Commentary on Crone, "Self-consciousness, interaction, and understanding others"

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Introduction

Crone has provided us with a philosophically rich account of the role that interaction plays in facilitating social understanding—that is, our ability to perceive, understand, and respond to the behavior of others. Moreover, while much of the current debate draws upon familiar phenomenological and cognitive scientific resources, Crone introduces a new voice into this discussion—the German Idealist Johann Gottlieb Fichte—and indicates how Fichte's view of the relation between self-consciousness and intersubjectivity might productively enrich current discussions. There is much in Crone's analysis that I agree with; there are also several points where our views part ways somewhat. For the sake of moving the debate forward, I will, in what follows, focus mainly on the latter.

The ambiguity of "interaction"

Crone argues that the notion of "interaction" remains underdeveloped within certain embodied approaches to social cognition and intersubjectivity. This is problematic because these approaches explicitly place this notion at the very center of their respective analysis (e.g., Gallagher 2005, 2008; Ratcliffe 2007; Gallagher and Zahavi 2008; De Jaegher, Di Paolo, and Gallagher 2010). According to embodied approaches to social cognition, details of our embodiment shape both what we come to know about others and how we come to know it. More pointedly, the idea is that our basic sensorimotor capacities for embodied engagement—for example, our ability to detect and monitor another's gaze; facially and gesturally express emotions and respond to these expressions in others; discern intentions within another's context-sensitive actions, etc.—is sufficient, at least in many cases, to secure rich interpersonal understanding. We see mental properties in others via their

expressive behavior and we respond accordingly. Call this view the "interactive theory" of social understanding (IT).

Crucially, proponents of IT often argue that this interactive process is non-mentalistic. That is, it does not require or presuppose the explicit attribution of mental states to others via some sort of high-level inferential process, folk psychological theory (Theory Theory) or simulation heuristic (Simulation Theory). Rather, it is a perception-based form of understanding that arises within the ongoing dynamics of our face-to-face engagements. And it is therefore a *shared* process, one which spans multiple agents—coming together in what Crone characterizes as a "two-directional mutual relationship" (Crone p.3)—and is not, then, reducible to the cognitive capacities of a single subject. IT is in this way often offered as an alternative to purportedly individualistic and mentalistic accounts of social understanding like Theory Theory, Simulation Theory, etc.[1]

As Crone rightly notes, however, the notion of "interaction" at play in these debates is not always made sufficiently clear. Nor is the scope of IT always sufficiently delimited. One way to understand IT is to see it as offering a necessity claim. This is the idea that interaction (i.e., embodied face-to-face engagement) is necessary—and perhaps even sufficient—for social understanding. But this does not seem very plausible. There are many cases where social understanding occurs in the absence of real-time interaction. For example, I can follow someone from afar, gaze at my fellow diners while eating in a restaurant, or simply watch people on TV and, in all of these cases, reliably interpret their actions, emotions, intentions, etc. in the absence of any real-time interaction with them. Surely being able to read another's thoughts, emotions, intentions, etc. *sans* face-to-face interaction is a crucial part of the mature agent's social toolkit. So IT construed as a necessity claim is almost assuredly false.

[1] For example, Matthew Ratcliffe suggests that his version of IT departs from standard orthodoxy (i.e., Theory Theory and Simulation Theory) "in just about every respect" (Ratcliffe 2007, p.2). See also De Jaegher and Di Paolo (2007) and Gallagher (2008).

In response, an IT proponent might insist that, in the cases mentioned previously, there is still some sort of minimal interaction occurring—I might subtly mimic the gestures and facial expressions of the people I'm observing from afar, say, or intensely focus on their expressions and feel a strong emotional identification—and thus that interaction is still necessary for whatever social understanding comes about. However, this rather liberal characterization of interaction potentially extends the scope of the term so broadly that it loses its explanatory power. After all, if *every* sort of experiential encounter with another is a kind of interaction, it's not clear, then, that interaction can be said to play a unique role in generating social understanding.

Interact with attitude!

