Why We Read Fiction

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today takes serious chances. In the words of cognitive evolutionary anthropologist Dan Sperber, “[O]ur understanding of cognitive architecture is [still] way too poor, and the best we can do is try and speculate intelligently (which is great fun anyhow).” I proceed, then, both sobered by Sperber’s warning and inspired by his parenthetical remark. Every single one of my speculations resulting from applying research in cognitive psychology to our appetite for fiction could be wrong, but the questions that prompted those speculations are emphatically worth asking.

WHAT IS MIND-READING (ALSO KNOWN AS THEORY OF MIND)?

In spite of the way it sounds, mind-reading has nothing to do with plain old telepathy. Instead, it is a term used by cognitive psychologists, interchangeably with “Theory of Mind,” to describe our ability to explain people’s behavior in terms of their thoughts, feelings, beliefs, and desires. Thus we engage in mind-reading when we ascribe to a person a certain mental state on the basis of her observable action (e.g., we see her reaching for a glass of water and assume that she is thirsty); when we interpret our own feelings based on our proprioceptive awareness (e.g., our heart skips a beat when a certain person enters the room and we realize that we might have been attracted to him or her all along); when we intuit a complex state of mind based on a limited verbal description (e.g., a friend tells us that she feels sad and happy at the same time, and we believe that we know what she means); when we compose an essay, a lecture, a movie, a song, a novel, or an instruction for an electrical appliance and try to imagine how this or that segment of our target audience will respond to it; when we negotiate a multilayered social situation (e.g., a friend tells us in front of his boss that he would love to work on the new project, but we have our own reasons to believe that he is lying and hence try to turn the conversation so that the boss, who, we think, may suspect that he is lying, would not make him work on that project and yet would not think that he didn’t really want to); and so forth. Attributing states of mind is the default way by which we construct and navigate our social environment, incorrect though our attributions frequently are. (For example, the person
who reached for the glass of water might not have been thirsty at all but rather might have wanted us to think that she was thirsty, so that she could later excuse herself and go out of the room, presumably to get more water, but really to make the phone call that she didn’t want us to know of.

But why do we need this newfangled concept of mind-reading, or ToM, to explain what appears so obvious? Our ability to interpret the behavior of people in terms of their underlying states of mind seems to be such an integral part of what we are as human beings that we could be understandably reluctant to dignify it with fancy terms and elevate it into a separate object of study. One reason that ToM has received the sustained attention of cognitive psychologists over the last twenty years is that they have come across people whose ability to “see bodies as animated by minds” is drastically impaired—people with autism. By studying autism and a related constellation of cognitive deficits (such as Asperger syndrome), cognitive scientists began to appreciate our mind-reading ability as a special cognitive endowment, structuring our everyday communication and cultural representations.

Cognitive evolutionary psychologists working with ToM think that this adaptation must have developed during the “massive neurocognitive evolution” which took place during the Pleistocene (1.8 million to 10,000 years ago). The emergence of a Theory of Mind “module” was evolution’s answer to the “staggeringly complex” challenge faced by our ancestors, who needed to make sense of the behavior of other people in their group, which could include up to 200 individuals. In his influential 1995 study, Mindblindness: An Essay on Autism and a Theory of Mind, Simon Baron-Cohen points out that “attributing mental states to a complex system (such as a human being) is by far the easiest way of understanding it,” that is, of “coming up with an explanation of the complex system’s behavior and predicting what it will do next.” Thus our tendency to interpret observed behavior in terms of underlying mental states (e.g., “Peter Walsh was trembling because he was excited to see Clarissa again”) seems to be so effortless and automatic (in a sense that we are not even conscious of engaging in any particular act of “interpretation”) because our evolved cognitive architecture “prods” us toward learning and practicing mind-reading daily, from the beginning of awareness.

