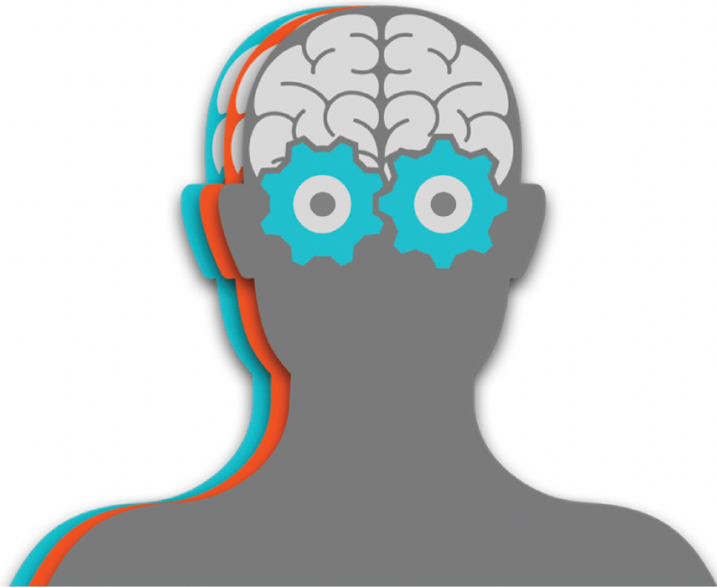


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MASTERING MENTALIZATION

Taking, Gaining, Shifting and Shaping Perspectives
Through Basic, Affective and Strategic Mentalizing

COMPLETE VOLUME



ANIQUE VAN DER PUTTEN
Edited by Dennis Weyrauch

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Perspectives Through Basic, Affective and
Strategic Mentalizing

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MASTERING MENTALIZATION

Introduction

Over the course of our lives there are many occasions when we wish we could read the minds of others. The good news is, we actually can, although only to a certain extent, and not in a magical or mystical way. The fact that there is nothing mystical in the way we mindread does not mean that it isn't still one of our most fascinating social abilities. This book is designed to arouse your interest in the most powerful social tool at your disposal: Mentalization.

Mentalization pertains to our ability to *take, gain, shift* and *shape* the *perspectives* of others. We use these mentalization abilities as a guide to explain or predict behavior. The mentalization process starts with the detection of social signals and cues in the verbal and nonverbal behavior of others. It continues with the attachment of meaning to these social indicators. These meaningful inferences allow us to explain past behavior and to predict future behavior. Our own perspectives are likewise inferred through a mentalization process.

Mentalization lies at the core of the key cognitive processes that we use to interpret and guide social behavior. It is, by and large, an interpersonal endeavor that we rely upon in order to make social interactions run more smoothly and at the same time achieve our objectives. In addition, we use our mentalization capacities to assess the trustworthiness and competence of others, helping us to make better social affiliation decisions. Mentalization is critical to successful affiliation and cooperation with others. It is also key to gaining competitive advantage over others or socially distancing ourselves from those whose interests do not align with our own. The motivational impetus to mentalize about others is innate. The tendency is so strong, in fact, that we even infer mental states in non-human entities, such as cars or computers, thereby anthropomorphizing them. Mentalization has actually played an important role in the emergence of religious beliefs and devotion to a personified higher power.

Mentalization is a multifaceted concept, which operates on many

different layers. Although the constituent components of mentalization are closely interconnected, we have identified three distinct levels of mentalization: *basic*, *affective* and *strategic*. We call the first level basic mentalizing as it involves the most elementary level of mentalization at which we derive basic mental state inferences by reading nonverbal behaviors and our sensorial reactions to them. Basic mentalizing reveals straightforward goal-directed behavior and primary affective states. The second level is labeled affective mentalizing, as it involves our ability to make more complex affective mental state inferences that help us to regulate emotions, feelings and moods that advance or impede our social interaction and our mentalization efforts. We call the third level strategic mentalizing, as it involves the most cognitive level of mentalization, enabling us to infer the more epistemic (cognitive) mental states such as desire, belief, knowledge and intention. We refer to this level as strategic mentalizing since it involves the prediction or explanation of increasingly complex goal-directed behavior. Strategic mentalizing is an ongoing, iterative and cyclical process that coalesces in a comprehensive theory of mind. This level represents the integration of all three levels of mentalization: basic, affective and strategic. In other words, accurate complex mental state inferences are the result of an iterative process by which we navigate among the three levels of mentalization during our interactions with others. Additionally, strategic mentalizing is an iterative process in the sense that we repeatedly move forward and backward in time to gather and connect social information from events in the past, from the present and from our predictions of possible future scenarios. Accurate mental state inferences are likewise the result of a co-creative, iterative endeavor involving interactional partners.

