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Continuing debates on direct social perception: Some notes on Gallagher's analysis of "the new hybrids"

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ABSTRACT

This commentary argues that Gallagher's account of direct social perception has remained underdeveloped in several respects. Gallagher has not provided convincing evidence to support his claim that mindreading is rare in social situations. He and other direct perception theorists have not offered a substantive critique of standard theories of mindreading because they have attacked a much stronger claim about the putative unobservability of mental states than most theories of mindreading imply. To provide a genuine alternative to standard theories of mindreading, the direct perception theorist needs to provide more detailed answers to the following questions: What are the criteria for distinguishing perceptual processes from non-perceptual processes? How exactly does direct social perception function on the subpersonal level? What is the content of direct social perception? How does direct perception theory relate to more recent developments in the mindreading literature?

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1. Introduction

In "The new hybrids: Continuing debates on social cognition" Shaun Gallagher briefly outlines his version of the *direct social perception* (DSP) account as it forms a part of the *interaction theory* (IT) (see e.g. Gallagher, 2004; Gallagher & Zahavi, 2012). IT is a theory of human social cognition, proposed as an alternative to standard theories of mindreading: theory-theory (TT) and simulation theory (ST). IT states that mindreading via theorizing or simulation is unnecessary in most social situations. According to the thesis of DSP, we can directly perceive some mental states of other individuals, paradigmatically their intentions and (basic) emotions. In the context of IT, DSP is understood as an embodied and enactive process in the service of social interaction. Gallagher criticizes what he labels "the new hybrids," characterized as recent attempts to integrate standard theories of mindreading with IT and, in particular, with the thesis of DSP. He argues that a better model for a hybrid approach would be a pluralist one.

In this commentary, I would like to point out some issues in relation to which Gallagher's IT in general, and DSP in particular, would benefit from being developed in more detail. I suggest that more empirical research is required to back up Gallagher's claim that mindreading occurs rarely in social situations. I raise the point that DSP-theorists have not offered a substantive critique of theories of mindreading because they have attacked a much stronger claim about the putative unobservability of mental states than most theories of mindreading actually imply. In order to provide a genuine alternative

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to standard theories of mindreading, a much more detailed explanation of how DSP works on the subpersonal level would need to be worked out. Finally, more needs to be done to relate the DSP view to recent developments in the mindreading literature.

2. How “rarely” do we actually mindread?

Let me start with some thoughts on Gallagher’s critical analysis of the account provided by Michael, Christensen, and Overgaard (2014). Michael et al. argue that it is plausible that in social contexts high-level processes (including mindreading) and low-level processes (such as embodied social responses highlighted by IT) inform each other. Gallagher partly agrees with this proposal, saying that “IT doesn’t deny that higher-order cognitive processing may be involved in many social encounter contexts” (Gallagher, current issue), but he strongly resists the idea that such higher-order processing may typically involve mindreading via theorizing or simulation.¹ Instead he claims that mindreading (in the sense of TT or ST) is “rarely used” in social encounters.

Gallagher and other proponents of IT correctly point out that the assumption that mindreading is ubiquitous in human social cognition, and necessary for human social interaction, is unwarranted. Mainstream research on mindreading has been based mainly on laboratory experiments, such as false belief tasks, which are specifically designed to elicit mindreading. But such experiments cannot possibly tell us how commonly people mindread in real life. The proponents of TT and ST have arguably simply assumed that mindreading is ubiquitous in human social cognition, which has prevented empirical research on how often people actually mindread in real-life social situations. However, it is equally problematic to prematurely buy into the opposite claim, namely that mindreading is rare and hardly plays any role in human social cognition. Unfortunately, this is exactly the claim that Gallagher and the other proponents of IT are making. The problem with any claim about the frequency of mindreading is that it currently remains as speculative as the claim that mindreading is pervasive in human social cognition: at the moment we have no decisive evidence on the matter.² We simply do not know how often and for what purposes people actually engage in mindreading in real life. So far, Gallagher has not provided compelling empirical evidence to back up his theoretical claim that in most social situations, people typically rely on low-level processes (such as DSP) and higher cognitive processes *except for mindreading (in the sense of TT and ST)*. In sum, his claim that mindreading is “rarely used” remains as speculative as the claim that it is ubiquitous in human social cognition.

Ascertaining the frequency of mindreading may or may not be an interesting research aim in its own right but it is clearly an important step toward specifying the role of mindreading in human social cognition. If human social cognition can in most cases be explained by reference to social interaction, DSP and non-mentalistic higher-order cognition as Gallagher suggests, it remains mysterious why the ability to attribute full-blown propositional attitudes like beliefs and desires has evolved in the first place, and what its current function is. The upshot is that it is indeed unwarranted to assume *a priori* that mindreading is as ubiquitous in human social cognition as standard theories of mindreading have arguably assumed, but it is equally unjustified to suppose that mindreading is as peripheral to human social cognition as the proponents of IT tend to claim.

On a more positive note, by suggesting a pluralistic approach in this special issue, Gallagher seems to be moving beyond insisting that IT should be adopted as an alternative to the standard theories of mindreading. In the framework of the pluralistic approach it will hopefully be possible to learn more about the role of both, mentalistic and non-mentalistic social cognitive processes.

3. Interbreeding the standard theories of mindreading with DSP: “new hybrids” or old news?

Whereas Gallagher finds the idea that DSP is compatible with standard theories of mindreading surprising, and labels such accounts “the new hybrids,” several other authors are unlikely to see anything “new” or “hybrid” about this idea (Gallagher, current issue). What is the real issue here? And what, if anything, can a DSP theorist learn from this controversy?

Gallagher argues that authors like Spaulding (in press), Carruthers (current issue), and Lavelle (2012) have not properly understood what DSP amounts to. In his view, these authors interbreed DSP with theory-theory on the assumption that DSP is merely a phenomenological thesis: “DSP is compatible with an inferentialist view as long as one thinks of DSP as merely a characterization of perceptual phenomenology or phenomenal experience, and thinks that all the real inferential action of social cognition is located at the subpersonal level and is inferential.” (Gallagher, current issue). But why do many authors tend to read DSP in a rather thin sense as targeting mainly the perceptual phenomenology of experience? I think the main reason is that DSP has not yet been fully developed as an account of the subpersonal processing underpinning the phenomenology of DSP. Gallagher’s ambition clearly goes beyond defending DSP as just a thesis on the phenomenology of certain social experiences (e.g. apprehending other people’s intentions and emotions) – he wants to rule DSP-TT/ST hybrids out,

¹ Like most authors, I prefer to use the term “mindreading” for mental state attributions irrespective of how the underpinning cognitive processes are specified. On my use of the term, TT, ST and DSP are all theories of mindreading. Gallagher uses the term “mindreading” primarily to refer to mindreading by means of theorizing or simulation.

² Recently, Bryant, Coffey, Povinelli, and Pruett (2013) have carried out a pioneering study using the *experience sampling method* to investigate the frequency of mental state attributions in contrast to behavioral attributions and miscellaneous thoughts. Bohl (2014) proposes a more specific hypothesis concerning the frequency and function of mindreading, which could be tested by the method of *experience sampling*.

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