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Networks of Meaning and Interpretation: The Cultural Origins of Symbolisation

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I'd like to begin by correcting a slight error on my part. The overview for this paper incorrectly claims that interpretation is a purely linguistic skill. If that were the case, then language would be impossible because we would be incapable of interpreting any of the nonverbal gestures and communicative techniques that necessarily precede language. Instead what I intend to discuss is expressed much more clearly in the abstract.

Despite the fact that we commonly refer to artworks as “meaningful” things, this is not to say that meaning is an objective property analogous to size or shape. If meaning is not a physical property then it follows that it can only be a way of using things, of treating them as if they were imbued with features that they do not actually possess. Meaning is thus an attribution in which we agree through social consensus to use objects as tokens of power, prestige, celebration, explanation, instruction and so on. I argue that such symbolic procedures originate in practices of tool-use in which tools are commonly employed in various different ways depending on context and opportunity.

The purpose of this paper is to show that the ability to interpret artworks and more generally to ascribe meanings is a highly sophisticated cultural capacity and, more specifically, a verbal skill dependent upon a network of symbolic resources and techniques that only a socially evolved linguistic culture can provide and enable.

So my principal focus will be on our skills of ascription, attribution and predication and the extent to which these symbolising practices are central to the interpretation of meanings and intentions (including the ascription of psychological attributes to individuals based upon the interpretation of their actions). It is my view that these skills have their ancestral origins in longstanding social practices of exchange and tool-use in which objects are imbued with functions and values which transform their identity but leave their causal properties untouched.

There is considerable debate within current ethological research regarding the capacity of nonverbal animals to interpret intentions: to have a Theory of Mind. The evidence so far gathered is insufficiently conclusive but what is clear is that the

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capacity to interpret intentions requires the ability to respond to the perceptible behaviour of another creature *as if* it symbolised, indicated or referred to a disposition, attribute or propensity on the part of the individual concerned. This is a skill that improves with practice, and the interpretation of artworks and other artifacts of culture — narratives in particular — is one of the ways in which we humans develop and refine this skill.

Artworks are a means both of showing and of telling. My aim is to explain how in every instance of telling, an artwork is treated as a symbolic entity situated within a wider system of socially negotiated references, codes and concepts. This is not to say that language is our only means of intelligently negotiating the world. But it is to say that the symbolic system of representation, of which language is almost entirely comprised, is the very same system by which we take any object or artwork to mean whatever we take it to mean.

Why is this important? There are two reasons. The first is a point of clarity because it may not be immediately obvious that artworks mean what they mean by precisely the same strategy of representation as language.

Secondly, important insights emerge as a consequence of clearly distinguishing between the purely verbal strategies of representation of language and the purely nonverbal strategies of representation that allow us to show but not to tell and to interpret what things are of, from and for but not what they are about.

Ultimately though, this paper is concerned with the evolutionary emergence of the practice of symbolisation as a communicative tool. It is my speculative contention that without such practices, the capacity to interpret the intentions of others — the capacity to ascribe psychological predicates to them — would be impossible.

So, what is it to symbolise something?

Symbols are a type of representational stand-in. They employ a form of substitution in which we use one thing to represent another, even though the two things concerned need have nothing in common. I can use anything to symbolise anything else, so long as the people with whom I am communicating know the substitutive rule I am using. It is for this reason that all symbolic systems are reliant upon rules. Without rules for their use, objects and behaviours are simply whatever they are; they are merely bundles of properties.

At the Olympic Games, sportswomen and sportsmen represent their countries of origin. Likewise, the medals they accumulate represent their sporting accomplishments. It may not be obvious, but the word "medal" stands in relation to the disk of gold, silver or bronze in precisely the same way that the medal stands in relation to the concepts of attainment, achievement and success. Likewise, when we attribute meanings to works of art, we draw upon socially negotiated conventions of signification.

It is important to note that meaning is always an attribution and never an attribute of

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things. A meaningful silence is not a silence capable of being emptied. Nor is a meaningful absence an absence with additional ingredients.

Things are meaningful not because they have special characteristics or attributes but because we do. The capacity to ascribe meaning to things is a sophisticated skill that must be learned through discursive interaction and the acquisition of techniques and conventions that have been accumulated over millennia and that continue to develop and change. To "read" an object or artwork — to be capable of articulating what it might mean — is to have something to say about it: something to tell.

In the same way that meaning is only ever ascribed to objects and states of affairs, psychological attributes like believing, thinking and intending can only be intelligibly attributed to perceivers. When we say such things as "The sign says that the speed limit is 30mph." we do not mean to suggest that the sign intends its message. Signs are intended but they do not have intentions. Likewise, we do not suppose that the bullet, or the gun that propelled it, is responsible for the shot fired. Intention is not a measurable property of things or agents – it can only be inferred on the basis of the behavior of perceivers (including any representations they may produce). This is why the question of intention is such a vexed and much disputed issue in the arts, as well as in numerous other fields of human interest (law being an obvious example).

