

Lecture 01: Social Cognition

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1. The Topic

‘For humans, like many animal species, survival depends on effective social functioning. Social skills facilitate our access to sustenance, protection and mates, and socially adept individuals tend to be healthier and live longer. However, social interaction in humans is exceedingly complex compared with that in other animal species: representations of internal somatic [action-guiding] states, knowledge about the self, perceptions of others and interpersonal motivations are carefully orchestrated to support skilled social functioning. This complex set of processes [...] is broadly referred to as social cognition’ (Amodio & Frith 2006, p. 268)

1.1. [Working definition v1]

Social cognition: The processes involved in orchestrating representations of actions and mental states to support skilled social functioning.

1.2. [Working definition v2]

Social cognition: cognition of actions and mental states which supports social functioning.

1.3. aside: Function of social cognition

Shaping minds? (see Zawidzki 2013)

‘Social cognition is ... primarily a means to be connected ... with others, enjoying rather dreading one another, overcoming tensions, gaining respect, building trust, getting our ways.’ (Rochat 2009, p. 303)

‘in physics there is a mind at work making as much sense as possible of a subject matter that is being treated as brainless; in the psychological case, there is a brain at each end.’ (Davidson 1995, p. 12)

2. Radical Interpretation

How in principle could someone infer facts about actions and minds from non-mental evidence.

Facts about actions and minds: for example facts about what someone does, thinks, desires, feels, or sees.

Non-mental evidence: facts about events and states of affairs that could be known without knowing what any particular individual believes, desires, intends, ...

3. The Intentional Stance

‘the intentional stance ...

‘first you decide to treat the object whose behavior is to be predicted as a rational agent;

‘then you figure out what beliefs that agent ought to have, given its place in the world and its purpose.

‘Then you figure out what desires it ought to have, on the same considerations,

‘and finally you predict that this rational agent will act to further its goals in the light of its beliefs’ (Dennett 1987, p. 17)

‘one rule for attributing beliefs in the intentional strategy is this: attribute as beliefs all the truths relevant to the system’s interests (or desires) that the system’s experience to date has made available’ (Dennett 1987, p. 18)

‘We attribute the desires the system ought to have. That is the fundamental rule. It dictates, on a first pass, that we attribute the familiar list of highest, or most basic, desires to people: survival, absence of pain, food, comfort, procreation, entertainment.’ (Dennett 1987, p. 20)

(b) *The metaphysics* ‘any object—or as I shall say, any system—whose behavior is well predicted by this strategy is in the fullest sense of the word a

believer. What it is to be a true believer is to be an intentional system, a system whose behavior is reliably and voluminosly predictable via the intentional strategy.' (Dennett 1987, p. 15)

4. Social Cognition vs Radical Interpretation

What is the relation between an account of radical interpretation and a theory of social cognition?

'Do people actually use this strategy? Yes, all the time.' (Dennett 1987, p. 21)

'[a]ll understanding of the speech [and thoughts] of another involves radical interpretation' (Davidson 1973, p. 125)

'The approach to the problems of meaning, belief and desire which I have outlined is not, I am sure it is clear, meant to throw any direct light on how in real life we come to understand each other' (Davidson 1980, p. 12)

Marr (1982, p. 22ff) distinguishes:

- computational description—What is the thing for and how does it achieve this?
- representations and algorithms—How are the inputs and outputs represented, and how is the transformation accomplished?
- hardware implementation—How are the representations and algorithms physically

realised?

A theory of radical interpretation is supposed to provide a computational description of social cognition.

5. Objections to the Intentional Stance

Does the Intentional Stance actually describe how it would be possible, even in principle, to infer facts about minds and actions from evidence that can be described without knowing anything about the particular actions, beliefs, desires and other mental states of any individual?

Objection 1: The Intentional Stance provides no way to distinguish different kinds of errors.

Objection 2: The Intentional Stance provides no adequate way to distinguish one subject from another.

References

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