

First-person Folk Psychology: Mindshaping *and* Mindreading

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Proponents of mindshaping argue that third-person folk psychology (i.e., the ascription of mental states to others) is not primarily about “reading” mental states for the purpose of behavior prediction and explanation. Instead, they claim that third-person folk psychology is first and foremost a regulative practice—one that “shapes” mental states in accordance with the norms of a shared folk psychological framework. This paper investigates to what extent the core assumptions behind the mindshaping hypothesis are compatible with an account of first-person folk psychology (i.e., the ascription of mental states to ourselves) that is based on the notion of “self-regulative agency.”

Keywords: McGeer, Moran, first-person folk psychology, mindshaping, mindreading

1. Introduction

The philosophical debate on folk psychology has primarily focused on the question of how we understand other people. Proponents of mindreading typically maintain that understanding others depends on a capacity to “read” and represent their mental states (beliefs, desires, intentions, emotions, etc.), which allows us to predict and explain their behavior. Some of them argue that this requires a theory about how mental states are related to perceptual input, actions and other mental states. Others claim that it involves “putting ourselves in the shoes of others” by simulating the mental states we would have in their situation.

These explanations, respectively the Theory Theory and the Simulation Theory, have been heavily criticized over the last couple of decades. According to proponents of mindshaping (e.g., McGeer 2007; Hutto 2008; Andrews

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2008; Zawidzki 2013), understanding others does not depend on some internal capacity to read and represent mental states for the purpose of behavior prediction and explanation. Instead, they argue that folk psychology is first and foremost a *regulative practice*—one that “shapes” the mental states of others in accordance with the norms of a shared folk psychological framework.

The main aim of the present paper is to investigate to what extent the core assumptions behind this mindshaping account of third-person folk psychology (i.e., the ascription of mental states to others) are compatible with an account of first-person folk psychology (i.e., the ascription of mental states to ourselves) that is based on the notion of “self-regulative agency.”

The paper is structured as follows. In section 2, I start with an introduction of the core assumptions behind the mindshaping hypothesis, and show how they differ from those that fuel theories of mindreading. In section 3, I discuss two accounts of first-person folk psychology, developed by Peter Carruthers and Richard Moran. Carruthers argues that self-ascribing mental states is a matter of “turning our mindreading capacities upon ourselves.” On his view, there is no principled difference between how we understand others and how we understand ourselves. Moran, by contrast, argues that there is a crucial difference: understanding ourselves is fundamentally *agentive* and depends on a capacity to “make up our minds.” Moran’s account is promising but also limited—it focuses exclusively on a conscious capacity for rational agency and dismisses the importance of taking an “objective,” third-person stance towards oneself. In section 4, I propose a richer view of first-person folk psychology which is based on Victoria McGeer’s notion of “self-regulative agency.” On this view, first-person folk psychology should be seen as a self-regulative practice by which we bring our mental and bodily states into alignment according to the norms and expectations of our social environment. Section 5 discusses some further differences between Moran and McGeer in order to explore to what extent the concept of self-regulative agency is compatible with the core assumptions behind mindshaping (as presented in Section 2). Section 6 concludes with a brief discussion of the importance of self-regulative agency for the special authoritative status of self-ascriptions.

2. What is mindshaping?

The best way to explain the concept of mindshaping is to show how it differs from the concept of mindreading. In this section I will therefore concentrate

on what I take to be some of the main disagreements between proponents of mindshaping and proponents of mindreading.¹

First, proponents of mindshaping and proponents of mindreading disagree about the primary *function* of third-person folk psychology. According to proponents of mindreading, folk psychology should be defined as the ability to read and represent the mental states of others (most importantly their beliefs and desires) in order to predict or explain their behavior. Proponents of mindshaping, by contrast, claim that folk psychology is essentially a regulative practice that shapes the way in which we act, think and operate. They argue that we are able to understand others because we both participate in a folk psychological framework of shared cultural norms and expectations, and because we have learned to present ourselves in ways that fit this framework.

