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Understanding the Other: Spaulding and the Inclusion of Being-in-the-World in Folk Psychology

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ABSTRACT
In her book, How we Understand Others, Shannan Spaulding attempts to expand the orthodox theory of mindreading, which claims that we mostly attribute beliefs and desires to explain the behavior of others. She argues that mindreading tends to be much more complex and messy than what is assumed, for there are additional folk psychological dimensions to mindreading which must be considered. The various goals we have when mindreading, the stereotypes that are implicit in our interpretation of others' behavior, and the way in which situational context affect our explanatory ability are a few facets of mindreading that Spaulding considers. Despite Spaulding's pursuit to expand mindreading having merit, her position is nonetheless limited in the sense that she does not properly account for a fundamental way in which we understand others; namely, as being wrapped up in the world. I argue in the following essay that any discussion of mindreading, or folk psychology, must account for how we see the other as a subject engaged in the external world. I use Spaulding's book How we Understand Others as a way to illustrate an account of mindreading that falls short in considering how the other's worldly involvement affects how we explain and predict the behavior of others. The first part of the essay elucidates on Spaulding's position on mind reading. In the attempt to provide a more comprehensive account of mindreading, I explore the phenomenological concept of being-in-the-world as it relates to explaining the behaviors of others. The last section demonstrates how empathy can be further developed when emphasizing the other's being-in-the-world in explaining behavior.

KEYWORDS
Philosophy of Mind, Folk Psychology, Phenomenology, Social Cognition

Our social interactions with others vary from walking past someone on the street to arguing with a loved one. These are merely two of the many ways in which we interact with others. Essential to the system of interaction is explaining and predicting the behavior of others; for this is what folk psychology primarily concerns itself with. The orthodox view contends that folk psychology mostly consists of mindreading, "the capacity to make sense of intentional behavior in terms of mental states'' (Spaulding 2018, 1). Shannan Spaulding, in her book How We Understand Others, argues that while she agrees with the orthodox view, mindreading turns out to be much more complex and messy than what is assumed. Despite Spaulding's basic pursuit to expand mindreading having merit, her position is nonetheless confining in the sense that she does not properly account for a fundamental way in which we understand others; namely, as being wrapped up in the world. I argue in the following essay that any discussion of mindreading, or folk psychology, must account for how we see the other as a subject engaged in the external world. I use Spaulding's book How We Understand Others as a way to illustrate an account of mindreading that falls short in considering how the other's worldly involvement affects how we explain and predict the behavior of others. The first part of the essay elucidates on Spaulding's position on mindreading. In the attempt to provide a more comprehensive account of mindreading, I explore the phenomenological concept of being-in-the-world as it relates to explaining the behaviors of others. The last section demonstrates how empathy can be further developed when emphasizing the other's being-in-the-world in explaining behavior.

MINDREADING AND EXPLAINING BEHAVIOR

To understand my focal thesis in this essay, it is important that I elucidate Spaulding's exposition of mindreading and how she responds to the various perspectives. She begins her argument by first stating that while she still defends the standard mindreading story (i.e. the orthodox view), she concedes that mindreading is not as "simple, uniform or accurate as the philosophical literature on mindreading suggests'' (Spaulding 2018, 3). In other words, we mostly attribute beliefs, desires, and other mental states to a person in order to explain and predict their behavior; however, there are additional moving parts to mindreading that must be explored.

The "broad scope of mindreading claim" —the claim that mindreading is essential for social interactions—which Spaulding supports is not without its challenges. Proponents of embodied and enactive cognition contend that most of our folk psychology is not based on mental state attribution, but rather a mixture of non-mentalistic, embodied understandings predicated on perception. For example, we perceive in the "other person's bodily movements, facial gestures, eye direction, and so on, what they intend and what they feel" (Spaulding 2018, 9). A more sophisticated social interaction occurs when a child is capable of engaging in shared attention behaviors. Abilities such as "following gazes, pointing, and communicating with others about objects of shared attention" are elements of advanced social interactions which do not involve attributing mental states (Ibid). The former embodied practice is what embodied cognition calls "primary intersubjectivity" and the latter "secondary intersubjectivity." Attempting to substantiate their objection to the broad scope of mindreading claim, embodied cognitivists like Shaun Gallagher assert that our phenomenological accounts reveal that our ordinary interactions with others do not involve explicit attempts to understand the mental states of others. Spaulding takes issue with this position by pointing out that the evidence yielded by the phenomenological method is not novel, reliable, and relevant, thus rendering his objection to the broad scope of mindreading claim flawed. The second challenger to the insistence on mental state attribution being the primary social navigator comes from pluralist folk psychology. Similar to the embodied cognition perspective, pluralists (Kristin Andrews, Victoria McGeer, etc.) maintain that there is more to folk psychology than merely mindreading for the purpose of explaining and predicting the behavior of others. Pluralists note that sometimes our goal in a social interaction is not to ascertain the other's mental state, but rather to shape their mental state in accordance to our desires.

