

Communication With Animals: Direct Social Perception, Phenomenology and Communication

MOSTYN TAYLOR CROCKETT

Recent theories of direct social perception (DSP) have challenged standing philosophical and scientific approaches to the problem of other minds: the question of how we can know that other people have minds the same as ours. DSP theories, in contrast to contemporary scientific approaches, suggest that we (humans) have experiential access to the mental states of others. While these theories are becoming more widely accepted with regard to human minds, there has been little examination of their relevance to non-human animal minds. In this paper, I argue that DSP can be applied to non-human animals and that this opens up the possibility for limited, yet significant, communication between humans and non-human animals. To do this, I will first give an account of DSP and respond to an objection which will help clarify its limits. Second, I will link DSP with the phenomenological figure of the Other, the possibility of other people existing that shapes the way they interact with the world and give an account of its role in communication, particularly of emotion. Third, I will turn to non-human animals by engaging with some traditional phenomenological responses to the problem of human/animal interactions. I will suggest that these phenomenological models can be

Mostyn Taylor Crockett is a final year student studying Philosophy and Politics at the University of Exeter (UK). He is currently applying to graduate programs in the UK and Europe for 2020. His philosophical interests revolve around 'continental philosophy' with a particular interest in post-structuralism and phenomenology. He also has an interest in interdisciplinary work especially with the social sciences and political theory.

enhanced through the adaptation of DSP theory as well as Daniel Stern's theory of forms of vitality. Finally, I will conclude by showing that DSP undermines traditional taxonomic conceptions of animals and opens up the potential for communication between humans and non-human animals.

Kiverstein on Direct Social Perception

DSP's main claim is that we are able to directly perceive people's mental states. As such, it stands opposed to both Simulation Theory and Theory Theory which claim that there is some cognitive process beyond perception which is involved in understanding another being's mental states. Julian Kiverstein notes that, phenomenologically speaking, we take for granted that other beings possess minds and thus we are able to perceive that they have a self understanding just like our own (Kiverstein 533). In contrast to Simulation Theory and Theory Theory, he argues that we do not see someone frown and use this information in an extra cognitive process to understand that they are sad. When we see their frown we directly experience this feeling of sadness (533). For Kiverstein, there is, at times, ultimately no difference between one's own sadness and the sadness of others (533). If we are to accept this phenomenological description of having direct, experiential access to another's mental states, the question remains: How is this experiential access possible?

Kiverstein suggests that there is, in fact, some external element to mental states. For example, behaviour is not a representation of a mental state, however, the way that people interact with the world (their being-towards-the-world) is constitutive of their mental states (533). This relationship between one's own mental states and the external world hinges on the distinction between what one sees and what one perceives. Alva Noë claims that when we look at a partially obscured object (for example, a cat through a fence) we experience it as a whole thing, including the parts we are unable to see. This is because we know that if we moved we would be able to see the obscured parts (Noë 413). The perception of the thing as a whole does not seem to involve any extra cognitive work, it is direct. A similar thing happens when we experience other's emotions through behaviour. Although we may only see a frown on a face, this perception of a constitutive element of an emotion is enough to enable one to experience another's emotion as a whole (Kruger 305). This, of course, suggests that our previous experience does have an impact on our ability to directly experience another being's mental states. However, this is not a claim which, as some suggest, DSP seeks to deny. DSP sees perception as a practical skill which we develop through learning from past experience and through

which we become better at perceiving (315). What is key to DSP is that we do not use this experience in an extra cognitive step. Indeed, our perception is still just as direct.

An Objection to DSP Theories Considered

One particular objection to DSP helps to clarify the scope of the claim DSP theories make. The “Asymmetry of Access Objection” (313), maintains that: if, as Kiverstein suggests, I experience another person’s emotions as my own (Kiverstein 533), then I should also have access to other elements of a person’s subjectivity (Kruger 313). While, *prima facie*, this objection appears to undermine DSP, what critics of DSP often fail to see is that DSP endorses an asymmetry of access between subjects. That is, DSP would not be a theory of perception if there were no way to distinguish between one’s own mental states and those of another. This objection presupposes that on DSP one, theoretically, has full access to the mental life another. This, however, is a much stronger claim than DSP actually makes; instead, DSP merely contends that we can directly perceive limited elements of another being’s mental states in order to understand another’s emotions. Indeed, it is entirely possible that on DSP one can fail to understand a complex emotion or, perhaps worse, one might be misled (Gallagher 540). Thus, the fallibility of DSP suggests that we do not have any kind of telepathic access to all of the thoughts and mental states of others.

