

Open Minds

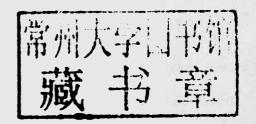
The Social Making of Agency and Intentionality

Wolfgang Prinz

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Open Minds

"As sombras da alma" ["The Shadows of the Soul"]

The stories others tell about you and the stories you tell about yourself: which ones come closer to the truth? . . .

But, actually, that is not the question on my mind.

The true question is:

In such stories—

is there, as a matter of fact, a difference between true and false? . . .

Is the soul a place of facts?

Or are the alleged facts only the deceptive shadows of our stories?

-Pascal Mercier

Preface

A book like this is always a collective endeavor. Collective action pertains to both intellectual foundations and practical realization. As regards intellectual foundations, the ideas laid out here have emerged over the past two decades from numerous discussions with scientists from various branches of cognitive science. Their ideas have helped me tremendously to shape my own views. Yet, while I am extremely grateful to all of them, I have decided to refrain from naming them here. Since a good deal of these discussions have actually yielded contrast rather than assimilation between their ideas and my views, I thought it would be both unfair and unwise to mention their names in connection with ideas that they may find strange or even somewhat absurd. There is one exception, though—one of the rare cases of assimilation. I would like to thank Pascal Mercier for allowing me to use a congenial passage from one of his novels as epigraph and helping with its translation.

As concerns practical realization, the work on the manuscript has extended over more than a decade. While it has been a painfully slow process for me, it must have been a painfully chaotic and patience-demanding process for all of those who supported me during that time. I am extremely grateful for their never-ending patience with my reiterative attempts at clarifying thoughts and shaping words accordingly. Angelika Gilbers, Heide John, Assja Metzger, and Claudia Pethke started working on the manuscript in my former Munich office, supported by Monika Nisslein, who coordinated their work. Later, Susanne Starke, Stefan Liebig, and Marion Schmidt took over in my Leipzig office and helped complete the project. I am deeply indebted to all of them for their friendly support and enduring patience. Special thanks go to Susanne Starke, Janette Studniczka, and Rosie Wallis for putting it all together in the end.

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Last, but not least, I would like to thank Philip Laughlin and Judy Feldmann at the MIT Press for their constructive support. Without Phil's enthusiasm for the project and Judy's careful and sensitive editing, the book would not be what it is now.

Leipzig, July 2011

Prologue

The nature of all other beings is limited and constrained within the bounds of laws prescribed by Us.

Thou, constrained by no limits, in accordance with thine own free will, in whose hand We have placed thee, shalt ordain for thyself the limits of thy nature.

We have made thee neither of heaven nor of earth, neither mortal nor immortal, so that with freedom of choice and with honor, as though the maker and molder of thyself, thou mayest fashion thyself in whatever shape thou shalt prefer.

—Giovanni Pico della Mirandola¹

Autonomy from Heaven

In 1486, in the heyday of Renaissance humanism in Northern Italy, the Tuscan nobleman Giovanni Pico della Mirandola delivered to the Florentine intellectual elite an oration entitled "On the Dignity of Man." This oration was to become a manifesto of humanism—a programmatic document of a novel understanding of man's place in the world, remapping the human landscape to focus all attention on human talent and capacities and the human perspective. At the heart of the novel understanding lies the idea that man is not only God's creature but his own creator as well. God, after creating man in His own image and shaping him after His likeness, grants man creatorship to make and mold himself and freedom of choice to fashion himself in whatever shape he may prefer.

Rhetorically, Pico della Mirandola lets God speak to Adam, explaining to him that He has endowed him with the capacity to create himself and

^{1.} Pico della Mirandola (1486/1948), pp. 3-4.

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determine his own nature ("... shalt ordain for thyself the limits of thy nature"). God's speech puts Adam into the role of an artist or engineer who invents and creates himself—in fact, a godlike role, as the same text addresses God as the supreme architect and craftsman of the world. Accordingly, since man is now endowed with the ability to fashion himself, facts about man's nature must, to a large extent, be facts about artifacts created by himself.

