The Anthropology of Intentions: Language in a World of Others, by Alessandro Duranti

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BOOK REVIEW

Promises, Promises


Making a promise may seem a straightforward, fundamental, and in many ways exemplary human action. I made a promise to review this book, for example. My intentions were sincere, but when other commitments took priority I found the pressure of the self-imposed obligation somewhat onerous. Completing this review, then, was something of a relief, as well as a fulfillment of what the promise was about in the first place, all those months ago. It was also, I should add, a pleasure.

Theory of mind has been one of psychology’s “hot topics”: 3,950,000 entries in Google Scholar; and Google Ngram shows an explosive increase starting around 1985 (though the term is often considered to have been coined by Premack and Woodruff in 1978), an increase of 600% by 2010 with no sign of slowing. Yet a countermovement has begun. Alongside theory of mind, or the mentalistic stance (Gopnik & Wellman, 1992), or what Dennett (1989) called the intentional stance, is, several scholars have recently proposed, a normative stance (Clément, Bernard, & Kaufmann, 2011; Rakoczy & Schmidt, 2013), a theory of society (Hirschfeld, 2013), or an attention to deontology (Wellman & Miller, 2008), that is at least as important as theory of mind, perhaps even more so. The suggestion is that we understand a person’s actions not, or at least not only, by inferring or intuiting his or her beliefs, desires, goals, and intentions (by forming a theory about their mental states) but also by paying attention to the social contexts in which the person acts: to the person’s rights, responsibilities, and obligations within social relationships, community conventions, and societal institutions.

It is in the light of this shift in emphasis, this turning of the tide, that Sandro Duranti’s book makes its welcome contribution. In 2008 “normative stance” still had only one sixtieth the citations of “theory of mind”; Duranti’s book promises to make a difference!

At first glance, the title, The Anthropology of Intentions: Language in a World of Others, might seem to promise the impossible. How on earth could anthropology gain access to and study people’s intentions? What link is suggested here between intentions and language? And should an anthropologist need to emphasize that the world contains other people? But in a sense that emphasis is the central point. Duranti, Distinguished Professor of Anthropology at UCLA, where he was also Dean of Social Sciences from 2009 to 2016, has written a book that can be read as a sustained examination and critique of our obsession with theory of mind. Drawing on his own extensive research in the United States and in Samoa (which was also the object of ethnographies by Margaret Mead and by Elinor Ochs, which Duranti draws upon), as well as reviewing work by many other anthropologists, he documents how “intentional discourse,” that is to say, talk about individuals’ intentions—their beliefs and desires, their plans and goals—is, in certain cultures and contexts, avoided and apparently unnecessary.

Duranti proposes, however, that the form of intentional discourse is not an either–or matter, an indication of some kind of division between people who read minds (the West?) and people who don’t (the rest?). Rather, we are witnessing here what he calls an “intentional continuum.” More on this shortly.

Many psychologists, and apparently some anthropologists, accept without much question a model, a theory, in which action (including talk) is taken to be based on the intentions of the agent. Understanding an action (whether in everyday interaction or as a scientific project) is assumed to require inferring or reconstructing an underlying, prior intention. Understanding the meaning of talk is taken to be a particular case of this reconstructive process; the meaning of an
utterance is similarly assumed to stem from the speaker’s intention. In addition, this model takes for granted that such intentions have the form of mental states. This Standard Theory was built upon the work of a trio of “ordinary language” philosophers at, or visiting, Oxford University: Paul Grice, John Austin, and John Searle. Duranti contends, however, that “a great deal of what philosophers write about intentions is folk-theory, with little empirical support” (p. 192). One might reasonably advance the same claim about psychologists.

The analysis of promising is a paradigmatic case of the Standard Theory. The speech act of making a promise, in this analysis, is a performative, an act that is performed by speaking, and intention is one of several key aspects of performing that act, one of its felicity conditions (sometimes called the “state-of-mind” condition). There is, indeed, some complexity to making a promise even within theory of mind. But that complexity is nothing compared with the subtlety that Duranti’s book brings to light and starts to explore.