The complexity of mentalization has attracted the interests of scientists, philosophers and psychologists, as well as others from wide-ranging fields of interest, each with their own distinct perspectives on what mentalization entails, giving rise to the many synonyms for mentalization. To name just a few: “theory of mind” (Premack & Woodruff, 1978), “mind-reading” (Whiten, 1991), “folk psychology” (Gordon, 1986), and “the intentional stance” (Dennett, 1987). Our view of the subject matter is best

represented by the verb “mentalize,” the noun “mentalization” and the term “theory of mind.” The verb “mentalize” was first used by Frith et al. (1991) in their paper on theory of mind in relation to autism. Because mentalization is a behavioral process (i.e., something we do), a verb is well fitting. Mindreading is also a useful verb, although in its colloquial use it has gained a mystical connotation, which tends to conflict with our objective of demystifying both the overall ability and its constituent components. We use the noun “mentalization” to refer to the more general concept of the act of mentalizing. We also decided to adopt the term “theory of mind” when discussing the highest level of mentalization that we refer to as strategic mentalizing. The term was coined by Premack and Woodruff (1978) in their paper entitled “*Does the Chimpanzee Have a Theory of Mind?*” Theory of mind refers to the human capacity to construct and evaluate increasingly rational models of what is going on in the minds of others. It demarks the point at which we step away from common-sense psychology and mentalize on a more abstract level, applying psychological theory to human behavior and reasoning.

Philosophers have played an important role in kindling interest in the subject of mentalization, and later in the development of empirical research on the topic. Descartes' *Second Meditation* (Descartes, 2008), where he discussed “[t]he nature of the human mind, and how it is better known than the body,” set the groundwork for considering the science of the mind. He regarded the mental state of knowledge, particularly the capacity to doubt this particular mental state, as evidence of the fact that we exist. His famous adage “*Cogito, ergo sum*” (“I think therefore I am”) was born out of the need to defend his views. Within the contemporary branch of philosophy known as “philosophy of mind” two dominant theoretical views emerged to explain how it is that we are able to mentalize. According to one view, “theory theory” (see Gopnik & Wellman, 1994) derived from Morton (1980), we come to an understanding of the minds of others through *the deployment of a theory* that relies upon an understanding of mental state concepts and behavioral laws and principles to explain and predict behavior. In several

fundamental aspects, theory theory stands in contrast to a second view known as “simulation theory” (see Harris, 1992; Goldman, 2006; Gordon, 1992).

Simulation theory takes the position that *mentalization may not depend upon a fully specified theory of mind*. Instead, we use our empathic abilities to simulate the minds of others, or we project our own mental states onto the minds of others and assume that they feel and think as we do. The contrasting views represented by these two theories have provided fodder for interesting debates that have advanced scientific understanding of the various components and layers of mentalization. In our opinion, both *theory theory and simulation theory have a proper place within the study of mentalization as basic and affective mentalizing approximate simulation theory, while strategic mentalizing tracks closer to theory theory*.

In the twentieth century mentalization was examined by a field of research known as “belief-desire psychology,” also referred to as “folk psychology.” For instance, Daniel Dennett (1987 p. 17), an American philosopher, writer and cognitive scientist, proposed the procedure of mentalization as follows:

Here is how it works: first you decide to treat the object whose behavior is to be predicted as a rational agent; then you figure out what beliefs that agent ought to have, given its place in the world and its purpose. Then you figure out what desires it ought to have, on the same considerations, and finally you predict that this rational agent will act to further its goals in the light of its beliefs. A little practical reasoning from the chosen set of beliefs and desires will in most instances yield a decision about what the agent ought to do; that is what you predict the agent will do.

