

## A Humean Psychological Alternative to Kant and Wittgenstein

### Comments on Stueber's "Importance of Simulation for Understanding Linguistic and Rational Agency"

Joe Cruz  
Williams College

Let me begin by saying that I am sympathetic to the simulation theory, especially where it is conceived of as a crucial and central addition *alongside* the theory-theory as the explanation of our capacity to attribute mental states, rather than as an exclusive and exhaustive account by itself.<sup>1</sup> I part company with Professor Stueber, however, in that I view the recent simulation theory/theory-theory controversy as subject to resolution primarily through empirical findings. Still, it cannot be denied that Stueber has helped to crystallize elements of the simulation theory/theory-theory debate that have been lurking all along, and has illuminated an important avenue of inquiry into the status of simulation.

In Stueber's treatment, the capacity to simulate is implicated fundamentally in our understanding of rational agency itself and of linguistic behavior. The form of the argument in both cases is the same. In order to understand another agent as subject to the motivational force of reasons or as able to realize normative practices that allow rule-following, one must appeal to a first-person concept that allows these in oneself. Since we undeniably do understand rational

agency and the ability to follow a rule to others, it must be *through* our own first person concept and thus through a simulative capacity that can project us into the perspective of someone else.

After offering these arguments, Stueber makes room for elements of theory-theory by pointing out that cognitive extrapolation — i.e., our ability to make relevant changes in our psychology in order to explain agents quite different from us — requires us to invoke a theoretical apparatus regarding the dynamics of mental states. In my view, there is much that is compelling in this last discussion and I want to heartily endorse it, though, regrettably, only in passing due to the limited time for my comments. In my remarks below, I concentrate on Stueber's treatment of rational agency and linguistic understanding.

## 1. Rational Agency

Stueber first argues that simulation is crucial for making intelligible the possibility of thoughts having rational force for an agent. In the first person case, an irreducibly indexical concept is a precondition for thoughts having motivational force because the motivational force must impinge on a unified consciousness. In Stueber's example, the recognized unity of one's thoughts allows one to be moved by instances of epistemic incoherence. Without the indexical concept, there would be no bounded realm of thoughts that would be judged as incoherent and as in need of revision in light of epistemic tension.

---

<sup>1</sup> In Goldman's hands (1989), for instance, simulation has never been conceived of as a complete replacement for theorizing.

Understanding rational agency from the third person perspective cannot, of course, involve an appeal to another person's indexical concept in a way that maintains the indexicality of that concept. Without the indexical concept, however, it looks as if we cannot make sense of rational agency from the third person perspective. The reason we need to understand someone as using an indexical concept is that *they* could not be rationally responsive to thoughts without having an indexical concept of their own, just as we could not respond to reasons without a concept that unifies our psyche in a way that allows us to see that it is me that needs to respond to a reason. This is where Stueber advances a simulationist proposal. We understand the rational force of reasons for another person by taking her reasons and — via simulation — having them impact against our own psyche through our own indexical concept. It is through this exercise that we render intelligible how reasons could be motivational for her.

I have two concerns about this proposal. The first has to do with the view of rational agency that it presupposes. The framework that Stueber is working in is explicitly Kantian. That is, reasons have normative motivational force in virtue of being recognized as reasons by the agent, rather than in virtue of, say, some merely causal property possessed by the putative reason. So it looks as if we would have to accept an extremely partisan conception of reason in order to be swayed by Stueber's arguments. The state of the practical reason literature on this topic is vexed, to say the least.<sup>2</sup> It may be — and it would be a powerful revelation if Stueber's arguments

---

<sup>2</sup> The specific case that Stueber focuses on involves theoretical reason (namely, epistemic incoherence), but I presume that that is incidental. Simulation is not to be restricted to theoretical reason; indeed, the literature on the simulation

revealed it — that a Humean picture is at the bottom of the theory-theory perspective, or lurking within more empirically oriented versions of the simulation theory.

I cannot hope to even begin to do justice here to Kantian versus Humean accounts of reason, but a few remarks are in order. Let us compare Stueber's view with a more austere framework that treats reasons causally. This picture would have it that it is a mistake to think that agents are ever guided by reasons in the sense of crafting their thoughts in light of an apprehension of the rational force of reasons. Instead, on the austere picture, the idiom of reasons is an after-the-fact reconstruction of the underlying causal dynamic. This reconstruction allows for prediction and explanation.<sup>3</sup>

No doubt there are many puzzling things about this Humean account, and there has been no shortage of criticism of it in the recent literature. Following Nagel and Korsgaard, for instance, we might note that a person could be causally motivated in all kinds of bizarre ways that would not respect the dictates of reason. Indeed, even if the way someone is motivated is not bizarre where bizarre means that her thoughts are conceptually unconnected, she might still fail to recognize the normative force of her reasons. We might conclude from that that mere causal motivation — even

---

theory seems as eager to advance it as an account of the attribution of mental states involved in practical deliberation as in theoretical deliberation. Moreover, at least some people writing in the practical reason literature maintain that the same issues arise in the theoretical reason case. This is what allows for companions in guilt arguments found in the practical reason literature (Hampton, 1998).

