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Is Direct Social Perception a banal thesis? A phenomenological response to Spaulding's critique of Direct Social Perception

RESUMÉ

Direkte Social Perception (DSP) hævder, at vi kan erfare visse mentale tilstande hos andre. Spaulding påstår, at de eneste mentale tilstande, som kan blive direkte perciperet, er motor-intentioner og aktuelle følelser, og konkluderer derfor, at DSP er en banal tese. Jeg argumenter for, (i) at Spaulding ikke tilstrækkeligt har demonstreret, at DSP bør begrænses til M-intentioner og aktuelle følelser, og at (ii) selv inden for Spauldings begrænsede forståelse kan DSP heller ikke karakteriseres som banal. Jeg slår til lyd for, at opfattelsen af DSP som banal er en misforståelse af DSP's sande radikalitet som en del af den fænomenologiske fremstilling af social kognition.

ABSTRACT

Direct Social Perception (DSP) claims that we can directly perceive some mental states of others. Spaulding asserts that the only mental states that can be directly perceived are motor-intentions and occurrent emotions and therefore concludes that DSP is a banal thesis. I argue that (i) Spaulding has not sufficiently demonstrated that DSP should be limited to M-intentions and occurrent emotions and (ii) that even upon Spaulding's restricted account, DSP cannot be properly deemed banal. I suggest that to view DSP as banal is to misunderstand its true radicality as a component of the phenomenological account of social cognition.

EMNEORD

Social kognition, direkte social perception, teori-teori, fænomenologi, inferens

KEYWORDS

Social cognition, direct social perception, theory-theory, phenomenology, inference

1. Introduction

The Direct Social Perception Theory (DSP) claims that we can directly perceive some mental states of others. DSP is a component of a wider phenomenological critique that seeks to challenge traditional accounts of social cognition. One such account, which has come under attack from DSP, is Theory-Theory (TT). TT claims that we understand others by making inferences about their mental states based upon a theory.

However, some have claimed that DSP is not a radical new approach to social cognition but is in fact compatible with TT (e.g. Carruthers 2015; Lavelle 2015; Spaulding 2015, in press). Spaulding asserts that the only mental states which can be directly perceived are motor-intentions (M-intentions) and occurrent emotions. Spaulding suggests that DSP presents such an uncontroversial position that even “a modern-day Cartesian could perfectly consistently accept this idea” (in press., 20). Spaulding, therefore, concludes that DSP is a “banal” thesis (in press., 20) as she sees it as having limited scope and because she thinks that it can be incorporated into the very theory that it seeks to challenge.

Spaulding’s critique appears to leave DSP, and consequently the phenomenological approach to social cognition, with bleak prospects. However, her critique requires an affirmative answer in response to the two following questions:

- i) Are M-intentions and occurrent emotions the only possible candidates for DSP?
- ii) If so, does this mean that DSP is a banal doctrine?

Pace Spaulding, I will show that to answer (i) in the affirmative one has to adopt a form of DSP that is divorced from the phenomenological proposal as a whole, and to answer (ii) in the affirmative is to misunderstand the true radicality of DSP as a component of the phenomenological account of social cognition.

In this article, I will start by briefly introducing the social cognition debate (section 2) and setting out a summary of Spaulding’s assessment of DSP (section 3). I shall then present two reasons for rejecting Spaulding’s restriction of the scope of DSP to M-intentions and occurrent emotions (section 4). The first reason being that Spaulding’s scope of DSP is founded upon a definition of

inference that she herself has stipulated; as such, she can be accused of begging the question. Secondly, I draw on the research of Beccio et al. (2012) to show that there is evidence which calls into question Spaulding's assertion that M-intentions are the only kind of intentions that we are able to directly perceive. I then turn to the question of whether DSP can be rightly deemed a banal doctrine (section 5). I suggest that Spaulding's claim that DSP is banal because of its limited scope relies upon interpreting this scope within the traditional framework of social cognition that the phenomenological approach challenges. In response to Spaulding's claim that DSP is banal simply because it is compatible with TT, I suggest that such a claim fails to recognise the radicality of DSP in challenging the way that we approach social cognition and that DSP, arguably, has already changed the framework in which the social cognition debate takes place.

