

Origins of Mind: Philosophical Issues in Cognitive Development

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1. Short description

How do humans come to know about objects, causes, words, numbers, colours, actions and minds? We will attempt to answer this question using a range of conceptual tools from philosophy to examine puzzles arising from some recent scientific breakthroughs. The question, which goes back to Plato or earlier, is challenging because it requires us to consider minds where knowledge is neither clearly present nor obviously absent. This is challenging because, as Donald Davidson observes, '[w]e have many vocabularies for describing nature when we regard it as mindless, and we have a mentalistic vocabulary for describing thought and intentional action; what we lack is a way of describing what is in between' (1999, p. 11). To understand the emergence of knowledge we need to investigate what is in between mindless nature and the sorts of cognition captured by commonsense psychological notions.

Questions arising include:

Action Does identifying an action as such necessarily involve representing an intention?

Holism Could there be mindreaders who can identify intentions and knowledge states but not beliefs?

Modularity If mindreading is modular (or automatic), what can we infer about the representations and processes it involves?

Tracking What could someone represent that would enable her, perhaps within limits, to track another's mental states?

- Evidential basis* What evidence could in principle support the ascription of a particular belief to a given subject, and how does the evidence support the ascription?
- Objectivity* Could there be mindreaders who are able to identify beliefs despite not understanding what it is for a belief to be true or false?
- Self-awareness* Does being a mindreader entail being able, sometimes, to identify one's own mental states and actions?
- Interaction* How is mindreading involved in joint action?
- Social Grounding* In what ways (if any) could mindreading, or its development or evolution, depend on abilities to engage in joint action?

2. Sample essay questions

In addition to those below, also consider questions from the titles of lectures (available at <https://origins-of-mind.butterfill.com>).

1. Are there limits on the behaviour that can be modelled using simple forms of decision theory (such as the version presented in Jeffrey 1983)? You may choose to answer with respect to one of Sugden (2000) or Bratman (2000).
2. How, if at all, can we distinguish different kinds of mindreading? If you provide a distinction, discuss an application of it.
3. Which events are actions?
4. What is the relation between a goal and an action when the action is directed to the goal?
5. What could someone represent that would enable her to track others' desires?
6. What could count as evidence that a mindreader was ascribing intentions to other individuals? You might relate your answer one or more of the following: Fogassi & Ferrari (2007); Dasser et al. (1989); Astington (2001); Malle & Knobe (2001).
7. 'The concept of a joint action as such is just that of an event of which there are multiple agents' (Ludwig 2007, p. 366). First explain and then evaluate this claim.
8. Does joint action necessarily involve mindreading?

3. Reading and Sources

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