Mind in practice : a pragmatic and interdisciplinary account of intersubjectivity

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Prologue

From Theory to Practice

Philosophers and psychologists tend to inscribe their own project of inquiry into our ordinary methods of understanding one another, so that in the context of everyday life we too are presented as navigating our social world primarily by observing, hypothesizing, predicting how creatures like us operate.

- McGeer 2001

The problem of intersubjectivity

This book is about what happens when two people meet. Or perhaps it is better to say that it is about what *precedes* such an encounter, since it attempts to spell out the *preconditions* of our meetings with others. It tries to capture the practices and processes that enable and facilitate these meetings in the most basic of ways, in order to lay down the 'rules of engagement'. Its main aim is to present an account of *intersubjectivity.* We sometimes use the word 'empathy' to denote the experience of similarity that arises when our encounters with others go well. This book, however, importantly goes beyond empathy insofar it rejects the idea that we can explain our face-to-face encounters in terms of a specific and particular mode of consciousness. Instead, it emphasizes that our ability to engage with others cannot be taken as a brute fact, since this ability is conditioned, structured and shaped by our bodily existence and social embeddedness.

Most contemporary explanations of intersubjectivity fall into two main categories: theory theory (TT) and simulation theory (ST). Theory theory argues that our encounters with others depend on the ability to employ a folk psychological theory (a 'theory of mind') in order to explain and predict their behavior. Some rationalist-inclined theory theorists claim that such a theory is already there from the very moment we are born - in the form of

a sophisticated, inherited biological device they call a 'mindreading module'. Young children use only some of its basic principles, but over the course of development, their ability to exploit what they already know increases (cf. Fodor 1995). Other more empiricist-oriented theory theorists stress that the ability to explain and predict others' behavior is not innate, but develops as children increasingly start to experiment and explore the world. According to this 'child scientist' approach, children proceed in very much the same way that scientists proceed, getting new evidence and revising their folk psychological theories in light of it (cf. Gopnik and Meltzoff 1997).

Simulation theory rejects the idea that our understanding of others requires a theory. Instead, it proposes that social encounters are primarily about putting ourselves in the others' shoes, imagining what we would do (think, feel etc.) in their situation. According to proponents of 'offline simulation', such a process is driven by pretend mental states that are fed into our own offline decision-making mechanism (cf. Goldman 2006). Advocates of 'actual simulation', on the other hand, argue that simulation has a much more basic function: it enables us to apply what are essentially first-person decision procedures to others by transforming ourselves into other 'first persons' (cf. Gordon 1995).

Despite the fact that TT and ST are often portrayed as bitter rivals, they have a lot in common. A good way to get an initial feel for what drives both positions is to see them as providing an answer to a fundamental question about intersubjectivity: how are we able to recognize that other persons are 'mind-endowed' in the first place? John Stuart Mill (1889) formulated the question as follows: 'By what evidence do I know, or by what considerations am I led to believe, that there exist other sentient creatures; that the walking and speaking figures which I see and hear, have sensations and thoughts, or in other words, possess Minds?' (p.243). This is nowadays referred to as *the problem of the other mind*. Mill also offered a possible solution to this problem: the argument from analogy. He argued that, since I know my own mind and how it relates to my body, I am able to infer that this is probably also true for other persons on the basis of an *analogy* between our bodies.

The argument from analogy is still the point of departure for most versions of ST. However, it can be objected that Mill's solution is flawed, because it represents one's knowledge of the other mind as resting on an inductive generalization from exactly *one* case. Therefore, TT tackles the problem from a rather different angle. It claims that mental states such as beliefs and desires are *theoretical unobservables*, and maintains that we are justified in postulating them as long as this yields an appropriate amount of explanatory

and predictive power (cf. Churchland 1988). I will explore and discuss the specifics of both TT and ST, and the way they deal with the problem of the other mind extensively in the coming chapters.

It is important to realize that in their attempts to come up with an answer to the problem of the other mind, both TT and ST agree with many of its undergirding assumptions. Moreover, these assumptions are arguably a decisive source of inspiration for their take on intersubjectivity. In what follows, I will highlight the ones that are particularly important to our discussion:

(i) In the first place, there is the idea that our encounters with others are intrinsically *problematic*. The problem of the other mind suggests that *doubt* is at the heart of intersubjectivity: how can we be sure about the existence of the other mind? TT and ST follow in Mill's footsteps by depicting our everyday encounters with others as complicated puzzles, uncertain expeditions to a remote and unknown region called 'the other mind' with the primary objective of gaining knowledge of what goes on there.

