

Why the Folk Aren't Doing Psychology: Review of *Interpreting Minds* by Radu Bogdan

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REVIEW OF: Radu J. Bogdan (1997). *Interpreting Minds*. Bradford (MIT Press). ISBN 0-262-02419-5. x + 304pp. Price: \$US35.00; hbk.

Radu Bogdan would like us to change the way we think about what goes under the heading of "folk psychology," "everyday mind reading" (or, in my case, "social cognition"). From gaze-tracking to linguistic content ascription, Bogdan tells us, the competences displayed in primate social interaction are adaptations, and as such, designed to enable effective action. What we have on our hands is thus "neither a (naive) *logos* nor literally about the *psyche*" (p. 2). It is, rather, a specialized kind of practical know-how, concerned with "external relata"--agents and relevant aspects of a context of interaction. Bogdan prefers therefore to use the term "interpretation," whose "Ursense" he glosses as "organisms making sense of each other in contexts where this matters biologically" (p. 10). Interpretation is "a modality selected for *doing* something about a subject's goals and behaviors" (p. 30) in situations where these have a bearing on the goals (and therefore the biological interests) of the interpreter. The interpreter's "categorization prism ... articulates a network of nodes and routes of practical involvement" (p. 60). Interpretation is not "spectatorial" or "theoretical"; it is continuous with science only insofar as we endorse a philosophy of science characterized by "healthy marxist and pragmatist themes ... that practice dominates theory, that acting precedes and constrains representing, and that successfully intervening in the order of nature is evidence of knowledge and test of reality" (p. 106).

Much of *Interpreting Minds* is dedicated to Bogdan's project of associating selective pressures with corresponding interpretive capacities. "If one knows why some dimensions of interpretation evolved ([i.e.,] under what selective pressures) and in what

environments of selection ..., then one can approximate what the skills involved were good at achieving (as adaptations) through the practical involvements they generate" (p. 131). He divides selective forces into *communal*--based on benefits derivable from collective activities, *epistemic*--resulting from benefits associated with acquisition of social (and socially mediated) information, and, most crucial, *political*--arising from "competition, exploitation, deception, and [the opportunity for] tactical alliances" (p. 32).

This set of categories is then crossed with a taxonomy of interpretive capacities that range from early, *situated* interpretation--stimulus bound, innate, exploiting stable, shared contexts--to increasingly flexible strategies of interpretation, capable of coping with variability and complexity in target and circumstance. Bogdan sees the highest level of situated interpretation--"the psychosocial turn"--as a uniquely human achievement. Advanced or *unsituated* interpretation includes both metarepresentational interpretation (seen here as a transitional "apprenticeship") and full fledged "reconstructional" interpretation, where affordances for intervention are specified by cultural roles, scripts and canons rather than by natural regularities, and concepts augment the rules and procedures previously available.

Bogdan characterizes each of these types of interpretation in terms of three "dimensions"--*accomplishments*, *operating parameters* and *symptoms*. Thus, being able to categorize in terms of "mental take"--"a sort of protoattitude"--is an *accomplishment* of situated psychosocial interpretation (p. 95); being able to transcend the here-and-now is the crucial *operating parameter* of (unsituated) metarepresentational interpretation (p. 151), and a major *symptom* of (situated) psychobehavioral interpretation is protoimperative communication (p. 88). Bogdan also offers computation-style descriptions of, e.g., a "mechanical agency parser" (p. 136), a "belief-action parser" (p. 156), the "goals and tasks of reconstructive interpretation" (p. 204), and "unsituated explanation" (p. 236). (Some of these mini-formalizations were easier for me to follow than others. There certainly seems to be something missing from (5.6): "If [basic goals], then [expect aggressive behavior], so [involvement]" (p. 141).)

Along the way, Bogdan deals with a wide range of topics: phenomenal experience as providing efficient access to practically relevant databases; the pragmatic nature of *de re* versus *de dicto* content ascription; the "public semantics" of everyday interpretive language (Ryle got it right); simulation as a poor candidate for the "installation" of interpretive concepts; "intentional" explanation as successful although not really intentional, the fatal flaw in psychosemantics and, for good measure, a throwaway allusion to Fodor as reread by Derrida.

Although Bogdan insists throughout on his status as a dissident, prospective readers may already have noted that much of what he has to say is accepted in their own discipline. The view that cognition cannot be understood in isolation from action and that the "external" world, including its cultural artifacts, plays a substantial role in cognition has been widely endorsed by cognitive scientists, especially those with affiliations in artificial intelligence (e.g., Clark, 1995, 1997; Hutchins, 1995); psychologists concerned with social cognition take the pragmatics of everyday psychological ascription and explanation

seriously, right down to its Gricean constraints (Sabini, 1995), and, as Bogdan's references indicate, evolutionary psychology is currently a thriving enterprise. (Oddly, there is no separate entry for Hirschfeld and Gelman (1994), whose title is given differently--and incorrectly--in two references to papers included in it.) The view that cognition progresses from sensorimotor "things-of-action" to categories less immediately tied to perception or behavior will, in particular, be familiar to developmental psychologists. (Eleanor and James Gibson, from whose work the vocabulary of "affordances" derives, are not mentioned.)

What probably *is* reasonably controversial, of course, is the brand of philosophical bread that Bogdan bakes with these ingredients. And here there is an awkwardness. Despite Bogdan's refusal to take part in "the good old philosophical game," (p. 11), it is hard to see how else one might reasonably deal with claims about *aboutness*, distinguish between practical know-how and implicit theory or explain in what way, if any, mental causes explain. These are not issues about which psychology or evolutionary theory have a lot to say. At a number of points, Bogdan refers the reader to places where he does seem to have been willing to dig in and do standard philosophy of mind and language; it would have been nice to have had a bit more of it here.

Interpreting Minds also has more than its share of distractions. It took me a moment to recognize that "intrasibling rivalry" was not what Bogdan meant, that "distal outlay" should have been "distal layout," that "pretension" could be translated as "pretence" and "alternance" as "alternation"; it took a few more to get a colleague's reassurance that the accent garnishing Bogdan's French "Heaven help me!" was, indeed, slanting in the wrong direction. I never completely adapted to 'causal' applied like ketchup: "causal intervention," "causal ways of performing a function," "causally affected," "causally influenced," "causally produced," a "causal manipulator," "*intersubjective* causal impact," and so on. (What would a *non-causal* influence be like?) And it took me more time than it should have to crack "A *contexture* is to the information conveyed by a subject about a situation what a practical selection is to a role or attribute parser, namely, a practical contextualization promising specific affordances" (p. 203).

I found *Interpreting Minds* ingenious, full of provocative suggestions and fairly exasperating. My feeling is that as with black walnuts, you have to be pretty fond of the flavor to put in the effort required to extract the meat. I would suggest browsing before buying.

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