Unlike embodied and enactive cognition, Spaulding is more sympathetic towards the pluralist perspective; for she dedicates the third and fourth chapter of her book considering how the pluralists' contributions to folk psychology can expand our understanding of mindreading. Although, this is not to say that she agrees with everything pluralists espouse. Spaulding disagrees with the tendency pluralists have to separate non-mindreading social practices (like personality trait inferences or stereotypes) from mental state ascriptions. She argues that they cannot be separated from mindreading by virtue of the fact that they "interact

in messy ways" (Spaulding 2018, 17). The third chapter of How we Understand Others draws the reader's attention to the ways in which mindreading is affected by aspects of social interaction such as stereotypes and situational context; for these are features that the orthodox mindreading theories often neglect. Situational context refers to how a certain environment—whether that be in an airport, in school, on a bus, etc—contains implicit rules, norms, and behavior scripts which shape how we explain and predict the behavior of others. Those who live in populated urban settings like New York, will typically associate someone walking up to them with the desire to sell them some product. This explanatory behavior (explaining why the man is walking towards them) becomes shaped by being familiar with the context of walking in the streets of New York.

Stereotyping describes the tendency to associate a particular group with a set of characteristics or attributes. This can take on rather neutral form, as in associating children with being innocent, dependent, and vulnerable. Stereotyping or social bias can also be negative, as in the categorization of black Americans with unpleasant words like "terrible" and "horrible" (Spaulding 2018, 28). Spaulding notes that these developed associations prime or filter how we explain the behavior of others; her example of the man attempting to explain the behavior of his female colleague illustrates this. When a male faculty member explains that his colleague is less productive or is teaching a fewer number of courses due to her being a mother now, "he is explaining her behavior by categorizing it as an instance of a familiar pattern of behavior, namely, women putting their careers on the back burner to focus on their families'' (Spaulding 2018, 53). The association of being a mother and prioritizing family over a career is implicitly deployed in his attempt to make sense of her behavior. Moreover, the goals inherent in the man's attempt to make sense of his colleague is another dimension of mindreading which Spaulding highlights in this example. Explaining the colleague's behavior with the goal of accuracy may not be the focal aim in his mindreading, it is likely that his explanation "serve[s] to protect his ego as he regards his colleague as a competitor in terms of research productivity…" (Spaulding 2018, 55). Since I am mostly concerned with accuracy as the main goal of mindreading, there is no need to explore the other goals. The principal takeaway from the fourth chapter is that sometimes our main goal is not to accurately determine the beliefs and desires of others, but instead to boost our self-worth (as evidenced by the previous example) or to manipulate others.

BEING-IN-THE-WORLD AND THE OTHER

While Spaulding's efforts to expand mindreading appear to be successful, there is a feature of explaining the behavior of others that is missing in her exposition; namely, how the other is engaged in the world. This concern can be made manifest when observing the following example of "how mindreading works," found in the second chapter of the book (Spaulding 2018, 7). If we suppose that Lawrence (a colleague of yours) agrees to meet you at your office at 11 a.m., however, ten minutes pass and he has yet to show up. A possible explanation for his behavior might be that he desires to meet with you but believes that the meeting is at 12 p.m. Or perhaps Lawrence knows the meeting time but does not desire to meet with you. Spaulding also mentions that it may be the case that he "desires to meet with you, has a true belief about the scheduled meeting time and location, but something urgent has come up and he cannot come to your office"(Ibid). Notice how the final plausible explanation involves more than merely beliefs and desires about the meeting; for it involves an alteration in Lawrence's relation to the world. Attributing beliefs and desires to explain and predict the behavior of others, might not be helpful in many social interactions. Exploring the phenomenological concept of "being-in-the-world" and how it relates to our social interactions will capture the importance of considering the other's engagement with the world when explaining behavior.