(ii) To accept the problem of the other mind as a genuine problem is not only to conceive of social interaction as a quest for certainty, however. It is also to accept a certain conception of the mind it brings along. TT and ST interpret the mind as an isolated 'I' - an autonomous entity that represents the outside world and its own body but is at the same time separated from it. They conceive of the mind as a mysterious inner realm, hidden away behind the overt behavior we can see. This conception of the mind has a rich historical background, and in their attempts to trace its origin, philosophers are often quick to point the finger at Descartes, the godfather of modern philosophy of mind. Such accusations are certainly not unfounded. At the same time, however, we should take into account that for Descartes, the existence of the other mind was not yet problematic – he was able to evade the solipsistic consequences of his method of doubt by appealing to a benevolent God. But the specter of solipsism started to loom ever more threateningly in the works of Descartes' successors, particularly in those of the British empiricist tradition who no longer accepted such a theological appeal. It is therefore scarcely surprising that, for a philosopher such as Mill, the problem of the other mind becomes an 'official' problem.

(iii) Another important assumption is that our doubts about the other mind can be overcome by a self-conscious, methodological and critical way of thinking. Descartes thought that a strict introspective method was the only road to certain knowledge, since it provided the user with an immediate awareness of the mind's ideas. These ideas,

supported by divine authority, also guaranteed the existence of the other mind. Mill, on the other hand, like his contemporaries, no longer wished to invoke God to assure him of the existence of the other mind, and therefore sought its justification in radically different terms. His argument from analogy postulates an *inferential process* that enables us to come up with empirical generalizations between our mental states and our bodily behavior, which then in a further step can be attributed to other people. However, despite the huge differences between Descartes and Mill, both thought that intersubjectivity depended on a conscious, cognitive process - a stepwise procedure initiated by a hyper-reflexive agent. And this idea is very much alive in contemporary articulations of TT and ST. It is telling that intersubjectivity is nowadays often understood in terms of 'folk psychology', a label used to emphasize that our common-sense understanding of others is actually nothing more than a folk-version of the methodology employed in the science of psychology.

(iv) Last but not least, it is generally assumed that thinking or cognition functions as an *intermediary* between perception and action. Hurley (2008) calls this the 'sandwich model' of intersubjectivity, since it regards 'perception as input from the world to the mind, action as output from the mind to the world, and cognition as sandwiched in between' (p.2). According to the sandwich model, our meetings with other minds are structured in the following way: we start out by observing another agent's bodily behavior, but at this point, we don't yet have evidence for the existence of his mind or any clue about the mental states he is currently entertaining. In order to get there, we need to engage in an inferential and/or deliberative process. When this process is brought to a satisfying conclusion, we are ready for (inter)action. It goes too far to trace the historical roots of the sandwich model here. For now, it is sufficient to point out that both Descartes and Mill were each in their own way committed to this model. So are many contemporary versions of TT and ST.

The practice of mind

This book, in one clear sense, seeks to undermine the picture of intersubjectivity sketched above and the various problems that result from it. But it does not want to do so by simply denying its underlying intuitions. Instead, it aims at a more constructive approach by showing what intersubjectivity looks like from a *pragmatic* point of view. Most explanations of intersubjectivity that stress the importance of theory, such as TT and ST, end up

modeling our knowledge of the other mind on the perceptual abilities of the *individual agent*. This inevitably leads to what Dewey (1960) called a 'spectator' theory of knowledge. The pragmatic perspective I want to promote, however, emphasizes the *interactive* instead of perceptual nature of our knowledge of the other mind. The word 'pragmatic' is derived from the Greek word 'pragma', which means 'action'. However, it also lies at the basis of the word 'practice'. The centre of gravity of this book is the idea that intersubjectivity is enabled through a large variety of *second-person practices*. These practices structure our encounters with other minds and provide us with the social tools needed to understand them. Thus, we might say that the primary focus of this book is on the *practice of mind*.

My pragmatic account of intersubjectivity does not so much elaborate on one single theory, but rather unites and integrates a number of recent insights and proposals that have been made with regard to social interaction. It borrows from *enactivism* insofar as it endorses the aphorism: 'knowing is doing is being.' Neither our being in this world, nor our knowledge of it is pre-existent, in the sense that it is given beforehand. Instead, it is *enacted*, arising from our moment-to-moment coping with the environment and other people. The adaptive process wherein identity and knowledge are constantly emerging as the result of interactions with the environment is what we call learning: a continuing exploration of an ever-evolving landscape of possibilities and of selecting (not necessarily consciously) those actions that are adequate to maintain one's balance.