Second, proponents of mindshaping point out that understanding others is not a “spectator sport” of inferring mental states from a distance. Folk psychology is exercised in second-person, interactive contexts rather than third-person observational settings. This is also how we acquire our folk psychological skills, namely, in conditions of mutual engagement and by playing the game of giving and asking for reasons.

Third, proponents of mindshaping propose a shift of focus in the explanation of third-person folk psychology, from internal (individual) capacities to external (social) structures and practices. This is often accompanied by arguments from parsimony, in the sense that mindshaping is said to be cognitively less demanding. McGeer (2007), for example, claims:

When we develop as folk psychologists, we no doubt hone our interpretative skills; but, more importantly, we come to live in a world where the kind of interpretive work we need to do is enormously enhanced by how much meaning our interactions already carry for us and carry because of the way we habitually conform to norms that invest our actions with common meaning. (McGeer 2007, 150)

In other words, the idea is that mindshaping to some extent obviates the need for mindreading. If we are able to make sense of the actions of others from the perspective of a folk psychological framework of shared cultural norms, we do not need to read and represent their mental states.

Of course, proponents of mindshaping do recognize that the exercise and acquisition of folk psychological skills also depends on individual cognitive capacities. However, they typically argue that understanding others requires more than considering their beliefs and desires. We also engage

¹ For a more critical evaluation of mindreading accounts and the concept of folk psychology, see (Zawidzki 2008) and (Ratcliffe 2005; Ratcliffe 2007) respectively.

with others' emotions, goals, moods and character traits, and interact with them on the basis of the social roles they play and the histories they have experienced (Andrews 2015). Proponents of mindshaping tend to explain this in terms of shared linguistic practices rather than individual cognitive capacities in order to emphasize that the latter are shaped by the former (which is the main point of mindshaping). Hutto (2008), for example, proposes that folk psychology develops through participation in "narrative practice"—a shared activity of telling and listening to the stories behind people's actions. His hypothesis is that through attentive listening and active participation (e.g., asking questions), children gain familiarity with the way beliefs, desires and other folk psychological concepts interrelate and lead to action.

The emphasis on narrative practice dovetails nicely with the claim about the primary function of folk psychology. According to proponents of mindshaping, folk psychological narratives can help us to understand others in cases where their actions deviate from the expectations and norms of our shared practice, by revealing the reasons on which they acted. Folk psychological narratives can serve an explanatory function by contextualizing and normalizing behavior that is "out of line," forging "links between the exceptional and the ordinary" (Bruner 1990, 47).

Although proponents of mindshaping agree with proponents of embodied cognition that folk psychology depends on more basic embodied practices (see, e.g., Gallagher 2001; Gallagher 2012), they insist that folk psychology plays a crucial role in understanding others. Their aim is not to eliminate or trivialize the importance of folk psychology. On the contrary, they want to give a re-description of the explanandum, i.e., what it is that we should try to explain. At the same time, however, this re-description of folk psychology usually goes hand in hand with a renewed respect for more embodied forms of understanding others.

To sum up, then, the differences between mindshaping and mindreading can be roughly described as follows:

1. The main function of folk psychology is not prediction or explanation, but the regulation of behavior (in a broad sense).
2. Folk psychology is not about reading minds from an observational, third-person point of view; it is about shaping them in second-person interactive contexts.
3. Folk psychology depends on (external) shared linguistic structures and practices, rather than (internal) individual cognitive capacities.

3. Understanding others and understanding ourselves

Views of first-person folk psychology are often based on the assumption that there is an important difference between our understanding of others and our understanding of self. According to one influential theory, the difference is that we can directly introspect our own mental states, whereas we have to infer the mental states of others. This gives us “privileged access”—a special kind of epistemic authority with respect to self-ascriptions of mental states.

Some philosophers argue that the introspective access to our own mental states is both prior and serves as a foundation for the attribution of mental states to others. Goldman (1993; 2006), for example, defends a version of the Simulation Theory which involves the following elements: a) an analogical inference from oneself to others, b) premised on introspectively based ascriptions of mental states to oneself, and c) requiring prior possession of the concepts of the mental states ascribed.

