

Daniel D. Hutto

Folk Psychological Narratives: The Sociocultural Basis of Understanding Reasons.

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The past three decades have seen a vigorous discussion of what is often called ‘theory of mind’, the ability to attribute mental states to oneself and others. The two main contenders in this debate—theory theory and simulation theory—both suggest that our folk psychological capacities have a biological basis. This book challenges this view by arguing that children’s acquisition of a theory of mind is socioculturally based. A full understanding of others’ doings, so it proposes, is conditional on grasping their reasons for action; and the development of this kind of grasp is fostered through an engagement with narratives—stories that involve the child from a second-person perspective.

Hutto begins by developing the ‘narrative practice hypothesis’ in the first two chapters. In Chapters 3 through 7 he introduces a wide-ranging set of background considerations to flesh out his proposal, and in the following two chapters he makes use of these considerations to critically examine the rival theories. He ends by casting doubt on the view that humans’ immediate ancestors had mature theory of mind abilities.

Hutto’s account can be called minimalist, in that it explains our most basic interactions with one another without relying on any capacity for prediction or explanation. It is only when these interactions break down that we attempt to make sense of others’ doings in terms of folk psychology. For Hutto, such sense-making does not proceed merely in terms of the ascription of belief and desire to others. It involves understanding the reasons for their doings, and thus their intentions. Grasp of these reasons is not acquired through the application of an abstract theory. Rather, it is acquired through the direct, second-person engagement with narratives. Such narratives are concrete, in that they are concerned with particular persons in particular situations, and understanding them presupposes having a handle on propositional attitudes involving content and the way in which they are connected to each other. But, crucially, Hutto draws a distinction between these propositional, content-involving attitudes, which presuppose the possession of language, and intentional attitudes which are, on his account, non-cognitive and nonrepresentational. Having intentional attitudes is sufficient, on his account, for even the most sophisticated non-linguistic interpersonal engagements with others, including the capacity for joint attention. Having such attitudes is a practical, embodied skill; and it is on these intentional attitudes that infants’ grasp of propositional attitudes builds. It is a process that unfolds in stages and that involves the deployment of narratives, engaging with which enables children to participate in the kind of linguistic practice that is necessary for understanding action in terms of reasons.

So the viability of the narrative practice hypothesis depends, among other things, on whether we can make sense of the idea that intentional attitudes are not propositional—that they consist in being informationally sensitive to specific worldly offerings, while not requiring the acquisition of encoded informational content. Hutto defends this idea by drawing on what he calls ‘biosemiotics’ (as opposed to ‘biosemantics’), which requires us to quite radically rethink the notion of intentionality: on Hutto’s approach, intentionality is an embodied trait displayed by entire organisms in response to features of their surroundings, which accounts for their success or failure at certain tasks. Intentionality thus is normative, albeit in a very thin sense, and it is world-directed; it is not, however, content-involving. This is a substantial proposal which Hutto develops, positions and defends at some length, and it is impossible to do justice to the wide array of arguments he brings forward within the constraints of this short review. Thus, I will comment on only one key feature of his account, which I think is both extremely interesting and brings up an important question.

Part of what makes Hutto’s position so attractive is that it defends an account of intentionality which makes do without the rather breathtaking intellectual apparatus mounted by the established rivals of the narrative practice hypothesis. It is appealing to suppose that the nonverbal, though intentional, responses to environmental features displayed by conscious creatures can be fleshed out in terms that are as simple and elegant as Hutto presents them. And it also seems at least plausible to suppose that the engagement with stories plays a crucial role in an infant’s cognitive development. However, the big question—one on which I am still undecided—is whether the account of intentionality put forward by Hutto really captures a core property of *consciousness*. As presented, it is not entirely clear to me in what way the embodied response of a bat, or a preverbal infant, to features of or events in the environment, is categorically distinct from a purely mechanistic cause-effect relationship that might explain the reaction of a thermometer, say, to changes in temperature. Hutto is adamant in rejecting functionalist accounts of mind that attempt to spell out purely mental states in terms of particular kinds of cause-effect relationships. But how exactly are we to understand the embodied nature of an organism’s response to worldly offerings if this response is the defining feature of that organism’s conscious attitude? A detailed argument would help here.

This, however, is not to diminish the substantial achievement of Hutto’s book. It already occupies a prominent place amongst the fast-growing body of literature that is investigating alternatives to the established positions on theory of mind, and the breadth and originality of its arguments makes it a key text for researchers interested in folk psychology.

Axel Seemann

Bentley University