This has important consequences for our conception of identity and knowledge, of 'mind' and 'world'. Enactivism rightly emphasizes that the mind is fundamentally shaped by its bodily existence (embodiment) and cannot be understood in isolation from its environment (embedment). The focus of this book is in particular on how this mind-shaping has to be understood in relation to our interactions with *other minds*. Pursuing an enactivist agenda also has important consequences for our conception of the world - our knowledge of the environment. According to enactivism, knowledge is not 'the representation of a pre-given world by a pre-given mind', but it is rather 'the enactment of a world and a mind on the basis of a history of the variety of actions that a being in the world performs' (Varela et al. 1991, p.9). This book tries to explain how this process of enactment provides us with knowledge of the other mind.

Besides its obvious affinities with enactivism, my pragmatic proposal builds on the insights of several philosophers from both the phenomenological and the analytical tradition. It draws on the phenomenological tradition (the work of Shaun Gallagher in

particular) in order to question the phenomenology of uncertainty that is presupposed by TT and ST, and argue that what is at the core of our everyday social encounters is not exclusively a knowledge-affair. On the contrary, much of what goes on during these face-to-face meetings actually happens *before we know it*. Moreover, the phenomenology of everyday intersubjectivity suggests that the explicit kind of meta-cognitive theorizing presupposed by many versions of TT and ST 'is not our everyday practice; it is not the way we think of ourselves or of others' (Gallagher 2004, p.202). My proposal draws on the analytical tradition insofar it follows philosophers such as Ludwig Wittgenstein and Wilfred Sellars (and their contemporary representatives such as Daniel Hutto) in their view of the relation between language, mind and meaning. Most importantly, I use their insights to criticize the attempt to model our knowledge of the other mind on a first-person 'immediate awareness' of one's own mind, as ST does, or on a third-person theoretical understanding of psychological principles, as TT does. The lesson I take from them is that neither what we call 'mind', nor 'world', is *presupposed by* or *constitutive for* social interaction. Rather, both *emerge from* the linguistic practices that structure second-person interactions. Therefore, instead of appealing to a private language or a set of implicit theoretical principles, the pragmatic approach to intersubjectivity I have in mind pays attention to *actual linguistic practices* since these make it possible for us to deploy such vocabularies in the first place.

An important aim of this book is to stretch intersubjectivity beyond the limits of 'folk psychology', or what has recently become its substitute term: 'mindreading'. This is not to say that mindreading does not play any role in our encounters with others. But on my proposal, its role is relatively modest and its function different from what is generally assumed. The consensus has it that mindreading is primarily about the generation of reliable predictions and explanations of others' actions. It is often assumed that this depends on a very basic (innate) capacity that is mainly exercised in third-person theoretical contexts - situations in which the interpreter is a bystander, someone observing the agent performing the action without interacting with him. This book, however, presents a view of mindreading as firmly rooted in a rather advanced, second-person practice, and also promotes a very different picture of reason explanation. It takes to heart Hutto's (2004) advice that 'taking seriously the second-personal starting point ought to provoke us to reconsider the [...] prevailing views about the function and context of much commonsense psychology, even when it comes to its most characteristic activity of

providing reason explanations. In abandoning the idea that the contexts in which we make sense of others are normally spectatorial, we can recast and re-orient our thinking about the nature of our expectations about each other and about how such explanations are ordinarily achieved' (p.550).

Pragmatism and its limits

Restricting the scope of folk psychology allows for an explanation of intersubjectivity that goes above and beyond those of a purely 'mentalistic' variety, and paves the way for an appeal to evidence that is *interdisciplinary* in nature. This book draws on various disciplines, such as experimental psychology, neuroscience, studies of pathology and developmental psychology, and uses their findings to support the large range of practices it puts forwards. For example, many anticipatory and predictive processes that facilitate our meetings with others are dependent on low-level sensorimotor processes that can be described in terms of neurobiological mechanisms. To a certain extent, these processes allow for 'hands-free' intersubjectivity and can be used to explain why a large part of our encounters with others does not require conscious reflection at all.

This naturally leads to questions about the status of empirical evidence in the debate on intersubjectivity. Although the brand of pragmatism I want to articulate pays a lot of attention to scientific findings, this does not mean that it advertises reductionism or instrumentalism. Nor does it wish to promote a kind of scientism. Rather, it starts by taking intersubjectivity at face value and closely studies what people are actually *doing* when they are trying to understand others and what happens during these encounters. The kind of pragmatism I have in mind focuses on *actual second person practices*. It asks: How can we describe what is going on? And: How does it come about? The first question addresses the phenomenology of intersubjectivity, and to answer it properly we require something along the lines of what Gallagher (2006) calls 'front-loaded phenomenology': a good description of the way we experience our everyday encounters with others, which can then be used as input for scientific experimentation. The second question suggests that we can tackle many problems pertaining to the various elements of intersubjectivity by investigating how intersubjectivity comes about, that is, by identifying its preconditions. In my opinion, the most promising approaches to intersubjectivity therefore have to engage

with either its ontogenetic development or its phylogenetic evolution. The aim of this book is to do the *former* - it provides the reader with a developmental story about intersubjectivity. A short but plausible story about the evolutionary roots of intersubjectivity can be found in Hutto (2007a), who also deals with TT and ST claims on this subject. For more elaborated accounts, see for example the works of Donald (1991, 2001) or Tomasello (1999, 2003, 2008).

