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Intermental Functions, Evolved Cognition, and Fictional Representation

In “Social Minds,” Alan Palmer extends the perspective he developed in *Fictional Minds*, offering an important revisionary perspective that notes the centrality of a cognitive approach to all other approaches and points attention to intermental function as a corrective to a too-exclusive attention to internal character thought in narrative theory. How people think as groups and how such “mind beyond the skin” becomes represented in fiction forms the central purpose of his essay and his forthcoming book (6, 27-28). In concert with scholars like Lisa Zunshine and Blakey Vermeule, Palmer’s claims that readers make sense of storyworlds primarily through the construction of fictional minds and through the comprehension of intermental activity are vitally important to grounding narratology in the social nature and function of cognition. However, I see three aspects of Palmer’s argument that could benefit from some strengthening: 1) the reason social minds are so fundamental in human life; 2) the definition of “intermental thought”; and 3) the differences between literary representations of intermental function and this same phenomenon on the ground, so to speak. Early in the essay, Palmer asserts emphatically that he is not saying that fictional minds are the same as real minds, but, toward the end of his essay, in his otherwise valuable discussion of the *Middlemarch* mind, Palmer does not elucidate the differences between the narrative representation of intermental function and everyday intermental function.

When Palmer presents the *Middlemarch* passage, he asks four questions: Who? How? What? Why? Stepping back and returning to the initial portion of the essay, I would like to suggest that bringing this pragmatic spirit to bear on the fact of social minds might result in a more comprehensive theory. Both Palmer’s present and past work stresses that our motivating interest in fiction stems from our interest in persons, and hence, from a *fundamental human sociality*. Like many others in cognitive narratology and cognitive poetics who have begun moving in the promising direction of the phylogenetic and ontogenetic underpinnings of our aesthetic accomplishments, Palmer stops short of exploring the “why” of human sociality, since his research base consists in the areas of cognitive neuroscience

allied primarily to AI and philosophy. Extending beyond this domain into some of the subdisciplines that comprise evolutionary social science and developmental psychology provides a profound rationale for the ultimate cause of human sociality.

Although there are a wide range of perspectives in evolutionary social science (Laland and Brown), no one, to my knowledge, disputes the importance of *the human group* to the survival and evolution of the species, and it is here that we should look for the source of intermental function. Beginning approximately five million years ago, the evolution of stronger and more extensive emotional attachments and greater cognitive power formed the basis of kinship groups (approximately fifty to one hundred persons) that eventually provided the security for medium-sized, vulnerable human to exist on the open savanna. Evolving the mechanics of high-level sociality and bipedalism, however, takes some time: the first of these groups, the gracile australopithecenes (including *a. afarensis* and *a. africanus*, between 4 and 2.5 million years ago), was partially arboreal, not fully bipedal, and slowly developing group-dependence (Mithen 25). Ultimately, cooperative groups afforded protection not only from larger, faster predators but from other groups of humans competing for territory and resources. Citing Peter Carruthers, Palmer points to the need early humans had for tracking movements and updating representations, and he especially stresses the enhanced cognitive power that intermental function offers. Explanatory power is certainly crucial to the wayfinding, knowledge-seeking human species (Kaplan), which does not have built-in homing mechanisms like other species but must instead interpret clues cognitively (Ross). But explanatory power does not itself explain how evolution got us to work together in the first place, nor does it cover a range of instances of intermental function we might consider. A group of early hominids attempting to interpret the nature, freshness, and direction of a set of animal tracks around a watering hole is indeed pooling its explanatory power and thus requires a far different type of intermental activity from the sorts of social prejudices and biases inscribed in the *Middlemarch* passage, which Palmer himself points out are phrased in terms of passive voice and presupposition, hardly an epistemic language, or from a group of co-workers casting bets on, say, the size and nature of Tiger Woods's final divorce settlement.

Artificial intelligence models efficiently point to explanatory power, but what powers *evolved* human groups in the first place is emotional bonding; and sometimes the *feel* of the group itself, or the fun of it, may supersede the informational aspect of intermental activity, as in the last two examples above. *Feeling is first in human evolution and development*. The altricial—slow developing, dependent—human infant cries and solicits proximity, and the pattern of solicitation, care, and long-

term close contact with the primary caregiver forms the basis of a first social relationship (Bowlby; Stern). Contemporary attachment theory suggests that these primary bonds form the foundation of all subsequent social attachments, and that they evolved to serve group cohesion. The emotional bonds to group members motivate continued physical closeness or proximity; in evolutionary prehistory, these bonds established the substrate of our sociality and the mechanism upon which the explanatory power of the group might be built. The human species did indeed come to occupy what John Tooby and Irven DeVore characterize as the cognitive niche. To all appearances, the human species underwent a cognitive explosion relatively recently (within approximately the last 60,000-30,000 years) that enabled the development of language, external memory stores, and art, all of which are linked to enhanced explanation, behavioral flexibility, and environmental manipulation (Tooby and DeVore; Mithen; Donald). But none of these would have been possible without the bonding mechanisms that underlie human sociality and are entwined with intermental activity.

