

SOCIAL THOUGHT & COMMENTARY SPECIAL SECTION:
Anthropology and the Opacity of Other Minds

Further Reflections on Reading Other Minds

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The articles in this special collection give us an opportunity to further reflect on a central concern for any discipline dedicated to the study of human action, namely, the role that introspection plays in giving us insights into what people think, feel, and want. The starting point of this discussion is the observation that members of a number of Pacific societies have been said to claim—or to imply through their behavior—that it is impossible to know what goes on in another person's mind. This claim, called the “doctrine of the opacity of other minds” by the editors (hereafter “opacity doctrine”), is often extended to the self, as when native consultants refuse to provide motivations for their own actions or resist any kind of intentional reading of what they have just done. In treating this type of attitude as a puzzle that needs our empirical and theoretical attention, the authors in this collection, like those of us who were dealing with it some twenty plus years ago, are making a set of analytical choices based on assumptions that should be re-examined. In the following comments I review some potential problems that emerge in the arguments presented in this collection and also suggest some ways of integrating philosophical and anthropological perspectives that could help develop more precise research tools and hypotheses about the opacity doctrine.

Levels of Argumentation

A careful reading of the articles in this collection shows that the opacity doctrine has been dealt with on two main levels, observational and explanatory, each of which relies on a different order of generalizations and implies different kinds of analytical categories and types of argumentation. The first level—which we might call “observational”—draws from fieldwork situations in which ethnographers try to get their consultants, field assistants, hosts, and friends to tell them about other members’ actions, motivations, explanations, and emotions. These attempts, as we know from the ethnographic literature, which include the articles in this collection, are sometimes met with surprise, suspicion, or flat rejection, as in “How would I know?” or “Why should I know?” Such responses are subsequently interpreted as consistent with a particular “local” theory of interpretation, to be distinguished from the ethnographer’s. This move transforms the earlier “observational” level into a first stage “explanatory” level. With the confidence that comes with labeling, ethnographers could begin to search for more evidence to support their hypothesis about the local theory. At this point ethnographers also face the question of whether they themselves are creating the problem, and the theory, by asking certain kinds of questions (Briggs 1984). Could it be that a different way of asking about introspection would bring about a different kind of answer? This line of inquiry, as far as I know, has never been fully developed, even though the next step could be seen in part as a way of addressing this issue. Armed with the hypothesis that the natives have a way of thinking about what we can know about others that is different from what is usually assumed in western theories of meaning, ethnographers are able to search for naturally occurring situations in which the same reluctance to read other minds might manifest itself spontaneously, that is, without any outsider’s prompting. One important source of evidence for this line of investigation is provided by language socialization studies, as shown by Bambi Schieffelin in this volume and elsewhere (Schieffelin 1990:72–3). The fact that Bosavi adults do not try to guess what an infant is trying to say—Bosavi, like Samoans (Ochs 1982), do not “expand” children’s elliptical utterances—shows that the opacity doctrine works across a number of activities and contexts.

Another opportunity to look for further evidence of the local theory is presented through inter-cultural contact situations and the introduction of new activities that typically accompany contact. For example, it makes sense to hypothesize that the opacity doctrine would inhibit or in some way affect participation in introduced Christian practices such as confession, which relies on the assumption of the existence of an inner self that is accessible to introspec-

tion (Cary 2000). This indeed seems the case among the Urapmin, as described by Robbins (this collection), and the Bosavi, as described by Schieffelin (this collection). In the first case confessing in public made people very uncomfortable and occasionally even suicidal in some cases—we can imagine the same effects on Catholics in the west, who are accustomed to confession as a private activity. Among the Bosavi, Schieffelin documented people resisting confessing altogether and holding on to the privacy of their own thoughts, intentions, and desires.

Once a family resemblance among different practices is identified, some ethnographers are tempted to move to an even higher level of explanation, proposing to subsume the opacity doctrine under another, more general principle. For example, Robbins suggests a general tendency among the Urapmin to think of people's minds as "private places" and calls this phenomenon "psychic privacy." Stasch suggests that the opacity doctrine may be linked to an egalitarian ethos. This particular generalization however does not hold cross-culturally given that opacity doctrine phenomena have been documented in highly stratified societies like Samoa (Ochs 1982; Duranti 1988). A more promising line of explanation is Stasch's observations regarding the potential relationship between opacity of mind and local attitudes toward authority and responsibility, two dimensions rich with political and ethical implications that can potentially have universal application (Duranti 1993). As I will suggest below, we need a more nuanced analytical framework that could connect different manifestations of the opacity doctrine with their respective cultural implications.

