

Overintellectualizing the Mind¹

S. L. Hurley

Philosophy and Phenomenological Research LXIII:2 (2001) 423-431.

Brewer's Perception and Reason argues, from familiar scenarios of duplicate environments and switching, that a subject's perceptual experiences must provide reasons for her empirical beliefs. Only perceptual experience can tie reference down to a thing as opposed to its duplicate, and this tying down must be a matter of giving the subject reasons that she can recognize as such. Moreover, such reasons require conceptual contents.

The book is squarely within the distinctive British approach to these topics, both in style and substance. Its strictly *a priori* arguments, focussed on the epistemological role of perception, make valuable contributions to philosophy of mind and epistemology. Elements of McDowell's influential position are developed in interesting ways, and there is an excellent discussion of externalism and self-knowledge. However, some of the book's presuppositions are open to doubt. In particular, its preoccupation with epistemology leads to neglect of the arguably more fundamental role of perceptual experience in action and reasons for action--neglect which threatens to undermine certain of its arguments. But despite this, there is a much merit in the book; it crystallizes a certain target and clearly advances debate. It may be that many of the points made here could be accommodated within a view that is similar to Brewer's in spirit but broadened to give due recognition to action.

Consider Brewer's argument that only perceptual presentation suffices to tie down reference to a particular object, given the possibility of duplicate environments (xivff)². This argument slides from:

experience is essential to understanding which object is in question

to:

nothing non-experiential can refer to spatial particulars in the way experience does

to:

beliefs about spatial particulars have their contents only in virtue of their relations with perceptual experiences (46).

But perception is no more fundamental in this respect than motor intentions directed toward particular objects. Both are essential to the rational motor action that most fundamentally entangles agents with

¹ Thanks to Mark Greenberg, Ram Neta, Alva Noe, Hanna Pickard, and Joelle Proust for comments and discussion.

² Page references are to Brewer.

their environments and underwrites reference to particulars--in a way that bypasses epistemologically motivated duplication worries. My intentions and perceptions refer to the ball I have just caught and thrown, the food I am cutting and chewing, the violin I am playing; and I am aware of this. By contrast, Brewer one-sidedly emphasizes that reference depends on the identities of objects the subject perceives (eg 28).

Moreover, motor intentions are as essential as perceptual experience to making a self-world distinction and a mind-independent world available to an agent at all. Many current views of perception emphasize the dynamic role of the agent's motor intentions and actions, as well as attention, in controlling his experience. Our understanding of the world as distinct from and independent of self is most deeply grounded in environmental recalcitrance in the face of our rational efforts at control (cf. 28, 195-196n). Control just is the maintenance of a target value by *endogenous* adjustments in the context of *exogenous* disturbances.

The central case in which Brewer's discussion is one-sidedly oriented toward perception and belief, as opposed to intention and action, is his argument that reasons require conceptual contents. He typically speaks of reasons for judgements or beliefs, adding parenthetically: "(or action)", to keep practical reasons in play (eg 150, 151, 168). However, these gestures toward action don't do the work needed.

Brewer's basic argument that reasons must be conceptual has two steps. First, giving reasons requires identifying propositions as premises and conclusions of the relevant inferences. Second, for reasons to be the subject's own reasons, at the personal level and from his point of view, they must consist in some mental state of his that's directly related to the propositional premise of the relevant inference: the premise proposition must be the content of the mental state in a sense that requires the subject to have all the constituent concepts of the proposition. Otherwise, the mental state will not be the subject's own reason (150-152).

Suppose we grant that nonconceptual content is not needed to provide an epistemological grounding for perceptual beliefs, and that indeed it could not do this work in any case. This will only seem decisive on the issue of whether reasons require conceptual contents if we have already overintellectualized the mind by giving epistemology priority over practical reason. If there is a case for giving either priority, reasons for action are primary and reasons for belief derivative. Even if reasons for belief must be conceptual, it would not follow that reasons for action must be, since reasons for action are not reasons for belief about what should be done (Hurley 1989, ch. 7-9). Practical rationality is not theoretical rationality with practical content.

The most powerful motivation for admitting that reasons need not be conceptualized derives from practical reason rather than epistemology. An intentional agent who lacks conceptual abilities and does not conceptualize her reasons can still act for reasons that are her own, from her point of view.³

³ I speak in terms of conceptual abilities, which are less abstract and contentious and more operational than conceptual content, assuming that whatever conceptual content is, it requires conceptual abilities.

Reasons for action can be context bound and lack conceptual generality. There can be islands of practical rationality. This possibility becomes clear when contact is made with empirical work.