The pragmatic attitude towards intersubjectivity which is advocated throughout this book has not only important consequences for the way I want to approach the problem of the other mind. It also affects how I see many of the ontological problems that have traditionally set the agenda of philosophy of mind: the relationship between mind and body, mental causation, emergence, dualism, physicalism etcetera. I am convinced that these problems would benefit from a pragmatic treatment as well, but unfortunately this falls beyond the scope of this book. However, since they often linger in the background of the debate about intersubjectivity, I will occasionally bring them to the fore in order to show what they would look like through pragmatic spectacles.

Of course I realize that pragmatism, as a philosophical program, has its limits. The kind of pragmatism that I want to put forward here, however, is actually very modest. It continues and deepens a line of thought initiated by Goldman (1989), who remarked that 'no account of interpretation can be philosophically helpful [...] if it is incompatible with a correct account *of what people actually do* when they interpret others' (p.162, italics added). In other words, this pragmatism emphasizes that we cannot explain intersubjectivity without paying attention to the fact that it is something that is 'happening' between people, something that is 'done'. Its main message is: preach what you practice!

A survey of the book

The outline of this book is as follows. The first two chapters deal with what I call the 'internal' problems of TT and ST, in other words, with the problems that start to appear when one accepts a certain picture of intersubjectivity. I will advance conceptual as well as phenomenological arguments in order to show that both TT and ST offer an extremely impoverished and problematic account of intersubjectivity. These chapters also involve a critical assessment of the scientific evidence that both parties have brought forward in

order to support their claims, ranging from the field of developmental psychology (e.g., results on false-belief tasks) to the realms of neurobiology (e.g., findings on mirror neurons).

It is also possible to question TT and ST approaches to social interaction at a more basic level. Such a more hermeneutically-oriented analysis allows us to uncover their deeper motivations and investigate the extent to which both are inspired by similar assumptions about intersubjectivity. These assumptions will be discussed and challenged in chapter 3.

The pragmatic view I want to propose has its starting point in the idea of intersubjectivity as building on a set of second-person practices. It further articulates and extends Gallagher's proposal (e.g., Gallagher 2005) that a wide range of *embodied practices* allow us to employ various innate or early developing capacities that provide a basic form of social understanding - what Trevarthen (1979) called 'primary intersubjectivity'. Throughout development, these capacities become more and more embedded in a broader social and pragmatic context, thereby enabling us to engage in *embedded practices* of joint attention (so-called 'secondary intersubjectivity'). This is the topic of chapter 4. Embodied and embedded practices are not self-sufficient. They depend on and are shaped by our bodily existence, and build upon the kinds of experiences that result from having a body with various sensory-motor capacities. Chapter 4 also offers an explanation of how complicated processes at the neurobiological level provide us with a minimal form of self-awareness (including a sense of ownership and agency), and a basic awareness of others (what I call 'co-consciousness').

While embodied and embedded practices constitute the base-line for social understanding and continue to do this after the development of more advanced abilities, they by no means exhaust the possibilities for intersubjectivity. *Narrative practice* comes into play with the emergence of linguistic abilities and a number of other ontogenetic achievements (such as the capacity for temporal integration, (auto)biographical memory and perspective taking), and they allow us to further fine-tune and sophisticate our understanding of self and other (Hutto 2007, Gallagher and Hutto 2008). This will be discussed in the first part of chapter 5.

Narrative practice may also explain how we enter what Sellars termed the normative 'space of reasons', and acquire the ability to make sense of actions in terms of *reasons*. The second part of chapter 5 discusses the strengths and weaknesses of Hutto's (2007)

'narrative practice hypothesis', according to which children come to master the art of folk psychology through direct encounters with folk psychological narratives - stories about reasons for acting. I propose that, initially, children are only capable of interpreting others' actions in terms of reasons against the background of a *shared* world. But the acquisition of mental concepts eventually enables them to vastly expand and improve their interpretation abilities by opening up new ways of *individuating* the reasons of other agents, in a way that is tailored to their psychological make-up