2. The social cognition debate

The social cognition debate¹ is concerned with the question of how it is that we understand other people. When we interact we do not approach the other as an inanimate object but as another subject with thoughts, emotions and beliefs. Social cognition seeks to explain how this social understanding and interaction comes about.

Traditionally, TT has featured as a major contender in the social cognition debate. According to TT, in order to attribute mental states to others we use a theory about the relationship between mental states, behaviour and the environment. Such a theory involves law-like generalisations from which we can infer mental states based upon our observation of the other's behaviour

¹ Questions about how we understand the mental states of others have traditionally been labelled as taking place within the 'Theory of Mind' debate. However, this phrase has been closely associated with a particular brand of Theory of Mind, namely TT. This has led some to adopt phraseology such as 'mindreading', 'mentalising' or 'social cognition', which they consider to be more neutral. In my view, 'mindreading' and 'mentalising' are still loaded terms as they contain an implicit assumption that understanding the mental states of others relies on our ability to gain or infer access to the internal, hidden mind of the other. As this is a premise that DSP wishes to challenge, I favour the term 'social cognition' and will use this in an attempt to set a more neutral framework for the discussion.

and environment (e.g. Gopnik & Wellman 1992; Segal 1996). While the theory can be applied to others explicitly (at the personal level), many proponents of TT claim that these inferences take place implicitly (at the sub-personal level).

Although addressing how we understand others from a phenomenological perspective is not a new approach, there has been a recent upsurge in phenomenological contributions to the social cognition debate (e.g. De Jaeger 2009; Gallagher 2008a, 2008b, 2012, 2015; León 2013; Ratcliffe 2007; Taipale 2015; Zahavi 2011, 2015). A central idea of these phenomenological contributions is that we are able to perceive some mental states directly and non-inferentially. To support this claim, an appeal is made to our everyday experiences of how we understand others. For instance, when I see someone's face contorted in anger it seems that I really am perceiving his anger; the bodily expression of anger is not just a clue for recognising the presence of another's anger but is itself part of that person's anger.

According to DSP, as we can directly perceive some mental states, in most face-to-face social situations we do not rely on a theory to understand others. Note should be taken of the word 'most'. It is recognised that sometimes others appear to be an enigma to us. It should also be emphasised that this article is focused upon social perception in face-to-face scenarios. With the advances in communicative technology, we increasingly interact with one another from a distance. In such scenarios it is anticipated that we may use other methods to understand people, such as theory or simulation. It is therefore important to stress that phenomenological accounts do not claim that directly perceiving the mental states of others is explanatorily exhaustive.

It should be emphasised that DSP is proposed as a component of a broader phenomenological approach to social cognition. Therefore, it should not be seen as an isolated claim but as embedded in a wider phenomenological assessment of social cognition. As Gallagher (2008b) summarises, the phenomenological alternative to social cognition challenges three pervasive assumptions that underlie TT, namely:

- i) the Cartesian supposition that behaviour is observable but mental states are hidden and inaccessible;
- ii) that in social cognition we assume the position of observer rather than being embedded in interaction with others; and

- iii) the notion that TT must lie at the foundation of our understanding of others, instead of seeing these as special (and perhaps even rarely used) skills.

To this list, I would suggest explicitly drawing out a fourth assumption that phenomenological approaches, such as those espoused by Gallagher (2015) and Ratcliffe (2007), also contest:

- iv) that the fundamental way that we understand others is through the ascription of propositional attitudes (e.g. beliefs and desires) to them.

In light of this, DSP should be considered as a component of a broader phenomenological proposal challenging the tradition framework in which we think about social cognition.