He referred to this process as “the intentional stance.” Dennett’s philosophical proposition spawned many insightful debates. Belief-desire psychology does not, however, explain the full extent of what is needed to understand a person’s motivations or intentions, which Dennett also recognized by his subsequent inclusion of additional factors. To begin with,

because belief-desire psychology *primarily focuses on beliefs and desires*, it ignores a vast range of mental state information that must be taken into account in order to accurately predict or explain complex behavior. For instance, affect and knowledge are two primary mental state categories which, together with desire and belief, make up increasingly complex mental states such as intentions, motivations and attitudes. Additionally, contextual and situational factors, such as social environment, have a significant influence on mental states and behavior. Predictions and explanations of behavior need to be based upon the range of behavioral possibilities for the particular person about whom we are mentalizing. Furthermore, predictions of complex behavior should never be made on the basis of what a person *ought* to do. Many studies have shown that humans often do not follow “logical rules” in their behavioral choices. Predictions and explanations need to be tailored to the individual within context, which requires consideration of all factors of influence. By taking all of these factors into account we are able to evaluate all of the different possible behaviors that the person might choose, and assign probabilities to each. The behavior with the highest probability will generally be our best bet. In other words, we have to predict complex behavior on the basis of what the person in question is *most likely* to do, rather than what the person ought to do. In 1971, Dennett injected the following into his intentional stance proposition: “a personal stance,” which not only “presupposes the intentional stance,” (viz., treats the system as rational) but also views it as “a person” (Dennett, 1971/1978, p. 240). Here we see the emergence in Dennett’s proposition of a more personalized perspective in predicting behavior.

Mentalization has been, and continues to be, extensively studied in connection with the developmental trajectory of children. The vast majority of research to date has focused exclusively on abstract mental state reasoning of children. For instance, many research papers focus on “false-belief” reasoning, which is the ability to reason about another person’s beliefs with the understanding that those beliefs can differ from reality, an important aspect of perspective gaining. This strong focus on the development of abstract mental state concepts has given prominence to the theory of mind

aspects of mentalization. However, some mentalizing of *non-propositional* mental states, affective mental states in particular, can be done through the use of *common-sense psychology, simulation, or projection* as it does not require propositional mental state reasoning to predict or explain behavior.

Research on mentalization has expanded beyond the study of early childhood development. Scholars in the field of artificial intelligence are conducting extensive research into how computers and humanoid robots can be programmed to mentalize about humans. Turing, one of the founders of artificial intelligence, was the first to ask the question “*Can machines think?*” (Turing, 1950). Turing introduced an imitation game, which became known as the “Turing Test,” to test whether artificial intelligence can equal human intelligence. This game involves a test subject who communicates through a teleprompter with two agents in another room. One agent is a human being, and the other is a computer. The test subject asks both agents questions and the agents have to answer those questions. When the computer “passes” the Turing Test it means that it has tricked the test person into believing that it is the human. The ability to deceive others by altering their belief state requires insight into their minds. Will artificial intelligence ever be able to mentalize in the same way humans do and develop and reflect on its own mental states? We don’t know yet. Scientists in the field of “game theory” are particularly interested in the strategic aspects of mentalization. Game theory focuses on interactive decisions where behavioral strategies, either *cooperative* or *competitive*, of two or more people jointly determine an outcome that affects all of them. This field of research also studies strategies of “cheaters.” Cheaters often use mentalization to manipulate and deceive others. Researchers in the area of evolution focus on questions such as: Has mentalization developed for *cooperative planning* and to *strengthen social cohesion*, or has it developed principally to *deceive competitors* or to *recognize deception*? To place mentalization in an evolutionary context, scientists primarily use behavioral theories based on research with primates. Humans, however, have distinct capabilities, for instance the use of “language” and “mental time travel” (the capacity to project oneself into scenarios in the past, alternative scenarios in the present, or future scenarios). Do primates mentalize? Results are still

inconclusive. Ape-like species such as chimpanzees and bonobos display signs of having a theory of mind, however, this might be more in terms of “perception-goal” inferences than in terms of mentalizing. They might, for example, just look at an object in which another primate shows interest, and predict behavior without consideration of the other’s mental state. There are also scholars who study mentalization abilities in nonprimates. The goal of such studies is to determine whether these animals are capable of forming the conceptual understanding of what is going on in another animal’s mind, or whether, instead, they learn to predict behavior through perception-goal inferences. For instance, let us say a dog detects sadness in its owner’s voice. The dog tries to cheer up its owner by wagging its tail and lavishly licking its owner’s hand as an appeasement gesture. Does this mean that the dog infers its owner’s mental states of sadness and desire to be consoled (a theory of mind), or does it merely want to lower its own stress level through behavior that dogs instinctively employ when another pack member is in distress (a perception-goal inference)? Attempts to prove the existence of a theory of mind in nonhuman species can be exceedingly complex as researchers are not able to rely on verbal confirmations. Social neuroscientists study the “social information-processing architecture” and “functionality” of mentalization. Neurological research on mentalization shows that the ability to mentalize encompasses a variety of cognitive processes that have been developed at different times, over millions of years, and for a variety of reasons. These processes have had different developmental trajectories. Some neural system elements implicated in mentalization are part of systems that developed earlier in our evolution, while other elements belong to more recently developed neural architectures. Neurological insights, in addition to making it possible to map the neurological architecture and functionality of our mentalization efforts, are also critical to understanding discrepancies in the mentalization abilities of different people. These research outcomes add valuable information to studies conducted by scholars in other fields, such as psychopathology and social, gender and cross-cultural psychology, who try to explain categorical differences in mentalization abilities. To illustrate, individuals with “autism spectrum disorder” are profoundly impaired in

