

# Reading reflection 4

Critically analyzing and reviewing the excerpt "2- In defense of mindreading" by Shannon Spaulding

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## I. INTRODUCTION

This text is supposed to be a reading reflection of the excerpt "2 - in defense of mindreading" from the book "How we understand others" by Shannon Spaulding. First, there will be a quick placement into the field, or topic this text is about. After that, the central thesis of the text will be presented, as well as the arguments supporting this thesis will be summarized. Finally, the strength of Spaulding's line of argumentation will be reflected critically.

## II. WHERE WE ARE

With regard to the course Philosophy of social minds, the excerpt "2- in defense of mindreading" can be categorized into the field of social cognition. Social cognition refers to the mental processes that enable individuals to perceive, understand, and remember information about other people, including their thoughts, emotions, and behaviors. It involves the ability to recognize and interpret social cues, make inferences about others' mental states, and use that information to guide one's own behavior in social interactions.

## III. CENTRAL THESIS

Two main challenges namely the pluralistic folk psychology challenge and the embodied and enactive cognition challenge fail to invalidate the broad scope of mindreading claim denoting that mindreading is a primary, pervasive way to understand others and a necessary component to understand and interpret social environments properly, rather the embodied and enactive cognition challenge can be invalidated and the pluralistic folk psychology challenge can be seen as an opportunity to enrich mind reading accounts with regard to the complexity of social interactions.

## IV. SUMMARY OF ARGUMENTATION

First, Spaulding starts her argumentation by giving a definition for mind reading, namely that it denotes attributing mental states like beliefs in order to explain behavior of others. After that, she is motivated by the interest of people to do mind reading which can be seen in the social life we live in like TV shows or gossip. She highlights that there exists an intrinsic motivation to mindreading and to understand others and that people actively search for situations where they can do it. Next to that, she is displaying a specific example where a person is coming late to a meeting without any excuses. She emphasized that one would try to make sense of such a behavior and try to explain that. In doing this, Spaulding motivated the importance of mindreading in daily social life.

Based on that, she is introducing the so-called broad scope of mindreading claim which means that mindreading is a primary, pervasive way to understand others and a necessary component to understand and interpret social environments properly. She argues that this claim is confronted with certain challenges and criticism she will illustrate in the following. Since she motivated the importance of mindreading in everyday life and introduced the broad scope of mindreading claim, she will now counterargue the given critic and challenges this claim is confronted with.

Subsequently, Spaulding is starting to explain the movement in philosophy which is arguing against the broad scope of mindreading claims, namely the field of embodied and enactive cognition approaches. As a consequence, she names this the embodied and enactive cognition (EC) challenge. The main claim from the EC account is the rejection of cognitivism since this field is misguidedly viewing the mind as something to be studied independently of the body. In other words, EC claims that it is important to also include the body and the environment as well as their interplay in order to interpret how this is shaping the mind. Moreover, EC theorists argue that Folk psychology is based on embodied practices and constituted by primary and secondary intersubjectivity. Primary intersubjectivity denotes the perceptual experience one has and can be described as the capacity for facial imitation and proprioceptive sense. Secondary intersubjectivity is denoting the sophisticated folk psychological abilities, or in other words the capacity to engage shared attention behaviors. As EC theorists argue, in order to gain the capacity of mindreading primary as well as secondary intersubjectivity are necessary requirements. Consequently, embodied practices are developmentally fundamental according to EC theorists. Additionally, EC theorists also claim that Mindreading is only rarely used, since ordinary interactions rarely go beyond primary and secondary intersubjectivity. The idea is that people only mindread in inexplicable situations.

Based on that, Spaulding is outlining the main arguments against the broad scope of mindreading claim by Gallagher. Namely Gallagher argues that there is phenomenological evidence in a sense that it becomes obvious through phenomenological reflection, that ordinary situations don't involve mindreading. Against the counterargument that mindreading processes can be subconscious, Gallagher is arguing that the process of inference may be subconscious, but the product and explanation out of this is nevertheless conscious, or phenomenologically accessible. Connected to that argument from Gallagher, Spaulding is arguing that this debate or strength

of argument is dependent on the question whether phenomenological evidence can play such an important role as proposed in Gallagher's argument, or in other words if it can serve as the basis for decisively rejecting or accepting theories of folk psychology. Spaulding further argues that EC accounts and mindreading theories agree on the fact that phenomenology weakly constrains the study of folk psychology as well as they agree on the fact that phenomenology only weakly constrains study of social cognition. The real disagreement however concerns whether phenomenology strongly constrains the study of social cognition. Based on that thought, Spaulding argues in the following against the claim that phenomenology plays a more substantial methodological role in social cognition.

