

Failing to See the Irony in 'Mind-Reading'

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ABSTRACT. We are puzzled by Szilvia Papp's response to the recent Special Issue of *Theory & Psychology* devoted to critiques of and alternatives to Theory of Mind. Although Papp is a linguist with a special interest not only in Theory of Mind but also in 'Relevance Theory', we can find no reference in her response to the critical issues raised in the Special Issue, nor any defence of the dualist metaphysics behind Theory of Mind. Instead, she presents us with a further demonstration that *if* one starts from dualistic premises, then one does indeed end up with something along the lines of Theory of Mind with its resort to 'mind-reading'.

KEY WORDS: dualism, inference, Relevance Theory, Theory of Mind

... metaphysical systems do not yield, as a rule, to frontal attack. Their odd property of being demonstrable only, so to speak, from within confers on them also a high resistance to attack from outside. The onslaughts of critics to whom, as likely as not, their strange tenets are very nearly unintelligible are apt to seem, to those entrenched inside, misdirected or irrelevant. Such systems are more vulnerable to ennui than to disproof. They are citadels, much shot at perhaps but never taken by storm, which are quietly discovered one day to be no longer inhabited. (Warnock, 1969, pp. 7–8)

Our recent Special Issue on Theory of Mind (Leudar & Costall, 2004a) was not the first by any means to subject this still dominant approach to criticism. But it was perhaps the most sustained recent attempt to mount an attack on several fronts: against its grossly intellectualized accounts of autism and schizophrenia, of social development, and of how we are all supposed to make sense of one another and of ourselves. Most fundamentally, we sought

to challenge the dualist metaphysics that makes Theory of Mind appear a *necessary* truth to its proponents, and hence makes them so perplexed by criticism. Indeed, it has become standard practice to *identify* Theory of Mind with the phenomena it is supposed to explain (e.g. Garton, 2004, p. 80), a cause of serious confusion, not just to undergraduate students.

Psychology has drawn not only upon new technologies as a source of theoretical metaphors, most notably the computer, but also upon its own research practices, such as experimental method, statistical analysis and decision-making. Even so, the Theory of Mind paradigm itself could hardly be more incestuous. The basic idea has been set out routinely in the introductory textbooks, long before it came to be regarded as a serious psychological theory. Here, for example, is Donald Hebb's account of how psychologists—following the cognitive revolution, and the supposed overthrow of behaviourism—are supposed to go about their business

First, then, the evidence which psychology can be sure of consists of what a man or animal *does*. The experimenter can observe the behavior directly and can show it to others, so that agreement can be reached concerning the facts. . . . Everything you know about another person's thoughts or feelings is inferred from his behavior. Knowledge of behavior is factual. Knowledge of mental processes is theoretical, or inferential. (Hebb, 1966, p. 4)

Hebb then goes on to explain, without any hint of embarrassment, that standard cognitive psychology is a variety of behaviourism. It has bought into a thoroughly behaviouristic conception of *behaviour* as antithetical to mind. Yet, behaviour, so construed, is also supposed to provide the evidence for mind:

Thus the method of psychology is to work behavioristically, constructing a theory of mind that is based on the objective facts of behavior. This means that we know mind, and study it, as the chemist knows and studies the properties of the atom. Atoms are not observed directly; still less the electrons, protons, neutrons and so forth that—theoretically—compose the atom. (Hebb, 1966, pp. 10–11)

Unfortunately, the analogy between the psychologist studying the mind and the chemist investigating the hidden structure of matter is misleading. For the dualistic antithesis of behaviour and mind that makes Theory of Mind seem so inevitable also renders the assumed gap between what can be 'directly known' and what must be 'inferred' utterly unbridgeable. Now the Theory of Mind theorists have certainly kept themselves very busy invoking various kinds of wonderful capacities for theoretical inference to bridge the gap between behaviour and mind. But they never explain how these inferences could *work*. As we pointed out in the Special Issue, inferences require some kinds of *grounds*, but the nature and origins of any that could support ToM can only remain a mystery, precisely because of its starting point in dualism (Leudar & Costall, 2004b, p. 615).

Szilvia Papp (2006) as a linguist certainly takes up these dualist assumptions with gusto, perhaps more enthusiastically than most psychologists would do today: her list of what cannot be observed but can only be 'figured out' includes speech acts and even non-verbal communication! The notion of 'Theory of Mind', she argues, is necessary to explain the ability to 'work out emotional states from "natural signs", such as facial expressions, eye-gaze or other non-verbal affect cues such as posture, gesture, physical changes, tone of voice or actions' (p. 143). The artificial separation here of the 'natural' from the psychological seems complete. Perhaps what underlies this is the rather impoverished idea of engagement or relatedness that is revealed in her statement that only inferential cognitive processes can lead to creativity or variation in social interactions. It not only objectivizes meanings, making them independent of the relation, there to be observed or there to be inferred from behaviour, but it also devalues the potential for openness of dialogue, making emotional relatedness nothing more than the practice of 'natural' stereotypes. Yet, in fact, emotional engagements are the very condition of human—including infant—life. A participant in such relation is never a mere observer, nor a mere logician, but a player whose motives and emotions affect the other (Reddy, 2003).

We are also puzzled by Papp's understanding of the pragmatics of a 'response', given this is what her paper is supposed to be. Surely a felicitous response requires at least some attempt to take our points on board, rather than a dogmatic restatement of Theory of Mind. Indeed, Papp compounds the problem by uncritically accepting Relevance Theory, a position that has itself been subject to sustained criticism. She seems to be unaware of the controversies that surround it as a basis of explanations in the pragmatics of communication (see, e.g., the peer commentary on Sperber & Wilson, 1987, and, more recently, Levinson, 2000). This is obviously not a place to embark on a detailed assessment of *Relevance* Theory, but it does certainly share two problems with Theory of Mind—it investigates problems created by its own dualist assumptions, rather than those intrinsic to everyday communicative practices, and it then tries to solve these problems in an overly intellectualized and reductive way. In effect it draws an artificial line between language and meaning, as Theory of Mind does between behaviour and mental processes. Papp does not seem to have read Leudar and Costall (2004b), where we explained this.

As a counter to the critiques of Theory of Mind included in our Special Issue, Papp claims to present an argument 'that *only if* a mind-reading capacity is imputed to the normally developing child can the range of deficits of communication found in people with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) be accounted for' (p. 142, emphasis added). We can find no such argument in her article—just another demonstration that *if* one starts from the dualistic premise of an antithesis between behaviour and mind, then one does end up

with something along the lines of Theory of Mind. There is no defence offered in support of such dualism, nor any discussion of our criticisms.

Finally, given Papp's avowed interest in irony, sarcasm, deception, lies, persuasion and other manipulative uses of language, we are surprised by her relentless literal-mindedness regarding theory. Admittedly 'mind-reading' may well now have joined the realm of dead psychological metaphors, but we presume it must have initially been invoked in Theory of Mind circles with some humorous intent, even self-irony. Once you think about it, the metaphor is quite subversive. After all, mind-reading is supposed to be a *magic* act! Yet if one accepts the dualistic premises of Theory of Mind, then we would all have to be *really* engaging in something like magic to make sense of one another. Mind-reading, in short, far from being a serious theoretical option, needs to be recognized for what it is—a joke. It is the *reductio ad absurdum* of cognitivism.

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