attributing mental states (Baron-Cohen et al., 1985). These impairments in mental state attribution were defined by Baron-Cohen (1990) as the “mindblindness theory” of autism.

There is evidence to believe that the development of mentalization, especially at higher levels, is closely linked to language development in humans. For instance, young children must possess an understanding of mental state words such as “think” and “believe” before they can make theory of mind inferences. Exposure to language helps children to become familiar with the various mental states and perspectives of others. There is also evidence that the neural networks responsible for language and those implicated in theory of mind reasoning are closely linked.

Mentalization depends not only on social processes and language, but also on our capacity for “cognitive control” and “cognitive flexibility.” Many studies have found correlations between children’s mentalization abilities and their performance on a variety of tests that measure executive functioning. “Executive functions” comprise a set of cognitive processes involved in attention, working memory, response inhibition, resistance to interference and planning. “Sharing of attention” with others is a hallmark of mentalization. In addition, executive functioning enables us to form “metarepresentations” of the content of our minds and those of others. Our ability to respond to others on the basis of their mental states (rather than our own) is *mediated* through executive functioning. Cognitive control and flexibility are particularly important in complex social situations that require the highest level of mentalization.

Additionally, “affect regulation” has been associated with our ability to mentalize, with research indicating that high levels of stress, boredom, or fight, flight and freeze states, significantly interfere with our capacity to mentalize during social interaction.

Moving away from scientific research to practical applications of mentalization, we see that in recent years psychotherapists have increasingly recognized mentalization as a fundamental component of psychotherapeutic treatments. In fact, mentalization is the *principal* and most *persistent* mental activity that a patient employs during psychotherapy. Patients mentalize

when they narrate their reasons for seeking psychological help, when they explain how they experience situations, when they disclose details of their relationships with others, and so forth. Most importantly, patients *activate* and *develop* their ability to mentalize through the *associations* they make between their own behavior and the behavior of others, including their interactive behavior with the therapist. It is not only the patient, however, who mentalizes during therapy sessions; mentalization efforts are also employed by the therapist. Therapists are constantly trying to understand what is going on in their patients' minds, to gain insight into their mental states and behaviors and to find the most effective ways to change unhealthy patterns in their thought processes and behavior. Furthermore, therapists help patients to develop their mentalization abilities: first, to help them understand and navigate their own inner world; second, to help them understand and navigate the social world; and third, to better connect their inner world with the social world. A clinical therapy that focuses on mentalization in particular is known as "mentalization-based therapy" (MBT). The development of this therapy finds its roots in research on theory of mind in relation to children with autism spectrum disorders. More recently, therapeutic interventions of this nature have been extended to adult patient groups and to patient groups with other psychological disorders. "Adaptive mentalization-based integrative treatment" (AMBIT) is an extension of mentalization-based therapy. As with MBT, therapeutic interventions using AMBIT focus on patient groups with complex psychological problems, in particular people with "borderline personality disorder" (BPD). People who suffer from BPD comprise a population that represents extreme deficiencies in mentalization and affective communication. *Underdeveloped* mentalization abilities have serious implications in relation to the formation of attachment relationships and self-development, both problematic areas for people who suffer from BPD. Vice versa, the attachment relationships that we develop, especially with our primary caregivers during childhood, significantly influence the strength of our mentalization capacity. *Securely* attached individuals tend to have more complex and sophisticated mentalization abilities than *insecurely* attached

individuals.