Other philosophers, by contrast, propose that self-understanding presupposes a capacity to understand others. Carruthers (2009; 2011), for example, claims that we have a single “mindreading mechanism” that allows us to infer and attribute mental states to self and others solely on the basis of sensory input. In cases of third-person folk psychology, the sensory input will typically be restricted to perceptual (behavioral, situational) input. In cases of first-person folk psychology, the system also has internal sensory information at its disposal, including proprioception, interoception, visual and other kinds of imagery. Yet, the kind of access we have to our own mental states is no different in principle from our access to the mental states of others.

On Carruthers’ account, then, the difference between first-person and third-person ways of knowing minds is merely a matter of degree. The special authority we grant people with respect to their own mental states turns out to be a mere quantitative epistemic advantage. Both ways of knowing should be understood in terms of the amount and kind of information that one’s mindreading mechanism can get its hands on. Surely the difference will normally be significant, since the information provided by first-person imagination, inner speech, and somato-sensory input is bound to be richer than the information obtained through perception of someone else’s situated behavior. Yet, ultimately, we understand ourselves in the same way as we understand others.

An alternative view of first-person folk psychology has been put forward by Richard Moran (2001). On the one hand, Moran agrees with Carruthers that the special status of self-ascriptions cannot be secured on the basis of some kind of introspective process that gives us privileged access to our own mental states. On the other hand, however, Moran argues that this does

not mean that there is no qualitative difference between how we understand ourselves and how we understand others. On Moran's account, what makes this difference is a first-person capacity for rational agency. This capacity allows us to "make up our mind," i.e., to determine our beliefs and other mental states by means of rational deliberation.

There are interesting parallels between Moran's account of self-understanding and mindshaping accounts of how we understand others. Like proponents of mindshaping, Moran construes understanding as an *activity*, and argues that it does not result from passively observing mental states. Mind-reading accounts such as the one proposed by Carruthers fail to recognize the importance of (conscious) rational agency, and present us with "an essentially superficial view of the differences between my relation to myself and my possible relation to others" (Moran 2001, 91).

Carruthers claims that empirical studies on confabulation show that we do not always judge best which states and processes are psychologically active in us and have a causal impact on our behavior. But Moran argues that this sort of epistemic accuracy is not really to the point when it comes to the special status of self-ascriptions:

[T]he primary thought gaining expression in the idea of 'first-person authority' may not be that the person himself must always 'know best' what he thinks about something, but rather that it is *his business* what he thinks about something, that it is up to him. In declaring his belief, he does not express himself as an expert witness to a realm of psychological fact, so much as he expresses his rational authority over that realm. (Moran 2001, 123–124)

According to Moran, our capacity for rational agency allows us to play an active role in the determination of our mental states by deliberating about the reasons for having them. When people ask us what we believe, we do not track internal mental states, as we might perceptually track external objects and events in the world. Rather, we first reflect on what, given the current state of the world, our beliefs ought to be; and then, insofar as we are rational, we actively endorse their content by *avowing* them.² This is how we are able to shape our minds and express rational authority over our mental states.

² An avowal, as Moran uses the term, is a declaration of one's belief which obeys the so-called "Transparency Condition": "With respect to belief, the claim of transparency is that from within the first-person perspective, I treat the question of my belief about P as equivalent to the question of the truth of P" (Moran 2001, 62–63). Thus, when asked whether we believe that P, we need to reflect on the reasons we have for believing that P. As soon as we reconsider and start doubting P's truth, the avowal ceases to exist (Moran 2001, 74–77, 80–82; see also Kloosterboer 2015).

4. Rational or self-regulative agency?

Sometimes our avowals are in conflict with our actions. Consider the following example. You have decided to stop smoking cigarettes. After a couple of months, however, it turns out that your smoking habits are stronger than you thought. Your first response is to reconsider your decision to stop smoking altogether. Is it so bad to smoke the occasional cigarette? You go through the same deliberative process over and over again, but as it turns out, the conclusion remains the same. Yes, it is indeed rational to stop smoking. At this point your partner intervenes and gives you the following advice: although there is nothing wrong with your sincere avowals to stop smoking, what you really need to focus on are those factors that unconsciously influence your smoking behavior (e.g., being in the company of other smokers, being under a lot of stress, etc.) She suggests that you should take concrete steps to diminish the influence of these factors (e.g., by instructing your friends and family not to give you cigarettes).

