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## Ways of mindreading

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It is by now generally recognized that the capacity to “read” other people’s intentions, attitudes, and postures, to understand expressions (of emotions) and conduct, or simply to empathize with fellow human beings, is a necessary part of the human cognitive endowment. Much less clearly perceived is the resolutely Cartesian outlook of the cognitive theories of mindreading. This starts with representing the very possibility of mindreading as an enigma, much in the way Descartes described in *Meditations* his perplexity in regard to the fact that we are able to perceive people and objects in the outer world in spite of our impossibility to have direct access to whatever occurs outside our body limits. And much as Descartes who turned to his concept of *cogito* to give the Cartesian being the capacity to cognize the outer world, cognitive theorists devised a series of kindred concepts (theory of mind, theory of simulation, theory of theory, narrative theories) to account for mindreading. In a nutshell: I assume that other people feel, act, and react much in the way I do, so that knowing myself I can assume an analogy while devising a model which reads for me your intentions, feelings, attitudes, and behavior, and even lets me share your feelings/emotions (to the extent I happen to be an empathizer). It goes without saying that devising such a model takes an amount of self-knowledge, so don’t expect your newborn baby to be an expert mind reader; let her first acquire sufficient self-knowledge.

While cartesianism *per se* is not amenable to philosophical refutation, its avatars in the field of science are open to scrutiny. In the case of mindreading, the first thing that stands out is the assumption of accessibility of self-knowledge: it is because I know myself that I can infer other people’s intentions, emotions, motivations ... But are we proficient knowers of ourselves? Do I see myself in the midst of action, as I perceive your attitudes, facial expressions, looks, postures, voice...? There is an ancient maxim in English that says *Know Thyself*. Whatever the specific philosophical debate it refers to (see Plato), it basically boils down to the observation that self-knowledge is problematic, that it is an achievement, and incidentally a worthy purpose. Another issue with cognitive theories of mindreading can be summarized as the *paradox of tuition*. How can mother, father, or caretaker ever educate an infant who has no access to their intentions, attitudes, expressions, so long she hasn’t acquired sufficient self-knowledge to model the caretaker’s mind?

My proposal in this presentation will be that the conceptualization of mindreading ought to be reversed: since postures, attitudes, facial and vocal expressions, and generally the other people’s behavior are intrinsically expressive they are (to a large extent) directly perceivable. We do not need to draw inferences or otherwise elaborate models of other people’s intentions because we (even infants) directly perceive in their behavior anger, threat, warmth, friendliness, impatience, or withdrawal. By experiencing the world, we directly experience our fellow human beings (and



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animals), and it is the knowledge of the other that eventually serves the basis of our self-knowledge. Thus while true understanding other people's motives, intentions or conduct may also take a narrative (fiction), and remain incomplete it is by no means an elusive skill. Unlike self-knowledge that always was.