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Stream A: Consciousness and Naturalism

Title: Cultural variation in "theory of mind": The view from cognitive science

Abstract: Anthropological research over the last several decades has revealed a striking degree of cultural variation in the way people conceive of the mind. Unfortunately, however, this data has not received the attention it deserves from those outside of the anthropology community. The purpose of this talk is to bring this cross-cultural data into contact with the current state of our cognitive-scientific understanding of "theory of mind" in humans. Doing so provides a novel take on certain questions being debated among anthropologists, such as whether theory of mind might actually play as insignificant a role in some human cultures as the data suggests it does. At the same time, it raises new questions for those working on the evolution of distinctively human forms of coordination, communication, and social learning, activities that are all typically regarded as requiring sophisticated theory of mind abilities. These two sets of questions are related in that how we answer the former has consequences for how the latter should be answered. I conclude the talk by considering some of these connections and offering a few thoughts.

Bio: Ronald J. Planer received his PhD in Philosophy from Rutgers University in 2015. He is currently a Post-doctoral Research Associate in the School of Philosophy at the Australian National University. His research interests lie at the intersection of philosophy of psychology and biology, with a special focus on human evolution.