Today, more than 500 years later, we find Pico's message broadly received and widely implemented in various domains of life and branches of scholarship such as the arts, literature, politics, economics, and law. Modern theory and practice in these domains is very much grounded in the notion that human beings are autonomous agents, who are, at least to some extent, capable of inventing and creating themselves and designing their lives. Western, post-enlightenment modernity assumes that humans have the right and the necessary talent to determine their own way of life. We attribute such rights and talent not only to individuals but also to collectives such as families, tribes, cultures, and states. Yet, Pico's claim suggests that humanity's self-determination goes deeper than just scratching the surface of our way of life. It seems to posit that we humans can even self-create the talents and capacities through which we make and mold our way of life.

In a nutshell, Pico's account of human autonomy is as simple as it is radical: God gives man autonomy as a gift, and man, who is furnished with all the necessary talents for making use of that gift, thankfully accepts it and happily enjoys it.

Deterministic Science

On the one hand, the idea of human autonomy has been widely received and implemented in various branches of modern life and associated practices and discourses; however, on the other hand, it is fair to say that scientists concerned with the study of the mind and its workings have always been skeptical of the message of Pico's manifesto and have remained more or less immune to its constructivist spirit. Science has a hard time accommodating the notion that humans are capable of creating and designing their own minds and fashioning the way they themselves work. A famous pamphlet by the behaviorist B. F. Skinner, which also deals with man's freedom and dignity, may be considered a modern scientific counterpart to Pico's manifesto. For Skinner, the notion of autonomous man is, in scientific terms, useless and misleading. Autonomous man is for him "a

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center from which behavior emanates. He initiates, originates, and creates, and in doing so he remains, as he was for the Greeks, divine. We say that he is autonomous—and, so far as a science of behavior is concerned, that means miraculous."²

Rather than believing in humans as makers and molders of their own minds—as Pico suggests—cognitive and behavioral scientists believe that the workings of human minds are determined by the natural history of their makeup and the cultural and individual history in which they are formed. A deterministic blueprint like this is implicitly inherent in all branches of these sciences. On this view, the human mind is made and shaped by nature and culture, with no room left for invention and creation through the mind's owner him- or herself. This view is obviously not compatible with the constructivist flavor of Pico's idea of man as his own architect. From a scientific point of view, Pico's claim may even sound a bit paradoxical: How could it be possible that a thing like the mind creates itself? Doesn't such self-creation presuppose what it is meant to explain?

The ideas laid out in this book aim to make hard-nosed cognitive science more open to the constructivist spirit embodied in Pico's ideas. I am not going to offer a full-fledged theory of the mind, cutting across various domains of mental functioning. Rather, I will concentrate on an outline for a theory of human agency and subjectivity—certainly, as core features of human mentality, these are the hallmarks of the human mind. How do agency and subjectivity arise in human minds? How does a mental self emerge and what may it be good for? And how is conscious experience related to the sense of self?

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These are the questions that I will address below. The answers I will offer follow a twofold commitment: to develop a *constructivist approach* within a *representational framework*.

As concerns constructivism, I follow the spirit of Pico's manifesto, though I deviate from its inspiration in one crucial respect. The spirit in which the manifesto is written suggests that the creation and invention of human selves is a matter of individual geniuses who design and fashion their lives and their minds as they choose. In that regard it follows the lead of the Renaissance understanding of architects, engineers, and artists, who were seen as the individual bearers of outstanding talents. By contrast,

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the approach I am going to develop here holds that individuals can only create and invent themselves in and through interaction and communication with others. Accordingly, rather than working as closed, individual systems, their minds need to operate in ways that are fundamentally open to other minds. The "open minds" perspective holds that the role Pico attributed to individual geniuses is in fact played by collectives of individuals—by collectives of architects, engineers, and artists, who design and fashion their minds in and through mutual interaction.

As concerns representationalism, I start from a conventional framework as it is widely used in cognitive science. This framework sees the mind's proper function in representing and controlling selected features of the environment. The mechanisms subserving these functions can be studied in both behavioral performance and mental experience. According to this framework, nature has created minds for representing and controlling events in the environment. In terms of ultimate function, action is for control and representation is for action.