According to Moran, this would actually be a piece of bad advice insofar as trying to manipulate your behavior in this way involves the kind of control that is “not the expression of ‘activity’ relevant to autonomy or rational authority” (Moran 2001, 117). By adopting an instrumental, third-person perspective on yourself, you cease to function as a rational being because you answer questions about your mental states merely in the *attributive* sense. That is, you are only interested in whether you have these mental states or not, regardless of the reasons for or against them. You become “alienated” from yourself because you answer questions about your own mental states as if you were answering questions about the mental states of another agent.

Elsewhere I have argued (De Bruin et al. 2015; De Bruin and Strijbos 2015) that Moran’s rejection of the third-person perspective is misguided, and that McGeer’s (1996; 2007) ideas about “self-regulative agency” provide us with the basics of a more promising account of first-person folk-psychology. In contrast to the pure form of deliberative agency advocated by Moran, self-regulative agency concerns the question of “how best to bring about *causally* what ought to arise spontaneously as the expressive outcome of deliberation itself” (McGeer 2008, 91). Besides trying to be a better deliberative agent, this also involves engaging in extra-deliberative activities, such as making notes to yourself, asking your partner for advice, or changing your (social) environment. Self-regulative agency implies that you are able to step back from your first-personal avowals, in order to reflect on them from the third-person perspective. This allows you to make a more balanced and comprehensive assessment of the relevant factors that shape and structure your reasoning, and your capacity to stay true to your commitments. It also implies keeping an eye on the deliberative processes that

motivate your avowals, since we often lure ourselves into believing or wanting something despite deep convictions, desires or feelings to the contrary. As McGeer puts it:

[O]ur best protection—indeed, our *only* protection—against an ego-driven corruption of reason is to cultivate an *allocentric* capacity to see ourselves as we see others—namely, as empirical subjects whose psychological states are responding to a variety of influences that are largely invisible from a naïvely egocentric first-person point of view. (McGeer 2008, 101)

Although avowals still play an important role in McGeer's account, they are part of a larger attempt at self-regulation. Your decision to stay inside when your friends are going out for a smoke may take the form of deliberative avowal ('I really believe I should stay inside'), but such a decision is not just a transparent conclusion about what you believe. It involves a commitment to regulate your mental states in such a way as to make sure that you will refrain from lighting a cigarette.

5. First-person folk psychology: Mindshaping *and* mindreading

Although McGeer is often seen as a proponent of the mindshaping hypothesis, the concept of self-regulative agency includes elements of mindreading as well, and therefore warrants further investigation. In this section, I will discuss some further differences between Moran and McGeer in order to explore to what extent the concept of self-regulative agency is compatible with the ideas about mindshaping as discussed in Section 2. Roughly, these differences come down to questions about the "how," the "what" and the "why" of mindshaping.

Both Moran and proponents of mindshaping construe folk psychology as an activity, and argue against accounts that attempt to explain it in terms of passively reading and representing mental states. However, Moran's notion of mindshaping is restricted to what can be deliberately avowed from the first-person perspective. Thus, on Moran's account, the "why" question of how mindshaping works is answered by appealing to an individual capacity for rational agency. You make up your mind by deliberating about the reasons for and against your mental states (which is what makes it rational), and this is something only you can do (which is what makes it strictly individual). In this respect, Moran's position seems closer to proponents of mindreading, who are also primarily interested in individual cognitive capacities.

