CHAPTER 4

Little Dorrit

SOCIAL MINDS IN LITTLE DORRIT

It is common, when reading discussions of the sustained inside views of characters’ private minds in the novels of, say, Henry James, to be told that, by contrast, characters in novels by Charles Dickens are really only ever seen from the outside. We only see their surface. They are flat when they should be round. The effect is often to sound rather patronizing about Dickens’s achievement: “Brilliant novelist in his way, of course, but without the depth of James!” I would like to reverse that perspective. In cognitive terms, nearly all of your life is spent on the surface, on the outside, in the sense that all of the minds with which you are involved (with the admittedly rather important exception of your own!) are only ever experienced on the surface, and from the outside. From this point of view, it is not surprising that Oscar Wilde said, as quoted at the beginning of this book, that it is only shallow people who do not judge by appearances, and that the true mystery of the world is the visible, not the invisible. Dickens is the novelist of appearances, and of the visible, and his achievement can only be fully appreciated from the externalist perspective.
Intramental Thought

There are few extended passages of inside views of private thought in *Little Dorrit*. One such is a long passage of Clennam’s inner speech regarding his love for Minnie Gowin (more usually referred to as “Pet”) and his concern about growing old: “And he had plenty of unsettled subjects to meditate upon . . . First, there was the subject seldom absent from his mind, the question, what he was to do henceforth in life” (231). However, in addition to these passages, there is a good deal of contextual thought report scattered around the rest of the text relating to private thinking. This intramental thought benefits from an externalist perspective just as much as intermental thought does. To illustrate, I will draw attention to three of the features of intramental thought that are undervalued by the internalist perspective.

First, it is worth questioning for a moment the apparent inaccessibility of private thought to others. How much mental functioning is there in the novel that at least one other character is not aware of, albeit in general terms? The answer that I would suggest is: not much. Regarding the passage quoted from just now, Little Dorrit for one is aware of Clennam’s feelings. She knows immediately that something is wrong with Clennam after he gives up thoughts of Pet, and she knows about his anxieties about growing old. “He never thought that she saw in him what no one else could see” (432). When asking this question of each character in turn (“Does another character know about how their mind works?”), I am struck by the public nature of the thought in the novel. Characters may have their secrets, such as Little Dorrit’s love for Clennam, but in most cases their thought is generally public. Miss Wade is obviously secretive by nature, but she reveals her mind to Clennam by showing him her life story. The minds of Frederick Dorrit and Mr F’s Aunt are pretty inaccessible (and perhaps Casby’s and Flintwinch’s to some extent?), but there are few others, it seems to me.

Second, intramental thought is intensely dialogic. In a splendidly Bakhtinian phrase that is used of Mrs Clennam, “It was curious how she seized the occasion to argue with some invisible opponent” (407). In a form of words that brings to mind Daniel Dennett’s notion of mind-ruts, Mrs General is described as having “a little circular set of mental grooves or rails on which she started little trains of other people’s opinions” (503). The point is that it is other people’s opinions that are running along her mind-grooves. The private thoughts of Mrs Clennam and Mrs General, in common with all of the other characters in the novel, are filled with the thoughts of others.

Finally, the presence of intermental thought is often concealed within descriptions of intramental functioning. “From the days of their honey-
moon, Minnie Gowan felt sensible of being usually regarded as the wife of a man who had made a descent in marrying her” (541). At first reading, this sounds like a simple example of intramental contextual thought report. However, her dialogic anticipation of the feelings of others contains an intermental component which, using the technique that was noted in the discussion of the opening passage of *Middlemarch*, is disguised within a passive construction (“regarded as”). It may be decoded as follows: the group of people who know her regard her (Pet thinks) as that sort of wife. When Miss Wade is part of the quarantine party at the beginning of the novel, the narrator says of her: “And yet it would have been as difficult as ever to say, positively, whether she avoided the rest, or was avoided” (62). Although this is a statement about Miss Wade’s disposition to be unsociable, it is also about the shared functioning of “the rest”: their awareness of her disposition and their resulting behavior in avoiding her. Similarly, it is said of Little Dorrit that “She passed to and fro in it [the Marshalsea] shrinkingly now, with a womanly consciousness that she was pointed out to every one” (118). This is a description of her state of mind, but it also refers to the joint state of mind of the prison population in considering her the Child of the Marshalsea that results in the communal pointing behavior. The externalist perspective is required in order to tease out the intermental element in sentences that appear to be simply presentations of private thought. And, as in *Middlemarch*, these examples show that much of the purpose of the narrative is to question the accuracy and authority of the collective judgments on the individuals who are experiencing the intermental gaze. The issue of accuracy in particular brings us to unreadability, or, at the very least, the possibility of incomplete, inaccurate, or otherwise defective reading of other minds.  

