Theoretical issues: Perceptual and cognitive processes in the Rorschach

The Rorschach method raises a lot of interesting issues which have to do with the way in which our brains process visual stimuli. This is a large topic; below I just sketch some of the issues which relate to one especially interesting response category: the kinesthetic responses. The text is actually an abstract for a poster at "TUCSON III", i.e. the conference, *Toward a Science of Consciousness,* Tucson, Arizona, April 27-May 2, 1998. Write me an e-mail if you want to comment on it!

On the Texts page, you can find the full text of the poster, as well a paper on movement responses which was published in *Rorschachiana*, 2000 (the Yearbook of the *International Rorschach Society*). You will have to send for a password to access the full texts.

Moving towards the Other

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Recent careful research on mental development in the child (Meltzoff & Moore 1995) has shown beyond much doubt that the capacity to perceive and imitate the actions of others is innate. It has been suggested that this capacity to imitate involves an "amodal" perception in which visual information about another organism is immediately transformed into a motor schema in the perceiving subject. Hence one might talk about a mechanism of immediate motor identification. In this paper I point to a number of antecedents of this idea and to some of its psychological and philosophical implications.

One important early application of the idea of an immediate motor identification is found in the works of Hermann Rorschach (Rorschach 1921), who describes a category of inkblot interpretations based on "kinesthetic imagery". These interpretations are variously labeled "kinesthetic responses" or "movement responses" (although they need not involve movement). Abstracting from the associationist psychology in terms of which Rorschach uses to express his ideas, it is clear that he was conceiving these responses in terms of an immediate motor identification.

Among philosophers, Maurice Merleau-Ponty (Merleau-Ponty 1945) also makes the observation that imitation involves a capacity for immediate motor identification. Indeed, his concept of body image is defined in terms of the capacity to translate motor schemata between different possible action perspectives. This capacity

corresponds to the "amodal" perception postulated by recent theorists. It is well known that Merleau-Ponty stresses the point that our mastering of action schemata is primary to our knowledge of objective ("Cartesian") space. Taken together, his arguments imply that our knowledge of other minds may be prior to our knowledge of objective space (cf. Malmgren 1976).

In the developmental psychology of Heinz Werner (Werner 1961), it is emphasized that human beings (and especially children) tend to perceive not only living beings, but also inanimate objects, in terms of motor identifications. Trees are seen as literally standing or bending, etc. According to Werner (and the so-called "percept-genetic school" which builds upon his works) this tendency towards a generalized "physiognomic" perception remains operative at a subconscious level even in mature perception. Klaus Conrad describes (Conrad 1961) how such latent physiognomic perception surfaces abundantly in the prodromal stage of confusion ("clouded consciousness").

It is clear that the concept of immediate motor identification has important bearings for any systematic theory of perception. From an ecological point of view, such a mechanism would serve an important function in terms of the ability to quickly predict future positions of an aggressor, a prey or a potential mate (J.J. Gibson 1979). Looking instead at computational models of perception, many of these hypothesize a mechanism for immediate translations between an egocentric and an object-centered space (Kosslyn 1994). The findings about immediate motor identifications imply that there is also a general ability to make translations between these spaces and an ‘other centered’ (allocentric) space (or several such spaces), which like the egocentric one is perceptually prior to the apprehension of object-centered space.

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