Both within and outside of the clinical field, another factor that presents unique challenges to our ability to mentalize about others is “sociocultural diversity.” When we do not share the same values, customs, beliefs and social rules with someone else, mentalization becomes increasingly difficult, and the accuracy of our inferences decreases significantly. In particular, when two people do not speak the same language they have to rely heavily on nonverbal behavior, which itself is subject to cultural differences in encoding and decoding.

To conclude, mentalizing on a basic, affective and strategic level enables us to take, gain, shift and shape the perspectives of others and our own perspectives. Mentalization is integral to our capacity to understand others and to understand ourselves. It is the most *powerful social tool* that we have at our disposal, affecting our well-being on a social, psychological and physiological level. Vice versa, the ability to mentalize is affected by a wide array of *intrapersonal*, *interpersonal* and *extrapersonal* factors, such as our motivation to mentalize, the person about whom we mentalize and the sociocultural environment in which we are mentalizing. Having well-developed mentalization abilities is associated with a multitude of social and personal advantages. However, before we can determine what our mentalization proficiency level is, we need to be able to recognize the indicators that evidence good or poor mentalizing. This is not only critical for estimating our own level of mastery, but also the level of those with whom we interact. Having well-developed mentalization skills yourself does not guarantee successful interactions with others, especially not with those who might be struggling with severely underdeveloped mentalization abilities. Besides recognizing good or poor mentalizing in others we need to be vigilant of those who use tactics that are indicative of “pseudomentalization.” Mentalization is our most powerful social tool and its power invites certain people to use tricks that one easily mistakes for mentalization to manipulate us.

THE GOAL OF THIS BOOK

The goal of this book is twofold: first, *to introduce mentalization and theory of mind to the general public*, extending familiarity with these concepts, including the practice of mentalization, beyond the clinical and scientific environments; and second, *to provide a clear description of the theoretical foundation for mentalization*. In clinical settings, the focus lies primarily on developing mentalization to provide insight into both our inner world and the social environment, with the aim of making interpersonal interactions run more smoothly. There is, however, another level that is of great interest and equal value, namely the practical application of mentalization as a means of achieving strategic objectives.

In this book we provide you with guidance on applying mentalization efforts more effectively in your personal and professional dealings with others. We have translated the most current and influential scientific research on the subject matter into practical and applicable knowledge. Our extensive survey of literature on the subject of mentalization made us aware of the need to deconstruct this multifaceted ability into smaller conceptual pieces. This effort has yielded both a granular and a holistic explanation of what mentalization entails. Moreover, it has enabled us to develop multilayered mentalization assessment tools and offer services that are tailored to specific training needs. In sum, our hierarchical classification helps to identify strengths and weaknesses in our mentalization competencies and helps to explain where, when and how the different levels of mentalization are best applied.

This book is divided into five sections. In the first section, we provide you with a general understanding of what mentalization entails. In the second section, we cover basic mentalizing. This most primitive level of mentalization helps us, among other things, to connect with others - to build rapport and share experiences nonverbally - and to detect nonverbal signals and cues that have the power to influence mental states and consequent behavior. In the third section, we explore the intermediate level of mentalization, affective mentalizing, which allows us to regulate our affective states and to influence the affective states of others. It helps us to

avoid fight, flight, or freeze reactions, enabling us to remain open minded and to take in all of the relevant social information for mental state reasoning. Affective mentalizing also helps us to repair and maintain healthy relationships through empathy, compassion and competent affective communication. In the fourth section, we examine the highest level of mentalization, strategic mentalizing. Strategic mentalizing is instrumental in enhancing affiliation and cooperation, in socially distancing from others, or in gaining competitive advantage. The fifth and final section, mastering mentalization, deals with the mastery of this powerful human capacity. Here we discuss opportunities for assessment and enhancement of mentalization competencies.

Each chapter of this book is divided into three parts: first, an introduction with a short anecdote or discussion of an illustrative topic to set the stage; second, an examination of the core principles of the chapter's subject matter; and third, a discussion of the advantages of, and possible impediments to, development or enhancement of the mentalization skills described in the chapter.

This book will introduce you to a number of concepts with which you may not be familiar. Therefore, we provide you with concise definitions of the relevant terms of art. Wherever possible, we use lexical definitions employed within the field of mentalization. Definitions employed in other related fields, or having varying connotations, are distinguished as appropriate. A clear understanding of the terminology is central to capturing the essence of mentalization. We hope you will find this book insightful and enjoyable to read. If you would like additional information on the subject matter, you can reach us through our website at www.appliedtom.com.

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