

Mindreading and tacit knowledge

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Abstract

Debate over the nature of mindreading proceeds on the assumption that theory and simulation offer distinct characterizations of this ability. The *threat of collapse* objection questions this assumption, suggesting that simulation collapses into theory because both are committed to mindreading as tacit knowledge. Although both sides dismiss this objection, I argue that the threat is real. Theory and simulation are both accounts of mindreading as tacit knowledge and so the debate between them collapses.

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1. Introduction

The debate over the nature of mindreading proceeds on the assumption that theory–theory and simulation theory offer distinct characterizations of our ability to explain and predict the behavior of others.¹ Theory–theorists argue that our ability to mindread is made possible by possession of a theory, albeit a tacit one. Simulation theorists argue that the inaccessibility of this alleged theory is a mark against the theory–theory proposal and offer an alternative account of mindreading as theory-less simulation of other minds. As characterized, this debate makes sense only so long as there is a difference between mindreading via use of a tacit theory and mindreading via simulation.

Proponents of the *threat of collapse* objection (e.g., Dennett, 1987; Heal, 1994) challenge this assumption,

arguing that simulation collapses into theory because both are committed to mindreading via tacit knowledge. While both theory–theorists (Davies & Stone, 2001) and simulation theorists (Goldman, 2006) resist this conclusion, I contend that the threat is real. In what follows, I argue that those involved in the debate over the nature of mindreading should pay closer attention to the requirements for tacit knowledge, and that doing so reveals two important conclusions. First, Goldman's account of process-driven simulation collapses into a variant of theory–theory; it cannot be saved in the way that Davies and Stone propose, nor can Goldman himself prevent the collapse. Second, the collapse extends to all other versions of simulation theory. In order to explain the ability to mindread, simulation must involve mental state ascriptions, and so there is no way to avoid characterization of simulation as appeal to tacit, psychological knowledge. By recognizing the collapse of simulation, we can abandon the view of mindreading as an entrenched debate between theory–theorists and simulation theorists, refocusing on the shared aim of best characterizing this ability.

2. Two views of the nature of mindreading

Mindreading refers to our sophisticated yet implicit ability to explain and predict the behavior of ourselves and

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¹ Mindreading should be understood as roughly synonymous with *folk psychology*, *theory of mind*, *perspective taking*, and so on. Gordon (2009) and other proponents of the Embodied Cognition View (e.g., Gallagher, 2007) take issue with the presumption that social cognition requires appeal to mental states. For the purposes of this paper, I do not question this assumption. However, my claim that the mindreading debate collapses should come as welcome news to proponents of the Embodied Cognition View, as it serves to corral their opponents.

others in terms of underlying mental states—most commonly beliefs and desires, but also hopes, fears, hunches, and the like. Suppose, for example, that I am trying to predict whether you will go see the newest action movie at the cinema. My speculation about what you will do will almost certainly involve appeal to your mental states: whether you prefer documentaries, believe that box office ticket prices have become exorbitant, or fear going out in public. All of these—and more—will be used to generate my prediction. I arrive at an answer by coupling them with an understanding of how mental states connect to one another and to behavior. The disagreement between theory–theorists and simulation theorists concerns how to best characterize this understanding that mindreading requires. In this section, I provide an overview of theory–theory and simulation theory, focusing on the versions developed by Stich and Nichols (2003) and Goldman (2006), respectively.²

2.1. Theory–theory

Theory–theorists claim that our ability to predict and explain the behavior of others requires the possession of a body of knowledge about mental states and their interrelations, and further, that this body of knowledge is best described as a theory (Morton, 1980). Sellars (1956) is often credited as the source of this claim, as he put forth the idea of “folk psychology” in his mythical account of Jones—a (fictional) ancestor who initiated the practice of speaking about behavior as caused by hidden, inner states like beliefs and desires.³

While all theory–theorists subscribe to the idea that folk psychological practice relies upon a theory of folk psychology, theory–theorists differ amongst themselves as to what this theory involves.⁴ Some believe that the theory is a set

of law-like generalizations, exhibiting a deductive nomological structure (Fodor, 1987) while others contend that the theory is comprised of a small set of core heuristics (Botterill, 1996). Still others do not take a stand, allowing any body of internally represented psychological information to count as theoretical (Stich & Nichols, 1995, 2003).