The Asymmetry of Access Objection, and the response that I provided to it above, highlights the importance of other people to DSP theories. The space in which DSP functions is intersubjective and the concept of “the Other” is indispensable in opening up this space. Through the asymmetric access to mental states, the Other adopts a different perspective on the world from their own subjective position (Scheer), opening up a shared reality which is perceived from multiple subjective positions. This is key to DSP as the Other is always engaging with or responding to their environment (Kiverstein 537). Thus, understanding some of their subjective position involves agreeing on what constitutes the space between the subject and the Other. For Kiverstein it is only against this shared social background, towards which the behaviour of the Other is directed, that we are able to understand the Other as having a unique perspective (537).

The Phenomenological Other

As humans, we view language as our main form of communication. Indeed, we conceive of language as a higher, mostly abstract cognitive function. However, Thomas Fuchs argues that language is not entirely abstract; instead, he suggests, language is embodied, especially during child development. Like behaviour, Fuchs maintains that language is not a representation of inner mental states but is 'a form of embodied inter-subjectivity' (Fuchs 108). Rather than being a symbolic system, language is 'a network of meanings evoking a certain way of embodied being-towards-the-world (the way in which we comport ourselves towards the world)' (111). Language is always tied to interaction with the subject's spatially extended environment through their body. There are strong parallels between this analysis and DSP. DSP behaviour functions in exactly the same way language does for Fuchs. In contrast, on Theory Theory and Simulation Theory, behaviour is a sign to be decoded, a sign that has information hidden behind it. For DSP, behaviour is immediately meaningful. The idea that language is imbued with intentionality also connects the DSP conception of behaviour as always directed towards-the-world, giving the Other a sense of a 'project' in the world. If one takes language as an action which is performed in much the same way as a behaviour is, then it seems to take exactly the same role. Fuchs even notes that 'we do not distinguish between an interlocutor's mental state and his utterances' (110, n.4). As such, if embodied language is able to take on a communicative function, it seems that all that is stopping other behaviours from functioning in the same way is that we do not recognise them as being able to fulfil that function.

Merleau-Ponty on Non-Human Animals

Merleau-Ponty gives a rich account of animal interaction with the world, and one that leaves more space for the application of DSP. Merleau-Ponty's claim is limited yet important, he suggests that non-human animals have a different being-in-the-world to humans but notes that this should be seen as a continuity and not a rupture - in other words, humans and non-human animals do not have *essentially* different structures of being (Bannon 22). He argues that non-human animals are able to understand the world in an expressive manner and achieve things which have meaning to them (25-26). Merleau-Ponty does not see the non-human animal as simply responding to the world in a mechanistic way (Fóti 77), rather, non-human animals 'exhibit certain behaviours that have no practical or

efficacious goal; they are behaviours or activities for pleasure' (Bannon 28). Merleau-Ponty argues that, for the animal, "the body is entirely a manner of expression" which suggests 'a creative response to an affectation from the world' (27). Looking at this idea through the lens of DSP, it seems that the action or behaviour of non-human animals is able to tell us something about their subjectivity. This openness to and meaningful interaction with the world is the most important element of Merleau-Ponty's theory. It allows us to understand the non-human animal body as able to express something about non-human animal subjectivity.

Merleau-Ponty's account of non-human animals does not immediately presuppose DSP; however, it does pose the question of how expression functions in the non-human animal. For Merleau-Ponty, the body (human and non-human) is more "than the bare fact of its existence," there is a 'depth' to the lived body which gives it an openness that the objective body does not have (29). Significantly, Merleau-Ponty sees there being no essential difference between the structures of being of humans and non-human animals (32). Kiverstein suggests that every species has a different 'form of life,' a pattern of behaviours which, in humans, 'take the form of social and cultural practices' giving a context against which to interpret bodily action (Kiverstein 536). This idea of a 'form of life' speaks directly to Merleau-Ponty's analysis. The "form of life" is a structure of being (-in-the-world) which can translate across species boundaries. Kiverstein sees this structure as, at least partially, underpinning DSP in humans. Therefore, if it is a universal structure, then I suggest that it might be able to facilitate DSP among non-human animals. However, this position gives rise to two problems that must be addressed: (1) we must give an account of non-human animal DSP; and (2) we need to try to understand if there can be some kind of inter-species DSP.