Crone offers an alternative reading of IT. She argues that a more promising way to understand the notion of "interaction" is to think of it as a kind of stance or attitude that we adopt exclusively in relation to other persons. According to Crone, a stance is "an attitude adopted in the face of an object or types of objects"; and it is the quality of the stance, moreover, that defines the various ways in which once relates to different objects (Crone p.5). According to Crone, then, we ought to think of interaction as that special kind of stance that we adopt only in relation to persons—and not, say, in relation to inanimate objects.

Crone appeals to Fichte to help elucidate the nature of this interpersonal stance. For Fichte, to be aware of oneself as an individual subject (i.e., to become self-conscious) requires that one be part of a "realm of intersubjective mutual recognition", as Crone puts it. In other words, self-consciousness is inextricably bound up with our awareness of an external world—a world that is both (1) structured as an arena of possible actions and (2) populated with other subjects. Our experiential encounter with the world is thus an encounter with a *shared* world. We discover ourselves as conscious subjects and free agents via our practical engagement with things in that world and with our fellow subjects who co-inhabit it. But crucially, we treat the latter in a special way, and they us. That is, we "mutually acknowledge and treat each other as self-conscious and free

agents" (Crone p.7). This attitude, then, is the core of the interpersonal stance for Crone. And it is a quality of relatedness—a kind of interaction—that can persist in the absence of the sort of real-time engagement that most IT proponents tend to focus on.

Two criticisms

I now offer two critical comments. First, it seems to me that, once we look more carefully at the details of Crone's Fichte-inspired account, we find that it remains excessively mentalistic and thus vulnerable to the sort of criticisms levied by those who endorse a more embodied rendering of IT. Second, it also seems to overlook—or is at least ill-equipped to characterize—the central role that emotions and affectivity play in shaping basic forms of interpersonal understanding. I consider these two criticisms in turn.

I suspect that many IT proponents will insist that this account remains excessively mentalistic. Consider how Crone, drawing upon Fichte, characterizes the dialectical emergence of self-consciousness and interpersonal understanding this way:

> Intersubjectivity, as Fichte argues, implies both "demand" (*Aufforderung*) and "recognition" (*Anerkennung*) (Fichte 2000, § 3, iv): in order to be aware of oneself one has to be addressed as a self-conscious and free subject by another subject. Being faced by another person means being implicitly demanded to be aware and to make use of one's free agency. And to be 'addressed' in this very way means to (again: implicitly) accept the demand and thereby to recognize the other as an equally self-conscious and free agent by the same token. Note that this recognition is not just a theoretical acknowledgement of someone's status as a free agent; it also requires that he be treated as such by others (p.6).

Construed thusly, the bar for recognizing another (and indeed, myself) as a subject—and subsequently treating them as such—is set awfully high, cognitively speaking. Much theoretical knowledge seems to be necessary before this process of recognition and response can get off the ground. To be fair, Crone is careful here. She says that this dialectic need not be something of which both subjects are consciously aware (Crone p.6). But there are still several troublesome features of this characterization.

First, in order to attribute to another qualities such as “free agency”, “being a self-conscious subject”, “demanding that I make use of my own agency”, etc., I already seem to require a fairly sophisticated (conceptually robust) understanding of them. Presumably another distinct process is responsible, then, for my becoming aware of them as the sorts of things that warrant my attribution of these qualities in the first place. Fichte’s account must be parasitic on a more basic account of interpersonal understanding. IT proponents will likely say that their account can fill this role since it appeals to various nonconceptual embodied capacities in place at birth.

Moreover, according to this account, to be recognized by another entails that I simultaneously recognize myself as a free subject capable of issuing an appropriate response *to* this recognition. That is, I become self-consciously aware of my free agency by (1) accepting another’s recognition and (2) responding to its implicit “demand” that I extend to them the same kind of recognition (Crone p. 7). One again, however, this seems to be a fairly demanding cognitive requirement for interpersonal understanding. For, to be in a position (i.e., the appropriate stance) to both recognize and respond to this normative constraint—“even in the absence of direct encounter” (Crone p.7)—presumably entails a fairly sophisticated understanding of the nature of this self-other dialectic and its implicit moral demand.

