

PART ONE: PHILOSOPHY AND THE OTHER MINDS

As we have no immediate experience of what other men feel, we can form no idea of the manner in which they are affected, but by conceiving what we ourselves should feel in the like situation.

- Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*

1 The Other Minds



assbach. (2007): Hiding from the Hidden. Salvation via Angst. <http://flickr.com/photos/assbach/440869941>

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1.1 The Problem of Other Minds

As Aristotle pointed out a long time ago, we are *by nature* political animals, i.e., animals that live together, such as the bee, the wasp or the crane. If it's in our nature, then we must expect our minds to exhibit some proficiency in social cognition, such as social perception, social reasoning, social learning, communication, knowing what others think, managing complex information structures related to social phenomena such as "Phoebe thinks that Monica knows that Phoebe knows that Monica and Chandler are together". These processes and cognitions presuppose that we know that others have a mind. But how do we *know* (if knowledge is justified true belief) that others have a mind and what they have in mind?

It could be an inference to the best explanation: our best theory of mind (either intuitive or scientific) may imply that there are no reasons to doubt that other things that look like minded human beings are in fact, minded human beings. Similarly, it could be an analogical inference. Both are interwoven here in David Hume's argument to attribute reasons to animals:

We are conscious, that we ourselves, in adapting means to ends, are guided by reason and design (...) When therefore we see other creatures, in millions of instances, perform like actions, and direct them to the ends, all our principles of reason and probability carry us with an invincible force to believe the existence of a like cause. (A Treatise of Human Nature, Sect. xvi.)

Or it could be a conceptual link. It is analytical of, or deeply entrenched in the grammar of, or a rule in the language-game of mental state attribution, that the link between behavior and mental states is not inductive nor an entailment, it is *conceptual*.

In any case, the problem is interesting for many disciplines. Philosophy of mind wonders how social understanding is possible; epistemology ask how this knowledge could be justified; social science and the philosophy of social science question whether the knowledge of other is something specific to human sciences or if it's in continuity with other sciences; cognitive science investigate the mechanisms by which we come to this knowledge. In any domain, the central controversy, as Stueber puts it, is

whether our epistemic access to other minds proceeds in a manner radically different from that by which we acquire knowledge about other domains of investigation, or whether it is structurally similar to such methods (Stueber, p.2)

They are two generic answers to this question because there are two generic ways of understanding other minds. Stueber gives the following example: how can we know whether two people are the same height? We can use two types of standards: an *external* standard such as a measuring tape or an *internal* standard, i.e., using yourself as a standard when you stand back to back with someone else. Similarly, in interpreting a text, a sentence or an action, we may use internal or external standards. In the first case, we put ourselves in the actor's shoes, and use our "capacity to transform ourselves imaginatively into an occupant of the other person's point of view" (Stueber); we change place in fancy as Adam Smith formulated it (Theory of Moral Sentiments, I, I, i). I will call it (following Stueber) the *engaged* conception. In the second case (the *detached* conception), we do not use our ability to reconstruct the target's (the agent we

interpret) point of view, but recruit some knowledge and apply it to the situation. The first one thus suggests that there is something peculiar to social understanding, something that is not found in other domains.

1.2 The Egocentric Conception

The first conception could be called egocentric, empathic, first-person, subjective, engaged, or understanding-based. It has roots in the romanticist view of the world and foundational debates in hermeneutics and social science. Until the 17th and 18th century, hermeneutics (the theory of interpretation) was a logic of interpretation and argumentation, a set of tools for reasoning that complemented basic logical skills. In the 19th century, it shifted focus from the logic of interpretation to the process of interpretation (e.g. how do we locate a text in an historical narrative, a speech in a religious ceremony, etc.) and the justification of interpretation. These questions led Dilthey to induce a psychological turn in the theory of interpretation: in philology and all the human/social sciences, we must use a particular method that is not found in other domains of enquiry: empathy. Contrary to Newton or other philosophers who wanted to introduce Newtonism (i.e. mechanistic and nomological explanations) in the social domains, Dilthey argued that human matters are to be *understood*, not *explained*: when we want to understand why Napoleon wanted to invade Russia or what Shamanic beliefs represent for a certain Native American cultures, we cannot evoke laws of nature or mechanisms (such as associationist psychological mechanisms), but *reasons*. Empathy-based interpretation, or re-enactment, is at the root of all human/social science. Whereas natural science has a nomological mode of explanation (a subsumption under a law), social science tries to reconstruct the holistic structures of the reasons; understanding a sentence, a text, or an action requires the “big picture” (context, society, history, etc.). We understand Napoleon’s decision and a Native American belief by showing the network of beliefs, desires and cultural factors that gives meaning to a particular action or sentence.