Uexküll's Umwelt and Stern's 'Forms of Vitality'

Merleau-Ponty draws on Uexküll's concept of the Umwelt, the subjective world of each individual animal which results from its subjective perspective (Shores 206). We can map the 'form of life' of each animal species onto this concept, it is the expression of their own relation to their Umwelt. Animals of the same species have similar Umwelten given their particular 'form of life' and the patterns of behaviour which form their interpretive background. Thus, it seems possible that DSP may be able to function within a species. For example, take two dogs in a park, one chases the other snapping at its heels and catching up with it knocks it to the ground and they begin to roll around (play) fighting. The second dog,

the one being chased, seems to allow itself to be caught. Contrast this with a similar situation where a dog runs up to an unfamiliar human barking and snarling, most people show an apprehension at being approached in this way by the dog and are certainly less calm than the second dog. This suggests the second dog is able, in a split second, to understand the intention of the first, unlike the human. This echoes the human phenomenological experience of DSP, it seems that there is minimal time for the dog to go through a simulation or 'theory of mind' type cognitive process and, therefore, there must be some qualitative element to the first dog's behaviour which allows the second to know its intentions. Of course, the second dog has all the relevant experience (collected in its *Umwelt*) which suggests a practical skill it has developed, allowing it to be sure in its assessment of the first dog's intentions. This echoes DSP as theorized in humans, both dogs have a shared 'form of life' which allows them to interpret directly the behaviour of the other. Their *Umwelten* have a lot in common functioning as the kind of shared social reality which Kiverstein's account of DSP rests upon.

It is important to note that non-human animals seemingly have no semiotic (a system that uses signs as its basic unit, for example writing) system of communication their only means of communication is the interpretation of behaviour. It would follow from this that non-human animals have no way of communicating propositional information. This makes the quality of a behaviour understood through DSP extremely important for communication. The role of the quality of behaviours in DSP can be illuminated by Stern's theory of forms of vitality. The theory suggests that the quality of a goal-directed action, or the way in which it is performed, is able to communicate the agent's thoughts regarding their action (Gallese and Rochat 154). This would appear to be a key element of non-human animal DSP as it gives scope for understanding beyond what is intended in the action by allowing for an understanding of how the action is intended. Let's go back to the two dogs: when the second sees the first snarl the what or goal directed intention seems fairly clear, it wants in some way to fight the second dog (this seems to be perceptible to humans too, a point I will return to later). However, the second dog seems to have a richer understanding of this snarl, there is something in how the first dog snarls that communicates to the second the mental state promoting this behaviour.

There is a strong indication of DSP in non-human animals which, when combined with Stern's forms of vitality, suggests intra-species communication. However, the question of inter-species communication still remains. In Merleau-Ponty's terms this is a problem of communication across the divide between different *Umwelten*. Moving forward there is one key claim that we must make: inter-species communication is not a

problem of communication between ‘man and animal’ but a problem of communication between animals, humans being just one particular example of an animal. Jaques Derrida notes this separation of the human from the category of the animal can function to undermine the possibility of human/non-human animal relationships by over conceptualizing ‘the animal.’ He writes: ‘[the cat] comes to me as this irreplaceable living being that one day enters my space, into this place where it can encounter me’ (Derrida 9, italics in original). Seeing the non-human animal as this thing starts to open the possibility of regrading it as behaving in this meaningful way, not behaving as (to take Derrida’s example) a cat but as a being which is open to the world. This once again brings us back to Merleau-Ponty who contends that all animals (including humans) have different ways of being but that these should not be put into a hierarchy (Bannon 30). Here the figure of the Other becomes important, as Derrida notes the animal is ‘the wholly other’ (Derrida 11). It constitutes the end of the space in which we are able to have meaningful intersubjective relations. Thus, for Derrida there are many ‘different modes of being, indeed of being-with. With the animal’ (10), which speaks to DSP, a theory of social cognition concerned of ‘being-with.’ Further, thinking in terms of forms of vitality the different qualities of behaviour between species become points at which, if we are able to glimpse inside an alternative Umwelt, inter-species communication can blossom.

