



## Perceiving mental states



Peter Carruthers

Department of Philosophy, University of Maryland, College Park, MD 20912, United States

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### ABSTRACT

This paper argues that our awareness of the mental states of other agents is often perceptual in character. It draws partly on recent experimental findings concerning perception of animacy and intentionality. But it also emphasizes the unencapsulated nature of perception generally, and argues that concepts (including mental-state concepts) can be bound into the contents of conscious perception. One of the main arguments used in support of this conclusion draws on recent work concerning the nature and contents of working memory.

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### 1. Introduction

Phenomenologically, our awareness of the mental states of other people can often seem immediate. It seems that we can just *see* someone's anger or fear, and our impression that a triangle in an animation display is chasing (trying to catch) a circle can seemingly be part of our perception of the event, not inferred in thought thereafter. Likewise, when someone reaches toward a glass of water we see her as *intending* to pick it up, and when someone is fumbling with a key in a lock we see her as *trying* to open it. Moreover, when people speak, we often seem to *hear* the intent behind their utterances (as joking, ironic, or whatever). And so when someone says to me, "I think the Democrats will keep the Presidency next time", I might hear her as *judging* or *believing* that they will. Or if someone stops me in the street and asks, "Can you tell me the way to the church?", I might hear her as *wanting* to know the church's location. These phenomenological facts don't resolve the issue, of course. Introspection can perhaps tell us of the coincidence in *time* between our conscious perception of an action and our awareness of the mental state that causes the action (although see [Dennett & Kinsbourne, 1992](#)). But it cannot tell us whether that awareness is a component *part* of the perceptual state or not.

In fact, introspection cannot be used to determine whether there exists just one mental event, which is perceptual in nature, and which contains a representation of someone else's mental state, or whether two distinct events co-occur: a conscious perceiving of the action, and a conscious judgment about the mental state underlying the perceived action. Sometimes introspection can determine that a judgment occurs *separately*, of course—if there is a noticeable time-lag between one's perception of the event and one's awareness of the underlying mental state, for example, or if one's judgment is expressed in inner speech or in some other sensory-like event that is distinct from the perceptual state itself. But if one assumes that judgments can also occur consciously in the absence of such "sensory clothing", then there need be nothing to signal the separation of those judgments from the perceptual states that ground them. (In Section 5 we will return to consider whether or not this assumption *should* be allowed.) One will merely be aware of a perception of someone's actions and

E-mail address: [pcarruth@umd.edu](mailto:pcarruth@umd.edu)

be aware of a judgment about her mental state, without anything to indicate whether or not the latter forms a constitutive part of the former.

What seems undeniable is that judgments about people's mental states can occur consciously (at least in the *access-conscious* sense; see Block, 1995),<sup>1</sup> and that they can do so in the absence of inner speech or any other such medium of representation. In fact one's "seeing" or "hearing" someone as possessing a mental state can have all of the hallmarks of a globally broadcast access-conscious event. In such cases one's awareness of someone's mental state can give rise to long-term memories, can issue in affective reactions, can guide one's verbal report of what one sees or hears, and can immediately influence one's planning and decision making. A lot may then turn on the question whether it is possible for amodal conceptual judgments of this sort to be conscious *without* being a part of some globally broadcast perceptual or sensory-like state. If they cannot, then it will follow that the mentalizing judgment in such cases must be a part of the perceptual state itself. We will return to this issue in Section 5.

The phenomenology of perceiving mental states has been taken at face value and emphasized especially by philosophers critical of both theory-theory and simulationist approaches to our understanding of other minds (Gallagher, 2001; Hutto, 2004). But the grounds for these criticisms are puzzling. Even if the perceptual character of our awareness of others' mental states in such cases is granted, it is far from clear why theory-theorists, in particular, should have any problem. For why cannot theory-theorists endorse the perceptibility of at least some types of mental state? Indeed, one might think that *any* adequate account of our perception of mental states (assuming that the latter is real) would need to appeal to a set of tacit inferences underlying such perceptions, which might then qualify as a form of theory-theory.