The engaged conception thus emphasizes the peculiarity of understanding other minds; we see others as minded *and* as same-minded, we use our knowledge of ourselves as minded agents to model someone else’s mind, a peculiar form of social reasoning, different to the reasoning employed when we predict/explain physical phenomena. This conception has a normative and a descriptive dimension. The normative dimension is a suggestion that empathy is an epistemically central process for understanding other minds; i.e., that empathy can give us *knowledge*, justified true beliefs, about what others thinks. On its descriptive side, the engaged conception construes empathy as an inner imitation for understanding other minds: interpreting requires that the mental process by which one *produces* an action/utterance are the same process that are recruited by the *comprehension* of that action/utterance. As Ryle argued, “the knowledge that is required for understanding intelligent performances of a specific kind is some degree of competence in performances of that kind” (1949, 51). Understanding is a skill rather than a theory, knowing-how rather than knowing-that.

Empathy can have an epistemic function (knowing what others think, feel, etc.), an evaluative function (approving or disapproving others’ reactions) and a rational function: the development of self-criticism by recognizing the opinions of others about myself.

One can distinguish *basic* and *reenactive* empathy. Basic empathy is the quasi-perceptual inference to the attribution of mental states, such as when we know *that* someone is angry; the

other one is a deliberative reconstruction of reasons, such as when we know *why* she is angry. Empathy is thus not just a fast, automatic and intuitive process, but also a more complex form of reasoning by which we reconstruct someone else's perspective and her network of reasons, beliefs and desires.

Sympathy is a related construct. While empathy is primarily an epistemic notion, sympathy is an epistemic and moral notion. Since Adam Smith and David Hume, it refers to the connection between acting morally and the intuition (or perception, or imagination) of the pain and pleasure of others. It could be described as a *concern* about other minds, rather than the *knowledge* of other minds. Sympathy, or "fellow-feelings" has a central role in social understanding: "we can form no idea of the manner in which [other persons] are affected, but by conceiving what we ourselves should feel in the like situation." (TMS, I, I, i). It is also a normative notion, because in sympathy, we also approve or disapprove of others' reactions; we also assess each other's intellectual and affective judgment according to our feelings. It is thus a convenient judgmental tool, the only one we have, according to Smith:

I judge of your sight by my sight, of your ear by my ear, of your reason by my reason, of your resentment by my resentment, of your love by my love. I neither have, nor can have, any other way of judging about them. (I, I iii)

The main problem that face the engage conceptions are the following:

1. How to justify empathic information? is it knowledge?
2. How to reconcile it with complex talks like a discussions about two characters?
3. What if we don't always put ourselves in others' shoes?

1.3 The Detached Conception

The second conception could be called non-egocentric (allocentric), theoretical, third-person, objective, detached, or explanation-based. Its principal feature is to construe our knowledge of other mind not as some sort of simulation skill or re-enactive process, but as the application of an intuitive, commonsense psychological theory.

Sellars ask us to imagine fictional humans speaking a language limited to the "public properties of public objects" (XII). They can only point what is perceptible to everybody. They can tell you have a red shirt, but not that they "believe" that you have a red shirt, or that they "want" to have a shirt like yours. What would this language require in order for its locutors to be able to express "inner", unobservable mental episodes? In order to be able to talk about mental states, this language and these individuals need an intuitive *theory*. Theories are not confined to scientific research. If a theory is a body of structured knowledge about phenomena and their cause, then we explain empirical phenomena with similar epistemic resources. As Sellars puts it:

science is continuous with common sense, and the ways in which the scientist seeks to explain empirical phenomena are refinements of the ways in which plain men, however crudely and schematically, have attempted to understand their environment and their fellow men since the dawn of intelligence. (Sellars, XIII)

The detached conception sees the interpretation of action as an explanatory process, similar to the explanation of other phenomena. While the engaged conception see interpretation

as having a peculiar operational mode, empathy, the detached conception see it as an instance of a more general capacity, where theoretical knowledge and information about a context are integrated so as to produce an explanation. A theory requires certain cognitive resources not necessarily involved in empathy: a certain representational format (structured network of propositions) and a certain inferential mode (inferences aimed at explaining a phenomena). Theories seem to require a faculty of judgment distinct from sensation, perception, emotions or imagination (all aspects of general perceptive capabilities): contrary to Adam Smith who saw sympathy as the only mean by which we can understand and assess each other, the detached conception argues instead that perception or imagination is unable to represent our knowledge of other minds. As Descartes argued, our knowledge of things does not come from perception or imagination, but rather from judgment. I can imagine a *pentagon*, but not a *chiliogon* (1000 sides): the difference between them comes from my propositional knowledge that a pentagon has 5 sides and that a chiliogon has 1000 sides. This reasoning applies to other humans as well:

what do I see from the window beyond hats and cloaks that might cover artificial machines, whose motions might be determined by springs ? But I judge that there are human beings from these appearances, and thus I comprehend, by the faculty of judgment alone that is in the mind, what I believed I saw with my eyes (Second Meditation)