3. Spaulding's critique of DSP

Spaulding (in press, 2015) has written two recent papers that aim to assess the plausibility of DSP and its potential scope in the social cognition debate. She claims that DSP is a banal theory: far from being a radical challenge to TT, she asserts that it is in fact compatible with it, and limited in its scope. Below I set out a summary of her main claims in these papers.

3.1 *The problem of inference*

Spaulding claims that the debate in social cognition about whether any mental states can be seen directly and non-inferentially has turned on a mismatch in the use of the word inference. Those supporting inferential accounts of perceiving mental states (such as TT) use the word inference in a broad sense, one that defines inferences as including sub-personal computations. By contrast, those in the DSP camp tend to use the word inference in a narrow sense, one that defines inferences as being at the personal, conscious level (Spaulding 2015, 476). Indeed, Spaulding is not the only one to highlight that debates about social cognition often turn on inconsistent uses of the word inference (see also: Bohl 2015; Zahavi 2011, 2015).

As such, when debating whether mental states can be seen non-inferentially there is a great risk of TT and DSP proponents talking at cross-purposes. Based on this conclusion, Spaulding suggests that it would be more

fruitful for this debate about direct perception to move away from the “thorny issue of what an inference is” (2015, 476).

3.2 *Basic perceptual beliefs*

In order to move away from the ‘thorny issue’ of inference, Spaulding attempts to reframe DSP in terms of basic perceptual beliefs (BPBs). Using Lyons’ criteria, Spaulding states that in order for a perceptual belief to be a BPB it “must be produced by a cognitive system whose operations are automatic, not subject to voluntary control, not consciously accessible, and do not take beliefs as inputs” (2015, 479). The claim that we can directly perceive mental states can now be reformulated in the following way: when I perceive your face contort in a particular way I form a BPB based upon my perception which has content such as ‘you are happy’, ‘you are angry’, ‘you believe x’ (Spaulding 2015, 477). Spaulding sees this as a promising route for DSP as BPBs are deemed to be non-inferentially justified beliefs (i.e. they do not rely upon inferences from other beliefs).

If some of our perceptual beliefs about mental states qualify as BPBs, Spaulding thinks this will allow us to contend that we can perceive certain mental states without relying on inferences drawn from beliefs about the other’s behaviour or social context. Spaulding claims that this approach captures the “spirit of DSP” (2015, 477) as it presents a formulation of mental states that are perceptual, non-inferential and immediately accessible.

3.3 *Mental state candidates for DSP*

DSP proponents commonly argue that intentions and emotions are directly perceptible (e.g. De Jaeger 2009; Gallagher 2008a; Krueger and Overgaard 2012; Zahavi 2011). According to Spaulding, however, the only intentions that are plausible candidates for BPBs (and thus for DSP) are M-intentions. M-intentions are goal-directed movements towards objects in the world. The examples of M-intentions that Spaulding gives are of pulling, grasping, pushing, opening and closing (2015, 480). The observation of M-intentions involves the activation of the mirror neuron system in the observer’s brain (Gallese & Goldman 1998). This system operates at the sub-personal level and thus is not under the direct, voluntary control of the subject. This suggests that

the observation of M-intentions is not inferentially mediated and therefore falls under Spaulding's defined scope of DSP.

Spaulding dismisses perceptual beliefs about present intentions and future intentions as possible candidates for BPBs. This is based upon her claim that in order for an observer to form beliefs about another's present and future intentions, the observer must draw upon inferences from additional beliefs that they hold about what the other is doing and the social context that the other is in. As highlighted below, for Spaulding social context is something that can only be incorporated into our understanding of others through inference.

Spaulding thinks that beliefs about occurrent emotions can also qualify as BPBs. Occurrent emotions are defined as including affective responses (e.g. anger) and moods (e.g. anxiety). Spaulding sees these as good candidates for BPBs as they involve distinctive bodily expressions and one formulates the belief that one is seeing an occurrent emotion automatically, without conscious deliberation. Occurrent emotions are contrasted against dispositional emotions (e.g. envy), which are not necessarily accompanied by any distinctive bodily expressions, which an observer can perceive. Spaulding dismisses beliefs about dispositional emotions as candidates for BPBs on the basis that in order to form such beliefs an observer would need to draw inferences from other beliefs about the other's character, history or circumstance.