The term "being-in-the-world" was first introduced by 20th century philosopher Martin Heidegger to emphasize the continual interaction we have with the world—whether that be engaging with others in conversation, being occupied with a task, or any of the various interactions we have with the world. Essential to this notion is recognizing that the world is not some neutral and static space; oftentimes the world complicates our desires to achieve some task. Heidegger remarks that our "concernful absorption in the work-world which lies closest to us" is disturbed once a piece of equipment breaks (Heidegger 1962, 103). For example, the carpenter faces resistance from the world when her power drill breaks; for now her preoccupation with building a chair must be deferred. Another primary element of being-in-the-world involves our encounters with others. When we interact with others, we typically do not consider them as objects with some semblance of consciousness; rather, we implicitly recognize them as having a similar conscious experience. Not only do we implicitly assume that they

have perceptual and rational faculties akin to ours, but there is an assumption that they are meaningfully involved in the world in their own unique way. This is to say that we understand others as having their own obligations, facing difficulties in the world, having particular desires and beliefs, and so on. Susan Bredlau, in her book The Other in Perception, says something similar in a succinct way: "[W]e discover that we encounter these bodies as perceiving subjects engaged with the natural and cultural world that we, too, can perceive rather than as thinking subjects engaged with ideas that are not immediately accessible to us" (Bredlau 2018, 29). In sum, not only do we find ourselves being-in-the-world, but we also take it as a fact that others are immersed in that same world. This has a few informative implications for discussions about mindreading and explaining the behavior of others.

Let us return to the example of Lawrence being late to the scheduled meeting. You take into consideration Lawrence's being-in-the-world precisely when the possibility that something urgent came up is subsumed with the array of plausible explanations for why he is late to the meeting. Another potential conjecture you might consider is the possibility that Lawrence is stuck in traffic, thereby preventing him from arriving on time. And, assuming that he desires to meet with you and has a true belief of the meeting time, explaining his behavior in terms of his mental states would not be helpful in this aforementioned possibility; it is simply the case that traffic is preventing him from being punctual. One might suggest that how the other is engaged with the external world falls into the broader domain of folk psychology, which makes it distinct from mindreading (making sense of behavior in terms of mental states). I however, contend that the other's being-in-the-world and their mental states cannot be separated as wholly distinct properties of a human; or as Spaulding would remark, they "interact in messy ways'' (Spaulding 2018, 17). This implies that it is common for us to also consider how their interaction with the world contributes to explaining their behavior. Moreover, the necessity to not divide these properties into distinct categories is demonstrated in the consideration that Lawrence's behavior can be explained by him attending some urgent matter. Spaulding or other defenders of orthodox mindreading might claim that we are still attributing mental states to Lawrence when we entertain the possibility that something urgent came up, namely, the belief that the urgent matter was more important than the meeting. I concede that this mental state ascription might be occurring despite us not being

aware of it; however, this ascription follows from the consideration that changes in Lawrence's external world are interfering with his plan to meet with you. In other words, attributing mental states (i.e. the belief that the urgent matter was more important than the meeting) to explain Lawrence's inexplicable behavior would not have been possible had you not entertained the possibility that he experienced some significant alteration in his being-in-the-world. Another messy interaction can be found in the case where a faculty member is explaining why his colleague is less productive in her work. Assuming the faculty member is not stereotyping nor motivated to protect his ego (as described in the previous section), he attributes her reduction in productivity to having a child precisely because he knows how having a child (with all the effort and time required) typically interferes with other dimensions of one's being in the world—like teaching or conducting research, for example. We can grant that inherent in the explanation is an implicit recognition that the colleague believes that childcare is currently more important than her profession, however, this only follows from conjecturing how external circumstances affected her being-in-the-world (namely, having a child). The foregoing examples involve explaining the behavior of others from a distance, that is, the other's behavior is not being examined in a perceptual and direct way. A woman hammering a nail into a chair is an example of another's actions directly conveying their desires and intentions. However, another's mental state is not always provided to us just by merely looking at them; many occasions require us to inspect how that person is engaged in the world in order to make sense of their behavior. Imagine you are walking along a street in an area that has many stores in close proximity to each other, and suddenly see a man across the street dressed in a batman costume. A common method deployed in understanding his behavior would be to look at the stores he is walking towards. Once you do that, you will find a comic book store holding a small costume convention. Observing the other's relation to their environment provided the necessary information in explaining their intentions and desires; this is related to the embodied cognition's commitment to not viewing the "mind as something to be studied independently of the body and its environment" (Spaulding 2018, 9)

