

Keynote

Tadeusz Wiesław Zawidzki: *What Is Mindshaping?*

Mindshaping is an alternative to orthodox accounts of human competence at social coordination. Human beings are extreme biological outliers in this domain: no other primate species approaches our capacities at coordination on complex, long-term, large-scale cooperative projects with unfamiliar others. Most of our unique capacities for technological innovation, threat mitigation, and resource extraction depend on this; so, it is no exaggeration that explaining uniquely human capacities for coordination is one of the most significant projects of the biological and social sciences.

On the orthodox account of this competence, it relies on our unique talents for “mindreading”: we are much better than other primates at reliably inferring each other’s thoughts, and this explains why we are so much better at social coordination. However, there are deep problems with this admittedly compelling picture. Most significantly, given the holism of human thought, it is not clear how we manage to reliably track each other’s thinking. Human behavior depends on indefinitely large, whole networks of cognitive and conative states. For this reason, any finite set of observable behaviors or situational factors is compatible with an infinite set of possible thoughts. E.g., the same stimulus may cause fear in one person and indifference in another, depending on differences in what each knows about the stimulus. It is not clear how any of the classical theories of mindreading, e.g., so-called “theory-theory” or “simulation theory” or other alternatives, can solve or mitigate the holism problem.

According to the mindshaping hypothesis, the holism problem is mitigated through mechanisms and practices, like fine-grained imitation, pedagogy, norm cognition, and narrative self-constitution, aimed at shaping human minds to be more alike, and hence, more easily interpretable and predictable. When interpreting others, we do not need to consider most possibilities compatible with observable behaviors or situational factors, because most of the people we need to interpret and predict have been shaped (as we have) to find familiar facts relevant and familiar outcomes preferable. Such shaping begins at birth, but continues throughout life, crucially involving self-regulation aimed at making our own behavior fit social roles that make us easily interpretable relative to our communities.

In this talk, I review some historical antecedents of mindshaping, including Aristotelian “second nature” (McDowell 1994), Kierkegaardian “pretence” (Lear 2011), various notions of “ideology” (including Nietzsche’s, Marx’s, Althusser’s, Deleuze’s, Foucault’s), Heidegger’s notion of “das Man” (Dreyfus 1995), Goffman’s “presentation of the self in everyday life” (2021), and Vygotskian approaches to developmental psychology (Vygotsky 2012, Tomasello 2019). I then consider some classic discussions of the orthodox view, e.g., Lewis’s analysis of convention (1969), arguing that they fail to account for coordination, due to the holism problem. Next, I ground mindshaping in a philosophical framework according to which social cognition is a species of norm cognition (Brandom 1994) and review some relevant empirical findings. Finally, I address the main challenge to the mindshaping hypothesis - bootstrapping: how can we shape each other to meet each other’s expectations without prior, reliable mindreading?