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Modeling self on others: An import theory of subjectivity and selfhood



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Dedicated to the memory of Bruce Bridgeman, erudite scholar, inspiring scientist, constructive advisor.

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ABSTRACT

This paper outlines an Import Theory of subjectivity and selfhood. Import theory claims that subjectivity is initially perceived as a key feature of other minds before it then becomes imported from other minds to own minds whereby it lays the ground for mental selfhood. Import theory builds on perception-production matching, which in turn draws on both representational mechanisms and social practices. Representational mechanisms rely on common coding of perception and production. Social practices rely on action mirroring in dyadic interactions. The interplay between mechanisms and practices gives rise to model self on others. Individuals become intentional agents in virtue of perceiving others mirroring themselves. The outline of the theory is preceded by an introductory section that locates import theory in the broader context of competing approaches, and it is followed by a concluding section that assesses import theory in terms of empirical evidence and explanatory power.

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0. Introduction

This paper outlines what I call an import theory of subjectivity and selfhood. The central claim is that subjectivity is first perceived and understood in others and then imported from others to self, to the effect that individuals model themselves on others.

Import theory combines old ideas concerning the nature of consciousness with recent discoveries concerning the interplay between perception and action. Old ideas pertain to the claim that consciousness subserves major social functions and may even be rooted in sociality (e.g., Baldwin, 1913; Hegel, 1807/1977; Mead, 1934; Smith, 1759/1976; Vygotsky, 1925/1979). Recent discoveries pertain to mechanisms and practices of perception/action-matching that may be seen to instantiate these social functions (e.g., Gordon, 2005; Meltzoff, 2005; Pineda, 2009; Prinz, 2012; Rizzolatti & Sinigaglia, 2008; Schütz-Bosbach & Prinz, 2015).

My argument will take three steps. The first addresses notions of subjectivity and selfhood and discusses their theoretical implications. The second explains how import theory works and what it requires. Finally, the third step discusses how import theory helps to demystify consciousness.

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1. Subjectivity and selfhood

1.1. Conscious experience

Let us first see what we need to explain. What do we mean when we talk about conscious experience? How does such experience come about and what does its conscious character exactly mean? While numerous answers have been suggested to these questions (cf., e.g., Block, Flanagan, & Güzeldere, 1997; Cohen & Schooler, 1997; Shear, 1995), only few have kept an eye on drawing a clear dividing line between description and explanation. A noteworthy exception is offered in Brentano's "Empirical Psychology" (1874/2014). In his discussion on the nature of consciousness, Brentano started from a purely descriptive account of conscious experience that may still serve as a useful starting point today. According to Brentano, conscious experience emerges from mental acts. To explain what counts as a mental act, he used a straightforward example: What actually happens when we hear a sound? What is it exactly that constitutes the conscious nature of this event? According to Brentano, two items are interwoven in this act: the *sound* that we hear and the fact that we *hear* it. However, these two items are not represented in the same manner. The sound is the primary object of the act; hearing, in contrast, its secondary object. Brentano says of this secondary object that it cannot be directly observed in the mental act but nevertheless enters consciousness in another, more indirect form:

"We can observe the sounds we hear, but we cannot observe our hearing of the sounds, for the hearing itself is only apprehended concomitantly in the hearing of sounds."

[Brentano, 1874/2014, p. 99]

This is as far as Brentano goes. Yet, in order to exhaustively characterize the structure of mental acts, we need to go forward another step that we find sketched out by Immanuel Kant. If it is the case that in hearing the tone, not only the tone itself, but its hearing is also implicitly included, then the subject who hears must also be included in the act in a further encapsulation. This is because just as the tone is unimaginable without being heard, so too is hearing unimaginable without a mental self, or subject, who is hearing. Conscious mental acts are therefore characterized by the fact that a mental self, or subject, is implicitly included and, in fact, involved in them. This idea is sketched out in Kant's doctrine of the unity of apperception.

"The '*I think*' must accompany all my representations, for otherwise something would be represented in me which could not be thought; in other words, the representation would either be impossible, or at least be, in relation to me, nothing. [...] All the diversity or manifold content of intuition has, therefore, a necessary relation to the '*I think*', in the subject in which this diversity is found."

[Kant, 1781; 1787/1996, p. 49]

In sum, the mental acts that a person performs *differ from one another* according to their primary objects (hearing a tone, a voice, a melody, etc.) and, naturally, according to their secondary objects (hearing, seeing, thinking, believing, hoping, etc. that something is the case). Yet, *they resemble one another* in virtue of the fact that the same subject is present in the background of all acts. When I hear a tone, the hearing is *my* hearing, when I think about something, it is *my* thoughts, and when I plan to do something, it is *my* intentions that I am aware of. In other words—and now detached from Brentano's act terminology—for the conscious character of mental content, the implicit involvement of the mental self seems to be essential and constitutive. The mental self forms the mutual clip that binds the multifaceted kinds of phenomena of conscious experience.

At a more theoretical level, a descriptive account like this may be rephrased in terms of self-representational approaches to consciousness (Frank, 2015; Kriegel, 2009; Kriegel & Williford, 2006; Musholt, 2015; see also Graziano, 2013; Lacan, 1977, and Silverman, 1996 for similar ideas embedded in entirely different and divergent conceptual frameworks). For these approaches, *intentionality* is the hallmark of conscious experience. This term denotes the fact that conscious experience always implies the experience of a particular kind of access to a particular kind of content (such as hearing a tone, remembering an event, or planning an action).¹ Self-referential approaches posit that intentionality requires self-representation, that is, that it builds on representations that represent both the content they refer to (*the tone*) and the intentional relation entailed in representing that content (*the hearing* of the tone). This is the reflexive sense of self-representation: representations representing themselves. Moreover, since intentional relations always imply, and require, a mental subject, there is a transitive sense of self-representation as well: representations representing the self. While the reflexive and the transitive sense may be conceptually separable (addressing what has been called non-egological vs. egological aspects of self-representation; cf. Gurwitsch, 1941), they are empirically inseparable because reflexive, non-egological self-representation must, by implication, always include transitive, egological self-representation.

¹ *Intentionality* is a tricky term. It has two readings that must not be confused. While the philosophical reading (as referred to here) addresses the general problem of representation of content, the psychological reading addresses the specific problem of voluntary (intentional) control of action and thought. Accordingly, intentionality in the philosophical sense does not imply, or require intentionality in the psychological sense.

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