mind*, Hillsdale: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 167-187.

Zapf, D. and Gross, C. 2000 "Mobbing - Konflikteskalation am Arbeitsplatz", *Forschung Frankfurt* - Wissenschaftsmagazin der Johann Wolfgang Goethe-Universität Frankfurt 18, 22-33.