Other sorts of mental states are considered beyond the scope of DSP for related reasons. Beliefs, for example, are ruled out entirely for not being closely linked to particular behaviours. Spaulding asserts that since it is possible to hold a belief without acting upon it, there is nothing observable for another to form a BPB about.

Spaulding asserts that if the only mental states that can be directly perceived are M-intentions and occurrent emotions, this renders DSP a banal thesis. Our social cognition abilities go far beyond understanding M-intentions and occurrent emotions, so on Spaulding's account DSP has very limited application in the social cognition debate. Moreover, Spaulding accuses DSP of banality because she thinks that it does not pose a challenge to TT. In her view, TT can accept that M-intentions and occurrent emotions are directly perceivable without undermining their own theory of social cognition; the idea being that this uncontroversial claim can be accepted while still upholding that

social cognition predominantly involves attributing mental states to others through the use of a theory of mind (Spaulding in press). The threat is that Spaulding shows the scope of DSP, and the phenomenological proposal more generally, to be narrow to the point of insignificance; insignificant precisely because it asserts a position that is uncontroversial and compatible with the very theory it tries to contest.

In order to assess Spaulding's conclusion that DSP is a banal doctrine, we must look at the following questions:

- i) Does DSP only apply to M-intentions and occurrent emotions?
- ii) If so, does this mean that DSP is a banal thesis?

4. Are M-intentions and occurrent emotions the only possible candidates for DSP?

4.1 The problem of inference revisited

A key motivation for Spaulding reframing DSP in terms of BPBs is to avoid defining what an inference is. As we saw, Spaulding identifies a tendency amongst many writers in the social cognition debate of simply picking out their preferred interpretation of inference and claiming that it is *the* correct interpretation (2015, 476). She claims that this leads to a stalemate in the social cognition debate.

However, Spaulding explicitly states that Lyons' BPB criteria "[determine] when cognition is inferentially mediated" (in press, 23). Consequently, anything that falls outside the limited criteria for BPBs is ruled out by Spaulding as a candidate for DSP on the basis that it is inferentially mediated. Indeed, Spaulding seems to suggest that all complex processes involving conscious control or access are necessarily inferential.

In defining everything outside the narrow scope of BPB as inferentially mediated, Spaulding *sets out a definition of inference*. As she states herself: "to stipulate that one [definition of inference] is the appropriate conception would be begging the question" (2015, 476). It seems odd, then, that Spaulding sets herself up for being accused of question begging when she has anticipated this very problem. She has not pivoted away from the problem of inference so much

as walked straight back into this 'thorny issue'. Unsurprisingly, the DSP proponent will not simply accept Spaulding's definition of inference as indisputable; particularly as she is coming to the table with a very liberal definition.

By opting for a broad definition of inference, Spaulding expels all reference to social context by DSP. As a result of this expulsion, present intentions, future intentions, dispositional emotions and beliefs are eliminated from the scope of DSP. In doing this, Spaulding overlooks the fact that DSP is not proposed as an alternative to TT on its own but as part of a wider phenomenological project (something which Gallagher (2015) claims many critics of DSP overlook). As Zahavi points out: "few, if any, phenomenologists would deny that the social understanding in question is influenced and enriched by background knowledge, contextual clues and past experiences" (2011, 547). To try and extract DSP from social context is to miss the very 'spirit' of the phenomenological approach (which, incidentally, Spaulding claims to be upholding).

Spaulding describes social context as something that must be added to direct perception. To use her own example, Spaulding states that when I see you grabbing a piece of cake I cannot directly perceive whether your intention is to eat the cake or to give it to someone else. She claims that the only way for me to reach your present intention is to infer your intention from my beliefs about the social context you are in and what you are doing.