Baron-Cohen describes autism as the “most severe of all childhood psychiatric conditions,” one that affects between approximately four to fifteen children per 10,000 and “occurs in every country in which it has been looked for and across social classes.” Although, as Gloria Origgi and Dan Sperber have pointed out, “mind-reading is not an all-or-none affair
Part I: Attributing Minds

... [p]eople with autism lack [this] ability to a greater or lesser degree,7 and although the condition may be somewhat alleviated if the child receives a range of “educational and therapeutic interventions,” autism remains, at present, “a lifelong disorder.”8 Autism is highly heritable,9 and its key symptoms, which manifest themselves in the first years of life, include the profound impairment of social and communicative development and the “lack of the usual flexibility, imagination, and pretence.”10 It is also characterized—crucially for our present discussion—by a lack of interest in fiction and storytelling (although one should keep in mind here, and I will address shortly, the important issue of degree to which people within the autistic range are indifferent to storytelling).

One immediate, practical implication of the last two decades of research in ToM is that developmental psychologists are now able to diagnose autism much earlier (e.g., the standard age for diagnosis used to be three or four years, whereas now it is sometimes possible to diagnose a child at eighteen months11) and to design more aggressive therapeutic techniques for dealing with it. Moreover, cognitive anthropologists are increasingly aware that our ability to attribute states of mind to ourselves and other people is intensely context dependent. That is, it is supported not by one uniform cognitive adaptation but by a large cluster of specialized adaptations geared toward a variety of social contexts.12 Given this new emphasis on context-sensitive specialization and the fact that Theory of Mind appears to be our key cognitive endowment as a social species, it is difficult to imagine a field of study within the social sciences and the humanities that would not be affected by this research in the coming decades.

What criteria do psychologists use to decide whether a given individual has an impaired Theory of Mind? In 1978, Daniel Dennett suggested that one effective way to test for the presence of normally developing ToM is to see whether a child can understand that someone else might hold a false belief, that is, a belief about the world that the child knows is manifestly untrue. The first false-belief test was designed in 1983 and has since been replicated many times by scientists around the world. In one of the more widespread versions of the test, children see that “Sally” puts a marble in one place and then exits the room. In her absence, “Anne” comes in, puts the marble in a different place, and leaves. Children are then asked, “Where will Sally look for her marble when she returns?” The vast majority of normal children (after the age of four13) pass the test, responding that Sally will look for the marble in the original place, thus showing their understanding that someone might hold a false belief. By contrast, only a
small minority of children with autism do so, indicating instead where the marble really is. According to Baron-Cohen, the results of the test support the notion that “in autism the mental state of belief is poorly understood.”

But, apart from the carefully designed lab test, how do people with autism see the world around them? In his book *An Anthropologist on Mars*, Oliver Sacks describes one remarkable case of autism, remarkable because the afflicted woman, Temple Grandin, has been able to overcome her handicap to some degree. She has a doctorate in agricultural science, teaches at the University of Arizona, and can speak about her perceptions, thus giving us a unique insight into what it means to be unable to read other people’s minds. Sacks reports Grandin’s school experience: “Something was going on between the other kids, something swift, subtle, constantly changing—an exchange of meanings, a negotiation, a swiftness of understanding so remarkable that sometimes she wondered if they were all telepathic. She is now aware of the existence of those social signals. She can infer them, she says, but she herself cannot perceive them, cannot participate in this magical communication directly, or conceive of the many-leveled, kaleidoscopic states of mind behind it.”

To compensate for her inability to interpret facial expressions, which at first left her a “target of tricks and exploitation,” Grandin has built up over the years something resembling a “library of videotapes, which she could play in her mind and inspect at any time—‘videos’ of how people behaved in different circumstances. She would play these over and over again, and learn, by degrees, to correlate what she saw, so that she could then predict how people in similar circumstances might act.” What the account of such a “library” suggests is that we do not just “learn” how to communicate with people and read their emotions (or how to read the minds of fictional characters based on their behavior)—Grandin, after all, has had as many opportunities to “learn” these things as you and I—but that we also have evolved cognitive architecture that makes this particular kind of learning possible, and if this architecture is damaged, as in the case of autism, a wealth of experience would never fully make up for the damage.

Predictably, Grandin comments on having a difficult time understanding fictional narratives. She remembers being “bewildered by *Romeo and Juliet*: ‘I never knew what they were up to.’” Fiction presents a challenge to people with autism because in many ways it calls for the same kind of mind-reading—that is, the inference of the mental state from the behavior—that is necessary in regular human communication.