

The Interpersonal Experience of Inanimate Objects

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The psychoanalytic literature has traditionally made a division between how individuals relate to and experience people on the one hand, and inanimate objects on the other. In the former, the relationship can be thought of as interpersonal and dynamic - but not so in the latter. Inanimate objects can be associated with real people, or function as a container for projected meaning, but not related to directly, or experienced as, a 'social' entity.

My objective today is to challenge that assertion; and to suggest that the human brain has not only the capacity - but also the innate propensity - to process and experience specific kinds of inanimate objects as both social and interpersonal; and that this processing is occurring within us today, outside of our explicit awareness. While this hypothesis may surprise you, significant evidence for it exists – at least outside of our own culture. Doug Medin, for example, has written that the Itza, a people indigenous to South America, interact with inanimate objects in nature “like friends or enemies;”¹ and numerous anthropologists who study indigenous cultures have made similar observations. Experimental evidence also exists, for example in Harry Harlow’s famous monkey studies², suggesting a monkey can be induced to experience a terrycloth-covered wire

¹ Atran, S., Medin, D.L., & Ross, N. (2005). *The Cultural Mind: Environmental Decision Making and Cultural Modeling Within and Across Populations*. *Psychological Review*, 112(4), 744-776.

² Harlow, Harry F., and M. K. Harlow. *Social Deprivation in Monkeys*. In M. L. Haimowitz and N. R. Haimowitz eds., *Human Development*. New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1966.

frame as mother – which is to say, relate to and seemingly experience the inanimate as animate. Less obvious evidence also exists within our own culture, but my goal is not to look at this process anthropologically or even psychologically – but rather to understand it mechanistically, in terms of a hypothesis, at the level of brain. To do that though, I will first have to lay the groundwork by reviewing certain ideas presented by Antonio Damasio, Vittorio Gallese and Rudolf Arnheim.

Neurology of Feelings

Let me begin by introducing you to the ideas of Antonio Damasio – and, in particular, his theory of feelings and emotion. Damasio argues, briefly, that our brain contains a *body map* that corresponds to our feelings, just as our brain contains a map, called the motor strip, which corresponds to our musculature. Its principle location, based on available evidence, is in the somatosensory cortex, and most particularly the right insula.

One function of these body maps is to tell us how our body feels physically, and to help locate feelings geographically. The physical body is one substrate for feeling, but so is emotion; and just as low plasma-glucose can result in feelings of hunger, so too can visual stimuli result in feelings of emotion. Most inanimate objects, writes Damasio “become capable of triggering some form of emotion consciously or unconsciously by virtue of our individual experiences.”³ All this input is mapped onto the insula,

³ Damasio, A.R. (2004). *Looking for Spinoza*. New York: Vintage.

giving us an interoceptive sense of our body's physical state on the one hand, and feelings of emotion on the other.

In addition, and most importantly regarding this hypothesis, the brain can also simulate the body states of other people. Damasio believes this process occurs by way of what he calls *as-if-body-loops*, which allow us to virtually experience another person both physically and emotionally – ‘as if’ we were them. This process, according to Vittorio Gallese, likely involves *mirror neurons*, which have been shown to fire in coordination with the observed meaningful movement of others. Gallese hypothesizes these neurons are involved in not only empathy, through the simulation of a shared body state, but *action intentions*, via the activation of shared motor programs and so on. The process, which he calls *embodied simulation*, is automatic and unconscious – and “constitutes a fundamental basis for a noninferential understanding of another's actions, intentions, emotions, sensations, and perhaps even linguistic expressions.”⁴ The result is an implicit attribution of, and insight into, the mind of others, a phenomenal state of “intentional attunement,” feelings of familiarity, and a felt sense of *we-ness* - which is to say an implicit sense of immediate interpersonal connectedness to another being.

The Psychology of Perception

⁴ Gallese V., Eagle M.E., and Migone P. *Intentional attunement: Mirror neurons and the neural underpinnings of interpersonal relations*. J. of the American Psychoanalytic Association, 2007, 55: 131-176.

This is Damasio and Gallese, in great summary. To make their work applicable though we have to venture into the psychology of art and perception, and the work of Rudolf Arnheim. In particular, I want to call attention to Arnheim's views on *expression* – a word he notes typically refers to the "external manifestations of the human personality."⁵ Presumably, what Arnheim means by "external manifestations" are those bodily forms, and their movements, which carry expressive meaning - which is to say, have the capacity to induce empathic understanding and *action intent* by way of the process of *embodied simulation*.