Opacity of Other Minds as a Problem

In a classic example of anthropological reversal in which the "strange" is turned into "familiar" and the "familiar" into the "strange," some of us started to argue in the 1980s that there was nothing really exotic about the reluctance to go into introspection or the avoidance of intentional readings of other people's actions, words included. Rather, it was the western view of interpretation and its associated concept of self or person (see Geertz 1983:59) that was the problem (Rosaldo 1982; Duranti 1984, 1988; Rosen 1995). The only thing we had to do was get rid of the philosophical bias represented by the views of philosophers like Austin, Grice, and Searle, who had built a theory of meaning that was too dependent on intentions and sincerity. If we could recast intentional meaning as simply another "local" theory—this one originating in Oxford, England, instead of a Polynesian or Papuan community—then the anti-intentionalist or

anti-personalist view of meaning documented in a number of Pacific cultures would no longer be a “problem.” In fact, some of us hinted, reducing the role of intentions in meaning-making might be beneficial, providing a theory that is closer to what people actually do when they go about their daily life.

As the articles in this special issue show, the “problem,” however, has not gone away. One of the reasons is that as ethnographers continued to look for evidence of the non-intentionalist theory of interpretation, some inconsistencies began to emerge.

Inconsistencies

Throughout the ethnographic data that specifically address this issue, it is not uncommon to find that the same people who in some contexts seem reluctant to read others' minds do not seem to have a problem doing so in other contexts. For example, Rumsey tells us that the Ku Waru are not reluctant to read others' minds in courtship situations or when describing sexual attraction. They also seem comfortable with the idea of being able to spot deception on the basis of observations of others' behavior. Among the Korowai, according to Stasch, it is recognized that people may think silently. But this recognition comes with the suspicion that silent contemplation may hide malevolent intentions—I will return to this finding below because it offers some important hints about how introspection is perceived.

The documentation of the adoption of the various Christian practices of confession also suggests that they are not completely rejected as inappropriate by some of the same groups that have been said to exhibit the opacity doctrine. In fact, in Rumsey's article we learn that prior to the introduction of Christian confession, the Ku Waru (as well as the Melpa and other groups in Papua New Guinea) had their own indigenous practice of group confession that was used in preparation for war or during war activities—a practice that was connected to the belief that “pent-up anger and concealed wrong-doing can cause bodily illness” (Rumsey, this collection, p. 460). We also learn from Robbins that the Urapmin people at first embraced the practice of public confession and claimed that they were able to see the sins that were harbored in the minds of others (Robbins, this collection, p. 425).

These inconsistencies suggest that our research strategies should be revised in at least two directions. The first concerns methods of data collection and analysis. We need to devise more precise and systematic methods for documenting and analyzing exactly when and how people engage in reading other

minds. It appears that we have been conflating differences between qualitatively distinct ways of making inferences about what others are up to. The focus on introspection as a conscious and deliberate activity might have impeded us from uncovering cases in which the reading of other minds is in fact going on without social actors' awareness.

The second direction that needs to be explored is theoretical. We need a more nuanced way of talking about opacity doctrine and more generally of native hermeneutic activities. To achieve this goal we need to leave analytical philosophy behind, at least momentarily, and engage with approaches that are potentially more useful for accommodating the type of phenomena we are interested in, including the opacity doctrine. As I discuss below, I believe that the phenomenological tradition offers some important tools for this enterprise.

Examining Spontaneous Interaction

We need to take advantage of the fact that the recording of spontaneous interactions provide us with an ideal opportunity to examine a range of situations in which participants may, without realizing it, make inferences about what others are thinking, feeling, or wishing. I will concentrate here on two types of situations: one in which a speaker makes a prediction about what someone else will do and another in which a speaker expresses her interpretation of what someone else wants. Both types of verbal activities are candidates for evidence of mind reading. First I will give an example of each situation and then I will return to their potential significance.

The first example is taken from a video recorded interaction among four Samoan women who are having lunch after cleaning up a communal house belonging to their church congregation. Suddenly one of them realizes that they are being watched by the children of someone they all know, a woman named Falafala. At this point the women speculate that the children will go and report what they saw to Falafala, who will inevitably come later to find out what the women were talking about and to add her own (annoying) stories.

(1) (Women of the Congregation, August 1988; Four women, Vaega (Vg), Vitelu (Vt), Tamae (T), and Malue (M) have been conversing while sharing a meal; their actual names have been substituted by pseudonyms that are not necessarily recognizable Samoan names; the double oblique, //, marks a point of overlap by the next speaker)