To fulfill these functions, animals require tools for representation and control. For most animals, how these tools work is not a target of representation and control itself. I will claim, however, that social animals like humans are an exception in this regard. They depend on not just representing and controlling their environment, but also representing and controlling the operation of the tools through which they represent and control their environment. In humans, I submit, such representation and control of tools for representation and control is first perceived and understood to be operating in others and only then becomes applied to one's self.

This is the path I shall follow in building a constructivist approach into a representational framework of the mind. As we will see, this path will lead us to two fundamental issues, both of which are addressed in the short passage from Pascal Mercier's *Night Train to Lisbon* that I have chosen as epigraph.³ One pertains to the sources from which the construction of agency and subjectivity actually emerges. How is it that people acquire beliefs about their minds? How is public communication related to private experience? "The stories others tell about you and the stories you tell about yourself: which come closer to the truth?" What roles are, in other words, being played by third-person and first-person accounts?

3. The epigraph is taken from Mercier (2008, p. 142, with slight changes of translation suggested and authorized by Pascal Mercier). In Mercier's novel that passage serves a quasi-epigraphic function, too. It is quoted from notes and reflections left behind by a Lusitan nobleman, physician, and philosopher who lived and died in the first half of the twentieth century.

The other issue pertains to the reality and efficacy of social constructions about the mind. How real are people's beliefs about the workings of their minds? Are such beliefs fact or fiction? Do they provide true stories of their workings, or must we consider them fictitious, perhaps even illusory cover stories that mask the true ones? "Is the soul a place of facts? Or are the alleged facts only the deceptive shadows of our stories?" Finally, and most importantly, can beliefs be efficacious in the sense that people's beliefs about the workings of their minds have an impact on the way their minds actually work?

This latter question is crucial to the enterprise of merging constructivism with representationalism. The answer I am going to propose is therefore key to the message I would like to convey. Our beliefs about minds, I will argue, are in fact not just beliefs about how our minds work, but also powerful tools for making them work as we believe. It is through our belief that our minds work in a particular way that we actually make them work that way.

This proposal may be seen to suggest a third answer to the epigraph's second question. Couched in its metaphorical language, the third answer claims that the stories people tell about others and themselves should be regarded as neither fact nor fiction about their souls but as tools for making and shaping them accordingly.

This claim suggests that beliefs may become real. A claim like this sounds like magic, and magic is hard to sell in science. However, as will become apparent below, that claim is nothing but an emergent property of the constructivist extension of representationalism that I am going to develop. As I will show, this notion may help to reconcile the bold claims of Pico della Mirandola's manifesto with the working principles of cognitive science. In fact, I believe that wedding the two to each other will rescue each of them. Constructivism can only survive if representationalism provides functional architectures that instantiate abstract theoretical principles in concrete processing mechanisms. Conversely, representationalism can only survive if constructivism provides theoretical principles that explain how mental representation can give rise to mental experience.

Overview

My argument comes in four parts. Part I is broad and introductory, offering a discussion of major views on the human mind and major approaches to its study. The chapters of this part aim at laying the ground for the open minds approach to human volition and cognition as it is outlined in Parts

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III and IV. Before we get there, Part II takes another preparatory step toward this goal. Here I examine mirror systems and mirror games, that is, particular kinds of representational mechanisms and associated behavioral games and social practices. Mirror systems and games, I propose, provide tools for aligning individual minds and molding one's own after other minds. In this way they offer unique and unprecedented tools for building open minds.

Parts III and IV then address the social construction of architectures for volition and cognition. Part III traces the formation of an architecture for volition, addressing issues of agency and intention-based top-down control. Agency and intention, I contend, are initially perceived and understood to be operating in others, and it is only through practices of social mirroring that individuals come to apply these notions to themselves and to implement related control mechanisms for their own actions. Part IV sketches how the same basic ideas can be applied to an architecture for cognition, addressing issues of subjectivity and intentionality. My main focus here is on how social mirroring can help with building architectures for mental experience from preexisting architectures for behavioral performance. A side focus is on the contributions of language use to social knowledge dissemination and control.

Minds are thus open in two senses: One is that they are made and molded in and through the mirror of others, thus designing themselves after others. The other is that they are open and highly susceptible to any knowledge they may attain concerning others' acting, thinking, and knowing.

Can open minds be autonomous? I return to this question in the epilogue, this time going back to the Bible's tale of the Garden of Eden.

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