Arnheim though wants to widen the definition of *expression* beyond people. He writes: "Expression is not limited to living organisms that possess consciousness. A flame, a tumbling leaf, the wailing of a siren, a willow tree, a steep rock....all convey expression through the various senses. The importance of this fact has been concealed by the popular hypothesis that in such cases human expression is merely transferred to objects. If, however, expression is an inherent characteristic of perceptual factors human expression will have to be considered a special case of a more general phenomenon." Thus, according to Arnheim, the down-turned branches and tear-like leaves of a willow tree are as capable of conveying expressive meaning as the tearful face and down-turned mouth of a human being – and in fact both phenomena can induce within us the same feelings of sadness and weight. In neither case, according to Arnheim, is expression a result of pictorial representation: the observation of a painting of a sad face, for example, does not mean we will necessarily experience the feeling of sadness. In fact, it is often a

⁵ Arnheim, R. (1966). *Toward a Psychology of Art*. University of California Press

measure of art's genius, done through the subtle manipulation of visual form, to accomplish this latter goal - which can be so difficult to achieve, whether the work be abstract or representational.

In addition, even the expression of movement, according to Arnheim, is neither limited to the observation of actual movement, nor necessarily induced by pictorial representation. Rather, movement too can be conveyed through expressive form – and result in a felt kinesthetic reaction. The psychologist Hermann Rorschach has labeled it the *m-response*.

An Implication

Essentially what Arnheim is saying, to reemphasize the point, is that expression is not limited to human form, and that the feeling or expectation of movement is not limited to the observation of action – but rather, a result of specific sensory patterns. As such, visual and/or cognitive associations, made to a known image or representation, do not drive expression but instead happen secondarily. The bottom line, if what he says is true neurologically, is quite significant. It suggests that inanimate objects – in proportion to their expressivity – are automatically mapped and processed by way of the same unconscious mechanisms we use to understand people: *embodied simulation*. As such, we can feel empathically engaged with, and interpersonally connected to, certain inanimate objects. And in regard to Rorschach's m-response, a subjective sense of movement with a sometimes implied volitional intent can also arise in the observation of some inanimate objects - insofar *action intention*, understood by way of the activation of

“logically related” mirror neurons, can be elicited not only by the observation of entire gestures, but by single (static) visual cues.

The Right and Left Brain

This processing, which largely involves the right brain, is largely unconscious and automatic; and as such, we aren't privy to its machinations, except to the extent we're left with its feeling product. As we all know though, we're more than our feelings; and it is up to our left-brain and frontal lobes, which are typically dominant in language and logic, to weave a conscious narrative understanding of our feeling states. This narrative, for those living within an indigenous culture, is self-evident: since the expressive object 'feels' alive, insofar feelings of empathic resonance and interpersonal interconnectedness arise, and certain 'dynamic' elements within the object activate motor programs that carry with it the implicit expectation of mindful intent, it is called spirit. And since there are no cultural or rational probation suggesting otherwise, its apparent aliveness can be validated, and made sense of cognitively, through the construction of an animistic cosmology. As such, at least from within these cultural constructs, it is rational to attribute mind to the inanimate.

This straightforward explanation though, which shifts the attribution of mind from the implicit to the explicit, and puts feeling and thought on similar ground, is denied to most of us today. We, unlike those living in indigenous cultures, can't help but be influenced by cultural paradigms that are at odds with our feeling experience. Science, for example,

tells us to trust the empirical; and that we have no basis for believing in spirit-life residing within inanimate objects. Religion too, particularly protestant religion, quashes the idea of the object as container for spirit, by viewing God as external to the physical world; and lastly, and perhaps most inhumanly, consumerism teaches us to treat objects as a commodity, whose worth is saddled to function.

At a non-cognitive level too, starting from birth, there is a maternal emotional biasing of the infant towards novel inanimate objects. Allen Schore writes, concerning this biasing, that the mother's appraisal of the animate and inanimate world communicates to that infant an object's emotional meaning – including, I would imagine, its capacity to be experienced as alive and/or interpersonally connecting.

The result of these ideas and influences is a cultural construct that denies life to the inanimate; and as such, the personal narratives we create in response to the expressive, but ultimately inanimate, object must logically deny its social aspect. Moreover, and in turn, these narratives - which arise out of the cognitive, verbal and conscious - can inhibit and filter the unconscious emotional processing of the right brain, as well as redirect attention – further weakening our social experience of the inanimate world. The result is a dynamic feedback loop that reinforces the non-social experience of the inanimate - versus a similar loop that can reinforce the social experience of nature, for those believing in animism.

