Preliminary Analysis of the Desiderata for a Theory of Mind

Philosophy 462
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One way to build theory is bottom-up – you begin with a general sense of what you’re after (e.g., justice, reference, the part/whole relation) and then you cast about and identify what counts as instances of the concept/thing/event/phenomenon (viz., the desiderata). This will be guided by intuition, and could also be guided by empirical methods (e.g., surveys, emails to friends, interviews). The nature of the domain will be a limiting factor – e.g., if you want to develop a theory of justice, it is highly unlikely that the distinction between metamorphic and sedimentary rock will be included in the scope of your theorizing. The nature of the theory will also be a limiting factor – e.g., if you are interested in a formal theory, you will attend more to the structural characteristics of the data you collect and not other aspects of it.

We have come up with the following list of desiderata, which is a preliminary list that is likely different from what it would be at the end of the semester:

1. The integrated relationship between minds (and mental agents) and the world
2. Our ability to see the world through another person’s eyes
3. Filters used in processing information about the world (e.g., language)
4. Difference between dreams and reality
5. Subjectivity of experience
6. Mental imagery
7. Pain
8. Qualia
9. Belief revision
10. Generation of meaning
11. The difference between the feeling of sensation and the content of perception
12. Answer the question: Can we survive our own death?
13. Memory
14. Concept of déjà vu
15. Phantom limb syndrome
16. Measurement of thinking
17. Difference between being merely alive and being alive and aware
18. AI
19. Difference between minds
20. Difference between perception and reality
21. Difference between people’s perceptual experiences (within a person/ across people)
22. Objectivity of mental phenomena
23. Sensual sensitivity related to awareness

Once you have a healthy list, you need to start analyzing it. For example, one thing you might do is group the items on your laundry list into categories. Typically, if the list is rich enough, there
will be more than one category into which something might fit – i.e., there won’t really be a “right answer” to the question, “How can the list be systematized?” Here, as elsewhere in philosophy, the proof of the pudding is in the eating. Here is the challenge: can you combine different elements in a way that (a) is principled (i.e., captures higher level generalities about the mind that are antecedently of interest), (b) is comprehensive (i.e., accommodates as many of the desiderata as possible), and (c) is foundational (i.e., functions as a platform for further reflection and theory construction)?

We have done a bit of this, and (predictably) the results vary. For example, here are your higher-order categories introduced to subsume the desiderata:

1. Sensation & perception; Comparison & interaction between minds; Thought processes; AI (an outlier); [ ] (an outlier)
2. Mental phenomena; Things we need for “mentality”
3. Phenomena; Mind & material; My mind, your mind; Machine mind
4. Consciousness/Mind \rightarrow \{Qualia; Cartesian dualism; Idealism; Occasionalism; Epiphenomenalism \rightarrow \{Body\}\}

Not all of the groups supplied higher-order categories, however, choosing instead to systematize without labels. In addition to clusters of like desiderata (or in one case, in place of these), some of you added arrows between categories, which is a second layer of information about how we should proceed in constructing a theory here. (Questions: what do the arrows mean? Are they all doing the same work?)

We will revisit this from time to time this semester to see if there is more to add. Well done!