A consequence of deeming social context something that must be inferentially added to the situation, is that it gives the impression that social understanding happens in snapshot moments, rather than something that unfolds over time. The phenomenological approach seeks to challenge this seemingly disjointed picture of social cognition. For the phenomenologist, social context is not inferentially tacked on to our perception of others. Just as when we see an object we see it within the context of our perceptual field, when we see other people we do so within a specific situation. That this might be neurologically complex does not necessarily make it inferential. Perceiving objects involves complex neurological processes but we do not say we perceive objects inferentially. Therefore, saying that perception of social context is complex, as Spaulding implies, is not sufficient for concluding that it must be inferential (Zahavi 2011). While Spaulding criticises this move for only

amounting to a negative definition of inference, it certainly raises questions about whether Spaulding's very broad definition of inference is justified.

The reason that the phenomenological approach emphasises the role of social context as enriching our direct perception is to reflect our experience that people do not appear to us in a vacuum. For example, if I see you reaching out to grab a cake and I know that you are a waitress, I see your cake-grabbing in the meaningful context of you serving food. I do not need to inferentially contemplate the social context; the whole scene appears to me as meaningful precisely because of the context in which the actions occur.

It is arguable that even M-intentions only make sense if we recognise that they occur in context. I can only see you as grabbing something if there is a context in which there is something to grab; the context adds the specification of the action (Gallagher 2015). Perceiving M-intentions presupposes that there is something to be intentionally directed to. If there is no contextual understanding, it is difficult to explain how we can distinguish between a meaningful, intentional movement from a random movement (which research on M-intentions shows we do (Iocaboni et al. 2005)). If context non-inferentially plays a role in directly perceiving M-intentions, this leads one to ask if context might be non-inferentially involved in detection of other intentions and emotions.

If Spaulding is not justified in expelling social context from DSP, then additional mental states could be brought within the fold of DSP. As set out above, by allowing the cake grabbing situation to be informed by social context, it can be argued that the present intention of the waitress to serve the cake can be directly perceived. Thus it could be argued that the scope of DSP should be expanded to include, at the very least, some present intentions.

This stress upon social interaction and understanding being embedded in a wider context is at the heart of the phenomenological approach to social cognition. It opposes the descriptions found in traditional social cognition theories of social experience as something that is coldly observed on a moment-by-moment basis. In trying to demonstrate that DSP is compatible with TT by extracting it from social context, Spaulding risks presenting an account of DSP that is fundamentally *incompatible* with the phenomenological conception of social cognition. It may be the case that Spaulding is happy to accept that her

account is not palatable to phenomenologists. However, as stated above, Spaulding will still have to answer the challenge that she is question begging by stipulating that everything outside the scope of the BPB criteria is intentionally mediated.

4.2 M-intentions

There is an additional reason for challenging Spaulding's construal of DSP as limited to M-intentions and occurrent emotions. This challenge is found in recent research about visual kinematics. The research of Beccio et al. suggests that "[b]y simply observing others' movements, we might know what they have in mind to do" (Beccio et al. 2012, 4). This leads us to ask whether Spaulding is justified in asserting that we can only directly perceive M-intentions and not present intentions.

Let us consider what Spaulding grants when she claims that we can directly perceive M-intentions. When talking of M-intentions, the examples Spaulding gives are of grabbing, pushing, pulling, opening and closing. As such, the claim that M-intentions are the only intentions that we can directly perceive in action gives us a pretty sparse account of the scope of DSP.

However, research has suggested that the information conveyed by perceiving another person's actions is more far-reaching than Spaulding implies. The research of Beccio et al. (2012) provides evidence that our movements slightly differ depending on whether we are grabbing something in order to eat it, to serve it or to throw it and that we are able to perceive these differences. This research shows that we can differentiate between these intentions without relying upon contextual clues. This suggests that we can see many actions as meaning-laden without needing to appeal to anything beyond perception. As such, Beccio et al. claim that "motor information conveyed by visual kinematics may provide a direct access to others' intentions" (2012, 1).