Despite these cultural and narrative inhibitions though, the social processing of expressive form remains - as would be expected, from a process that is automatic and unconscious. Thus, we continue to feel interpersonally connected to the inanimate in our experience of art, nature, the mystical and so on, despite lacking a comprehensive cosmological or theoretical framework by which to make sense of the experience; and as such, words like beautiful or moving or spiritual or symbolic are used in substitute for the words social or interpersonal - to describe what indigenous man might call spirit.

Implications

For a hypothesis, such as this one, to be actually useful, it needs to provide a deeper understanding of the phenomena it purports to explain – beyond the substitution of one word for another, like “moving” for “social”. Can this theory provide that understanding? Let us look at four examples: art, nature, the mystical and the psychological, and very briefly examine their experience from this new perspective – with the understanding that the social is just one strand of influence amongst many, those influence will vary from person to person.

Art: the hypothesis suggests that visual art, in proportion to its expressivity, will induce feelings of interpersonal connectedness; and that it is this feeling of social connectedness, in which resides a sense of personal well being, which makes art uniquely powerfully and attractive. No wonder then, some of us go to the museum: the feeling of interpersonal connectedness can make the self feel more cohesive.

Several interesting implications follow. For example, because art is engaged with interpersonally an art reproduction cannot substitute for the original. A reproduction is no more equivalent to the original, to this way of thinking, than a snapshot of a woman is equivalent to the woman herself. Another implication is that art cannot exist as a category in animistic cultures – insofar those cultures experience a broad range of physical objects interpersonally, and therefore cannot use this characteristic as a defining element in the construction of a unique category.

Finally, regarding psychoanalysis, it has traditionally been interested in art's meaning, which is to say its content, which resides, in part, at the level of image. What I am suggesting here is that beneath content, at the level of form, lies the social and interpersonal – and that it is this aspect, which distinguishes visual art from other forms of communication. What can potentially be interesting to psychoanalysis, given this, is to examine this latter effect, and its influence on meaning and experience.

Regarding nature: this hypothesis suggests the mechanism as to why, at least in part, certain forms in nature, like the rising sun or misted forest, or craggy rock, can be so affecting. The result – which can be at the level of implicit, which is to say at the level of feeling, or explicit, by which I mean at the level of spirit – is that behavior towards that body will tend to become modulated by way of the rules and expectations of an interpersonal exchange. As such, for example, we may empathize with a magnificent

tree, and not want to ‘hurt’ it – as if a tree actually has feelings, which we know cognitively it cannot have – thus protecting it.

There is an interest today in treating our earth with greater respect; but the stated rationale, as far as I can tell, is based on the logic of interdependency. We do not harm the earth, accordingly, not out of altruism, but because harming it harms us. I believe though, that what motivates many people is a feeling, possibly unbeknownst to them, of interpersonal connection and empathy towards the physical world – towards *mother-earth* - and as such, their motivations are as much altruistic as selfish.

Religion. There is an interest amongst the cognitive and evolutionary psychologists who study religion to understand the mechanism inducing the experience of spirits. I do not have the time to go over their theories, but they are cognitive in nature; and perhaps because the science underlying social processing is so new, the social hasn’t been incorporated into their thinking. This hypothesis provides an alternative model, which takes into account both the cognitive and social, and their interdependencies.

Lastly, I’d like to mention the psychological. I have treated several patients with highly problematic early parental relationships, who report having turned, during the magical thinking of preadolescence, to the inanimate for comfort. The objects were such things as a tree or painting; and in each case, there was the implicit - but not explicit - assumption that the object was self-aware and welcoming. These objects, which were benign and accepting, seem to have functioned as a *selfobject*, and were experienced as if from

within a stable dyadic relationship. I imagine there are more patients such as these; and that by uncovering these less obvious but possibly important relationships, we can better understand some of our patients, and the complexity of their early attachment history.

There may also be a role today, particularly for those patients who have difficulty attaching or trusting, to engage nature or art. For some patients it may be enough to just point them, but for others it may be helpful to explore ways to cognitively understand the experience. “When you feel the power of the rising sun,” you might ask, “is it the Holy Spirit that fills you?” Have you read, you might ask, *The Gospel of Saint Thomas*? Now all of this doesn’t sound very analytic, but I think you get my point: it can be useful to explore and perhaps discover meaning underlying meaningful experience.

Conclusion

The ideas that I’ve presented today remain very much a hypothesis, which require further development and testing. I would say more, and need to say more, about the specifics of *embodied simulation* in regard to the experience of inanimate objects, but I don’t have the allotted time to do so today. That elaboration will have to wait for another time.