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Commentary/Dienes & Perner: Implicit and explicit knowledge

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Nonconceptual content and the distinction between implicit and explicit knowledge

Abstract: The notion of nonconceptual content in Dienes & Perner's theory is examined. A subject may be in a state with nonconceptual content without having the concepts that would be used to describe the state. Nonconceptual content does not seem to be a clear-cut case of either implicit or explicit knowledge. It underlies a kind of practical knowledge, which is not reducible to procedural knowledge, but is accessible to the subject and under voluntary control.

In this commentary I would like to point to some cases in which the knowledge involved does not seem to fit into Dienes & Perner's (D&P's) schema. This is primarily the kind of knowledge that lies behind practical competence. In some cases, at least, it cuts across D&P's categorisations.

D&P rely on the representational theory of mind (RMT, Fodor 1978) to describe knowledge representations, which means that explicit knowledge must be represented propositionally. RMT squares very well with their theory. But there seems to be knowledge that can neither be described in the framework of RMT nor does it fit into the schema of the implicit and the explicit. Whether RMT is correct or not is nevertheless more of a technical than a substantial question in the present context, and I will not discuss it further.

Let me instead turn to the notion of nonconceptual content, that is, content that is independent of concepts. A subject may be in a state with nonconceptual content without having the concepts that would be used to describe the state. It is evoked to explain behaviour that relies on representations, but cannot be captured by concepts.

Examples of nonconceptual content are the richness of perceptual experience that exceeds conceptual description, and infant and animal perception of the environment, the content of which diverges from conceptual descriptions of the environment. Nonconceptual content has correctness conditions, although it does not constitute propositional belief that can be assigned a truth-value. It presents things to the subject and can do so adequately or inadequately.

Nonconceptual representation of categories will be context-sensitive and influenced by the properties of the subject's ongoing interaction between subject and environment, and other factors that emerge in the context. It does not involve general conceptual identification or metarepresentations of relations.

What is the place of nonconceptual content in D&P's theory? It cannot constitute explicit, propositional knowledge. But if we turn to the related distinctions brought up in the article, nonconceptual content does not seem to be a clear-cut case of implicit knowledge either. It cannot fulfill the requirement on verbal expressibility, because by definition it is not verbal. But what about accessibility and being under voluntary control?

Let us consider some cases in which the knowledge that lies behind the behaviour seems to rely on nonconceptual content. Examples of nonconceptual content as used in guiding behaviour while one's attention is attracted to something else (e.g., riding a bike) fit the description of procedural knowledge, which is governed by a rule that can only be active or inactive and is not open to scrutiny.

On the other hand, in the case of cycling, and perhaps even more in cases like playing tennis or golf or dancing, these activities can be deliberately improved. Different techniques can be tested, details can be changed, and the repertoire extended.

What is more, the standards that govern these activities are not only correctness conditions, that is, those that spell out whether representations match or fail to match their sources or targets, but also normative rules, or norms, which concern the quality of what is done. The same goes, for example, for craftsmanship.
Abstract: Dienes & Perner's target article constitutes a significant advance in thinking about implicit knowledge. However, it largely neglects processing details and thus the time scale of mental states realizing propositional attitudes. Considering real-time processing raises questions about the possible brevity of implicit representation, the nature of processes that generate explicit knowledge, and the points of view from which knowledge may be represented. Understanding the propositional attitude analysis in terms of momentary mental states points the way toward answering these questions.

The theory outlined by Dienes & Perner (D&P) constitutes a significant advance in thinking about implicit knowledge. In particular, their analysis of knowledge states in terms of content and noncontent aspects, and the observation that there is at least a kernel of explicit content in even "maximally implicit" knowledge, provide important bases for sharpening the debates about implicit knowledge. Their contribution might be even clearer if its focus provide important bases for sharpening the debates about implicit knowledge. Their contribution might be even clearer if its focus provided important bases for sharpening the debates about implicit knowledge. However, it largely neglects processing details and thus the time scale of mental states realizing propositional attitudes. Considering real-time processing raises questions about the possible brevity of implicit representation, the nature of processes that generate explicit knowledge, and the points of view from which knowledge may be represented. Understanding the propositional attitude analysis in terms of momentary mental states points the way toward answering these questions.

The norms can be intersubjective, although it is impossible to formulate them explicitly. We can judge quantitatively measured properties according to explicit criteria. However, properties that influence our judgments of performances or products are experiential and not readily verbalizable, but they are nevertheless intersubjectively recognized. Examples of this can be found in judgements or classifications made in sports like gymnastics or figure skating, also in judgements of style.

Craftsmanship as such does not depend primarily on the kind of conceptual, context-independent, and general knowledge representations D&P use in their theory. Instead, the activity is tuned to the context. It relies on a constant perceptual evaluation of the process (where perceptual is taken to involve all the senses) and not on verbal reflection. During this progressive evaluation, the subject incessantly makes decisions about what to do the next moment. As an example, take a blacksmith or the architect working with clay models. The skill required to create new products constitutes a practical knowledge accessible to the subject and not reducible to procedural knowledge.

Moreover, not only people working with design or art make use of the external world in reasoning. Idiosyncratic representations tuned to what things are like or how they appear to the subject, rather than accurate conceptual descriptions, are prevalent. We pay attention to them, although we do not, and cannot, verbalize them. They often underlie decisions about the immediate future. But nonconceptual, contextual representations are not fit to enter into long-term planning or reasoning. They do not stretch into the distant future.

D&P's description of visually guided behaviour (e.g., the remarks about its being based on feature-placing instead of identification of objects) fits rather well with the processes governed by nonconceptual content described here, but a difference is that D&P seem to hold that visually guided behaviour is procedural and inaccessible. This is exactly what I would contest.

To sum up, I believe that the picture that D&P give of cognition is too crude. There are not only two opposing forms of knowledge, implicit and explicit, but also another kind that has properties from both sides, but also some properties of its own. The question is whether it can be incorporated into D&P's model.