Why Do We Mindread?

Human beings spend a lot of time trying to figure out what other human beings are thinking: We try to read each other’s minds. The thinking is that by observing people’s behavior, we try to infer each other’s hidden thoughts, so that we can better predict future behavior. There is a lot of debate about how we manage this, but a great deal of consensus about why we do it. It seems obvious: By figuring out what other people think, we are better able to predict their behavior — and clearly knowing what someone is going to do is very useful! This is plausible from an evolutionary perspective: If we know what other people are thinking, & hence how they will behave, we are better able to coordinate our behavior. Being able to coordinate in groups gave humans an evolutionary advantage by allowing our ancestors to engage in cooperative projects like group hunts, group warfare, group predator defense, and so forth.

However, despite its plausibility, I think this explanation of why we mindread is misguided. The idea that I must accurately figure out what you are thinking before I can successfully coordinate with you seems implausible the minute we reflect on how quickly and seamlessly humans interact. In this talk, I provide some strong reasons to reject the received explanation of why we mindread, and suggest an alternative.

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A reception will follow at 14 Glebe Street