

Please cite this article as:

Fernyhough, C. (in press). Even 'internalist' minds are social. *Style*.

Even 'internalist' minds are social

Charles Fernyhough

As a psychologist, I welcome Alan Palmer's thoughtful appraisal of the value of cognitive-psychological approaches to literary minds. Such accounts enrich literary studies by using ideas about real-world mental functioning to explain how minds operate on the pages of a literary text. Palmer's call for a renewed focus on social minds demonstrates the possibilities offered by such interdisciplinary approaches, and it comes from an author who is well versed in the psychological literature. My commentary will focus on some areas in which his theory might be extended to provide a slightly fuller account of the minds that are encountered in novels.

The argument before us is premised on an opposition between internalist and externalist approaches to the novel. Texts which lend themselves to an externalist perspective are those which "describe *intermental thought*, which is joint, group, shared, or collective thought, as opposed to intramental, or private, individual thought" (p. 1, original emphasis). Novels are variable entities, of course, and certain texts lend themselves more readily to interpretation within one or other of these frameworks. Palmer's main point is that the operation of social minds has been neglected in the predominance of internalist literary criticism, with its privileging of intramental over intermental thought. In so doing, he relies on an opposition between social and individual minds.

Let's begin with two terms, *thinking* and *thought*, which appear frequently in the target essay. These terms are underspecified in psychology (e.g., Fernyhough, 2009), and conceptual difficulties follow from a lack of clarity about their extension. If we define thinking as everything that the conscious mind does, then we end up with a term that is too broad to be of any real use. Much of what our brains do is underpinned by relatively autonomous, highly evolved cognitive sub-systems, many of whose operations take place without our awareness of them (see e.g. Carruthers, 2002). What we usually describe as 'thinking', in contrast, is domain-general, conscious, active, coherent, and frequently goal-directed. I have argued that it is also

fundamentally semiotic (Ferryhough, 2006; 2009), typically mediated by natural language (although other sign systems such as sign language can also be a medium for thinking). This view represents a take on the theories of the Russian psychologist L. S. Vygotsky (e.g., 1934/1987), who argued that our higher mental functions develop out of semiotically mediated social interactions which are gradually internalized to form verbal thinking. In my own formulation of these ideas (e.g., Ferryhough, 2008; 2009), I have emphasized how thinking consequently retains the dialogic quality of those primordial social exchanges.

In some ways, this view of thinking (as verbal thought or inner speech) does not sit well with the internalist perspective that Palmer describes. Some of our mental activity is, as Palmer notes (p. 9), fairly readily perceptible to others. But the Vygotskian view would hold that even prototypically internalist forms of mental activity, such as inner speech, are fundamentally social. Whether or not the reader will accept that all thinking involves inner speech (bearing in mind that I do not designate all conscious cognitive activity or intelligence as ‘thinking’), it remains the case that large parts of our conscious mental lives involve internal language (see e.g. Baars, 2003). Indeed, a bold statement of this view would hold that there is no such thing as non-social, purely intramental thought. Thinking is constitutionally intermental, because its dialogicality is guaranteed by its social origin. Palmer accepts this description of some mental activity (e.g., p. 11), but he continues to rely on the intermental/intramental opposition in developing his argument. In my view, it is precisely because minds are (intramentally) social that certain forms of intermental thinking become possible. There is a developmental story here, in which early social exchanges restructure cognition to allow the development over early childhood of more advanced forms of social understanding (Ferryhough, 2008). The importance of intermental thinking as both input and output in this developmental process provides another reason for us to heed Palmer’s call for increased attention to socially distributed mental activity.

The implication for our reading of novels is therefore that intramental minds need to be viewed as social as well. No doubt it is because he needs to emphasize his own positive thesis, but Palmer appears to underestimate the extent to which minds are social, even in novels which appear to lend themselves most readily to an internalist reading. On the view outlined here, Bakhtinian dialogicality is not merely a feature of literary texts and other discourses; it is a fundamental structural principle of

human cognition (Fernyhough, 1996). And it carries the implication that all thinking is intermental, even that “inner, introspective, private, solitary, individual, psychological, mysterious, and detached” (p. 10) cognition favoured in internalist accounts. There is a small irony here, in that Palmer views the verbalization of thinking in internalist accounts as a telling feature of their unhelpfully abstracted nature. I would argue that it is precisely this verbal quality of consciousness that, through internalization of dialogue, allows the inner to be social. Depictions of individual consciousnesses lend themselves to verbal expression because those consciousnesses themselves develop from social, linguistically mediated exchanges.

