

Talking Point: Week 5

So far, we've been thinking mostly about individual minds - from now on, the focus is going to shift to thinking about how we coordinate our behaviour, and how society functions as a whole, despite the 'flatness' of every individual mind

We began by introducing the 'puzzle' of the hi-lo game: where two people have to shout either "high" or "low" simultaneously, and win a large prize if both shout "high", a small prize if both shout "low", and nothing if they shout different things. Of course, the game doesn't really seem like a puzzle at all - it's totally obvious that we should both shout "high." But what's interesting about this is that it's a very simple illustration of a very powerful ability - the ability to think about what the other person will do, to think as a team, and to imagine what we would do if we were able to communicate.

We introduced the idea of "we-thinking", as the ability to think collectively: to imagine what we, as two people, or as a group, would do if we could communicate, to understand our shared context and goals.

In everyday life, this ability to coordinate our actions is incredibly important. It allows us to coordinate on simple actions like moving a piece of furniture, to coordinate on interpretations to develop complex languages, and to coordinate on the meaning of social interactions, which provides the basis of complex social behaviours.

In order to coordinate in this way, we have to think about what other people around us are going to do - which is actually an incredibly complicated thing. I'm trying to predict the behaviour of another human being, with complex intentions and behaviours.

This situation also seems to lead to a nasty circularity - with person A wondering what person B will do, whilst person B is of course thinking about what person A will do...

"We thinking" is the way out of this circularity. Instead of thinking "what will person A/B do?", each person is thinking something more like "what should we do?"

This capacity to "we-think" seems to be crucial to human language. In order to communicate effectively, we have to be able to coordinate on the meaning of words - when I tell you "Fred went to the shops", I'm assuming that you know which Fred, and which shops I mean.

So when two people communicate effectively with each other, there's a lot of we-thinking going on. I'm throwing a signal at you, and expecting you to produce a meaning from it. How you interpret it depends on the shared assumptions and knowledge we have, so I need to be thinking about those shared assumptions to communicate with you.

This ability to “we-think” may be uniquely human, and what sets us apart from animals. It may well be the reason that humans have been so successful: it underlies our ability to communicate much more complex ideas than most animals, and to develop much more complex societies and methods of coordination.

Of course, animals certainly do coordinate and communicate in some remarkable ways. **But most animal coordination and communication is very different from that of humans in that it seems to be genetically wired in.**

Take communication as an example. Of course, almost all species have ways of communicating with one another. But methods of communication that we observe in animal species are surprisingly fixed - they don't vary from group to group, or really evolve over time. This clearly isn't the case with humans - different human societies have drastically different languages, and human languages have evolved a great deal over time.

While human language is certainly shaped to some degree by our genes, they aren't imprinted in our genes the way animal communication is - we invent them, and are constantly changing them.

What's remarkable about humans is that we can work together collectively to understand and shape our behaviour, to shape our societies. For all other animals, changes in 'culture' evolve at the same pace as genetic evolution - whereas for humans, these changes take place much more quickly.