If someone's states have conceptual content, he must have conceptual abilities.⁴ If information that an object has a property is conceptualized, it has a structure that enables the subject to decompose and recombine its elements promiscuously in other contexts, and to generalize and make quantificationally-structured inferences that depend on such context-free decompositional structure. His reasoning abilities are governed by correspondingly rich normative constraints, and are not context-bound but extend systematically to states of affairs removed from his immediate environment and needs. I am inclined to agree with McDowell that conceptual abilities come with language (though I would allow that both may come by degrees; see below).

Intentional agency--something that many animals have and plants lack--makes normative space between a mere stimulus-response system and conceptual abilities (Hurley 1998). A creature that acts intentionally acts for reasons. Relations between stimuli and responses are not invariant. Rather, actions depend holistically on normatively constrained relationships between motor intentions and perceptions, between ends and means. A given intention will yield different actions given different perceptions, and vice versa. Actions can be understood as mistaken or inconsistent or instrumentally irrational. Means and end can decouple: an intentional agent can try, err, and try again, can try various different means to achieve the same end. These features of intentional agency make for a minimal kind of recombinant structure: an intentional agent has the ability to combine a given intention with different perceptions, given ends with different means. The holism and normativity here invoked are of a kind familiar from the writings of Davidson, Dennett and others, though applied to perceptions and motor intentions rather than beliefs and desires, and detached from requirements that the creature have conceptual abilities or itself be an interpreter.⁵ Such holism and normativity characterize the personal or animal level, at which it is correct to regard an agent as acting for reasons that are its own, from its own point of view.⁶

The relatively weak structure and normativity of intentional agency contrasts with the richer structure and normativity of conceptual abilities. An intentional agent has a point of view from which reasons for action register, and she can act for such reasons. Acting *for* a reason, rather than merely in the presence of or in agreement with a reason, requires the reason to cause the action 'in the right sort of way'. But this does not require the reflective, context-free, inferentially promiscuous understanding of the reason that goes with conceptual abilities. Reasons can be available to an agent from her point of view even though they are bound

⁴ Cf. MacIntyre.

⁵ A creature could be an intentional agent, for whom means and ends decompose and recombine in certain contexts, without being able to understand others as intentional agents, for whom means and ends similarly decompose and recombine. Tomasello suggests that chimps are such agents.

⁶ The personal level is here understood as the locus of normative/rational constraints, not in terms of consciousness. In Freudian examples, or cases of self-deception, the partitioning of an agent into subsystems may be driven by normative constraints of consistency. Even if some such subsystems are unconscious, they would still count as at the personal level. The subpersonal level is understood as the level of causal/functional description at which talk of normative constraints and reasons no longer applies.

to particular contexts and do not generalize. An agent may perceive and act for a reason in a particular context without propositional premises and conclusions being available to her. Again, a reason for action is not a reason for belief about what should be done. The agent may not generalize or theorize about such a reason; her intentional agency may be expressed in context-bound islands of practical rationality. Yet she may be aware of why she should act a certain way, and of being wrong if she does otherwise, in that context. And she may also be quite capable of doing otherwise, for example, given some different background intention.

What kinds of cases might illustrate intentional agency without conceptual abilities? Here are some suggestions worth considering.

(1) Sarah Boyson's chimp Sheba displays an island of instrumental rationality that does not generalize. Sheba was allowed to indicate either of two dishes of jellybeans, one containing more than the other. The rule was: the jellybeans in whichever dish Sheba indicated went to another chimp, and Sheba got the jellybeans in the other dish. Sheba always chose the dish containing more jellybeans, even though this resulted in her getting fewer. Despite her apparent frustration, she seemed unable to indicate the smaller amount in order to get the larger amount. Boyson next substituted numerals in the dishes for actual jellybeans. She had previously taught Sheba to recognize and use the numerals '1' through '4'. Immediately, Sheba began to choose the smaller numeral, thereby acquiring the correspondingly larger number of jellybeans for herself. The substitution of numerals seemed at once to free her to act in an instrumentally rational way, as she had been unable to when faced directly by the jellybeans. When the numerals were again replaced by jellybeans, Sheba reverted to choosing the larger number.

(2) Tomasello suggests that nonhuman primates have a special ability to understand the social relations of conspecifics that hold among third parties, such as the mother/child relation. They are also unusual in their ability to learn relations among objects: for example, to choose a pair of objects that display the same relation as a sample pair. However, mastering relations among objects is a difficult task for nonhuman primates, taking hundreds or thousands of trials, whereas understanding of third party relations among conspecifics is seemingly effortless. Their skill with relations fails to generalize smoothly from the social to the nonsocial domain.