These three cases of explaining the behavior of others illustrate the messy interaction between mental state ascriptions and accounting for the other's engagement with the world. This messy interaction impels me to conclude that any theory or discussion of mindreading must account for the way we interpret

others' behavior through the understanding that they are subjects being-in-the-world. If we draw our attention back to Spaulding's criticism of the pluralists, we find her critical of the "idea sometimes implicit in pluralist folk psychology that we can separate mindreading from these other social practices (other folk psychological tools typically not subsumed into mindreading)" (Spaulding 2018, 18). And Spaulding takes great efforts in the third, fourth, and fifth chapters of her text expanding the theory of mindreading to include these non-mindreading social practices. However, if the goal is to include those folk psychological tools which interact with mindreading in "messy ways," in order to devise a ..".more comprehensive, cohesive, and plausible account of mindreading," it would be remiss to not consider how the other's relation to the world (their being-in-the-world) affects explaining and predicting their behavior (Spaulding 2018, 72).

EMPATHY AND BEING-IN-THE-WORLD

Besides increasing the accuracy of explaining the behavior of others, deliberately considering the other's being-in-the-world can also engender greater degrees of empathy in our folk psychological practices. As mentioned in the fourth chapter of How We Understand Others, standard theories of mindreading presuppose that accuracy is our primary goal when attempting to understand the behavior of others. This, however, is not always the case; for "we have various goals in our social interactions, and accuracy is just one of them" (Spaulding 2018, 43). Moreover, we can have more than one motivation influencing our interactions, where one is primary and others are secondary. Even our goals in understanding our own behavior can be skewed by self-serving motivations, which is evidenced by the self-serving attributional bias. This self-serving cognitive bias describes the tendency to attribute our successes to internal factors (e.g., hard work or intelligence) and attribute our shortcomings to external factors (e.g. other people or bad luck). The basic mechanism structuring this bias can be found in our social interactions with others. Like when explaining the behavior of individuals we are fond of or consider to be part of our "in-group" (family members, close friends, etc), it is likely that being empathetic and charitable are part of our goals; Spaulding remarks something similar when she says, "[w]e tend to have more favorable attitudes and empathize more with in-group members" (Spaulding 2018, 32). This means that a shortcoming of an in-group member is

likely to be explained by external factors interfering with their engagement in the world; for this is a basic feature of group-serving attribution bias. On the other hand, being uncharitable or confirming our unpleasant beliefs about the other are goals affecting the social interaction we have with those we deem despicable, which usually results in focusing on internal attributes (like their beliefs, desires, personality, etc.). For example, if you think highly of Lawrence, it is more plausible that you would attribute his unpunctuality to external factors, like being stuck in traffic or some urgent matter arising. Conversely, if you did not think highly of Lawrence, unpleasant internal factors such as being disrespectful or not valuing the meeting are plausible explanations you would consider. What is important to notice is that empathy or being considerate seems to shift our focus to the other's being-in-the-world—how they are interacting with the world— when explaining their behavior. As Shuan Gallager and Dan Zahavi note in The Phenomenological Mind, "[e]mpathy is defined as a form of intentionality in which one is directed towards the other's lived experiences'' (Gallagher and Zahavi 2008, 183). This phenomenological definition of empathy is meant to convey that empathy attempts to consider the totality of the other's experience, which includes accounting for their external circumstances as well as their mental states. If one is attempting to become more empathetic (especially towards those who they deem as an out-group) in their folk psychological practices, a possible step in that direction would be to focus on how the external world might be influencing their behavior.

CONCLUSION

As mentioned in the introduction, I am sympathetic to Spaulding's efforts to expand mindreading in order to make it a comprehensive and cohesive domain of cognitive science. The orthodox accounts of mindreading fail to capture the complexity that goes into explaining the behavior of others, which in turn negatively affects how one might try to change their maladaptive mindreading practices. While I concur with Spaulding's expansion of mindreading, there are nonetheless aspects of our folk psychology needed to be accounted for, given they are inextricably tied to mindreading. I argued in this essay that any discussion of mindreading must account for how we see the other as a subject engaged in the world. I use Spaulding's book How We Understand Others as a way to illustrate an account of mindreading that falls short in considering how the other's

worldly involvement affects how we explain and predict the behavior of others. The first part of the essay elucidated on Spaulding's position on mindreading. The next part explored the phenomenological concept of being-in-the-world as it relates to explaining the behaviors of others. Finally, I considered how the other's being-in-the-world is relevant to empathy in our folk psychological practices.

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