In the last decade or so, interdisciplinary research on the nature of social cognition has made enormous progress. New developments in developmental psychology and cognitive neuroscience and ethology have had (and still have) a huge impact on philosophical work done in this area. The debates on how we understand other minds are no longer dominated by the choice between theory-theory (TT) and simulation theory (ST). Practically no one still defends either of these theories in its pure form; instead, more complex hybrid accounts have been put forward. But in addition, new alternatives have been developed (by Shaun Gallagher for example) in the course of a larger paradigm shift in the cognitive sciences. The computation-based cognitivist and representationalist framework is currently being replaced (or at least complemented) by an embodied, embedded and enactive cognitive science emphasizing that a full understanding of the workings of our mind needs to go beyond the investigation of computational brain processes and take into account the body and environment of the cognizing organism, in particular its interaction with other organisms/people.

Hutto belongs to this recent movement and emphasizes that “our primary modes of interpersonal engagement … are characterized by the possession of embodied expectations” (3). In line with the enactive approach to cognition, he holds that in most ordinary encounters we can rely on a “wealth of telltale cues, expressions, and responses of a more embodied variety” (12). Therefore, folk-psychology, understood as “the practice of predicting, explaining, and explicated intentional actions by appeal to reasons” (2), covers only a (small) part of our social cognitive capacities. The most basic intersubjective engagements depend on a biologically based perceptual sensitivity to certain informational cues. On top of that a more sophisticated folk-psychological understanding may (but need not) be acquired by “linguistically competent creatures” (4). According to this developmental and evolutionary theory of social cognition, the basis of folk-psychology is socio-cultural, but folk psychology does not exhaust the repertoire of social cognitive skills.

The core claim of his contribution to the family of theories about understanding other minds—the so-called Narrative Practice Hypothesis (NPH)—is that “direct encounters with stories about persons who act for reasons—those supplied in interactive contexts by responsive caregivers—is the normal route through which children become familiar with both (1) the basic structure of folk psychology and (2) the norm-governed possibilities for wielding it in practice, thus learning both how and when to use it” (p. x). This claim has some major consequences for a variety of (quite general) issues in the Philosophy of Mind, e.g. the nature and scope of animal cognition, the development of social understanding in infancy, the characterization of pre-linguistic mental capacities and the acquisition and mastery of mental concepts and so on. It also means that Hutto, who himself regards his approach to cognition as an “attempted fusion” of the approaches by Davidson and Millikan (p. xx), needs to discuss (and often refute) a large number of alternative accounts in these various areas. In this review, we can only mention some of these debates.

Outline

Hutto first motivates an investigation of folk-psychological understanding from a second-person perspective (ch. 1–2). That is, in everyday face-to-face encounters, reasons for acting are typically delivered in “online interactive dialogue” (20), i.e. they are embedded in stories (narratives) of some kind. Typically, we need not engage in inferential reasoning from the third-person perspective as defenders of TT would have it; nor need we often rely
on our first-person experiences to create pretend states that we project into others after putting ourselves in their mental shoes, as suggested by simulationists. Hutto holds that in most of our social interactions we take a more engaged second-person stance towards other people, whose expressive behavior is a much more reliable and more immediate guide to what they feel, believe, desire and intend (20). This general approach makes complete sense since we would expect that social cognition is fundamentally different when we are actively engaged with others, embedded in 'online' interaction, than when we merely observe others 'offline'. 'Online' interaction draws heavily on implicit modes of processing and mechanisms of interpersonal coordination – constituting a form of procedural knowledge that may be our 'default' mode and pervasive way of understanding others, which appears to be prior to theory and simulation, not only systemically but also ontogenetically. Hutto shares this view with a number of philosophers and psychologists (e.g. S. Gallagher, D. Zahavi, V. Reddy, P. Hobson) who have recently criticized TT and ST accounts for presupposing a detached and disengaged "spectatorial stance" towards others (12).

Since the NPH ties the mastery of propositional attitudes to the mastery of language, Hutto needs to tell a story about the social understanding of nonverbals and their mental capacities more generally. To this end, he introduces an important distinction between (merely) intentional attitudes and propositional attitudes in Ch. 3. Nonverbal responding (in human infants and nonhuman animals) only involves mastery of the former, not the latter. The bold claim is that all interaction with worldly objects and other people before the acquisition of language is explained and succeeds without invoking the notion of content, not even nonconceptual content. In this context, Hutto argues both against Bermudéz' claim that there is thinking without words (ch. 4) and against Fodor's claim that mentality is based on computations in a Language of Thought (ch. 5). Ch. 6 and 7 are devoted to the ontogenesis of folk-psychological understanding in infancy. In these central chapters, Hutto describes our primary nonverbal interactions in more detail and explains how they enable children to participate in the social discourse where they 'become familiar with the forms and norms of folk psychology" (xii) by way of being exposed to the appropriate narratives. Ch. 8 and 9 contain the main arguments against rival positions on social cognition, while the final chapters are devoted to some speculations regarding the origin and evolutionary development of our folk psychological skills (ch.10–12). This review will focus on the viability of the NPH as an account of social cognition and on Hutto's industrial-strength anti-representationalist approach to the mind with its implications.

Narratives and social cognition

Any story that provides an explanation of someone's action in terms of (the ascription of) reasons (belief/desire-pairs) is called a folk-psychological narrative. There are all kinds of narratives, but in order to acquire folk-psychological skills through them, the 'right kind of narrative' must feature people acting for reasons. Then such narratives provide "snapshots of the adventures of situated persons, presented in the kinds of settings in which all of the important factors needed for understanding reasons are described – that is, those that are relevant to making sense of what is done and why" (34). And even narratives of this kind come in different guises. They might be spontaneously produced, have an autobiographical background, be mere gossip or established cultural facts. They may not only be provided through face-to-face communication, but also through television and comics. Interestingly, Hutto takes the paradigm narrative, which presents people acting for reasons, to be fairytales with which children are confronted from early on in their cognitive career. Fairytales like Little Red Riding Hood provide the right kind of training (30), Hutto claims, because by listening to them children learn that what people do is determined not only by what they believe and feel, but also by their character, past choices and existing commitments, and so on.

Now, one might object that in order for the children to make sense of the agent's