Crone will likely respond that this process or stance can be implicit. But this response sits uncomfortably with her earlier contention that it is “reflective self-consciousness (and not pre-reflective self-awareness) which is at stake in the argument at issue” (Crone p.5). Additionally, if this dialectical process *always* unfolds beneath the threshold of conscious awareness, it’s not clear to me what new explanatory resources we gain by appealing to Fichte and characterizing it in such explicitly mentalistic terms. Other models appear better equipped for the job.

Finally, a potentially troubling consequence of this mentalistic picture of interpersonal understanding is that creatures lacking the requisite theoretical resources (infants, individuals with severe mental disabilities, etc.) fail to be participatory members of the social order. Moral

considerations aside, this exclusion also seems problematic in light of much developmental evidence (see below).

This takes me to my second criticism. A Fichte-inspired rendering of the interpersonal stance seems to overlook—or is at least ill-equipped to characterize—the fundamental role that emotions and affectivity play in shaping primitive forms of social awareness. Much evidence from developmental psychology, for example, suggests that emotional intimacy in early infant-caregiver interactions provides the developmental context for our basic social-cognitive abilities. From birth, the emotional character of these interactions has a motivational effect on the infant, compelling them to engage with others. It also guides the infant's attention toward socially salient phenomena like facial expressions, gestures, and patterns of gaze and movement. *Affect attunement*—the ability to coordinate one's affective states with those of another—thus appears to be the basis from which various individualistic capacities (self-consciousness, language, self-regulation, self-representation, etc.) arise. It is, arguably, at the developmental ground of what Crone terms the "interpersonal stance".[2]

From birth, our earliest social interactions are in this way bathed in feeling: exquisitely tuned feeling-relations that attune us to others in fundamental ways, and which provide the inter-corporeal scaffolding both supporting and motivating the growth of our more sophisticated cognitive capacities and competencies for social engagement, as well as the development of our sense of self. These affectively-charged "intersubjective relations between bodily-expressive persons are at the core of what is irreducibly interpersonal" (Hobson and Hobson 2008, p.76). So, prior to the development of propositional or conceptual thought—both of which seem to be necessary for the sophisticated mutual recognition that Crone describes—these nonconceptual feeling-relations cultivate our basic social capacity for (1) recognizing another's body as an expressive unity, and (2)

[2] For a discussion of some of this work, see, for example, Hobson (2002, 2012), Reddy (2008), Rochat (2009), Trevarthen and Reddy (2007), Tronick (2005), and Zeedyk (2006).

coordinating our own bodily responses to them, and by doing so creating the context for sympathetic attunement and mutual understanding.

I doubt that Crone would reject any of what I've said. But it's unclear to me where, exactly, emotions and affectivity fit into Crone's portrayal of the interpersonal stance. By relying so heavily on Fichte's mentalistic rendering of the self-other dialectic, there is a danger of squeezing emotions out of this story completely. As a result, we are left with a relatively cold conception of interpersonal interaction, devoid of the very feeling-quality that appears to be a core feature of our social development. Moreover, this strongly mentalistic orientation seems to lead Crone to a very different level of explanation than IT proponents tend to be working at. Ultimately, I had the nagging feeling that the sort of high-level interaction Crone so capably describes still presupposes the more developmentally primitive sensorimotor engagements that IT theories are mainly concerned with.

In conclusion, I think that many of Crone's intuitions are sound. I agree that, within IT debates, the central notion of "interaction" is often rendered ambiguously and needs further clarification and refinement. Moreover, many IT accounts fail to give a satisfactory account of how embodied approaches to social cognition handle the many instances of offline, non-interactive instances of social understanding that are clearly an important part of our everyday lives. Finally, I very much welcome new players to the social cognition game (e.g., German Idealism and Fichte). A fresh perspective on familiar debates is always welcome. That said—and in light of the concerns voiced above—I nevertheless have some doubts that Fichte can contribute theoretical resources superior to those already found within, for example, phenomenological and enactive approaches to social cognition, even when it comes to non-interactive social understanding. I'm inclined to think that these latter approaches already offer resources better suited to account for the non-mentalistic, affectively driven origin of interpersonal understanding. But I'm happy to be proven wrong. Either way, I enjoyed Crone's paper very much and I'm grateful for the chance to comment on it.

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