The interesting implication here is that the line Spaulding draws between M-intentions and present intentions is blurred. The threat of Spaulding's account is that directly perceiving M-intentions can tell us the 'presence' of an intentional action but not the 'why' of the intentional action (e.g. that the other intends to reach for the cake but not why they reach for the cake). To get to the 'why' of an intentional action Spaulding claims that we

must make inferences from other beliefs that we hold and this exceeds her defined scope of DSP. However, if it is the case that I can see in someone's movements that they are not just grabbing cake but grabbing cake to serve it, this looks like I can see that person's present intention. As such Beccio et al.'s research calls into question the restriction of DSP's scope to M-intentions by Spaulding.

5. Is DSP a banal thesis?

As set out above, there are reasons to doubt Spaulding's conclusion that DSP only applies to M-intentions and occurrent emotions. Consequently, it seems that Spaulding's assertion that DSP is banal is, at least in part, based on an unjustified conclusion about the scope of DSP. Nevertheless, it is one thing to question Spaulding's manner of defining the scope of DSP and another to present a positive account of what the scope of DSP is. Indeed, it is difficult to see how Spaulding's call for DSP proponents to offer an explanation of how social context can be said to form part of our direct perception can be answered without another question-begging definition of inference being put forward. As such, I shall not attempt to formulate such a positive account here.

Rather, let us consider where DSP is left if Spaulding were right to conclude that the only candidates for DSP are M-intentions and occurrent emotions. In my view, the scope of DSP, as delimited by Spaulding, is only banal if you interpret this scope within the traditional framework of social cognition that the phenomenological approach challenges. What is more, I do not think that the potential compatibility of DSP with TT *per se* renders DSP banal. On the contrary, it is my view that the very idea that DSP can be considered a banal doctrine shows the impact the DSP thesis has already had on the way we currently approach the social cognition debate.

5.1 DSP in everyday encounters

Spaulding places stress on the argument that beliefs are not candidates for DSP; she sees this as a significant gap in the explanatory force of DSP. Indeed, if ascribing beliefs to other people is a prevalent way that we understand others in our everyday encounters and DSP cannot account for this, it might not seem a far stretch to conclude that DSP has a limited role to play in the social cognition debate and consequently be dubbed banal.

While some proponents of DSP argue that we can see beliefs (e.g. Gallagher & Hutto 2008), many do not. Does this amount to a concession to Spaulding's claim that DSP is banal? This would only be the case if you suppose that belief ascription is the most fundamental and common way in which we understand others (as this would imply that there are swaths of instances of understanding others in which DSP has no application). Yet, in emphasising that understanding others arises through interaction, the phenomenological approach challenges the supposition that belief ascription is at the heart of how we go about understanding people. As such, stating that we cannot directly perceive others' beliefs need not lead us to conclude that DSP is trivial in its application.

In many cases, belief ascription appears to be a detached and cognitively onerous way of understanding people. It seems odd to say that when I see you grab for a cake that I go through a process of ascribing beliefs to you about there being cake, it being edible etc. To use our earlier example, the fact that you are a waitress seems to be reason enough for me to understand that you intend to grab the cake to serve it. We might re-explain situations in terms of belief ascription but this does not seem to capture our situated experience of interacting with and understanding others.

Moreover, if one did need to rely on belief ascription it seems that we could get trapped in an infinite task. Ratcliffe summarises this dilemma as follows: "Trying to account for any action, whether one's own or someone else's, in terms of an exhaustive list of beliefs and desires would be a never-ending and futile task. Every belief listed would presuppose further beliefs. These would presuppose yet further beliefs and so forth" (2007, 99). The phenomenological approach avoids this problem by rejecting the notion that social cognition can only be accounted for in terms of propositional attitudes.