Cosmides' work on the Wason effect suggests that even for human primates certain inferential skills are bound to certain social contexts and fail to generalize. Wason asked people to test a simple instance of "p implies q": if a card has "D" on one side, it has "3" on the other side. Subjects observed 4 cards, showing on their upturned sides: D, F, 3, 7. They were asked which cards they should turn over to determine whether the rule was correct. The right answer is: the D card and the 7 card. Most people (90-95%, including those trained in logic) choose either just the D card or the D card and the 3 card.

But Cosmides shows that people *do* get the right answer when they are asked to test instances of "p implies q" that describe an exchange of the form: if you take a benefit, you must meet a requirement. People are very good at detecting cheaters; they can readily perceive reasons to act so as to flush out cheaters. But their reasons are highly context-dependent, and do not generalize, even to other social contexts. People do not get the right answer even for: if you

meet a requirement, you get a benefit. When an agent acts on her perceptions so as to flush out a cheater, she can be acting on her own reasons, available from her point of view, even though they are not inferentially promiscuous. She may *have* conceptual abilities, but not *use* them.

(3) Part of what it is to be conscious is to have a unified point of view, from which what you perceive depends systematically on what you do and vice versa, and such that you keep track of this interdependence of perception and action. Such *perspectival self-consciousness* involves ordinary motor agency (Hurley 1998; see and cf. Van Gulick; Bermudez). When I intentionally turn my head to the right, I expect the stationary object in front of me to swing toward the left of my visual field. If I intentionally turn my head and the object remains in the same place in my visual field, I perceive the object as moving. If my eye muscles are paralyzed and I try to move them but fail, the world around me, surprisingly, appears to move.

Such perspectival self-consciousness can but need not be conceptual. As an animal moves through its environment, its intentional motor actions dynamically control its perceptual experience in the face of exogenous environmental disturbances, simultaneously with its perceptions providing reasons for action. It can keep track of contingencies between its perceptions and motor intentions, in a practically if not theoretically rational way. In doing so it can use information about itself and its environment intelligently, to meet its needs.

Such a perspective is correctly described at the animal rather than the subanimal level. But it doesn't follow that the animal has a general concept of itself or its conscious states, or the ability to reason theoretically or systematically about aspects of self and environment in a variety of ways detached from its needs. Its perspectival uses of information about itself may be context bound.

Reasons for action in such cases are not 'sub-animal' level phenomena, but can properly be attributed to the intentional agents in question--even if they lack, to greater or lesser degrees, conceptual abilities. Why? For the old familiar reasons: holism and normativity. Perceptual information leads to no invariant response, but explains action only in the context set by intentions and the constraints of at least primitive forms of practical rationality. Perceptions and motor intentions combine to make certain actions reasonable and appropriate from the animal's point of view, and mistakes are possible.

The motivation such cases provide for admitting nonconceptual intentional agency is not epistemic, but rather to characterize the practical abilities of these creatures correctly, as neither too rich nor too impoverished. The normativity of nonconceptual intentional agency plays no role in an epistemological project; animals who display islands of instrumental rationality are not in the business of justifying their beliefs. But the reasons for which they act are nonetheless their own reasons, from their own point of view. Of course, they may not be conceptualized as reasons--but to require that would be to beg the question at issue (cf. pp. 166-168). Some of Brewer's formulations of the requirement that reasons be available from the agent's point of view come uncomfortably close to stipulating that the agent conceives of the reasons as reasons, in a way that makes the question-begging requirement of conceptual abilities.

The problem can be restated as follows. Brewer's view gives the having of reasons links in two directions, which pull against one another. First, he plausibly links having reasons with the agent's point of view: reasons make whatever they are reasons for appropriate from the viewpoint of the agent in question (e.g. 49, 54, 56, 77, 82). Second, he links having reasons with making general inferences from propositional premises to propositional conclusions, hence with conceptual abilities.

One way of making the links explicit is to claim that having a point of view requires having reasons, and that having reasons requires having inferential and conceptual abilities. But I have urged that having a point of view does not require having inferential and conceptual abilities--at least if the notion of a point of view has intuitive empirical application and is not wholly a theory-driven philosopher's tool. There is a sense of "having reasons", which relates *inter alia* to acting for reasons, in which it is plausible that having a point of view requires having reasons: requires that the point of view can be described in normatively constrained, personal-or-animal level terms, including essentially in terms of action for reasons. There may well be another richer sense of "having reasons" that entails inferential and conceptual abilities. But this is not quite the same sense of "having reasons", since having a point of view does not entail inferential and conceptual abilities.

A different way of making the links explicit may be suggested. Perhaps having reasons requires having reasons from a point of view, hence having a point of view (even though having a point of view does not require having reasons). And perhaps having reasons also requires having inferential and conceptual abilities, in the same rich sense of "having reasons". The problem then is that there is another sense of "having reasons" which still does not require inferential and conceptual abilities: the very sense, relating to reasons for action, that is plausibly required merely by having a point of view.