Admittedly, theory-theorists often introduce their work by emphasizing that mental states are abstract and imperceptible, generally by way of motivating the need for theory (Gopnik & Wellman, 1992). But one thing this might mean is just that mental properties cannot be *simply* seen (Dretske, 1979). That is, they cannot be seen independently of concepts and acquired knowledge of the world. (In this sense, the property of being a laptop computer cannot be simply seen, either.) Moreover, even if such statements by theory-theorists *are* intended to rule out perception of mental states altogether, it is far from clear that there is anything about theory-theory, as such, that requires such a stance. It may be that the statements in question are an optional extra, and that theory-theorists can just as easily accept that mental states are perceptible.

Indeed, one can ask: How *else* could one account for perception of mental states *except* through commitment to some form of tacit theory? How do writers such as Gallagher (2001) and Hutto (2004) think they can claim mental states to be perceptible without being led straight to a form of theory-theory? Gallagher (2001) is apt to stress that mental states like emotions and goals are *directly expressed* in bodily actions. So they can be perceived as directly as those actions themselves. This is implausible, however. There are no one-to-one correspondences between mental states and behavior. The actions and facial expressions that manifest any given mental state are always context-sensitive, and vary depending on the agent's other mental states and circumstances. As Smith (2010) points out, however, the true source of the belief that mental states can be perceived without relying on tacit theory may lie in the influence of Husserl (1973), specifically his account of what makes the unseen components of objects nevertheless *co-present* in perception. These views find their contemporary development in *enactivist* accounts of perceptual content (Noë, 2004).

According to enactivists, the contents of our perceptual states are constituted by a body of sensorimotor knowledge, or *know how*. Seeing a book as having a back as well as a front, for example, or seeing a complete cat as moving along behind a slotted fence, consists in one's ability to anticipate how one's perceptual experience would change if one were to pick up the book, or walk around the fence. This meshes nicely with the stress that Gallagher (2001) and Hutto (2004) place on *second-person* engagement with other people as being the fundamental mode of mindreading. When one is interacting with others, one is continually forming expectations about what will happen next, about how the other person will react if one responds in one way rather than another, and so on. Perception of the other person's mental states can then be said to be constituted by such sensorimotor knowledge, without needing to be grounded in any sort of tacit theory.

The arguments offered in support of enactivism persistently conflate *cause* and *constitution*, however (Block, 2005). At best they establish that perceptual contents both give rise to, and are influenced by, sensorimotor knowledge; they do not establish that they are constituted by such knowledge. For instance, one prominent argument used by Noë (2004) is that the perceptual contents of people wearing spatially-inverting lenses will right themselves after a few days, *but only if the subject is allowed to move around and act* while wearing them. What this shows is that visual contents are causally influenced by feedback loops linking perception, planning, and action; it does not begin to show that they are constituted by such loops. Likewise, although one knows what a nickel that one sees from an angle will look like when picked up, this need not *constitute* one's seeing it as round. Rather, seeing it (representing it) as a round nickel enables one to *predict* the nature of one's experience when viewing it from other angles.

In any case, however, even enactivism cannot obviate the need for tacit theory. Suppose we grant that one can have sensorimotor know-how with respect to other people, especially when interacting with those people face-to-face. And suppose we grant that this can constitute perception of the mental states of others. Still we need to explain how these sensorimotor expectancies get caused by the details of the behavior of the other person in a given context. We need to explain why someone will, in one context, anticipate one action, yet in a subtly different context, or with subtle differences in the other's

<sup>1</sup> My own view is that while concepts—including mental-state concepts—can be component parts of access-conscious perceptual states, they never make a constitutive contribution to the phenomenal properties of such states (Veillet & Carruthers, 2011). This is because only nonconceptual content gives rise to the so-called "hard problems" that are characteristic of phenomenal consciousness.

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