McGeer's account, on the other hand, suggests a much richer notion of mindshaping. Although it recognizes the importance of the first-person perspective, self-regulative agency also assigns a crucial role to the third-person

perspective. This, of course, is incompatible with the assumption that folk psychology is not about reading and representing mental states from an observational point of view, which most proponents of mindshaping seem to take for granted (see Section 2). But how valid is this assumption? Usually we understand others in a variety of ways, and although some of them are indeed highly interactive, we also and not infrequently simply observe other people and try to figure out what they are thinking about (Overgaard and Michael 2015; De Bruin et al. 2012). Ultimately, our preference for one type of stance might simply be a question of psychological profile (e.g., “extrovert” people tend to interact, whereas “introvert” people tend to observe). In a similar manner, one could argue that it is simply an empirical question whether people tend to take the first- or third-person stance towards themselves. An account of first-person folk psychology that is grounded in self-regulative agency does not need to prescribe the exact balance between the two stances that should be struck. Normatively speaking, the only relevant question is how to avoid the extreme ends of the spectrum. On the one hand, an agent who persistently adopts the third-person perspective on his own mental states undermines his deliberative power and his capacity to be rationally autonomous. On the other hand, an agent who is unable to take this stance can manipulate himself into a condition of deep self-deception.

At this point, the terminology has become quite complicated, so it might be good to clarify how I understand the terms ‘first-person’ and ‘third-person’ in the account of folk psychology I am discussing here. At the start of this paper, I coined the term ‘first-person folk psychology’ to designate the ascription of mental states to ourselves—in contrast to ‘third-person folk psychology’, which refers to the ascription of mental states to others. If we understand first-person folk psychology in terms of self-regulation, however, then the ascription of mental states to ourselves is only one side of the coin (i.e., the “mindreading” side). The other side consists of a capacity for rational agency, which allows us to deliberate about our mental states and our reasons for having them. What might be slightly confusing is that, following Moran and McGeer, I have also used the distinction between ‘first-person’ and ‘third-person’ to characterize the two stances we can take towards ourselves.

Irrespective of the labels we use to characterize these stances, however, it is important to recognize that self-regulation is very much a *second-person* activity. On Moran’s account, making up your mind is your own business; it is something only you can do. Self-regulative agency, by contrast, is situated in a broader context of interactions with others. As the smoking example in the previous section showed, these others do not only challenge our avowals and the mental states we ascribe to ourselves, and thereby our first-person

authority, but they are also (in the most literal sense) part of the processes that structure and shape our mental and bodily states. Self-regulative agency, although it recruits individual capacities, is best characterized as a second-person practice.

This brings me to the “target” of mindshaping, or the “what” question. Moran’s account focuses on propositional attitudes that we are conscious of, although there are reasons to doubt whether it works for other propositional attitudes than belief (see, for example, De Bruin et al. 2015; Kloosterboer 2015).

On McGeer’s account, the target of mindshaping has a much broader scope. First of all, self-regulative agency is not restricted to beliefs or other propositional attitudes we are conscious of. On the contrary, many self-regulative activities are part of our habits or routines (e.g., not going to bed too late, having a decent breakfast, turning off the music when starting to work, etc.). They are performed more or less automatically and with very little conscious reflection. Of course, some of these activities are more effortful and do require careful deliberation and reflection. For example, we might reflect on whether we should abandon some of our longstanding beliefs, and we might take steps so that we are more likely to abandon them. We might also pay special attention to our belief-forming habits, and closely monitor the way in which we reach certain beliefs, checking our habits of inference and guarding against malfunction (Pettit and McGeer 2002, 289; McGeer 2008, 89). This is usually a complex and dynamic process that involves going back and forth between the two stances we can take towards ourselves. Again, the exact balance or frequency is not what matters here. Nor is the point that we have to engage in all these types of self-regulation all the time. What is important is that we have the capacity to do so when the need arises, and this is usually determined by our interactions with others.

Second, self-regulative agency is not restricted to mental states—it targets bodily states as well. Indeed, it is by regulating our bodily states that we try to bridge the gap between saying and doing, i.e., between our avowals and our actions. Suppose you are involved in a long-term relationship, but somehow manage to work seven days a week. At some point, your partner confronts you about your long working hours and asks you whether you truly want to be part of a meaningful relationship. In response, you avow that this is indeed what you want, and you promise her to put your money where your mouth is, i.e., you promise her to work less and spend more time together. If successful, this would be a case of “upward” self-regulation, where you align your actions with your avowals.

Of course, it is also possible that, after several failed attempts to get your priorities straight, you have to conclude that you cannot keep your word.