This theory, or folk-psychology, is a set of common sense “platitudes”: obvious, shared, intuitive generalizations which are common knowledge amongst us, such as: that people do not like pain, that folk believe and desire, etc. This intuitive theory is similar to folk physics or folk biology: it is a non-scientific version. It is a “theory of mind implicit in our everyday talk about mental states (...) remarks linking sensory experiences to mental states” (Ravenscroft, 2004; see also Lewis 1972)

We’ve seen that the engaged conception can be a theory of mental process (we interpret by reconstructing) and a theory of social-scientific inquiry (human beings are not studied like the rest of the natural world). Similarly, the detached conception can be construed as such. As a theory of mental process, it states that interpretation is the application of and intuitive psychological theory that does not requires an egocentric perspective. As a theory of social-scientific enquiry, the detached conception is close to naturalism: it does not see social sciences as a separated domain of enquiry that requires a particular methodology such as re-enactment, but stresses instead the continuity of social science with natural science. From Hume to the Logical Positivists, proponents of the detached conception tried to bring natural-scientific methodology in social science. Newton established a new standard of rigor and simplicity in explanation, and many attempts to naturalize social science can be understood as attempts to bring Newtonian methodology (finding simple laws expressed that explain and predict a lot of phenomena) in this field. Empathic understanding, for proponents of the continuity between natural and social science, is not a particular methodology specific to the former, but a convenient tool, a useful heuristic whose utility lies in its ability to lead to general scientific laws about human behavior (see Hempel & Oppenheim, 1948). As Neurath (one of the member of the influent Circle of Vienna) puts it:

Empathy, understanding (Verstehen) and the like may help the research worker, but they enter the totality of scientific statements as little as does a good cup of coffee which also furthers a scholar in his work’ (Neurath, 1931, p. 357).

The detached conception face the following problems

Who says belief-desires are central?

Who says we use theory?

Who says this theory is descriptive/predictive and not normative?

What about character traits attributions? conscious states, etc?

Do we really have a theory that says that *if someone cries, then she must be sad* and apply this theory when we see people crying, or is there a more basic mode of perception involved here?

1.4 Comparisons

The two conceptions presented here (the engaged and the detached) are in fact two generic families—not always exclusive—of theory of interpretation and social cognition. They were characterized broadly because each individual philosopher might not fit squarely in one family. One could, however, identify certain features that are typically associated with each family. The following table illustrates what proponents of each conception tend to adopt, regarding the proper conduct of social-scientific investigation and the nature of the mental process of interpretation. Each of these topics can be divided in sub-topics:

Philosophy of Social Science

Epistemic goal

What is the goal of the study of human beings and their intentional productions? To reconstruct their meaning, to locate them in a web of belief (understanding) or is it the same epistemic goal that all science shares? (explanation)

Unit of analysis

What should figure in interpretation: reasons or causes? Mental contents and representations or causal entities?

Nature of social/human science

Is social science continuous with or distinct from natural science?

Mode of enquiry

In interpreting text and people, should we re-enact their reasons, or subsume them under general theories?

Mental Processes

Perspective

Do we interpret from a first-person, egocentric or a third-person, allocentric perspective?

Cognitive mechanism

Do we use a simulation skill or an intuitive theory?

Scope of the mechanism

Does the mechanism process only social information (domain- specific) or is it a mechanism that can be activated in other domains? (domain-general)

The following table illustrates the typical views of each conception:

Features	Engaged Conception	Detached Conception
<i>Philosophy of Social/Human Science</i>		
Epistemic mode	Understanding	Explanation
Unit of analysis	Reasons	Reasons and Causes
Nature of social/human science regarding the other science	Exceptionalism	Continuism
Mode of enquiry	Re-enactement	Theoretical reasoning
<i>Mental Processes</i>		
Perspective	Egocentric Subjective	Allocentric Objective
Cognitive mechanism	Simulation skill (<i>knowing-how</i>)	Intuitive theory (<i>knowing-that</i>)
Scope of the mechanism (bold indicate a preference)	Domain- specific /general	Domain-specific/ general

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