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THE DIRECTIONAL ORIENTATION OF INTERPERSONAL PERCEPTIONS

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A directional understanding of human being is not just supported by evidence of our own agency, persistence, and plasticity. It is also supported by evidence that we have a natural capacity, and tendency, to see directions in others. In other words, when we look at the actions of others, we do not see just ‘an undifferentiated series of motions through space’ (Woodward, Sommerville, & Guajardo, 2001, p. 151). Rather, we perceive a direction behind their behaviours: we hypothesise intentions, desires, and goals. Dennett (1987) writes that we approach each other as *intentional systems*: a tendency that is so habitual and effortless that it is easily overlooked. Gibbs Jr (2001) states:

[T]here is a tremendous body of evidence supporting the idea that people automatically seek out the m-intentions [meaning intentions] of others in understanding language, nonverbal gestures, and various kinds of human actions. These studies generally suggest that recovery of what another person intends to do significantly structures our understanding of people’s actions. (p. 108)

Similarly, Moskowitz (2009) writes:

Early researchers examining human inference about other humans specified one guiding principle of interpersonal perception: We attempt to infer the goals of others. We do so perhaps without thinking about it, we do so without necessarily knowing the rules we follow that provide us with inferences about intent, and we do so all the time, whenever we encounter another person in whom we anticipate (or observe) an action, and with whom we may expect an interaction that calls for us to produce behaviour of our own. Humans are creatures of *goal inference*. Why infer goals? Because goals provide for us meaning about why other people act in the way they do. Goal inferences define for us what we have seen and allow us to predict what will likely happen next. (p. 6)

My daughter, for instance, is very slow getting up for school this morning, and I am thinking, ‘Is she wanting to miss classes?’ ‘Is there something she’s upset about and wants to talk through?’ Here, I am not just perceiving my daughter in a ‘static’ sense: in terms of where she is at, solely in the here-and-now., rather, I am understanding her behaviour within a wider temporal context: from where she has been to where she may want to go.

This is not to suggest that people see directions in everything that others do. For instance, a statement like, ‘Anne is sweating’ was rated by research participants as relatively low in intentionality (1.37 on a 0 [*not at all*] to 7 [*completely*] scale) (Malle & Knobe, 1997, p. 104). Interestingly, raters showed a great deal of agreement in how intentional they believed a behaviour was. Similarly, if my daughter said she was feeling unwell, I would not see it as intentional. But then again... the tendency to see directions in the actions of others might swiftly come to the fore: ‘What is she trying to do?’ ‘Where is she trying to get to?’ Our reading of directions gives us the greatest

capacity to intuit and predict the behaviours of others; but it may also serve as the basis for distrust of the other and, ultimately, paranoia.

Dennett (1987, p. 91) goes on to make the point that this tendency to interpret behaviours in terms of directions is something we can turn on ourselves. That is, we have a tendency to understand our own behaviours in terms desires, intentions, and goals—even if, on many occasions, these interpretations may not be particularly accurate. Dennett writes:

[E]ach of us is in most regards a sort of inveterate auto-psychologist, effortlessly *inventing* intentional interpretations of our own actions in an inseparable mix of confabulation, retrospective self-justification, and (on occasion, no doubt) good theorizing. (p. 91)

This capacity to read the behaviours of others in terms of their intentions seems to start at a very young age, suggesting that it may have an innate basis. In a classic study, Meltzoff (1995) showed that 18-month-old infants who observed an adult failing at a task (for instance, pulling apart a toy dumbbell) will imitate what the adult was attempting to do (i.e., successfully pulling apart the toy dumbbell) rather than their actual behaviour. This indicates that the 18 months old could ‘read’ the intentions of the adult, and ascribed this greater importance than the actual observed action. Meltzoff writes, ‘It was as if children “Saw through” the surface behaviour to the intended act or goal’ (p. 846). Fascinatingly, when the infants saw a machine do the same thing (i.e., fail at an action), they were much less likely to re-enact the completed action. This suggests that, by 18 months of age, human beings recognise that ‘Intentions and goals are the types of things that are used to explain the behaviour of persons, not things’ (Meltzoff, 1995, p. 846).

In another fascinating study, infants watched a person reach over a barrier and grasp an object (Wellman & Phillips, 2001). Then the barrier was removed, and they were shown someone either reach the object directly, or else reach over indirectly to the object, as they did when the barrier was there. The question was this: which of these two conditions would the infants look at longer, given that infants tend to spend more time looking at novel stimuli. The experimenters found that, for 12-month-olds, looking times were greater for the indirect reach than the direct reach. What this suggests is that, when the infants saw the original reach for the object, they ‘read’ it in terms of the person wanting the object. Hence, they were not that interested in the person reaching (directly) for the object again. However, the indirect reach for the object—even though the same movement as they had seen before—was more interesting because it seemed a novel action.