Conclusion

With our current popular conception of the relations between humans and non-human animals, DSP is unable to allow communication between the two. However, the question of whether a change in the mode of relating can open up the space for communication remains. I conclude by sketching a possible way of reimagining human/non-human animal relations which may allow DSP facilitated communication between the two. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari posit a concept of becoming that happens between species, presenting it as creative coming together whereby two species become heterogenous parts of the same whole (Deleuze and Guattari 10). Thus, in order to gain access to the affectations of a particular non-human animal, we must change our affective milieu so that we become a reciprocal part of the non-human animal’s milieu (Shores 216–7). If non-human animal affects become part of human Umwelten and human affects become part of theirs, then these affects become intelligible as a shared mode of being-with. In sharing spaces with non-human animals we already have ‘overlapping Umwelten’ (Shores 209). Thus, there seems

to be a possibility of becoming (animal). Let us return to the dogs one last time. Often humans interact with dogs via overly expressive language which we would not towards another human. This does not allow the dog any insight into our Umwelt as they do not experience our communication as we normally use it and equally we do not attempt to enter the dog's Umwelt. DSP relies on a shared reality and if we are to share one with the dog then we must be able to relate to the dog as a 'normal' part of our world of affectations (and, as such part of the normative context on which our DSP relies). This seems the most promising starting point for DSP facilitated human/non-human animal communication, being-toward the non-human animal as we would towards another human. It is a sharing of a particular experience that would allow us and the non-human animal to develop the practical skill of DSP in new ways and towards new beings.

Non-human animals have bodies we recognise and relate to, so the question of communication with them is a pertinent one. In this paper, I have attempted to show that DSP can be applied to non-human animals, first on their own terms through Stern's theory of forms of vitality. I have also attempted to suggest a phenomenological opening for the possibility of sharing of DSP across supposed inter-species boundaries which looks to blur (if not deconstruct) those boundaries. I have suggested that this could be brought about through a creative becoming whereby humans and non-human animals are able to enter each other's Umwelten, allowing the inter-species understanding of the affectations that lie in behaviour. I believe the claim I am making is a modest one which points to the possibility of and possible mechanisms for communication between humans and non-human animals. Further empirical research would allow us to understand whether the ontological possibility I have outlined can become a reality.

Works Cited

- Bannon, Bryan, E. "Animals, Language, and Life: Searching for Animal Attunement with Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty." *Environmental Philosophy* vol. 6, no.1, 2009, pp. 21-34.
- Deleuze, Gilles and Guattari, Felix. *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Translated by Brian Massumi, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1984.
- Derrida, Jacques. *The Animal That Therefore I Am*. Translated by David Wills, New York, Fordham University Press, 2008.
- Fóti, Véronique, M. *Tracing Expression in Merleau-Ponty: Aesthetics, Philosophy of Biology, and Ontology*. Evanston, Northwestern University Press, 2013.
- Fuchs, Thomas. "The Embodied Development of Language." *Embodiment in Evolution and Culture*, edited by Gregor Etzelmüller and Christian Tewes, Mohr Siedeck, 2016, pp. 107-128.
- Gallagher, Shaun. "Direct Perception in the Intersubjective Context." *Consciousness and Cognition*, vol. 14, 2008, pp. 535-543.
- Gallese, Vittorio and Rochat, Magali J. "Forms of Vitality: Their Neural Bases, Their Role in Social Cognition, and the Case of Autism Spectrum Disorder." *Psychoanalytic Inquiry*, vol. 38, no.2, 2018, pp. 154-164.
- Kiverstein, Julian. "Empathy and the Responsiveness to Social Affordances." *Consciousness and Cognition*, vol. 36, 2015, pp. 532-542.
- Kruger, Joel. "Direct Social Perception." *Oxford Handbook of 4E Cognition*, edited by Albert Newen, Leon De Bruin, and Shaun Gallagher, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2018, pp. 301-320.
- Noë, Alva. "Experience Without the Head." *Perceptual Experience*, edited by Tamar S. Gendler and John Hawthorne, Oxford University Press, 2006, pp. 411-433.
- Schear, Joseph. "Sartre on Oneself and Others." YouTube, uploaded by Fred Cummins, 22 June 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zATPgyE9-xI>.
- Shores, Corry. "What is it Like to Become a Rat? Animal Phenomenology Through Uexküll and Deleuze & Guattari." *Studia Phaenomenologica*, vol. 17, 2017, 201-221.