- Vg; *va`aifo`ilâ i le fâgau a Falafala ((name))-*
“look there at the children of Falafala”
lâ e kilokilo mai lâ ua koe ô
“they are looking here, now they’ve gone back”
- Vt; *e ô mai e kilokilo mai poô i ai gisi igé*
“they’ve come to check out if there’s anybody here”
- Vg; *va`ai-va`ai*
“look- look”
- M; *mm::*
“mh”
(three turns left out)
- Vt; *lili mai â e va`aipo`oiai gisi*
“they’ve come to see if anybody’s here”
- T; *e ô aku gei`fa`pea-â e`a`ab ai?*
“now they go (and) say- they’re eating- (and they will be asked) who?”
- Vg; *Vitelu-`oKamae.-`oMalue*
“Vitelu- Tamae- Malue”
- Vg; *e lê mafai gei ga lê sau- // auâ o le mea fia iloa*
“now (she) cannot not come because the thing is that she wants to know”
- Vt; *mm::*
“mh”
- T; *sau gei kîgâ kaliga*
“(she’ll) come here (tonight) and our ears (will) hurt”

In this example we see what we might have expected to occur in this situation and yet such occurrences are precisely what we need to reconsider. Everywhere in the world people are constantly trying to make predictions about what will happen. Some of this prediction work is concerned with what specific individuals will do. One could argue that this is an example of reading another person’s mind. I would argue that this is a limited case of mind reading because it is based on expectations grounded in knowledge of previously observed behavior. In this specific case, the women know that Falafala tends to act in a certain way. Her likelihood of wanting to come to see them and gossip is not that different from other highly predictable events, including that her children will report what they have seen—this is what children are expected to

do—or that certain people will go to church on Sunday. This is a type of inference that is based on repeated, generalizable, and even routinized behavior. The person whose wants are being assessed is being treated as a type more than as an individual.

It is a different type of situation when a speaker shows that he or she has interpreted what someone else has just done or said as evidence of some specific desire that the person has not made explicit. This type of inference is much more context-specific. An example of this is found in (2) below from an exchange during a family dinner that I video recorded in the same village where the interaction reproduced in (1) took place. In this situation, 6 year old O., the youngest girl in the family, has been begging her mother to give her a bigger piece of banana (see Duranti 1994:154 for the earlier part of the interaction). Little O.'s actions are witnessed by her older siblings, including her 9 year old sister, R., who first verbally displays her disapproval of such selfishness (in line 516) and then ascribes to her younger sister the specific wish not only to get a bigger piece but “the very big one” (or “biggest”) (in line 519).

(2) (FamilyDinner number 3, August 1988)

- 514 O; ((to her mother)) *àumai le mea foi gale!*
Give me that one (piece) over there!
- 515 ((The mother apparently complies with O.'s request by switching the piece of banana on O.'s plate))
- 516 R; *ē! ò loū igoigo ia i amio a le laikiki // lea!*
Hey! I'm so disgusted at the behavior of this little one!
- 517 O; *leai, lea, e lē:, e lē (le) kipi:.*
No, this, it's not- not the one that's cut.
- 518 ((Once more the mother switches the piece of banana with a bigger one))
- 519 R; *magaò ā e faākelē aga ia.*
(She) wants hers to be the biggest.

What is important in this example is that little O. has not said that she wants the biggest piece. She has merely rejected the pieces that her mother has tried to give her. For this reason R.'s statement that O. wants the biggest piece available must count as an inference about what O. is thinking but not saying.

These two examples demonstrate that some kind of mind reading obviously goes on in Samoa, like in any other place in the Pacific or elsewhere. It might also indicate that children are more likely than adults to engage in this type of mind reading. At the same time, the contrast between the two situations also suggests that we need a more sophisticated set of analytical tools. We must move beyond the easy criticism of so-called “western” philosophers and be active participants in the shaping of a theory that could accommodate the types of phenomena just illustrated. In the next section I will illustrate how a collaboration between western philosophy and anthropology could help us better understand the problem of the opacity doctrine.

How Western Philosophy and Anthropology Can Inform Each Other

The relationship between anthropology and philosophy is characterized by a complex history that includes mutual attraction as well as mutual mistrust. Despite the fact that in the second half of the eighteenth century anthropology was one of the subjects taught in philosophy courses in German universities (Zammito 2002), some of the most influential European philosophers of the twentieth century treated anthropological thinking as highly problematic for any kind of theory of human understanding that aimed at being truly universal. Most anthropologists, on the other hand, came to see philosophers as just another “tribe” whose beliefs and classificatory systems should not be given any privileged status among the Earth’s populations. Despite the occasional borrowing of a concept or anecdote from each other’s writings, over the last few decades philosophers and anthropologists have rarely engaged in any serious intellectual debate. This is curious given that philosophers have thought a great deal about some of the very basic themes of anthropological research (knowledge, experience, symbolic representation and mediation, agency), and anthropologists’ interests in rituals, myths, and native cosmologies can be easily recast as interests in ontology and epistemology. Equally curious is the fact that in the discussion of the universality of introspection and the role of intentions in interpreting the actions of others, anthropologists have tended to invoke philosophers only to argue against their views. There are, however, philosophers whose work might be of help regarding this issue because they have introduced concepts that resonate with the goals of anthropological fieldwork (see Throop 2003). In our case, I think that a key concept for understanding how different people around the world see and

practice the interpretation of other people's thoughts is intersubjectivity, as defined in the writings of Edmund Husserl and some of his students and followers, including Emmanuel Levinas, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and Alfred Schutz.

