

Shannon Spaulding. *How We Understand Others: Philosophy and Social Cognition.* Routledge 2018. 106 pp. \$70.00 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9781138221581).

The original title of this book, *Mindreading and the Philosophy of Social Cognition*, more accurately indicated its content, that is, what analytic ‘philosophy of mind’ calls ‘mindreading,’ though its current title accurately signals its historical origin: Descartes’ ‘Problem of Other Minds.’ The majority of this book represents a summary of Spaulding’s many journal publications, concluding with her foray into social epistemology and ethics. In regard to the former, this review focuses on Spaulding’s ‘attack on phenomenology,’ and, in regard to the latter, it focuses on her discussion of peer disagreement and epistemic injustice.

More than its technical vocabulary, there are three peculiarities that further narrow the book’s audience and efficacy. First, though the generality of Spaulding’s thesis makes contesting it nearly impossible, its vagueness makes the value of its guaranteed success opaque: ‘my claim is that the input, processing, and output of mindreading all vary along many dimensions, which makes constructing an empirically adequate account of mindreading significantly more challenging than typically recognized’ (3). Second, Spaulding never states her ontology; we never come to know whether she thinks mindreading reveals the presence of actual mental states or whether ‘mindreading’ merely indicates a conventional heuristic assumption. Third, she uses the term ‘mindreading’ to refer to both an activity and a theory, and often the context does not sufficiently differentiate what she means.

For example, in her chapter titled *In defense of mindreading*, she announces: ‘I consider objections to mindreading from embodied and enactive cognition and from pluralistic folk psychology. I argue that both sorts of objections fail to show that mindreading is unnecessary, rare, or unimportant’ (7). We read the first use of the term as placed within a list of theories, so she probably had mindreading as a theory in mind; however, in the second, whereas ‘unnecessary’ is sufficiently ambiguous to modify mindreading as either a theory or an activity, it is not clear how competing theories could show that another theory is ‘unimportant’ or that a theory’s being ‘rare’ would invalidate it.

Echoing a declaration that she has consistently made throughout her career, she notes, ‘Phenomenological evidence is *not* relevant to debates about mindreading’ (14). Most notably, Shaun Gallagher and Spaulding have exchanged around this issue. Thus, since as early as 2010¹ Spaulding has criticized the value of phenomenology; in Gallagher’s responses² to her he precisely and accurately indicated how her specific criticisms of phenomenology were mistaken. In 2015, Spaulding forcefully reiterated her position against phenomenology; it was not, however, until she repeated her position again in this book that she made clear what Gallagher failed to say.³

That is, and sincerely with all due respect, Spaulding is not using the correct definition of ‘phenomenology.’ This can be discerned when she notes that ‘it counts against a theory if it entails a phenomenology radically different from what we experience’ (12). For, phenomenology provides an account of how we experience *what we experience*. That is to say, phenomenology refers to a methodology for revealing the conditions for the possibility of experience, so it’s not phenomenology if it’s not a phenomenology of what we experience. Spaulding seems to be confusing the description of empirical phenomena in the ‘natural attitude’ with phenomenology as a transcendental methodology.

¹ Spaulding, Shannon. (2010). “Embodied cognition and mindreading,” *Mind and Language* 25:1, 119-140.

² Gallagher, Shaun. (2012a). “In Defense of Phenomenological Approaches to Social Cognition: Interacting with Critics,” *Review of Philosophical Psychology* 3, 187-212.

³ Spaulding, Shannon. (2015). “Phenomenology of Social Cognition,” *Erkenntnis* 80, 1069-1089.

Thus, in regard to the debate over her use of the terms ‘explanation and prediction,’ in this book she concedes: ‘one could substitute [for them] “interpretation” and “anticipation”’ (15). In this way, she writes as if the choice is merely terminological, but from the correct understanding of phenomenology, accepting those terms shifts the conversation; whereas with ‘explanation and prediction’ thematization was the point of departure for determining the structure and value of ‘social cognition,’ now *temporality* becomes—and rightly so—the point of departure. In fact, it behooves Spaulding to eventually recognize that she is, however reluctantly, a phenomenologist. For example, she agrees with Husserl’s Fifth Cartesian Meditation; the ‘Other’ is phenomenologically a ‘modification’ of herself (§52). That is, she uses *her mind* to ‘read’ other minds; further, she would agree with Husserl that others are ‘surely not a mere intending and intended in me,’ thus, both she and Husserl are looking ‘for a path from the immanency of the ego to the transcendency of the Other.’⁴⁵

Spaulding defends an interesting position in response to the question, ‘Do we need mindreading at all?’ (17). Her position is: ‘we have a broad repertoire of methods for understanding others and these methods interact in messy ways.’ (17). However, adopting the method of phenomenology would clean up ‘the mess,’ since phenomenology would function to unify the other ‘methods.’ In fact, as Hubert Dreyfus has successfully shown, Heidegger’s phenomenology can provide a fruitful groundwork for cognitive science: ‘in active coping [like Jill at the coffee shop in one of Spaulding’s celebrated examples] I need not be thematically aware of my current activity... background [absorbed] coping is necessarily nonthematic and largely unconscious. [Consider] Pierre Bourdieu’s account of how *habitus* works through posture, mood, and so forth ... [this] allows Heidegger to claim that such coping is not a kind of intentionality at all and can, therefore, be a candidate for the condition of the possibility of all intentionality.’⁶

