

Manfred Jahn
University of Cologne

Mind = Mind + Social Mind?: A Response to Alan Palmer's Target Essay

Let me begin by saying that many of Palmer's ideas strike me as inspirational and that I admire the verve with which he tackles his subject. However, rather than tick off areas of agreement, of which there are many, constructive criticism may be better served if I focus on reconstructing some of the questions and problems that I encountered in the course of reading his essay.

Often, it seems, I get tripped up by ordinary language semantics. My first brief moment of doubt comes on page one, when Palmer asserts that "[a]ll of us, every day, know for a lot of the time what other people are thinking." In order to identify "other minds" in specific contexts I will use some simple shorthand acronyms, say "OMs" for other minds in general, "ROMs" for real other minds, and "FOMs" for fictional other minds. I understand Palmer's aim is to explore social access to ROMs, then investigate how it is handled in FOMs, and then come back to ROMs, hoping to garner some interdisciplinary profit along the way. All of which is fine with me. Now, in my mental lexicon, *know* is a fairly powerful verb signifying a high degree of certainty. In fact, on a gradient of epistemic certainty, I tend to place it in a polar position, with three further terms (all mentioned at one point or another in Palmer's essay) tentatively completing the scale thus: *not know* < *construe* < *assume* < *know*. As in the quote above, Palmer generally collapses the scale in favor of *know*, which strikes me as odd. Building on a normal-case scenario, it immediately necessitates some hedging, already present in "for a lot of time" in the above quote, and there is more in "I am not saying that we *always* know *all*. . . Sometimes we know . . . at other times we do not know . . . Sometimes we have secret thoughts . . . at other times . . ." (2), and so on, repeatedly, throughout. While laudably circumspect, this does not make for smooth reading or smooth theorizing. Readers do not want to be burdened with a backpack of exceptions, and I assume a writer does not want to go through a constant rigmarole of disclaimers either.

Otherwise, yes, I am prepared to accept that ROMs become "visible" and that mind content can be guessed at — known, Palmer says - via behavioral indicators and other external evidence. In fact, there is some internal evidence, too, because I

can personally attest to the fact that “You are not paying attention,” when addressed to me, is usually perfectly true. I would not go as far as to say assumptions about ROMs are verifiable, but I am happy to admit they are subject to confirmation and disconfirmation. (Should behavioral indicators be treated as a semiotic system? I was beginning to wonder, but then decided to leave well enough alone.) Let’s have a look at an example. You are sitting in an airplane, and you and the passenger seated next to you are observing a third passenger beginning to behave in a suspicious manner. Sure enough, your terrorism script springs into action, and you will readily assume that the passenger next to you shares your terrorism script and finds himself, just like you do, in the victim slot. Minimal body language such as meaningful eye contact may establish some mutual understanding prior to, perhaps, agreeing on a course of action. There’s your “intermental encounter,” Palmer will say. Fine — but note I refrained from phrasing any of this in terms of *knowing* - opting for the terrorism script you are pursuing an assumption that carries a failure clause as *know* does not; you are even taking chances as — “for all you know,” you know — that person next to you might be either “one of them” or else a security guard pretending to be an ordinary passenger. Indeed your cognitive system would be well-advised to have these fall-back constructions “at the back of your mind,” in case any of them should bubble up to the top.

Now let us consider “knowing” OMs in other contexts, including possible and fictional scenarios. God knows our minds; no shilly-shallying assumptions or constructions needed here. Second, a person gifted with parapsychic “clairaudience” apparently hears and thus knows what other people think. Third, the character Rosa in Ursula LeGuin’s science fiction short story “Diary of a Rose” knows because she knows how to operate a psychoscope, an apparatus that visualizes thoughts. Fourth, heterodiegetic (“omniscient”) narrators know because they have that epistemic privilege. Fifth, readers of fiction know FOMs provided the narrator has opened them up for inspection. Hence God, clairauditors, Rosa, narrators, and readers of fiction can know OMs like no real human being can know ROMs. My point is: Palmer, asserting that real humans can know ROMs, already uses *know* in a not-quite literal sense. This wouldn’t be very serious if it were an isolated slippage. However, I suspect it is systemic.

Let us briefly stand on our head and consider the opposite of visible thought, namely the notion that “thoughts are free” (henceforth TAF), as in the German folksong, known to all children here: “Who can guess them, they fly by like nightly shadows, no-one can know them, no hunter shoot them dead,” the song merrily continues — whilst Palmer, situating TAF “in the context of literary studies,”

unceremoniously brushes the notion aside calling it “the sort of thing that sounds true while it is being said within that context, but, in other contexts, can sound like complete nonsense” (1). But TAF, as attested by the song itself, is part of popular wisdom, not just “literary studies,” and the epistemological problem of OMs, which is TAF by another name, has been discussed in philosophy and cognitive science as anything but nonsense. Further, as a near-universal truism TAF is a good candidate for being a belief that we can attribute to others. In fact, it could be argued that it is on the principle of TAF that lying, deception and dissimulation can be acquired as possible modes of mental operation. At one point (say from around age three) everybody knows TAF for a truth, and knows that everybody else knows it for a truth, too. Cliché it may be, truisms usually are, but calling it “silly” and “complete nonsense” seems rather a harsh judgment considering that dissidents in all ages have staked their lives on it, often successfully so. In short, the proposition *I know that you know that thoughts are free* will need to be considered true. But it is, of course, a blatant contradiction, and do you know how I was able to generate it? I simply adopted Palmer’s usage of *know*.