Spaulding argues that empirical evidence capable of playing a substantial methodological role in theory choice is typically manifesting the feature of being novel, reliable, and relevant to the theories predictions. She infers that in order to answer the question of phenomenology's relevance in the context of social cognition, phenomenology needs to have the named features. She shows that phenomenological evidence is not novel in the relevant sense because it does not provide evidence beyond what is widely acknowledged and presupposed by the theories debated. Next to that Spaulding argues that phenomenological evidence is not reliable. She states that a subject report based on phenomenology is accurate to the extent that it provides a factually correct description of the experience of the individual, however this report may differ between different individuals. She infers that since phenomenological evidence is interpersonally and intrapersonally inconsistent and since there are no standards on what counts as an accurate phenomenological retrospection, phenomenological evidence is often inaccurate. Spaulding argues that based on the shown facts that phenomenological evidence is inaccurate, inconsistent and always subjective, phenomenological evidence is unreliable. Moreover, Spaulding also discusses that phenomenological evidence is not relevant to debates about mind reading. She starts by stating that in order to evaluate whether mind reading theories make predictions that are testable phenomenologically, there is a need find an answer to the question of whether explanation and prediction are exclusively personal level phenomena and additionally if lacking phenomenological experience of explanation and prediction indicates that explanation and prediction do not occur. Whereas Gallagher explicitly maintains that explanation and prediction are exclusively personal-level phenomena, Mind Reading accounts by contrast employ the terms explanation and prediction in a broader way to refer to both personal and sub-personal processes that are not consciously accessible. According to mindreading accounts social interactions therefore consist in tacit or implicit mindreading subconsciously explaining and predicting target behavior on the basis of attributed mental states. Spaulding invalidates this objection by revealing that the issue at hand is an unfortunate terminological confusion which can easily be avoided. Instead of interpretation and anticipation one could use the terms explanation and prediction as Spaulding proposes. Consequently,

Spaulding has shown that phenomenological evidence is not novel, relevant and reliable to the theories predictions and therefore she has proven that phenomenology is not playing a substantial methodological role in social cognition. Thus, Spaulding has invalidated the embodied and enactive cognition challenge.

Moreover, Spaulding introduces another challenge for the broad scope of mindreading claim, namely the pluralistic folk psychology challenge. Spaulding first defines pluralistic folk psychology based on Andrews as a movement claiming that we have lots of different methods for understanding and interacting with others and mindreading is just one of these methods. Pluralistic folk psychology argues that folk psychology has paid far too little attention to trait attributions, stereotypes, behavioral schemata, and the way in which we employ these folk psychological tools to regulate our own and others behavior, instead folk psychology mainly focused on mind reading. Andrews employs the example of autism and demonstrates that concerned people can attribute traits and employ schemata for social interactions but have difficulty attributing beliefs and desires. Andrews infers that the attribution of traits or schemata, do not require mindreading. Therefore, the objection is that the role mindreading plays in social cognition differs, Andrews objects that mindreading is just one amongst many social practices in folk psychology. Next to that, Spaulding also introduces regulative folk psychology based on Mc Geer. The idea is that we do mindread, however the process of attributing is meant to regulate our own and the behavior of others instead of explaining and predicting the behavior. In a sense, the objection is that mindreading accounts are not capturing well the normative role of folk psychology. Finally, Spaulding is illustrating another folk psychology approach, namely the approach of mindshaping by Zawidzki. The idea of mindshaping is that we are trying to make the minds of others coherent and more predictable which is facilitating cooperation.

