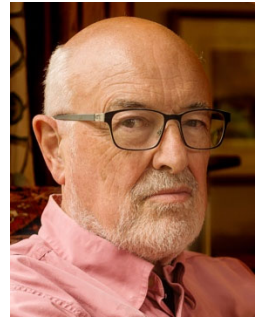


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Talk Title:

How do we know what other people are going to do?

Abstract:

People are predictable. What they do next is not entirely free, but strongly constrained. The more we know about these constraints, the better our predictions will be. But this knowledge also enables us to make our own behaviour less easy to predict when we are competing with others.

The constraints on our behaviour form a hierarchy. At the lowest level the constraints are physical. We cannot suddenly change our direction of movement. This kind of constraint is used to make short-term predictions by many animals from dragon flies to rugby players. At an intermediate level of the hierarchy, our behaviour is constrained by preferences and goals. Human infants learn about peoples' preferences by observing their behaviour. And, if we know about peoples' goals, we can predict their behaviour on the knowledge that they will achieve their goal in the most efficient way possible. At the highest level of the hierarchy, peoples' behaviour is constrained by their beliefs and intentions. Making predictions at this level is called mentalising. This is the most difficult kind of prediction since simply observing behaviour is not enough.

During social interactions each partner will need to predict what the other is going to do. In competitive situations when we want to gain an advantage, such mutual prediction will be cognitively taxing. Each person must estimate where their opponent is in the hierarchy and operate at one level higher. By contrast, in cooperative situations we will try to operate at lower levels of the hierarchy so that prediction is made easier.