Direct Social Perception and the Two-Systems Theory of Mindreading

The problem of other minds remains one of philosophy's most persistent challenges. In recent decades, the direct social perception (DSP) thesis has emerged as a promising approach. On this view, we do not infer other minds; rather, we are perceptually acquainted with others as minded beings. Others appear to us not merely as moving bodies but as persons – with goals, emotions, and intentions – in an immediate, unmediated way. If correct, DSP would provide a powerful approach to the problem of other minds: our belief in other minds would be justified perceptually, in much the same way our belief in the existence of external objects is. Versions of this thesis have been defended across both analytic and phenomenological traditions for the past century (Duddington, 1921; cf. Smith, 2010), but the last 20 years have seen a boom in advocacy (e.g. Krueger & Overgaard, 2012, Rowson, 2023, and many others).

However, DSP faces a serious internal tension. We ordinarily hold that other minds are *hidden* from us: we can never fully know what another person is thinking or feeling. If mental states are perceptual phenomena—visible in the way colours and shapes are—what explains this persistent sense of epistemic limitation? Some argue that in seeing expressions, we see parts or aspects of mental states, and since seeing part of an object is to see the object itself, we can therefore be said to see mental states even if not the *whole* mental state. Yet, as critics such as Chudnoff (2018) and Smortchkova (2020) have argued, what we perceive in these cases appears, strictly speaking, to be physical features – faces, gestures, bodies – not mental properties as such. The direct perception claim thus remains under pressure: the phenomenology of social encounter seems to deliver something genuinely mental, yet the direct social perception approach struggles to show that perception reaches mental states rather than merely their physical correlates.

Despite these difficulties, substantial empirical evidence supports the claim that something perceptual is at work in social cognition. The classic Heider and Simmel (1944) animations demonstrate that humans automatically and irresistibly interpret certain patterns of movement in terms of agency, goals, and emotion. Perceptual adaptation studies show that repeated exposure to emotional expressions produces aftereffects analogous to those found in colour or motion perception, suggesting informationally encapsulated processing (Varga, 2020). These findings indicate that our responsiveness to others' mental lives has perceptual characteristics,

and it is unclear whether what are perceived are full-blown mental states or something more basic.

This paper argues that the two-systems theory of mindreading, developed primarily by Butterfill, Apperly, and collaborators (Apperly & Butterfill, 2009; Butterfill & Apperly, 2013), can resolve the tension at the heart of DSP. Drawing on the dual-process framework familiar from other domains, Butterfill and Apperly propose that human mindreading involves two distinct cognitive systems. The first system is a *minimal* system that operates fast, automatically, and early in development, though it tracks simple relational versions of mental properties – such as what an agent has "encountered" or "registered" – without representing propositional attitudes. This system (so the theory goes) is shared with other species and is retained in adult cognition, operating beneath conscious attention. The second system is a *flexible* system which develops later, requires attention, and supports full propositional belief-desire attribution.

I propose that this dual architecture might explain the phenomenological paradox that challenges DSP. The minimal system provides genuine perceptual-level access to others as minded beings. It delivers what the direct perception theorists describe: an immediate, non-inferential awareness of others as animate, attentive, and intentional, which provides defeasible epistemic justification for the belief that others have minds. But the minimal system does not deliver access to propositional content—what others believe, want, or feel in any rich or specific sense. For that, the flexible system must intervene, deploying inference, attention, and higher-order representation. The result is a "split-level" picture: perception acquaints us with others as minded, but this acquaintance is not metarepresentational. It gives us enough to see others as persons, while the inferential machinery handles the rest.

The minimal system seems enough to account for the directness and immediacy that the phenomenological tradition emphasises; the flexible system accounts for the hiddenness and epistemic limitation that motivates scepticism about other minds. If this framework is correct, the problem of other minds is not solved outright but substantially deflated: our perceptual engagement with other minds is real, justified, and systematically limited in ways that the two-systems theory predicts.

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