Duranti doesn’t want to abandon the notion of intention. Rather, he seeks to make the case that intentions are “cognitive, emotional, and embodied dispositions always embedded in an intersubjective world of experience” (p. 16). In particular, he proposes that we can understand the force of an utterance or action—what that action accomplishes—in other ways than by inferring intention in the sense of an individual mental state. What makes a promise appropriate, or even possible, Duranti argues, is the way it is “embedded in its situation, in human customs and its institutions” (Wittgenstein, as cited by Duranti).

The Standard Theory views a promise as a personal commitment made by one individual to another, its key basis being the speaker’s intention to bind him- or herself to a future action. But a moment’s consideration—or the exploration of empirical data—shows us that other speech acts are binding because they occur in public: oaths, announcements, declarations. The centrality, and indeed the very possibility, of making a promise depends, it turns out on closer analysis, on a particular socioeconomic order.

Duranti builds a steady critique of the Standard Theory. He explores the implications of the fact that people are often unconscious of their own intentions, and that they cannot anticipate the unintended consequences of their own actions, so that interpretations of actions and of the meaning of utterances are inevitably retrospective, perhaps mainly good rationalizations. The Standard Theory generally fails to recognize the distinction between practical and theoretical involvement, and when it does pay some attention it assumes that the theoretical attitude has priority. Duranti argues in contrast that a theoretical stance is not fundamental, that it becomes possible through language, and that children learn it from their elders. Practical action displays intentionality, but it does not necessarily flow from mental-state intentions.

Duranti’s work has long been influenced by phenomenology, especially the work of Edmund Husserl. This book is no exception, but Duranti complements his appeal to Husserl with a discussion of Heidegger’s critique of his teacher’s analysis of experience, and of Husserl’s published and unpublished responses to Heidegger, and his later writing. He adroitly summarizes the debate between Husserl and Heidegger over the notion of intentions and the character of the broader concept of Intentionality—the way that human experiences are directed toward the world, in a variety of ways.

Duranti also grounds his discussion in a review of relevant literature in linguistic anthropology. The book begins with a detailed discussion of the strengths and weaknesses of Searle’s theory of speech acts, including responses by Michelle Rosaldo and others. The anthropological critique of Searle’s analysis as simply “too Western” is, Duranti argues, not quite right. Certainly, the very word “intention” proves hard to translate into many other languages. Certainly Samoans are generally anti-introspective. They are incurious about motives and much more interested in obligations and responsibilities, conventions, and expectations. Samoans are (philosophical) pragmatists. They read a person’s action in terms of its impact on social relations and its consequences for public “face” in social groups and societal institutions. Samoans, in short, focus on the way that action builds on and reconstitutes the social order.

The fact that a society can carry on a great deal of complex social interaction with little concern for people’s inner thoughts about what should be done and with a much more obvious concern for the
public, displayed, performative aspect of language is, in my opinion, an important fact which any theoretical framework concerned with the process of interpretation should take into account. (p. 95)

On the other hand, Duranti points out that there is no single, monolithic “Western” model of intentions. Alternatives to the mental-state theory of intentions, and to theory of mind, have been proposed by various figures in Western philosophy and social science. Improvisation (he has studied musical improvisation at UCLA) provides a model of intentional activity that is prereflective and intersubjective and that involves a variety of stances.

The anthropology of intentions would, in Duranti’s view, explore the models—both the concepts and the practices—of intentionality in different communities. It would be a study of “ethnopragsmatics,” based on field research with “a particular group of people who cannot but speak to one another in particular ways, for which they are accountable practically, morally, and aesthetically” (p. 22).

Linked to the notion of intention are notions of truth and sincerity. The sincerity of anthropological discourse and its truth claims has been much examined for some time now. Theory of mind is tied up with a representational model of knowledge and a correspondence theory of truth, as was the traditional conception of ethnography. In this model, a proposition—whether it is a mental belief or a verbal statement—can only be true or false. Outside academia, however, truth is various, debatable, contestable, and a form of power. Recognition of these characteristics has transformed anthropological fieldwork and the discipline’s understanding of the aims of ethnography. Duranti argues that there are many ways to relate to the world, through multiple kinds of intentional act. Judgments of truth are always embedded in human practices and institutions, in which code, context, audience, and activity play crucial roles precisely because they are not in the agents’ minds, as the Standard Theory has generally assumed. Propositional content and illocutionary force are not separable; both acts and meanings are open to multiple interpretations, which are and must be negotiated.

