Why We Read Fiction

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As we discuss mind-reading as an evolved cognitive capacity enabling both our interaction with each other and our ability to make sense of fiction, we have to be aware of the definitional differences between the terminology used by cognitive scientists and that used by literary critics. Cognitive psychologists and philosophers of mind investigating our Theory of Mind ask such questions as, What is the evolutionary history of this adaptation, that is, in response to what environmental challenges did it evolve? At what age and in what forms does it begin to manifest itself? What are its neurological foundations? They focus on the ways “in which mind-reading [plays] an essential part in successful communication.”¹

When cognitive scientists turn to literary (or, as in the case below, cinematic) examples to illustrate our ability for investing fictional characters with a mind of their own and reading that mind, they stress the “effortlessness” with which we do so. As Daniel Dennett observes, “[W]atching a film with a highly original and unsterotyped plot, we see the hero smile at the villain and we all swiftly and effortlessly arrive at the same complex theoretical diagnosis: ‘Aha!’ we conclude (but perhaps not consciously), ‘He wants her to think he doesn’t know she intends to defraud her brother!’”²

Readers outside the cognitive-science community may find this emphasis on “effortlessness” and “success” unhelpful. Literary critics, in particular, know that the process of attributing thoughts, beliefs, and desires to other people may lead to misinterpreting those thoughts, beliefs, and desires. Thus they would rightly resist any notion that we could effortlessly—that is, correctly and unambiguously, nearly telepathically—figure out what the person whose behavior we are trying to explain is thinking. It is important to underscore here that cognitive scientists and lay readers (here, including literary critics) bring very different frames of reference to measuring the relative “success” of mind-reading. For the lay reader, the example of a glaring failure in mind-reading and communication might be a person’s interpreting her friend’s tears of joy as tears of grief and reacting accordingly. For a cognitive psychologist, a glaring failure in mind-reading would be a person’s not even knowing that the water coursing down her friend’s face is supposed to be somehow indicative of
his feelings at that moment. If you find the latter possibility absurd, recall that this is how (many) people with autism experience the world, perhaps because of neurological deficits that prevent their cognitive architecture from narrowing the range of interpretive possibilities and restricting them, in this particular case, to the domain of emotions.

Consequently, one of the crucial insights offered by cognitive psychologists is that by thus parsing the world and narrowing the scope of relevant interpretations of a given phenomenon, our cognitive adaptations enable us to contemplate an infinitely rich array of interpretations within that scope. As Nancy Easterlin puts it, “[W]ithout the inborn tendency to organize information in specific ways, we would not be able to experience choice in our responses.” “Constraints,” N. Katherine Hayles observes in a different context, “operate constructively by restricting the sphere of possibilities.” In other words, our Theory of Mind allows us to connect Peter Walsh’s trembling to his emotional state (in the absence of any additional information that could account for his body language in a different way), thus usefully constraining our interpretive domain and enabling us to start considering endlessly nuanced choices within that domain. The context of the episode would then constrain our interpretation even further; we could decide, for instance, that it is unlikely that Peter is trembling because of a barely concealed hatred and begin to explore the complicated gamut of his bittersweet feelings. Any additional information that we would bring to bear upon our reading of the passage—biographical, socio-historical, literary-historical—would alert us to new shades in its meaning and could, in principle, lead us to some startling conjectures about Walsh’s state of mind. Note, too, that the description of Walsh’s “trembling” may connect to something in my personal experience that will induce me to give significantly more weight to one detail of the text and ignore others, which means that you and I may wind up with wildly different readings of Peter’s and Clarissa’s emotions “at eleven o’clock on the morning of the day she [is] giving a party.” None of this can happen, however, before we have first eliminated a whole range of other explanations, such as explanations evoking various physical forces (for instance, a disease) acting upon the body, and have focused instead solely on the mind of the protagonist.