Here is an objection to what I've said.⁷ The point cannot be that acting for reasons does not require the ability to infer *everything* that follows from it. That's also true of human beings who have conceptual abilities and conceptualized reasons. Then perhaps the point is that a creature can act for a reason without being any to infer *anything* that follows from it. However, the examples given do not support this claim. The agents there have some, if limited, inferential powers.

One response to this objection would allow that inferential/conceptual abilities are a matter of degree, so that the whole issue lacks the on/off character Brewer seems to give it. There is potential for common ground here. However, the critical further question is whether having reasons must go hand in hand with conceptual/inferential abilities, with respect to these difference of degree.

Another response, which leads back to related points, would emphasize that having a reason for action isn't a matter of theoretical inference, that reasons for action aren't reasons for belief about

⁷ Thanks here to Ram Neta.

action. It's not that Sheba can infer some but not all of what might be inferred, but that she has reasons for acting that don't have the character of conceptualized theoretical inferences at all. Reasons for action are constraints on understanding and interpreting action in general, which characterize the first person point of view as much as the third. By contrast, the capacity for conceptualized inference depends on the capacity for a very special kind of action, linguistic action. While conceptualized inference provides reasons for linguistic acts, reasons for action at large are available to those without linguistic abilities. This restricts inferential/conceptual abilities to linguistic creatures, but allows reasons without inferential/conceptual abilities (cf. Brewer at 163, who doubts that linguistic expression is essential to the link between reasons and conceptual content).

On this view, reasons for action go along with having a point of view at all, which does not require linguistic/inferential/conceptual abilities. The alternatives are: we could allow that inferential/conceptual abilities come apart from language also, along with reasons (this may be Brewer's view). OR, we could deny that reasons can come apart from language at all. My suggestion occupies the middle ground between these extremes, which I think more accurately describes the space occupied by intelligent but languageless creatures. Lacking language, they lack the abilities I describe in terms of conceptual generality and inferential promiscuity, and the kinds of reasons that depend on these abilities. But they do not lack reasons altogether, or points of view.

So: at one extreme we've got language, at the other points of view. In between, we need to locate reasons for action and inferential/conceptual abilities. I suggest dividing them: reasons for action go with points of view, inferential/conceptual abilities with language. However, I would not be strongly opposed to a weaker reading of inferential/conceptual skills to include nontheoretical skills that do not require language: this may be a notational issue. The bottom line is that reasons don't require language, or the kind of theoretical inferential/conceptual abilities that language makes possible.

If the kind of minimally structured means/end practical reasoning available to nonlinguistic creatures is counted as manifesting weak conceptual/inferential skills, then it's arguable that the criteria for having a person or animal level point of view at all, holism and normativity, are also criteria for having (some) conceptual/inferential skills. I could recast the substance of my position in these terms. So there is again potential for common ground here. However, it depends critically on seeing conceptual and inferential abilities as a matter of degree. By contrast, much of the discussion of conceptual vs. nonconceptual content gives the distinction an all or nothing character. One advantage of focussing on conceptual abilities instead of conceptual content is that this lends itself to displaying differences of degree by reference to empirical examples.

Bacharach, Michael, and Hurley, Susan (1991), Foundations of Decision Theory (Oxford: Blackwell)

Bermudez, Jose (1998), The Paradox of Self-Consciousness (Cambridge: MIT).

Boyson, Sally, and Bernston, G. (1995), "Responses to Quantity: Perceptual vs. Cognitive Mechanisms in Chimpanzees (Pan troglodytes)", Journal of Experimental Psychology and Animal Behavior Processes 21, 82-86.

Boyson, Sally, Bernston, G., Hannan, M., and Cacioppo, J. (1996), "Quantity-based Inference and Symbolic Representation in Chimpanzees (Pan troglodytes)", Journal of Experimental Psychology and Animal Behavior Processes 22, 76-86.

Cosmides, L. (1989), "The Logic of Social Exchange: Has Natural Selection Shaped how Humans Reason? Studies with the Wason Selection Task". Cognition 31, 187-276.

Hurley, Susan (1989), Natural Reasons (New York: Oxford).

Hurley, Susan (1998), Consciousness in Action (Cambridge: Harvard).

MacIntyre, Alasdair (1999), Rational Dependent Animals (London: Duckworth).

McDowell, John (1994), Mind and World (Cambridge, Harvard).

Tomasello, Michael (1999), The Cultural Origins of Human Cognition (Cambridge: Harvard).

Van Gulick, Robert (1988), "A Functionalist Plea for Self-Consciousness", Philosophical Review XCVII/2, 149-181.

Wason, P (1966), "Reasoning". In B. Foss, ed., New Horizons in Psychology (London: Penguin).