To illustrate these points, Duranti provides an analysis of political discourse—the U.S. House race by Walter Capps in 1996—and documents how the turn-taking of televised debate makes contesting and defending truth-claims difficult, and so makes truth an exploitable resource for participants. As more recent political events suggest, skilled politicians involve their audience in the claims they are making, or half-making, or implying, thereby playing with good effect upon audience members’ convictions and suspicions. Truth is not the sole criterion of a belief, or of a speech act; what is an acceptable account of reality depends on attributions of membership (including being an “outsider”), entitlement, and intention. A skilled politician is able to ride the wild horse of audience reaction, so that the truth of what is said—as well as the promises that are made—are not only not the only consideration, they are products of the audience as much as of the speaker. The intention attributed to the speaker changes, and so does the intention the speaker attributes to him- or herself. When a politician makes a promise to, for example, “make America great again,” the issue is not so much his sincerity as the fact that his words allow and even encourage the people who hear them to make a variety of attributions as to the character of the future course of action that is being offered as desirable.

In recent years, there has been a proposal within anthropology that the capacity for theory of mind is universal but that some cultures invoke and impose on their members the “doctrine” that minds are opaque. Duranti responds to this proposal by calling for detailed analysis of everyday interaction, and he returns to his own Samoan data to look for evidence of mind reading. He suggests that a universalistic position can be combined with cultural contextuality. One consideration here is whether it would not be helpful to use a distinction that Searle himself made, namely, between prior intention and intention-in-action. For example, consider this example that Duranti cites from the field notes of another anthropologist: “I quickly learned that if my eyes flitted to a bowl of food for even a moment, it would be offered to me immediately” (p. 225). Is this a matter of inferring beliefs and desires? Or of observing an intention (to eat more food) in the action (of glancing)? When Duranti concludes that “some kind of mind-reading obviously goes on in Samoa, as in any other place in the Pacific or elsewhere in the world” (p. 228), perhaps he concedes too much too quickly. As he notes on the next page, whether such an interpretation “should always be
glossed as ‘reading other minds’ depends on the specific situation as well as on our theory of human action.” The search for empirical evidence has to be combined with theoretical clarification and critique, as Duranti well knows.

Duranti also explores how adults try to “modify” children’s attention, and in doing so to change their way of being in the world, encouraging specific ways of “seeing as” (and “hearing as”) so as to alter what emerges in their awareness. This phenomenon suggests that it might be more helpful to think about what is going on in the example of interpreting the ethnographer’s glance not as “mind reading” but as a kind of “seeing as” of action that brings to the fore its telos, its intention-in-action. The shift here would not, or not necessarily, be to a “theoretical attitude,” as Duranti suggests, so much as to what we might call a teleological attitude. Socialization as modification—in Husserl’s technical sense—accomplished through speech (e.g., by posing particular questions to a child) is a powerful idea. Ways of seeing are ways of interpreting, and ways of interpreting are accomplished with more experienced others before they are accomplished individually. When we “read another person’s mind” we are typically involved in some kind of activity with them, in an artifact-filled environment and as participants in a social institution, such as a kinship group. This fact makes it even more likely that we read actions, not minds, and in doing so find in those actions a range of possible reasons and motives for action, by far the majority of which will not be intentions. As Duranti points out, intentionality “is intrinsically intertwined with intersubjectivity” (p. 289).

Duranti, then, aims not to avoid talk of intention but rather to relocate the concept, out of the mind and into the social world. He proposes an “intentional continuum”: “a range of graded ways of being disposed or mentally (and sensorially) connected with some entity in the world” (p. 290). The standard components of theory of mind—beliefs, desires, and goals—capture only a small part of this continuum. Searle’s (1983) attempt to reduce all points on the continuum to the fundamental Intentional states of belief and desire seems less than satisfying (though I should confess I once had two cats named Bel and Des to celebrate this attempt). When we understand another person’s actions, or grasp the meaning of their words, we are paying attention to one part or another of this continuum, “seeing as” in ways that have been shaped by the culture in which we live.

In short, Alessandro Duranti has offered us a text that sums up much of his own research over a period of many years and that points toward a much-needed rethinking of the concepts of mind and of mental states. Very promising indeed!

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