This elimination of irrelevant interpretations can happen so fast as to be practically imperceptible. Consider an example from Stanley Fish’s essay, “How to Recognize a Poem.” To demonstrate that our mental operations are “limited by institutions in which we are already embedded,” Fish reports the following classroom experiment:
While I was in the course of vigorously making a point, one of my students, William Newlin by name, was just as vigorously waving his hand. When I asked the other members of the class what it was that [he] was doing, they all answered that he was seeking permission to speak. I then asked them how they knew that. The immediate reply was that it was obvious; what else could he be thought of doing? The meaning of his gesture, in other words, was right there on its surface, available for reading by anyone who had the eyes to see. That meaning, however, would not have been available to someone without any knowledge of what was involved in being a student. Such a person might have thought that Mr. Newlin was pointing to the fluorescent lights hanging from the ceiling, or calling our attention to some object that was about to fall (“the sky is falling,” “the sky is falling”). And if the someone in question were a child of elementary or middle-school age, Mr. Newlin might well have been seen as seeking permission not to speak but to go to the bathroom, an interpretation or reading that would never have occurred to a student at Johns Hopkins or any other institution of “higher learning.”

The point that Fish wants to get across is that “it is only by inhabiting . . . the institutions [that] precede us [here, the college setting] that we have access to the public and conventional senses they make [here, the raised hand means that the person seeks permission to speak].” This point is well taken. Yet note that all of his patently “wrong” explanations (e.g., Mr. Newlin thought that the sky was falling; he wanted to go to the bathroom; etc.) are “correct” in the sense that they call on a Theory of Mind—that is, they explain the student’s behavior in terms of his underlying thoughts, beliefs, and desires. As Fish puts it, “[W]hat else could he be thought of doing?” (emphasis mine). Nobody ventured to suggest, for example, that there was a thin, practically invisible string threaded through the loop in the classroom’s ceiling, one end of which was attached to Mr. Newlin’s sleeve and another held by a person sitting behind him who could pull the string any time and produce the corresponding movement of Mr. Newlin’s hand. Absurd, we should say, especially since nobody could observe any string hovering over Mr. Newlin’s head. Is it not equally absurd, however, to explain a behavior in terms of a mental state that is completely unobservable? Yet we do it automatically, and the only reason that no “normal” (i.e., nonautistic) person would think of a “mechanistic” explanation (such as the string pulling on the sleeve) is that we have cognitive adaptations that prompt us to “see bodies as animated by minds.”

But then, by the very logic of Fish’s essay, which urges us not to take
for granted our complex institutional embedment which allows us to make sense of the world, shouldn’t we inquire with equal vigor into our cognitive embedment which—as I hope I have demonstrated in the example above—profoundly informs the institutional one? Given the suggestively constrained range of the “wrong” interpretations offered by Fish (i.e., all of his interpretations connected the behavior to a mental state), shouldn’t we qualify his assertion that unless we read Mr. Newlin’s raised hand in the context of his being a student, “there is nothing in the form of [his] gesture that tells his fellow students how to determine its significance”? Surely the form of the gesture—staying with the word that Fish himself has emphasized—is quite informative because its very deliberateness seems to delimit the range of possible “wrong” interpretations. That is, had Mr. Newlin unexpectedly jerked his hand instead of “waving” it “vigorously,” some mechanical explanation, such as a physiological spasm or someone pushing his elbow, perhaps even a wire attached to his sleeve, would seem far less absurd.

To return, then, to the potentially problematic issue of the effortlessness with which we “read” minds: a flagrantly “wrong,” from our perspective, interpretation, such as taking tears of grief for tears of joy, or thinking that Mr. Newlin raises his hand to point out that the sky is falling, is still “effortless” from the point of view of cognitive psychologists because of the ease with which we correlate tears with an emotional state or the raised hand with a certain underlying desire/intention. Mind-reading is thus effortless in the sense that we “intuitively” connect people’s behavior to their mental states—as in the example involving Walsh’s “trembling”—although our subsequent description of these mental states could run a broad gamut from perceptively accurate to profoundly mistaken. For any description is, as Fish tells us on a different occasion, “always and already interpretation,” a “text,” a story influenced to some extent by the personal history, biases, and desires of the reader.

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**WHY DO WE READ FICTION?**

I have mentioned earlier that works of fiction provide grist for the mills of our mind-reading adaptations that have evolved to deal with real