If I am not mistaken, there are quite a few other key terms — “visible,” “read,” “have access to,” “share” — that also suffer from stretched natural language semantics, and this problem also troubles the core element of Palmer’s exposition, namely the “question what is meant by a mind” (16). His answer, boiled down to bare essentials, is that “the whole mind” equals private mind plus social mind. Sounds alright, but clearly all depends on what the summands mean. Private mind, I take it, is what is traditionally understood by mind. Social mind, according to Palmer, describes “those aspects of the whole mind that are revealed through the externalist perspective” (10). Much of what is listed under the heading of externalist perspective (11) can apply to garden-variety private minds. So I, for one, assumed Palmer to suggest that any single person’s mind can be partitioned into two halves, one private, one social. One’s social mind, I thought, would be busy processing assumptions and beliefs attributed to others, whereas one’s private mind would be inward-directed, self-centered and all that. But this is not the intended meaning at all: What Palmer is after is “intermental units” (12) and “group minds” (15). When he draws up his typology of social minds (14), all types are based on intermental units comprising at least two brains. Consequently, a social mind, in my revised understanding of the term, is an aggregate of minds, hence a metaphorical “mind,” projecting the ordinary meaning of mind to a new subject and a new context, namely a group of people. Social mind and private mind, Palmer submits, are “similar in some ways, different in others” (23), but this seems well compatible with the nature

of metaphor in general, comparing something new (social mind) to something known (private mind), linking hitherto unrelated domains and opening up new ways of seeing things. But this is another misunderstanding because Palmer, possibly carried away by the momentum of his case, goes on to affirm that Middlemarch “literally and not just metaphorically has a mind of its own” (19), and that he is “not referring to this mind in any metaphorical sense” (23). To me, this is like the notorious sports commentator saying that Barcelona have promised “they will quite literally play out of their skins tonight.” Come now, supposing your love were like a red, red rose, would you be tempted to get up and ask your local horticulturist to consider growing the genus *Amorata* in order to offer a full assortment of roses? I think not. If “social mind” were literal, it should no longer be called “mind,” if only to avoid confusion. Do not use one term when two are needed, logicians say in such a case, wielding an “anti-razor” (for a change).

As a matter of fact, Palmer already has a second term, albeit one with a far less sexy name, it is the intermental unit. At the minimal level, an intermental unit comes into being when two or more people share assumptions. One could leave it at that, but Palmer wants more. “Sometimes,” he says, “[mind reading] is what might be called *reciprocal*: there is a conscious and fully intended sharing of thought and so people will know that others know what they are thinking” (13). Then he takes another step, claiming that intermental units can engage in “intermental communication” (14). In other words, the minds forming the intermental unit do not only share mental constructs such as a terrorism script, they also share information, as one shares an apple. Again the argument slips from one sense of a word to another, and *share* isn’t just any word; it is one of those words that Palmer wants to add to “the existing science” (26). This may all be yet another misunderstanding, but hasn’t the dividing line between intermental communication and parapsychic hocus-pocus become impossibly fine? And can the promise of a paradigm change be strong enough to tolerate the “anomaly” (26) that raises its head here?

Voicing these reservations I am not denying the merits of inquiring into community beliefs and strategies, be it in history, politics, literature or cognition. Palmer’s dissection of the Middlemarch mind is a brilliant piece of analysis, and I expect the book-length version of his study to contain many more of such insightful readings. The question is whether it is a good idea to allow a theory to rest on “anomalies” of the types discussed above. If not, then here are some suggestions on how to tackle some of the stumbling blocks. (I realize that in what follows I tend to set “my” cognitive sources against “his” cognitive sources, but how can I not do so?) Let me do it by numbers. (1) For a better handling of

defaults and exceptions (see my terrorism script example with its crucial alternate options), the concept of “preference rule systems,” as proposed by Ray Jackendoff in *Semantics and Cognition*, should come in handy. (2) For the reasons given, I find *construction* of ROM content far more adequate than *knowledge* (better than *assumptions*, too), especially if tackled from a dedicated constructivist point of view. Interestingly, nothing will be directly visible, readable, accessible or knowable on the constructivist road. As far as I am concerned, this is a welcome consequence, liberating the language of the explicans from the language of the explicandum. (3) On a similar note, consider everyday utterances such as “I know what you are thinking” and “I can read you like a book.” They demonstrate how strongly Palmer’s exposition relies on folk-psychological models of ROMs, and there is nothing wrong with that. However, as argued above, “Thoughts are free” is exactly the same type of folk truth as the other two, creating one of the many contradictions that characterize folk wisdom. There is a solution to this, namely to add a counterbalancing non-folkloristic perspective, by all means a constructivist and/or cognitive one. Monika Fludernik’s natural narratology is the obvious case in point — it has a central interest in folk judgments but is not folkloristic itself, interprets without repeating folk-interpretive moves on a theoretical level. As far as I can see, Gilles Fauconnier’s theory of mental spaces provides the infrastructure that allows one to pursue such a dual perspective. And, finally, (4), if the concept of “mind” is to be broadened or redefined then it should be done stipulatively, not by claiming that “mind” is, and all along has been, something dictionaries have been unaware of. In the absence of a stipulative definition, little would be lost, indeed much stands to be gained, if the metaphorical origin of social minds were acknowledged. In fact, analogies springing from the metaphorical impulse might turn out to be catalytic — just consider the notion that social minds might come with a body, a center of gravity, and a time/place tag. Possibly, conceptual blending theory, as laid out by Fauconnier and Mark Turner, could be used to further exploit the metaphor of social minds for all it is worth.

Works Cited

- Jackendoff, Ray. *Semantics and Cognition*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1983. Print.
- Fauconnier, Gilles. *Mental Spaces*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1994. Print.
- , and Mark Turner. “Rethinking Metaphor.” *The Cambridge Handbook of Metaphor and Thought*. Ed. Ray Gibbs. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2008. 53-66. Print.