



**Theory of Mind:
A critical assessment**

Ivan Leudar

The University of Manchester

Alan Costall

The University of Portsmouth

ivan.leudar@manchester.ac.uk

Synopsis

- 1. Theory of mind (ToM) is not a discovery but a set of Cartesian presuppositions about how people engage each other which psychology retained in ‘cognitive revolution’**
- 2. ToM is an attempt to resolve ‘the problem of other minds’**
- 3. ToM was inscribed in psychology through the work of Chomsky and Grice**
- 4. The role of thoughts, feelings and intentions in social engagements needs to be re-thought along Austinian lines.**

Tom as a theory of communication

‘In saying that an individual has a theory of mind, we mean that the individual imputes mental states to himself and others. . . .

A system of inferences of this kind is properly viewed as a theory, first because such states are not directly observable, and second because the system can be used to make predictions, specifically about the behavior of other organisms.’

(Premack and Woodruff, 1978, p. 515)

Tom as a theory of communication

A theory of ‘theory of mind’ is in fact not a theory of mind at all but a theory of communication.

Tom as a theory of communication

‘Social interaction is really an interaction of minds, of mental states’ (Astington, 1994, p. 43).

‘The account of communication and social interaction is *telementational*—individual social behaviours are caused by their doers’ mental states, and properly understood in terms of those states. Organisms do not react directly to the behaviour of others but instead to the occluded ‘mental states’ which these indicate. On this view, communicative behaviours mediate interactions that are effectively mental. (Leudar and Costall, 2004)

The problem of other minds

The problem: ‘How do we know that another person is angry? . . . Do we ever know?’

A sceptical answer: ‘We can never *know*, but we may believe it, with varying degrees of certainty and on the basis of inference.’

The problem of other minds

- It is so very easy to regard Descartes' epistemic dualism as a profound insight (Stuart Shanker , 2004)
- ToM assumes that the problem of other minds is basic and a universal problem for people
- Children recapitulate Descartes and have to discover the 'proper' understanding of other minds (as opposed to the mere *appearance* of understanding.)

The problem of other minds

John Austin found ‘the problem of other minds’ not difficult to misconceived (Austin, 1979, p. 76).

Treating other people as thinking, feeling and willing human beings is a necessary precondition of communication.

The problem of other minds

**‘the problem of other minds does not reflect something timeless and transcultural about the human condition, but is instead a problem which makes sense in specific historical conditions and in its current form is partly of psychologists’ own doing.’
(Leudar and Costall, 2004)**

The problem of other minds

‘In psychology, it does not usually arise as a formally stated philosophical problem but is instead inscribed in theories, methods of investigation and in the language of psychology itself—in this respect it is a historical problem and should be treated as such.’ (Leudar and Costall, 2004)

How did ToM get into Psychology – Chomsky

1. Downgrading learning and intellectualising language acquisition

‘I would take the view that the child’s knowledge of pre-linguistic communication, related as it is to world of action and interaction, provides him with tell-tale cues for *constructing and testing hypotheses* about the meaning and structure of the discourse into which he quickly enters. He does, as LAD [the Language Acquisition Device] would have us believe, have a *stunning capacity to infer and to generate rules*, indeed to overgeneralize them.’ (Bruner, 1978, p. 83)

How did ToM get into Psychology -Chomsky

2. Downgrading ‘behaviour’

a. Poverty of stimulus

b. Logical status of behaviour

‘But I see no reason to deny that there is a fact of the matter, however difficult it may be to establish, on that *behavior is only one kind of evidence—sometimes not the best, and surely no criterion of knowledge.*’

(Chomsky, 1980b, p. 6, our emphasis)

How did ToM get into Psychology - Chomsky

3. Modularity thesis

‘Pragmatic competence may include what Paul Grice has called a ‘logic of conversation’ (Chomsky, 1980a, pp. 224–225).

How did ToM get into Psychology - Grice

**‘Speech Act Theorists such as Grice (1967/1975), Austin (1962), and Searle (1965) had argued that a theory of mind is also essential for normal communication, both verbal and non-verbal.’
(Baron-Cohen, 1992)**

How did ToM get into Psychology - Grice

- 1. Communication is mediated by means of intention recognition (i.e. non-natural meaning)**
- 2. The distinction between meaning and implicature (the latter requires inference)**

How did ToM get into Psychology - Grice

‘a certain psychological state Y1 in certain circumstances is followed by a certain utterance U, made in certain circumstances, which in turn, if the circumstances are right, is followed by a particular instance of a further psychological state Y2, a state not now in the communicating creature but in the creature who is communicated to.’ (Grice, 1989, p. 287)

John Austin

How to do things with words

Locution – ‘phonetic’, ‘phatic’, ‘rhetic’ acts

He said to me ‘Shoot her!’ meaning by ‘shoot’ shoot and referring by ‘her’ to her.

Illocution

He urged (or advised, ordered, &c.) me to shoot her.

Perlocution

He persuaded me to shoot her.

(John Austin, *How to do things with words*, lecture VIII)

Wittgenstein

On telling of one's intentions

‘Why do I want to tell him about an intention too, as well as telling him what I did. ... because I want to tell him something about myself, which goes beyond what happened at the time. I reveal to him something of myself when I tell him what I was going to do.- not, however, on grounds of self-observation, but by the way of a response (it might be also called an intuition).’

(Philosophical Investigations, §659)

Elizabeth Anscombe

‘Actions under descriptions’

1. ‘Are we to say that the man who (intentionally) moves his arm, operates the pump, replenishes water supply, poisons the inhabitants, is performing *four* actions?’ (Anscombe, 1957, §26)
2. ‘... in the acts of pumping poisoned water nothing in particular is necessarily going on that might not equally well have been going on if the acts had been pumping non-poisonous water. Even if you imagine that pictures of inhabitants lying dead occur in the man’s head, and please him – such pictures could also occur in the head of a man who was *not* poisoning them, and *need* not occur in this man. The difference appears to be one of circumstances, not of anything that is going on *then*. (ibid, §24, the last emphasis ours)
3. ‘For moving his arm up and down with his fingers round the pump handle *is*, in these circumstances, operating the pump; and, in these circumstances, it *is* replenishing the house water-supply; and in these circumstances, it *is* poisoning the household. (ibid, §26)

Engagement and communication

- Interactions between people are immediate yet they are situated in culture, and participants personal histories
- Circumstances do not contain interactions but are made relevant and consequential by participants
- An element of our project is to document the *methods* people use to make circumstances consequential in locally managed talk and otherwise organised immediate interactions
- Analysts of engagements have to take on board what is important to participants in those engagements and so the analysis has to be a *participant analysis*.