I would therefore question the opposition underlying Palmer’s theory. It is not only that internalism fails to capture important ways in which social minds inhabit novels; it is also an inaccurate description of human mental functioning. Mind doesn’t just extend *beyond* the skin; the social *penetrates* the skin. A reliance on an internalist/externalist opposition betrays a lingering adherence to a one-mind/one-brain position of precisely the kind that Palmer is keen to avoid.

I think that one reason for this is that the conceptual framework of ‘theory of mind’ (so useful for literary studies in other respects) is itself wedded to a kind of cognitive individualism. ‘Reading’ another mind, according to the cognitivist orthodoxy, involves constructing a representation in one sealed container (mind or brain) of what is going on in another sealed container. Both Palmer and I would argue that minds don’t work that way. The danger is that, in importing otherwise valuable conceptual apparatus from cognitive science, some unexamined assumptions are imported too. Palmer asserts correctly that two main views of theory of mind have dominated the literature in the past twenty-five years: theory-theory and simulation theory. But these fundamentally individualistic approaches to mind-reading are not the only games in town. Palmer notes that certain other views of mind-reading de-emphasize the formation of cognitive representations of other minds, in favour of narrative (e.g., Hutto, 2008) and social-constructivist (e.g., Carpendale and Lewis, 2004) accounts. But these accounts risk losing explanatory power if they cannot offer a clearly specified psychological theory of how social understanding works. My own view (e.g., Fernyhough, 1996; 2008) is that many of the difficulties with our theorizing about social understanding become more tractable when we take seriously the dialogicality of thinking. To summarize very briefly: because the social penetrates the skin as well as extending beyond it, it is possible to see mental functioning as

involving a simultaneous accommodation of multiple perspectives and voices. These in turn provide the cognitive architecture which makes possible the holding of other perspectives, of the kind needed for mind-reading or social understanding.

To conclude, I would invite Palmer to consider what his externalist perspective can bring to our theories of ‘individual’ minds. Palmer is writing about fictional minds, not real ones. But if ideas from mainstream psychology are to continue to enrich literary studies, the implications of this view are worth exploring. What can literary-theoretical accounts of fictional depictions of consciousness gain from an acceptance of the dialogicality of thinking: not just as a hermeneutic tool, but as a structural principle of human cognition? It is of no surprise to me that internalist accounts are interested in inner speech, because I view inner speech as a primary tool for high-level cognition. But this is not necessarily to confine such accounts to the individualist and non-social. We should be interested in inner speech—in its heterogeneity, functional significance, phenomenology, and developmental pathways—because it is inner speech (or more specifically the internalization of dialogue) that makes the minds associated with biological organisms fundamentally social. Early in his essay, Palmer (p. 4) presents the social as an essential context within which fictional mental functioning must be considered. But the social is more than context; it is constitutive.

References

Baars, B. J. (2003). How brain reveals mind: Neural studies support the fundamental role of conscious experience. *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, 10.

Carpendale, J. I. M., & Lewis, C. (2004). Constructing an understanding of mind: The development of children’s social understanding within social interaction. *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, 27, 79-151.

Carruthers, P. (2002). The cognitive functions of language. *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, 25, 657-726.

Fernyhough, C. (1996). The dialogic mind: A dialogic approach to the higher mental functions. *New Ideas in Psychology*, 14, 47-62.

Fernyhough, C. (2008). Getting Vygotskian about theory of mind: Mediation, dialogue, and the development of social understanding. *Developmental Review*, 28, 225-262.

Fernyhough, C. (2009). Dialogic thinking. In A. Winsler, C. Fernyhough and I. Montero (eds.), *Private speech, executive functioning, and the development of verbal self-regulation*. Cambridge University Press.

Hutto, Daniel D. (2008). *Folk Psychological Narratives: The Sociocultural Basis of Understanding Reasons*. Cambridge, MA.: MIT Press.

Vygotsky, L. S. (1987). *Thinking and speech*. In *The Collected Works of L. S. Vygotsky, Vol. 1*. New York: Plenum. (Original publication 1934).