Additionally, it should be remembered that the claim of DSP is that *some* mental states can be directly perceived. DSP is not proposed as having exhaustive explanatory force and anticipates that other methods of understanding people (such as using a theory) are used. So, the assertion that at least in some circumstances we use a theory to ascribe beliefs to another person in order to understand them does not, in itself, refute DSP nor automatically render it banal.

If we recognise that the phenomenological approach rejects the prevalence of ascribing beliefs in social cognition, then perhaps the direct perception of M-intentions and occurrent emotions is not such a sparse account of how we understand people in everyday encounters. At the very least, before DSP is labelled banal, the assumption that belief ascription is an essential part of understanding others should be given fair consideration; to ignore this is to interpret DSP within the very framework that it attempts to challenge.

5.2 Challenging the framework

Even if we argue that DSP is not banal based upon its scope, Spaulding could respond that DSP still does not present a view that amounts to “a radical alternative to traditional views that it is meant to challenge” (in press, 25). Indeed, part of her argument about the banality of DSP rests on the idea that it is compatible with TT. The question to be considered, then, is whether the potential compatibility of DSP with TT *per se* renders DSP banal.

As Gallagher asserts, the claim that DSP and TT can be compatible at all might strike us as a “surprising turn” (2015, 453). Traditional TT accounts commonly describe mental states as being inaccessible, unobservable and hidden (e.g. Gopnik & Wellman 1992; Leslie 2004). Indeed, the supposed unobservability of mental states is often evoked as the motivation for claiming that we must employ a theory to understand the mental states of others. If TT is committed to the idea that mental states are unobservable, it seems strange to claim that TT could be compatible with any form of DSP (even Spaulding’s reformulation of it).

However, in more recent accounts of TT, proponents often do not defend a rigid idea of mental states as being essentially unobservable. For example, Carruthers (2015) claims that nothing about TT requires that mental states are always imperceptible (also see: Bohl 2015; Lavelle 2012, 2015). Spaulding’s claim that DSP is banal might be understood if we accept that modern theory-theorists are not necessarily opposed to the idea that some mental states are directly perceptible. For if DSP only applies to the perception of M-intentions and occurrent emotions and TT can accept this limited scope of direct perception, Spaulding thinks that DSP simply asserts something that is uncontroversial.

Nevertheless, it is important to consider *how* Spaulding seeks to make DSP compatible with TT. Her account of DSP is an attempt to delineate when it is we can be said to directly perceive the mental states of others. To create a DSP that is compatible with TT, Spaulding treats DSP as “merely a characterisation of perceptual phenomenology or phenomenal experience” (Gallagher 2015, 458); she sees DSP merely as a claim about perceptual experience. However, as I have attempted to make clear throughout this paper, DSP is not proposed as an alternative to traditional views in isolation but as part of a wider phenomenological conception of social cognition.

Spaulding’s version of DSP reveals an underlying commitment to the traditional way of viewing social cognition in the following ways: belief ascription is still cast as a principal way that we understand others, social context as the situation in which we encounter and understand others is not contemplated, the idea that we understand others through cold observation is prioritised over the idea that we understand others through active engagement, and TT continues to be viewed as the fundamental way in which we ascribe mental states to others. Since the phenomenological version of DSP rejects all these commitments, Spaulding’s account does not engage with the radicality at the heart of the phenomenological approach, which attempts to question the presuppositions inherent in the traditional framework of social cognition. Only by ignoring this radical element can one conclude that DSP is a banal doctrine (whatever its scope). As such, I suggest that DSP only appears banal in Spaulding’s assessment because she reformulates DSP in a banal form.