As it stands, Heidegger’s critique of the ‘Cartesianism’ of Spaulding’s mindreading theory would affirm, and yet go beyond, Gallagher’s two ‘challenges,’ namely: ‘mindreading as default’ and ‘observational stance,’ i.e., the ‘natural attitude’ of Spaulding’s philosophizing.⁷ For, Heidegger taught that: ‘Theoretically concocted “*explanations*” [emphasis added] of the Being-present-at-hand of Others urge themselves upon us all too easily; but over against such explanations we must hold fast to the phenomenological facts of the case which we have pointed out, namely, that Others are encountered *environmentally*.’⁸

With the rest of this book Spaulding ‘expands the scope’ of her mindreading theory and states its goals. It is, then, the concluding part of her book that shines. For Spaulding admits that ‘all philosophical theories are subject to counterexamples, and the number of counterexamples a given theory faces often has more to do with how prominent the theory is than its plausibility’ (63). Notice how this coincides with the standard characterization of ‘epistemic injustice.’ For example, epistemic injustice occurs when speakers are given more credibility—as evidenced by privileged-status regarding

⁴ Husserl, Edmund. (1999). *Cartesian Meditations: An Introduction to Phenomenology*. D. Cairns (Trans.). Dordrecht: Kluwer, §42.

⁵ Grush, Rick. (2007). “How to, and how not to, bridge computational cognitive neuroscience and Husserlian phenomenology of time consciousness.” *Synthese* 153:3, 417-450.

⁶ Dreyfus, Hubert. (2000). “Responses.” In M. Wrathall and J. Malpas (Eds.). *Heidegger, Coping, and Cognitive Science, Vol. II*. (pp. 313-350). Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, p. 332-3.

⁷ Gallagher, Shaun. (2012b). *Phenomenology*. London: Palgrave, p. 194.

⁸ Heidegger, Martin. (1962). *Being and Time*. J. Macquarrie and E. Robinson (Trans.). Oxford: Blackwell, 155.

publications and academic jobs—than their utterances deserve because of ‘identity prejudices’ held by, for example, publishers and universities.⁹¹⁰

According to Spaulding, ‘perceiving a social interaction involves categorizing individuals into a salient social group, which is associated with various features, stereotypes, and social biases’ (83). She goes on to say that ‘These associations influence how we decide who is an epistemic peer, inferior, or superior *before we even evaluate their evidence base or reasoning abilities* [emphasis added].’ (83). Of course, here, Spaulding is absolutely right. We would only suggest that through her next encounter with social epistemology she consider the following two developments of her position.

First, she should point out the depth of epistemic injustice and the manner in which university philosophy departments are complicit in such injustice. The fact of the matter is that universities are selling philosophy degrees that do not lead to gainful employment. Spaulding, who is a full-time tenure-track professor, can be seen highlighting this on YouTube at the beginning of a university-sponsored talk, where she jokes that most philosophy majors end up working in ‘fast food.’ A social epistemology regarding the biased, politically (not merit) motivated, decisions which allow some philosophy students to become gainfully employed as academics, while others have to endure sacrifice and hardship is needed, indeed.

Second, she should have taken the opportunity to show the epistemic justice involved in her own peer disagreements, that is, in regard to the epistemic practices of those social groups which support her own philosophizing. For example, soon, if not already, she will have been published by *all* of the so-called top-tier journals in philosophy of psychology, and was invited by Routledge to repeat herself in this book. The financial disparity between full-time and adjunct professors is extreme. Yet, on the one hand, schools continue to pretend that ‘peer reviewed’ journal publications are a ‘gold standard,’ ostensibly allowing journal publishing houses to determine who becomes gainfully employed and who does not. While, on the other hand, there are countless examples of epistemic injustice and bias determining the outcome of ‘peer review,’ most recently ‘Sokal Squared.’¹¹ Ultimately, though *Mindreading*, having spawned from the world of analytic philosophy of mind, may appeal to a small readership of all the people who read philosophy, this book provides a good summary of Spaulding’s work. In that world Spaulding is an influencer and determines what is trending, so she should be applauded for contextualizing the mindreading conversation in regard to social epistemology and ethics. Further, this book may in fact function as a catalyst with which she and her followers come to recognize the value of phenomenology for ‘social cognition;’ we look forward to the day when we may read Spaulding supporting her claims with references to Immanuel Kant and Heideggerian phenomenology.

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⁹ Peters, Douglas P. and Stephen J. Ceci. (1980). “A Manuscript Masquerade: How well does the review process work?” *The Sciences* 20:7, 16-19.

¹⁰ Mahoney, M.J. (1977). “Publication prejudices: An experimental study of confirmatory bias in the peer review system,” *Cognitive Therapy and Research* 1, 161-175.

¹¹ Mounk, Yascha. (2018). “What an Audacious Hoax Reveals About Academia,” *The Atlantic* Oct. 5.