Children as young as 18-months-old also seem to be able to recognise that the desires of others may be different from their own (Repacholi & Gopnik, 1997). In this study, the infants tasted two snacks, broccoli and goldfish crackers, and then watched an adult taste them, and either go ‘mm’ to the broccoli and ‘ew’ to the crackers, or vice versa. The adult then held her hand halfway between the bowls and asked for some

more (without specifying which they wanted more of). Of course, the infants liked the crackers more; so the question was, if the adults expressed greater liking for the broccoli, would the infants respond on the basis of the adult's expressed preference, or would they 'project' onto the adult their own preference for crackers. Here, the researchers found that the 18-month-old could, indeed, recognise the adult's preference for broccoli, even if it ran against their own preference for crackers. By contrast, however, 14-month-olds acted egocentrically, giving the adult whatever food they themselves preferred.

An understanding of the directions of another, then, does seem to develop over time. However, studies suggest that, by 6 months of age, infants may be able to 'detect certain instances of intentional action, and they attend to the aspects of the action that are critical for understanding the specific intentions behind' (Woodward et al., 2001, p. 155). And, again, this interpretation seems applied only to human behaviours—6-month-olds do not habituate to actions by inanimate objects in the same way.

Research also shows that children generally find it easier to infer motivational states, such as desires, as compared with beliefs (Moses, 2001). So, for instance, an understanding that another child 'wants' a toy may precede an understanding that they 'like' the toy or perceives it as heavy. Perhaps this is because the directions of others has a more immediate impact on us than what goes on 'in their heads'. It does not really matter to one child, for instance, whether another child sees the toy as heavy; but if the other child wants it (and they do too), it becomes a much more pressing concern. Closely, related to this, it may be that desires are nonrepresentational, they are what the child sees, whereas belief states require the capacity for more abstract thinking (Goldman, 2001).

Consistent with this, in very young children, actions are most frequently and typically explained in terms of desires (Wellman & Phillips, 2001). For instance, 3- and 4-year-olds were presented with the scenario that 'Jane went to preschool and saw that they were having apple juice for snack. She was very happy. Why was she so happy?' (Wellman & Banerjee, 1991). Typically, children responded with intentional explanations such as 'She wants apple juice,' rather than more situational accounts, such as 'apple juice is good' (pp. 131–132). And although children do not use such terms as 'intend to', 'on purpose', or 'mean' until about 3-5 years old, the term 'want' emerges around 18 months old (Wellman & Banerjee, 1991) and becomes a common feature of the toddler's language (as every parent or carer knows). For instance:

Ross (3 years, 2 months): I wanted it to be a sunday but it didn't.

Adult: What? Sunday? You wanted it to be a Sunday, but it wasn't.

Ross: No, no. I wanted it to be a sun day, 'cause the sun didn't come out.

Adult: Oh, you wanted it to be a sunny day.

Ross: I wanted to be sun. (Wellman & Banerjee, 1991, p. 132)

At an early age, however, children do not seem to make clear distinction between such aspects of the directional arc as desires (e.g., ‘I want the toy’) and intentions (‘I am going to grab the toy’) (Astington, 2001; Moses, 2001). Moses writes that children of three years old and younger have an ‘amorphous, global concept that fuses aspects of the adult conceptions of desire and intention but does full justice to neither’ (p. 78–79). Moses goes on to suggest that ‘Their conception may be something like a superordinate-level pro attitude’ (p. 79), at the heart of which is ‘an intention/desire notion that is closely wedded to action’ (p. 79). Similarly, Astington (2001) suggests that the toddler’s conception of motivation in others should be termed ‘desire-intention’. From a directional perspective, these analyses are particularly interesting because they support the idea that, beneath our various motivational constructs, we have some more primitive, basic, holistic understanding of human directions.

In summary, then, research suggests that, from an early age, we do not perceive others simply in terms of their external behaviours; or as static thing-like containers of beliefs and emotions. Rather, our natural tendency may be to perceive others as intending beings: moving along a trajectory from past to present to future. Hence, at the deepest possible level, our fundamental question may not be, ‘What is the other doing?’ or ‘Who is the other?’ but ‘Where is the other trying to get to?’ Seeing others in this way may be an evolutionary adaptation, which allows us the greatest possible ability to predict how the other will affect us.

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