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Consciousness and Cognition

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/concog

Is a modular cognitive architecture compatible with the direct perception of mental states? ☆

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 30 October 2014

Revised 22 January 2015

Accepted 23 January 2015

Available online xxxx

Keywords:

Social cognition

Mindreading

Direct perception

Modularity

Computational theory of mind

ABSTRACT

The Direct Social Perception Hypothesis maintains that we can perceive other people's psychological states. Furthermore, it claims that doing so does not require any cognitive process that is simulational or theory-like, putting it in sharp contrast with mainstream accounts of social cognition. This paper contrasts the DSPH against the modular account of mindreading as proposed by Peter Carruthers and H. Clark Barrett. It maintains that the modularity view can respond to the challenges levelled by the DSPH, and that the positions are not as distinct as they originally appear. Finally, the paper discusses the role of non-folk psychological state concepts in our perceptions of other people.

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1. Introduction

The Direct Social Perception Hypothesis (DSPH) maintains that we often perceive other people's psychological states and that doing so does not require any cognitive mechanisms in addition to those which facilitate perception. The hypothesis in its current form is associated with Gallagher's work (2005, 2008a, 2008b), Gallagher and Zahavi (2008), and this paper examines a recent presentation of the view in Gallagher and Varga (2014). The DSPH was originally introduced as a counter to simulation and theory-based accounts of mindreading, claiming that such positions were committed to the view that mental states were unobservable. In the light of what has been written, particularly by psychologists working in social cognition, such a characterisation is wholly understandable; for example, Wellman, an advocate of scientific-theory-theory, writes that 'mental states, such as beliefs and desires, are private, internal and not observable in others.' (1992, p. 107).¹ The most natural interpretation of this claim is that the content of our perceptual experiences does not include other people's psychological states. To use Gallagher's terminology, it implies that our perception of others is 'not-so-smart'. A direct perception experience which is 'not-so-smart' is one where very little information about the object is available in the content of the perceptual experience. Gallagher offers the example of opening his eyes to see 'a certain unrecognized red mass with a specific shape just in front of me' (2008a, p. 536). A smart direct perception is one where Gallagher opens his eyes and sees his car (ibid). One can thus interpret Wellman as saying that our perceptions of others are 'not-so-smart', in that while they can provide an experience of a person behaving, they are unable to provide information about the other's psychological states. And this is indeed how Gallagher and Varga (hence G&V) interpret such claims:

☆ This article is part of a special issue of this journal on Social Perception.

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¹ Such claims are common-place; for more examples see Lavelle (2012).

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.concog.2015.01.017>

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[...] both Theory-theory and simulation theory subscribe to the ‘principle of imperceptibility’ and hold that when we perceive others, we perceive mere bodily activity, patterns of mechanical movements that warrant the inference or suggest the correct simulation to the other’s intentional states. I may register what the other person does, but until I call forth some theory, or until I run a simulation routine, I seem not to have any sense of what that person is up to or what the behavior means.

[2014, p. 186]

If the imperceptibility principle means that other people’s mental states cannot be a part of our perceptual experience of them, and if theory-theory and simulation are committed to this principle, then theory-theory and simulation face a significant problem. For this is one case in cognitive science where experience counts for something, and our experiences of other people are not such that we see patterns of behaviour and then engage in a simulation or theoretical process to bring forth their psychological states. If simulation- and theory-theory maintain that the processes in question happen on a personal level then they are scuppered. While it may be the case that we sometimes have to consciously engage in a process of deduction or simulation because the other’s behaviour appears odd to us, this does not characterise the majority of our social interactions with others. If mindreading accounts are to maintain that mental states are unobservable, then they need to explain how this can be so while mental states remain part of our phenomenological experience of others.

In response, advocates of information rich² (broadly theory-like) accounts of mindreading have claimed that they are not committed to the imperceptibility principle if it is to be interpreted as a phenomenological claim.³ For example, Peter Carruthers writes,

‘We don’t just see someone’s arm moving in the direction of a transparent object, we see her as *reaching for a drink*; and we don’t just hear a stream of phonemes when someone talks, but hear him as *wanting to know the way to the church*; and so on and so forth.’

[2011, p. 48]

On this view other people’s psychological states can be a part of our perceptual experience of them, be that hearing or seeing their intent. Our perceptual experiences of others are ‘smart’, to use Gallagher’s phrase.

If both proponents of the DSPH and of theory-based mindreading views agree that other people’s mental states can be part of our perceptual experience of them, then are they still in conflict? G&V maintain that they are, due to differences in how the sub-personal processes facilitating these experiences are characterised. Critically, they claim that mindreading accounts are committed to ‘extra-perceptual inferences’ at a sub-personal level, in contrast to the DSPH which posits no such inferences. This paper challenges G&V’s presentation of the distinction between the DSPH and mindreading views. In particular, it will focus on the contrast between the DSPH and the modular mindreading account as presented by Peter Carruthers and H. Clark Barrett. Although advocates of the DSPH consider their target to be much broader than this, the modular mindreading account serves as an appropriate foil for two reasons: first, it is one of the most detailed accounts of mindreading available (see Carruthers, 2006, 2011, 2013); and secondly, it captures all those features DSPH advocates wish to challenge with their ‘smart perception’ account; in other words, modular mindreading epitomises the kind of theory of social cognition that the DSPH is purported to oppose.

2. DSPH vs. extra-perceptual inferences

Both the DSPH and theory-based views agree that other’s psychological states can be part of the contents of our perceptual experience of them; the disagreement now lies in whether the sub-personal processes that facilitate such experiences draw on any cognitive processes that are not perceptual ones. I will not be addressing the question of whether ‘inference’ properly describes any of our sub-personal cognitive processes: this debate merits more attention than it can be given here. Instead, the focus will be on the coherence of G&V’s concept of an ‘extra-perceptual’ cognitive process.

2.1. Sub-personal smart perception

G&V characterise smart perception as follows:

In the case of smart social perception, the brain actively contributes – more precisely, the organism, including the brain, is engaged and has something to contribute to the shaping of perception. Perception involves complex, dynamic processes at a sensory-motor level – but these processes are part of an enactive engagement or response of the whole organism, rather than additional, extra-perceptual, inferential or simulative processes.

[G&V 2014, p. 192]

² Information rich accounts of mindreading are those which maintain that the cognitive system contains representations of many inferential rules which describe how psychological states relate to each other and behaviours. There is a further debate between scientific theory-theorists and modularity theorists about how this information is acquired. The relevant contrast is with information poor accounts, like the simulation theory, which claims that few rules need be represented. For more on this distinction see Goldman (1992).

³ Similar claims may also have been made by advocates of the simulation theory. The focus of this paper is, however, on information rich accounts.

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