<sup>3</sup> As Korsgaard puts it, "...it looks as if all Hume can say is that the person is in fact caused to act by the recognition that an action will promote her end. And all that in turn means is that observers who know what the person's ends are may predict that certain conduct will follow. The person herself...is not guided by any dictate of reason. This suggests that Hume's view is that there is no such thing as practical reason at all" (1998, p. 222).

through conceptually connected thoughts — is not enough, and that what is required is the additional motivational force of a reason that is recognized as such. Again, in Stueber's view, this is just the sort of force that can only obtain when an agent has an indexical concept because the thought must have rational force for *someone*. But why should the Humean accept that there is an additional personal-level realm where the agent must recognize the force of her reasons? It seems that psychology gets by without such an extra element by restricting its attribution of reasons to the third person perspective in a way that, on the surface at least, is compatible with a Humean view.

What, then, should we make of the argument that, in order to have motivational force, a reason must impinge on a unified consciousness that in turn requires an indexical concept? The Humean can argue that this account is fundamentally misguided in treating reasons as entities that agents are responsive to. Humeans might claim instead that reasons interact with subpersonal causal mechanisms. These mechanisms will not require the indexical concept because the motivational force of reasons is not in light of an agent's specific deliberation. Naturally, the Humean would have to say something about what is going on during those occasions where we seem to explicitly deliberate. Presumably those second order mental operations would face the same deflationist treatment as the underlying first order operations. If anything like this account is a live option, Stueber would evidently have to take up the non-trivial task of persuading us of its failure in order to motivate his account of the role of simulation in understanding rational agency.

I said that I have two worries about Stueber's claim with respect to the rational agency. The second is more direct. Even if the Kantian framework is ultimately vindicated, it is not clear how

the motivational force of thoughts is retained when we move the rational force to the person that we are trying to simulate. In his short piece Stueber was not able to fully elaborate how he views the mechanism of simulation as it is applied to understanding rational agency itself. Still, we might ask, what happens when we attempt to relocate rational agency in someone else at the end of the episode of simulation? There would seem to be some danger that responsiveness to reasons will become completely mysterious when the indexical concept is eliminated during the attribution of rational agency to someone else. Another way to put this is, why isn't it the case that we think to ourselves, *I can see how those thoughts would be rationally motivating for me since I am a unified self, but I can't understand how it could be for her, because I don't have her indexical concept?* Stueber claims that it is "...only in the context of simulating the other person's thoughts and recognizing these thoughts as one's own [that we can] grasp the rational efficacy of thoughts" (p. 5). But this gloss is incomplete. We must go on to grasp the rational efficacy of thoughts *in someone else* if this is to be an account of our understanding of rational agency in general.

Unfortunately, it looks like a dilemma is lurking. Either we understand rational agency by appreciating the motivational force of a reason as it impinges on our indexical concept and thereby motivates us, or we take a step away from the motivational force in order to make sense of how the reason can be motivational for another person, which would seem to be stepping away from the indexical concept in a way that takes away any role it might play.

I turn now to a briefer thought on linguistic agency.

## 2. Linguistic Agency

At the heart of Stueber's argument for the importance of simulation for understanding intersubjective linguistic agency is the claim that we need to simulate in order to understand how someone else can come to follow a normative linguistic rule. The idea is that I can use my own know-how (viz., my practical ability) as a model of how someone else might have the practical know-how in following a rule. Along the way, Stueber rejects Kripke's skeptical solution to the problem of rule-following by pointing out that it makes unavailable any psychologically plausible story about how language users acquired enough language to engineer agreements about rules (p. 7).

Stueber's intriguing proposal is easier to make sense of in this case than in the rational agency case, above. That is because the practical capacity for following a rule is not essentially tied to oneself. Once the capacity in oneself is used as a model for the capacity in another person through simulation, there is no barrier to attributing that capacity to another person by detaching oneself from the version that one finds in oneself. The practical capacity is, we might say, agent-neutral in a way that the indexical concept decidedly is not.

It looks, though, as if this agent neutrality inherits the liability (for Stueber's case) of making it questionable whether simulation is necessary here. Why couldn't a theory-theorist claim that the practical capacity to follow a rule could be derived from dispositions as they are identified from a third person perspective? After all, if such capacities do not entail an essentially indexical concept, there would seem to be nothing to prevent its postulation from the third person

perspective. My sense is that Stueber is motivated to resist this view because, following Wittgenstein, he maintains that this practical capacity “cannot be explicated in a theoretical manner” (p. 8). This seems to involve an equivocation on ‘theoretical’. Wittgenstein may be right to maintain that the practical rule following ability cannot be further analyzed into dispositions or propositional relations operating in the rule following agent, but that is not the same as claiming that the practical capacity cannot be identified from a third person theoretical perspective. In my view, the theory-theorist only needs to claim that she has a theoretical framework that characterizes the relations between mental states, where some mental states may be related as a matter of unanalyzable practical capacity. This will not commit her to saying that the capacity itself should be further decomposed theoretically, and it is this latter thesis that I take Wittgenstein to be rejecting.

## References

Goldman, Alvin (1989). Interpretation Psychologized. *Mind and Language*, 4(3), 104-119.

Hampton, Jean (1998). *The Authority of Reason*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP.

Korsgaard, Christine (1997). The Normativity of Instrumental Reason. In *Ethics and Practical Reason*, Cullity, G. and Gaut, B., eds. New York: Oxford UP.

Nagel, Thomas (1970). *The Possibility of Altruism*. Princeton: Princeton UP.