Book Reviews

Short Communication


Tim Crane’s introduction to contemporary philosophy of mind has now appeared in a second edition. The main change is the addition of a sixth chapter (replacing what was previously an epilogue) that considers the question of consciousness in the light of a physicalist world-view. In addition come new sections on modularity and evolutionary psychology in Chapters 4 and 5, plus a glossary and chronology at the end. Crane has also rewritten certain passages to accord better with his more recent ‘intentionalist’ conception of the mind (cf. Crane 2001), but the differences are and are meant to be minimal with respect to the aims and messages of this book.

The format of the new edition is thus six chapters: “The puzzle of representation”, “Understanding thinkers and their thoughts”, “Computers and thought”, “The mechanisms of thought”, “Explaining mental representation”, and “Consciousness and the mechanical mind”. The underlying focus is the nature of mental representation, but, as will be gathered from these headings, many other issues are discussed along the way. Most of these fall within the broad but integrated scope of cognitive science, and encompass, in addition to the many metaphysical questions of philosophy of mind, central themes of computer science and AI, some cognitive psychology, neuroscience and cognitive ethology, plus a smattering of philosophy of language (cf. the discussion of intensionality on pp. 32 ff.).

The dialectical line of the book is as follows: Representation, the phenomenon whereby some entity in the world stands for, codes information about or somehow ‘re-presents’ some other entity or state of affairs, is a puzzling one. Symbols and signs in and of themselves do not seem to ‘point’ towards other things or how these things are. Ordinary ways of thinking about representation as bits of language or pictures do not explain it, but take it for granted. We must therefore seek an answer to our question in an understanding of mental representation. This paves the way for the subsequent chapters, though Crane proceeds in the first instance obliquely, focusing in chapter 2 on what we can say about the mind and its relation to action. This turns out to accord pretty much with what people assume in
their everyday explanations of each other, namely, that action is caused by internal mental states, like beliefs, hopes and desires, that represent the world around us and thus serve to rationalise behaviour. The next chapter, bringing the title of the book more squarely into view, considers whether computers might be able to think in this way and, conversely whether thinkers like us might be computers. Chapter 4 considers what kind of computational mechanism might underlie our representational thought processes, given they are to an extent computational, with the debate between the language of thought hypothesis and connectionism looming large.

Chapter 5 faces up to the first of the two really hard issues in the philosophy of mind: whether mental representation can be naturalistically reduced to some relation that does not itself presuppose representation. Crane critically surveys some of the main options that aim to give a positive reply, and concludes that representation needn’t be reduced to maintain faith in a mechanical view of the mind, sketching an account based on theories due to Frances Egan and Mark Cummins.

Chapter 6 faces up to the second hard issue: the fact that we are conscious, that there is something *it’s like* to be a living, perceiving being. Crane sees this as posing a dilemma: On the one hand, if we assign consciousness a separate, non-physical form of existence, how does it get to influence and be influenced by physical happenings? On the other hand, if we see everything as physical, how do we account for the strong intuitions, as articulated in the well-known knowledge argument and zombie argument, that physical facts cannot explain consciousness? He does not however see any considerations here that speak against the mechanical view of the mind, viz. that internal representational states causally underlie behaviour. Rather, there are limits to the extent to which we can or should seek to explain central mental concepts—like representation and consciousness—though it is left somewhat unclear to what extent these limits are epistemic or metaphysical in nature (I’ll return to this below).

Given the warmth of reception that met the first edition of the book, both from reviewers and, I gather, users of the book as an introductory text (teachers and students alike), it is hardly necessary to say much about the virtues of the second edition, insofar as so much is retained unaltered. But lest anyone should be in doubt: Crane deploys his knowledge of the field with a deft touch, steering an admirably didactic middle way between superficiality and over-complexity. The writing style is refreshingly vernacular and relaxed, but not to the extent of avoiding technical discussions where these are required for understanding. There is a clear and engaging dialectical thread, which the digressions to explain concepts and connected debates enhance rather than obscure. Though the later (fifth and sixth) chapters of the book are intellectually more demanding, enough is said in the early chapters to satisfy the casual reader, whilst the more seriously philosophically-inclined are given a taste of the challenges that still face us.