Perhaps you have a very demanding job, or you really need the money. Perhaps you are simply not “relationship material.” In such a case of “downward” self-regulation, you bridge the gap between saying and doing by changing your mind instead of your bodily states. Your habits and tendencies turn out to be stronger than expected, and you no longer avow that you want to be part of this relationship.

When it comes to questions about the “how” and “what” of mindshaping, McGeer seems to go beyond Moran insofar as self-regulative agency offers a richer notion of mindshaping and a broader scope of its target than rational agency. The fact that self-regulative agency is not restricted to conscious propositional attitudes, but also targets unconscious, bodily states fits very well with the ideas about mindshaping as discussed in Section 2. This is also true for the characterization of self-regulative agency as a second-person practice. Despite the fact that most proponents of mindshaping tend to downplay the importance of the third-person perspective, I tend to see the dynamic interplay between the first- and the third-person perspective that is implied by self-regulative agency as one of its most attractive features: it not only offers a promising way to explain how we are able to overcome the gap between saying and doing (see above), but also makes it possible to secure the special authoritative status of self-ascriptions (see below).

But what about the “why” of mindshaping? On Moran’s account, making up your mind involves focusing exclusively on the contents of your mental states and the reasons you have for or against them. The aim of first-person deliberation is to answer the question: “What shall I—*qua* agent—believe?” Self-regulative agency, by contrast, is primarily a way to facilitate increasingly complex forms of social coordination and cooperation. This is very much in line with the assumption that folk psychology primarily has a social function, which most proponents of mindshaping accept.

Here I think that the answers offered by Moran and McGeer are both valuable in their own right. It is true that we sometimes have to question the deliberative processes that motivate our avowals (e.g., in cases of self-deception). But it is also true that we sometimes need to be critical of the norms and expectations of our social environment (e.g., when social reform is needed). According to Andrews (2015), understanding ourselves should primarily be seen as a dictate towards empathy: “To know oneself one needs to know how one is perceived by others, to take on the other’s perspective and see oneself reflected back through her eyes” (Andrews 2015, 294). However, it seems to me that understanding oneself also has another dimension, one that is perhaps best captured by Kant in the opening lines of “What is Enlightenment?”, where he states:

Enlightenment is man's emergence from his self-imposed nonage. Nonage is the inability to use one's own understanding without another's guidance. This nonage is self-imposed if its cause lies not in lack of understanding but in indecision and lack of courage to use one's own mind without another's guidance. *Dare to know! (Sapere aude.)* "Have the courage to use your own understanding," is therefore the motto of the enlightenment. (Kant 1973, 384)

Taking this motto seriously implies that avowals can stand on their own—they are not merely part of a larger attempt at self-regulation (contrary to what McGeer suggests, see the end of Section 4).

6. Self-regulative agency and first-person authority

All of this suggests a natural answer to the question of first-person authority. On the view presented here, the authoritative status of our self-ascriptions depends on a practice of self-regulative agency. In everyday life we assume that people are able to keep their word and shape their behavior in accordance with the mental states they attribute to themselves. This shows that first-person authority is not only about "making up your mind"; it also involves "shaping your body." Together with the capacity for rational agency, this capacity to control and manipulate our behavior is what marks the difference between self-understanding and understanding others. Thus, we are granted first-person authority insofar as we are able to bridge the gap between saying and doing by aligning our actions with our avowals. First-person authority is withheld when we fail to live up to our avowals; in such cases, others expect us to "change our mind" instead and shape our mental states in accordance with the behavior we display.

This does not mean that first-person authority can be reduced to a form of self-regulation in the service of others. On the contrary, because others are constitutive of the processes that structure and shape our mental and bodily states, first-person authority as self-regulative agency often implies forms of "other-regulation" as well. Making up your mind creates a standard that you try to live up to, but this is frequently one that you hope others will live up to as well. By changing ourselves, we also change (our interactions with) the people around us, and this in turn has an impact on how we understand ourselves. These "looping effects" (Andrews 2015) are possible because we are able to adopt both the first- and the third-person perspective on ourselves.

Of course, more needs to be said about the specific sort of situations in which first-person is granted or withheld, and the kind of capacities that are required on behalf of the self-regulating agent. That, however, is something for another paper.

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