The Interpretation of Objects

In his 1985 essay "On the Interpretation of Prehistoric Rock Art" , Australian art theorist Donald Brook poses an interpretative problem that can be put in the following way: there are two stick figures on a cave wall. One is bigger than the other. For the people who did this, do these figures match a little person and a big person? Do they symbolise an important person and an unimportant person? Or do they simulate two people of the same size situated at different distances from their notional perceiver? Brook writes:

The dismal fact is that we cannot interpret representations from any "first principles," abstracted totally from the cultural context of origin, in order to infer what that cultural context must have been. The best we can do, most cautiously, is to use them in conjunction with some more or less hazardous pure hypotheses about the general tendencies of human beings and the specific nature of the society we are interpreting. (1985)

Brook's point is worth further consideration. Imagine that we gave a hammer to someone who had never seen one before. It seems very likely that they would quickly determine that the hammer is good for pounding things. Now imagine how this same hammer might be interpreted by a non-human creature with the equivalent of human intelligence and a completely different morphology — the shape of a horse for example. Without some idea of the creatures for which hammers are made or the kinds of activities to which our tools are put, the hammer would present an impossible interpretive puzzle, unsolvable even by the kinds of "ready-to-hand" manipulation discussed by Heidegger (1962). For Heidegger, a tool like a hammer

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"has a usability that belongs to it essentially", a "'towards-which' for which it is usable." In Heidegger's view, tools are best understood through use — through being "ready-to-hand". Artist and Heidegger scholar, Barbara Bolt (2006) puts it like this:

The kind of being that a tool or material possesses comes to light in the context of handability (sic). I can look at pots of different coloured paints, a camera or a computer screen and take pleasure in contemplating them, but it is only in use that they begin to reveal their potential. I can lay out my brushes and set a fresh canvas before me, but until I actually begin to work with them in making a painting I can not understand their being.

In the context of human practices — of tool use and manipulation in particular — it is true that hammers are ready-to-hand in ways that make them extremely well suited for the tasks to which we put them, but I hope the example of the intelligent non-human creature makes it clear that the notion of a "towards-which" that "belongs to [the hammer] essentially" is not necessarily the case. In fact, a hammer is only a hammer by virtue of the specific human techniques that instantiate its hammer-hood. Without these embodied procedures, the hammer might be used in innumerable other ways but in each case its identity would be significantly shaped by its integration within what Wittgenstein called a "form of life". By this I do not simply mean a culture, I mean a broader conception of the full gamut of biological and morphological features, strengths and weaknesses which typify our species as a form of life.

It should be clear then that our interpretations of the world are significantly influenced not only by our culturally and genetically acquired skills but also by our biological strengths and weaknesses. If our sensory capacities were infallible, then no single object would ever be mistaken for another and the whole extraordinary spectacle of nonverbal representations, for example, would be impossible.

In his book "The Limits of Interpretation," Umberto Eco writes: "But I confess that it is frequently very hard to distinguish between use and interpretation."

Eco opens up what I think is a significant insight here. To interpret something as having a use is not exactly a symbolic act, but it is what we might call a proto-symbolic act. This is to say that to interpret an object as having a dual identity is a crucial step towards a very particular form of symbolisation that we might call "artifactual symbolisation." Simple forms of behavioural symbolisation are very widely observed in nature but the production of symbolic artefacts — of meaningful tokens and tools — that are valued by other members of the species is unheard of outside human culture.

In a 2010 paper, on the co-evolution of tools and minds, Ben Jeffares writes:

"Tools start to play a role in the world of hominin that is ubiquitous in modern environments. Cultural products – tools – signal, buffer, and become available as means to reading the capacities of others. In a community of individuals

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such as the Erectines, who were without full language faculties, tools become important communication devices.”

Dennis Dutton's recent work on the evolutionary emergence of our concept of beauty corroborates this view. For Dutton our predilection for certain kinds of objects and material forms has a significant evolutionary basis in our long history of tool use. Speaking of the stone tools that our ancestors were already crafting 2.5 million years ago, he states:

Hand axes mark an evolutionary advance in human history -- tools fashioned to function as what Darwinians call "fitness signals" -- that is to say, displays that are performances like the peacock's tail, except that, unlike hair and feathers, the hand axes are consciously cleverly crafted. Competently made hand axes indicated desirable personal qualities -- intelligence, fine motor control, planning ability, conscientiousness and sometimes access to rare materials. Over tens of thousands of generations, such skills increased the status of those who displayed them and gained a reproductive advantage over the less capable.

So in conclusion, if my characterisation of the basic procedure of symbolic representation is correct, then the capacity to ascribe meanings to objects or intentions to agents are skills that require the ability to interpret objects and actions symbolically.

The purpose of this paper has been to show that interpretation falls into two quite different categories. Interpreting the meaning of things is a skill that we learn as soon as we begin to name things but the capacity to ascribe psychological predicates to agents is a much more sophisticated skill. One of the most common ways that we are introduced to such skills is obviously through narrative description as children. Narratives introduce us to the rudiments of logic as these are inscribed into our primary system of communication. But narratives also enable us to speculate and to reason about the intentions of others. In order to achieve such sophisticated inferential techniques, we already need to be competent not only in the skill of symbol attribution but in the more sophisticated procedures of symbol manipulation. It has been my aim in the preceding discussion to show why I believe that the manipulation of symbols has been significantly assisted by our ancestral history as tool users and as producers and users of symbolic objects.

The purpose of this paper has been to show that interpretation falls into three distinct categories. Using objects for. Retain purposes can be regarded as a basic form of symbolisation from which the capacity to ascribe meanings and psychological attributes derives.

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