

Intersubjective Communication and Emotion in Early Ontogeny

Edited by
Stein Bråten

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CHAPTER 2

Infant intersubjectivity: broadening the dialogue to include imitation, identity and intention

Andrew N. Meltzoff and M. Keith Moore

What is the problem of intersubjectivity and why does it intrigue us so? The problem stems from the fact that persons are more than physical objects. When we describe a person's height, weight, eyes, etc., we do not exhaust our description of that person. We have left off their psychological makeup. If a self-mobile, human-looking body were devoid of psychological characteristics it would not be a person at all, but a robot or, to use a philosopher's favourite, a zombie. A fundamental issue is how we come to know others as persons like ourselves.

Each one of us has the phenomenological experience that he or she is not alone in the world, in particular that we are not the unique bearer of psychological properties. We know that we think, feel, have intentions; we also find ourselves believing that others have similar psychological states, despite the fact that we do not experience others' states in the same way that we experience ours. Reflection on this gulf between ourselves and others intrigues us and can raise questions about our understanding of other persons. A computer with voice synthesis could be made to cry out, but we would not think it felt pain. A robot might be programmed to wrinkle its elastic 'face' when an internal chip detected sobbing, but we would not ascribe empathy to it. Why, then, do we ascribe psychological states to other humans?

Philosophers seek to justify the inference that the moving sacks of skin that we see are animated by psychological states just like our own. They contemplate whether this way of thinking might be a fiction and criteria for knowing whether it is or is not. Developmental psychologists ask different questions. They inquire how such a view takes hold among humans. Is it present at birth? Does it develop through social interaction? Does the nature of intersubjectivity change with age?