In addressing the first point of my critique (that Palmer might provide some account of the cause of social minds) I have begun to address the second (that the term “intermental function” needs some clarification). Once we recognize the extraordinary sociality of human beings and begin to consider the range and nature of intermental functions any one of us moves in and out of with great fluidity and engages in on a regular basis, the possibility of establishing a typology of *everyday intermentality* (as opposed to fictional intermentality) strikes me as problematic. Some of Palmer’s examples include conversation and some don’t, but that is not the least of it. Much of our time spent alone involves intermental function through what Merlin Donald calls the External Storage System of memory—everything from the most ancient, rudimentary symbolic markings to stop signs and shopping lists and books and computers. To my understanding, writing this response is an intensely intermental activity (otherwise, I do not know why I would be doing it). What about listening to a purely instrumental composition? Surely neither language nor ratiocination is required for intermentality. Along these lines, it does not seem correct to limit intermental functions to intraspecies relations alone, even if, for instance, my cognitive processes differ from my cats’. If I do not provide table scraps, Rudy’s expression of annoyance is direct and clear. What about those intermental experiences that we might put in the domain of the vaguely paranormal, such as when someone wakes bolt upright in the dead of night and gets a phone call two minutes later to learn that her mother has had a terrible car accident? Even if we bracket my last example, the point is that people are saturated in intermentality because

sociality has been the key to human survival. If Palmer considers the vast array of everyday intermental functions, I think it becomes evident that not all of these can be represented, or at least interestingly represented, in the linguistic medium of literature. Thus, whereas we are perhaps too pervasively social a species and our experience is too varied to lend itself to an intermental typology of everyday life, the matter may be somewhat different in characterizing intermentality in a limited aesthetic medium, such as the novel. Drawing such a distinction at the outset might strengthen arguments against criticism that Palmer makes inadequate distinctions between fictional minds and real minds.

Finally, in his analysis of the *Middlemarch* mind, Palmer has a valuable opportunity to note both continuity and difference between intermental thought outside and inside the novel. Palmer might broaden and clarify discussions of this kind to specifically articulate how intermentality is, *within the novel*, a rhetorically and aesthetically constructed phenomenon based on a feature of everyday human social psychology. Palmer has identified three types of rhetorical devices—the use of hypothetical groups, the passive voice, and presupposition—that work together to constitute a controlling social group that “within the *Middlemarch* storyworld . . . actually and literally does have a mind of its own.” In his presentation of a good portion of the novel’s initial paragraph, Palmer provides evidence for his thesis by highlighting those words and phrases that attest to group mind, and he points to narrative focalization through that mind.

One objection to Palmer’s thesis, of course, is that this is the narrative formalization of conventional thinking, rather than evidence of group mind. More importantly, though, the heterodiegetic narrator touches all and sundry with her high-toned irony, and it is to that strong perspective, I suspect, that most readers aspire. That is precisely why Palmer’s attention to the *Middlemarch* mind is so valuable: the rather pronounced presence of the group mind may be repressed by readers in the face of the more appealing narrator, who we, as readers, want to think we are like. As Blakey Vermeule says, “The trouble with mind-reading problems in literature is that they are like God: everywhere and nowhere” (66). But they are not quite like mind-reading problems in life, where we are just swimming in the soup of social existence, without the help of authors and narrators, who are vigorous pre-selectors. Placing his discussion of group mind in the context of Eliot’s controlling narrative irony, among other things, might help articulate the purpose and function of the *Middlemarch* mind as a fictive device, one based on a social disposition that evolved long ago.

Palmer brings the traditional discipline of a narratologist together with the perspective of a cognitive approach and, through these, reveals an aspect of fictive representation that criticism has not explored thus far. This is a significant achievement, and a slightly enlarged perspective might result in better comprehension of why we so readily lose track of that mind—in life, or perhaps even in fiction.

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