Stich and Nichols’ broad characterization is the widely accepted one, as it is compatible with the predominant information-processing approach to cognition. On their view, mindreading is theoretical so long as it “exploit(s) an internally represented body of information about psychological processes and the ways in which they give rise to behavior” (1995, p. 88). Stich and Nichols resist not only a particular account of theories, but also any particular account of mental representation or cognitive architecture. Leaving these matters unsettled is not intended as a signal of their unimportance, but rather as an acknowledgement that such debates are to be had *within* theory–theory and are thereby orthogonal to debates *between* theory–theory and simulation.

Theory–theorists agree that, whatever its structure, our folk psychological theory is tacit. Some claim it to be only “weakly tacit” (Botterill, 1996), but most draw on an analogy between the tenets of folk psychology and the grammatical rules of a language (e.g., Carruthers, 1996; Jackson, 2000).⁵ In much the same way that we cannot articulate the rules we follow when we understand a language and yet have no difficulty speaking grammatically and detecting ungrammatical sentences, so too proponents of theory–theory claim that our everyday interactions with one another are guided by a folk psychological theory that we understand but cannot articulate. Aside from this analogy, theory–theorists say little about the nature of tacit psychological knowledge and the requirements for its attribution. And yet, the claim remains critical to the view. The reliance of mindreading upon tacit knowledge is often described as the “prevailing assumption in the empirical research on folk psychology” (Nichols, 2002).

2.2. Simulation theory

Simulation theory is best understood contrastively, as an alternative to the dominant, theory–theory view.⁶ Simulation theorists reject the claim that mindreading requires a sophisticated body of theoretical knowledge and focus instead on our ability to project ourselves into the mental perspective of another person. The simulation process takes various names: imaginatively identifying

² My review leaves out what is often characterized as a third position: the Rationality view. Proponents of the Rationality view claim that when we engage in mindreading we are using a theory of rationality to explain how others should act and predict what they will do on the basis of our understanding of normative principles of reasoning and choice (e.g., Dennett, 1987; Heal, 2003). I view these accounts as personal level descriptions of mindreading that could be amenable to implementation by either by theory or simulation. For example, Heal’s notion of co-reasoning is often depicted as personal-level simulation (Davies & Stone, 2001).

³ Lewis (1972) offers a detailed account of how this theory could be understood. On his view, the set of folk statements we use to explain one another can be conjoined so as to create the theory of folk psychology. From here, each of our mental state terms is defined by the role it plays in this theory (i.e., a belief just is whatever state mediates between the behaviors and other mental states that are listed as being related in our commonsense statements). These functional roles implicitly define each term, which can be made explicit via Ramsification: by conjoining all of our folk statements, replacing mental state terms with variables, and then existentially quantifying over those variables, each term is defined without circularity.

⁴ Theory-theorists also differ in whether or not they consider the theory to be innate (Carruthers, 1996; Fodor, 1992) or learned (Perner, 1991; Wellman, 1990), or perhaps even learned by a process amenable to theory revision in science (Gopnik & Meltzoff, 1997). There are also differences in terms of whether the ability is thought of as modular (Baron-Cohen 1995; Carruthers, 2006) or not (Leslie, 2000).

⁵ For Botterill, a weakly tacit theory is one that is “unstated, but recoverable” (1996, p. 113). Chomsky (1986) offers a characterization of our linguistic abilities in terms of tacit understanding.

⁶ Although all simulation theorists agree that theory-theory is the dominant view from within the debate over the nature of mindreading, some theorists have noted the significance of simulation-style accounts of cognition from the Verstehen tradition that predate theory-theory (Heal, 2003).

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