In the sociological and psychological literature, there has been a tendency to think about intersubjectivity as "mutual understanding." This view assumes that communication implies the matching of well formed statements representing propositional attitudes (e.g. I believe/know/hope that X).

In fact, a close reading of Husserl's writings and lectures, starting around 1905 and continuing all the way to his last manuscript (Husserl 1970), shows that his notion of intersubjectivity accommodates phenomena that include but also go beyond what another person is thinking, wishing, or feeling. For Husserl (and some of his interpreters) intersubjectivity starts at a much more foundational level. It is already at work when a person is aware of the presence of others in his or her surrounding world. Such a presence may include language but in many cases consists of perceived embodied actions and dispositions that may or may not be directed at us and yet help define our own sense of an objective world that is shared with others.

This view of our being in a shared cultural world—which may but does not have to include physical co-presence—allows for the kind of immediate, intuitive, pre-rational understanding of another's actions that has been documented by neuroscientists tracking mirror-neurons in non-human primates and humans (e.g. Gallese 2003; Iacoboni et al. 2005). More generally, it recognizes a level of understanding of what others are up to that does not always need to, or cannot, be easily represented by propositional knowledge (e.g. I believe that X intends to do Y). Phenomenologists and neuroscientists agree that empathetic understanding is needed for the rapidity with which we get a sense of a situation and react to it, linguistically or otherwise. Equally important are the roles of cultural artifacts, cultural categories, and culturally organized activities. Participants make moves and thus display choices that are, at least in part, guided by routinized understandings of who others are and what they are expected to do. We do not just interpret our surrounding world as a world of objects or facts. As Husserl wrote, our world is "*a world of values, a world of goods, a practical world...* Things in their immediacy stand there as objects to be used, the "table" with its "books," the "glass to drink from," the "vase," the "piano," and so forth" (Husserl 1931:92–3, emphasis in the original). The same can be said about the people around me. They are not just "humans." They are "friends," "foes," "superiors" or "helpers," "strangers" or "relatives."

It is within this context that we should return to Husserl's notion of intentionality, namely, an aboutness or directedness toward the world that is not necessarily equivalent to rational action, as posited by Dennett (1987), or 'mental states,' as assumed by Searle (1982). Our body, through postures and conventional as well as non-conventional gestures, is a continuous source of information for others to get access to our conscious and unconscious attitudes or to the possible direction of our future actions. Even the most conventionalized of the codes at our disposal, human language, is typically at work at a speed and in a fashion that implies a considerable dose of routine, habitual thought, and encoding (Whorf 1956; Hanks 1996).

All of this means that (i) a certain amount of figuring out what others are up to is always going on and is necessary for people to manage their daily life; (ii) whether or not this type of thinking should always be glossed as "reading other minds" depends on the specific situation as well as on our theory of human action, including our view of intersubjectivity; (iii) conscious and explicit reading of other minds is one of the possible routes to understanding a situation retrospectively and prospectively; (iv) communities (and individuals) vary in the extent to which reading other minds is recognized, verbalized, and justified.

Because of its unique research conditions and interests, anthropological fieldwork can help us refine each of these generalizations. In particular, it can clarify the role of ideology in how people see and practice introspection. Although explicitly reflecting upon one's own thoughts and feelings as well as upon the thoughts and feelings of others is considered necessary if not innocuous by most philosophers, anthropologists have shown that such activities are seen as highly suspicious by ordinary people in the Pacific (and elsewhere). For example, Stasch (this collection) tells us that in those cases in which introspection is acknowledged among the Korowai it is cast as a morally dubious activity. This is an important hint because it can help us explain why people feel uncomfortable about trying to speculate about others' thoughts and desires. Our asking people to tell us what they imagine that others are thinking might be like asking them to spy for us. The ethnographer's curiosity might imply that there is something wrong or devious that needs to be uncovered. A number of ethnographic accounts show that the very act of bringing out in public one's speculations on the mental activity of others makes speakers worry about potential retaliation. Hence, from a sociocultural point of view, the phenomenon of the opacity doctrine might be seen as a defense strategy against the accountability that comes with making claims about what others think or

want. It is perhaps not by accident that the two Samoan examples briefly discussed above involve moral indignation. It could turn out that the opacity doctrine hides or at least implies a pan-human preoccupation with reducing one's accountability. The study of the conditions that might increase or decrease such a concern is a worthwhile research project.

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