1. *Three meanings of ‘Folk-Psychology’*

In a passage of his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, John Locke tells of a story in which the Roman emperor Augustus was forced to recognize that, despite all the might he was endowed with as ruler of the world, it was not in his power to create a new Latin word (Locke 1690, III, 2, viii).

The telling of this story serves a purpose. Augustus appears in it as the symbol of the despotic leader the power of whom is not limited by any legal or human constraints. It is therefore part of the story’s implicit information that the cause of Augustus’ semantic impotence could not have been something like, e.g., the existence in Roman law of some sort of disposition preventing the emperor from enforcing a bill introducing a new sequence of sounds in the official language. But, if neither a stronger human authority nor the law, then what other power could have originated such an imperial predicament?

According to Locke, the ultimate cause of the Augustan semantic incapacity was a semantic fact; its proximate causes, the unavoidable psychological consequences of the ultimate cause. The semantic fact was that meanings were essentially private ideas. The psychological consequences of such a semantic fact were the following. If meanings were essentially private ideas, then neither the emperor nor his officials could ever hope to control the “semantic correctness” of his subjects’ minds. As a consequence, every man could feel completely free to use any sequence of sounds in association with any meanings he fancied; and such a general semantic freedom would, in turn, inevitably entail the psychological consequence...
that a multitude of meanings unwanted by the word’s creator would be engendered by the word’s users and some of them would presumably end up prevailing in the minds of most speakers. Given the fact that the “essence” of a word is supposed to be its meaning, then anybody’s hopes of creating intersubjective meanings by fiat would thus have to be doomed to failure from the outset.

The effect Locke wants to produce in his readers by means of this appeal to Augustus’ complaint is to show how his theory of meaning is able to account for one of the most notorious peculiarities natural languages display, namely, what one might call their ‘semantic openness’.

I do not believe that Locke’s diagnosis of the cause of Augustus’ semantic impotence is correct; but I do believe that, in describing the semantic predicament of Augustus, Locke rightly highlighted the semantic openness of human languages as one of their essential features. Contrary to Locke, I think that languages are essentially public, and that, therefore, the cause of their semantic openness and of the unpredictability of the semantic fate of any consciously introduced lexical innovation, which Locke correctly associates with it, resides in the fact that meaning is the unstable result of a permanent semantic negotiation occurring in the open both among the present users of a language and between them and the tradition of language use in which they were raised.

The fact that divergent interests and motivations of different segments of language users interfere with the semantic destiny of a word is vividly illustrated by a recently introduced word which is of particular concern to the Philosophy of Mind, namely, the word ‘Folk-Psychology’. This is, moreover, the word I will use in order to refer to the standpoint I will criticize in this essay. In order to prevent the emergence of Augustian semantic misunderstandings, a few previous clarifications are however needed.

Dennett claims the paternity of the word in one of his last books (Dennett 1995, p. 237). According to his report there, this term was coined by him in 1978 in order to refer to both a human skill and a particular analysis of its structure. The skill in question was the (presumably innate) capacity for psychological understanding humans display in their intercourse with their conspecifics (that is, what might also be called our ‘natural Psychology’). The analysis of the