However, one might go even further than saying that Spaulding fails to demonstrate that DSP is a banal thesis because she fails to do justice to the DSP project. One could assert that the very idea that DSP can be seen as making a banal claim is evidence of the significant effect that DSP has already had on the way that we now frame the social cognition debate. Spaulding’s claim that TT need not necessarily deny that some mental states are directly perceptible may well be a reasonable one but we should not overlook that this marks a real change in the way that TT is formulated. This is an undeniably different position to earlier claims that mental states are inherently unobservable. I suggest that the intuitively persuasive notion that some mental states are directly perceptible, as espoused by DSP, may well be part of what has motivated this radical reworking of TT. It therefore seems disingenuous to

claim that DSP is a banal thesis if it has helped re-position the commonly accepted view about whether some mental states are directly perceptible.

What is more, in attempting to incorporate DSP, TT comes face to face with questions about what types of mental states might be deemed directly perceptible, how frequently mental states are directly perceptible and in what situations they are directly perceptible. Such questions are closely linked to the assumptions in traditional social cognition, which the phenomenological approach seeks to challenge; for example, about whether we understand people as observers or as embedded in situations, whether TT is the most fundamental and basic way that we understand people, whether we understand people by ascribing propositional attitudes to them or within interactive context. In trying to incorporate DSP, theory-theorists may well be forced to engage with these more radical questions or risk offering up a form of DSP that does not do justice to the phenomenological approach (as I claim Spaulding does). As Gallagher suggests, perhaps we should see DSP as a “Trojan horse” (2009, 547); if TT accepts even a minimal notion of DSP, it seems that questions that strike at the heart of how we understand social cognition could be unwittingly snuck in by the back door.

5. Conclusion

In this article, I have shown that Spaulding’s claim that DSP is a banal thesis can be challenged in several ways. First, by questioning her conclusion that the scope of DSP is restricted to M-intentions and occurrent emotions. This conclusion is founded upon a very liberal definition of inference, one that incorporates any reference to social context. To dismiss social context for being inferential without addressing notions of how we might be said to be embodied and embedded in situations amounts to a failure to engage with the proposals made by phenomenological accounts of social cognition. Moreover, using Spaulding’s own observations about the tendency of writers to opt for their own preferred definition of inference, she can be accused of begging the question by picking out her own preferred understanding of inference in reformulating DSP in terms of BPBs. In this way she stacks the cards against DSP from the outset. What is more, the research of Beccio et al. (2012) suggests that present intentions, as well as M-intentions, are directly perceptible in the

actions of other people. This provides additional cause for questioning whether DSP is limited in the way that Spaulding claims.

An alternative response to Spaulding does not involve rejecting her delineated scope of DSP but considering if such a scope would render DSP banal. As emphasised throughout this paper, DSP forms a component of a wider phenomenological approach to social cognition; an approach that challenges the framework of the debate. Considered from the phenomenological perspective of social cognition even Spaulding's restricted DSP is not banal. For if belief ascription is rejected as the dominant way that we understand others, the prevalence of DSP within day to day interactions comes to the fore. Spaulding may well reject this view of propositional attitude ascription. However, to deny DSP (and the phenomenological approach more generally) its radicality one must engage directly with the challenges that phenomenology poses to the traditional framework of social cognition. Spaulding has yet to do so.

Finally, I explored the idea that Spaulding might claim DSP is banal purely on the grounds that it is compatible with TT. In response to this accusation of banality, I suggested that Spaulding's own reformulation of DSP does not do justice to the radicality of the phenomenological approach; that DSP only appears banal to Spaulding because she interprets it in a banal manner. I have also claimed that the very idea that directly perceiving some mental states of others could be seen as uncontroversial betrays the radical impact that DSP has already had on the way in which we approach social cognition. This marks a significant shift in the debate about how we understand others and this should not be overlooked.

This does not mean that Spaulding's account is without merit. She effectively raises a number of questions challenging proponents of DSP to more exactly account for how we directly perceive mental states, delimit the scope of this and explain how it is social context enriches our perception. These are valid questions, which many claim have not been adequately addressed (e.g. Bohl 2015). However, I suggest that Spaulding's own attempt to answer these questions is unsatisfactory as it fails to do justice to the radicality of the phenomenological proposal.

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