After introducing different theories of folk psychology in order to approach the folk psychology challenge, Spaulding addresses two main objections and discusses them. In particular, she is pointing to the notion that mindreading is one of a lot of social practices and has a more insignificant role than proposed in the broad scope of mindreading claim. Besides, she also approaches the idea that mental state ascriptions are not causal explanations, but justificatory explanations that are regulating our social interactions. Concerning the first objection Spaulding argues that in mind reading social categorization and stereotypes have received very little attention and acknowledges that an adequate account of mindreading ought to take into consideration the effect that these other social practices have on mind reading. Spaulding infers that we cannot detach mind reading from other approaches and that mindreading should take the objections in order to embrace the spirit of challenge from pluralistic folk psychology. Concerning the second objection saying that mental state ascriptions serve as a rationalizing and regulating explanation, Spaulding is admitting that current mindreading approaches have paid no

attention to the variety of goals we have in a social interaction, and she is stating that mindreading is serving many purposes. She also reveals that social interactions are messy and highly complex leading to her conclusion that it is not helpful to differentiate causal explanations from rationalizing explanations since mindreading can generate different kinds of products. She further argues that mindreading is highly intertwined with all sorts of social practices and types of explanatory inferences. Based on this fact, Spaulding states that she is regarding the challenge from pluralistic folk psychology as an opportunity to enrich and advance the field of mindreading. She also highlights that due to the complexity of social interactions it is important for mind reading accounts to capture the diversity and nuances of social interactions.

## V. EVALUATION

Spaulding's overall argumentation can be described as clear and structured logically. The construction of her argumentation was intuitive in a sense that she first motivated and introduced mindreading and afterwards addressed two main challenges of this approach, and shared her inferences and conclusions from that. Her thesis was clearly named. What can be said about the invalidation of the fact that phenomenological evidence plays a key role for social cognition, is that she argued in a logical and successful fashion. She clearly decided on criteria that can help arguing against it, namely relevance, reliability and novelty and argued with them at hand. Furthermore, during the course of her argumentation she introduced a lot of different theories to support her arguments and even managed to address challenges, or arguments against the broad scope of mindreading claim. The fact that she inferred from the pluralistic folk psychology that this objection can be seen as an opportunity is appropriate in terms of accepting that social interactions are highly complex and there is the need to define mind reading approaches more properly. Nevertheless, the objections weaken the mind reading approach since it seems to be incomplete and this is failing to portray the whole reality. This might be explained and shown in more detail in her book, the excerpt however allows to question whether the consideration of the complex social interactions can help to make the account more credible and if these adaptations to the mindreading account can help explaining how we understand others. The idea that mindreading and other psychological or social practices are strongly intertwined may open up the question if a mindreading account, or the broad scope of mindreading claim can be true since social interactions are so complex that only one approach cannot explain the reality fully. Isn't this the proof for the objection that mindreading is one of a lot of different social practices which also play a key role in social interactions? There is definitely more research needed in order to make useful inferences and to determine which role mindreading actually plays in social interactions. What can be further said about Spaulding's argumentation is that even though she picked relevant challenges and objections against the broad scope of mindreading claim which are definitely relevant to examine,

these two may only serve as a quick overview since there are more important objections against this claim. The question in place is how representative is the choice of challenges that Spaulding picked? What about the objection that there is biologically and developmental science evidence that there are many forms of social interaction that are prior to mindreading? Can this also be seen as an opportunity to enrich the account of mindreading in a sense? I would argue rather not, since it is not matching to her argument of complexity of social interactions. The question is, has Spaulding picked on purpose challenges that match her idea of enriching the approach of mindreading by addressing the complexity of social interactions? Is her argumentation biased then? Next to that, it might be important to note that Spaulding has not employed scientific research in terms of psychological, developmental, or neurobiological studies. Rather, she argued on a logical basis. In order to make her arguments more credible, it would have been helpful to see studies that reveal the complexity of social interactions and interlacement of mindreading and other social practices. However generally speaking, her way of structuring the argumentation was logically and her arguments are logically sound as well as her conclusion can be inferred from her arguments. Spaulding managed to address two objections against the broad scope of mindreading claim and has also served a basis for developing and advancing the account of mindreading since she emphasized that the complexity of social interactions require mindreading accounts that are capturing this diversity in order to explain social interactions and how we understand others more properly. She offered a reasonable approach for these challenges which can be seen as a sensible reaction to the challenges. Nevertheless, it might be important to note that in general there is more science based evidence needed to show this named complexity of social relations and interlacement of mindreading and other accounts. Moreover, Spaulding also only addressed two main challenges, for the further idea of approaching mindreading it might be useful to also consider more challenges and how they could be overcome.

## REFERENCES

- [1] Shannon Spaulding (2020) "How we understand others" - "2 In defense of mindreading" Routledge.