As I have said, some characters tend to be difficult to read. Much is made of Flintwinch’s impassivity and impenetrability. Despite being physically pushed about by Blandois, he “bought himself up with a face completely unchanged in its stolidity” (602). When Mr Casby is questioned by Clennam about Miss Wade, being determined to tell him nothing of what he knows about her, he “knew his strength lay in silence” (594). When Miss Wade herself is similarly intent on revealing nothing of her mind, she “stood by the table so perfectly composed and still after this acknowledgement of his remark that Mr Meagles stared at her under a sort of fascination, and could not even look to Clennam to make another move” (376). This is a vivid illustration of the importance of publicly available cues when reading other minds. When those cues are missing, as when Miss Wade deliberately eliminates them to order to keep her thoughts hidden and makes use of “her distant, proud, and self-secluded manner” (719), then Meagles is at a loss to know how to deal with it. Miss Wade herself thinks that she is able to read
other minds accurately: “From a very early age I have detected what those about me thought they hid from me” (725). However, it is apparent from the context that she was frequently wrong, and was simply misinterpreting genuine kindness. On a more amusing level, the workings of Mr F’s Aunt’s mind are, mercifully perhaps, completely opaque: “Mr F’s Aunt may have thrown in these observations on some system of her own, and it may have been ingenious, or even subtle: but the key to it was wanted” (199).

Visible Thought

More typical of the novel, though, are the copious examples of thought that is easily available to others. Even a solipsistic character such as Mr Dorrit is able to notice when Merdle is out of sorts (674). The fairly unobservant Young John Chivery knows that Little Dorrit is in love with Clennam, and can make a remark to Clennam such as “I see you recollect the room, Mr Clennam?” (791; my emphasis). Even reserved characters such as Miss Wade are not always able to conceal their thoughts. During a discussion with Clennam, “She heard him with evident surprise, and with more marks of suppressed interest than he had seen in her” (719; my emphasis). This is a novel in which the visibility of thought is frequently and pointedly emphasized. When Pancks gives a glass of wine to Blandois, it is “not without a visible conflict of feeling on the question of throwing it at his head” (814; my emphasis). The narrator mocks the efforts made by Merdle and Lord Decimus to keep their thoughts secret. They move about at their dinner party, “each with an absurd pretence of not having the other on his mind, which could not have been more transparently ridiculous though his real mind had been chalked on his back” (624).

This visibility is a characteristic not only of the specific mental events that occur in the minds of characters but also of the dispositions that persist over time and that form part of their personality. Blandois’ selfishness is made visible by the way in which he moves around a room soiling the furniture (402). In a particularly vivid image, when Clennam watches Gowan while he is unawares, “There was something in his way of spurning [stones] out of their places with his heel, and getting them into the required position, that Clennam thought had an air of cruelty in it” (245). The externalist Dickens is particularly adept at observing the surface of the storyworld in order to create telling descriptions of small, inconsequential examples of behavior that appear to other characters and also to the reader to sum up the personality of the character performing the action.

Characters pass judgments, often spiteful but accurate, that are based
on their ability to see other characters’ personalities in action. Fanny says of her loved one, Sparkler, “If it’s possible—and it generally is—to do a foolish thing, he is sure to do it” (664). Fanny is again perceptive, this time in judging Mrs General’s mind by her mannerisms: “I know her sly manner of feeling her way with those gloves of hers” (666). Flintwinch is another character whose disposition is to be unsparing about the failings of others. He says of Clennam’s father, “He was an undecided, irresolute chap, who had everything but his orphan life scared out of him when he was young” (224). At the end of the novel, he shouts to Mrs Clennam, “But that’s the way you cheat yourself” (851). In each case, dispositions link specific mental events and actions (doing foolish, sly, irresolute, or dishonest things) to those characters’ stable, long-lasting personalities (being a foolish, sly, irresolute, or dishonest person). Occasionally, the insight that one character has into another extends beyond their dispositions and encompasses their whole mind. Miss Wade feels that Gowan knows her completely, all about how her mind works. “He understood the state of things at a glance, and he understood me. He was the first person I had ever seen in my life who had understood me . . . He accompanied every movement of my mind” (732).

The Face

One of the obvious ways in which thought is made public is by means of the face. As we do in real life, characters pick up cues about the mental functioning of others by reading facial expressions. Of course, this is only one means among many. At one point, Blandois does not need to see Clennam’s face; he knows what he is thinking simply by watching the back of his head: “Though Clennam’s back was turned while [Blandois] spoke . . . he kept those glittering eyes of his . . . upon him, and evidently saw in the very carriage of the head . . . that he was saying nothing which Clennam did not already know” (819). Nevertheless, the face is a particularly important source of knowledge about the minds of others, and there is a continual stream of references in the novel to this fact. Some relate to individual mental events. Mrs Clennam says to Little Dorrit, “You love Arthur. (I can see the blush upon your face.)” (859). Clennam “saw a shade of disappointment on [Mrs Plornish’s] face, as she checked a sigh, and looked at the low fire” (178). “There was an expression in his face [Blandois] as he released his grip of his friend’s [Cavalletto’s] jaw, from which his friend inferred that . . . [et cetera]” (174). “My God!” said Bar, starting back, and clapping his hand upon the other’s breast. ‘. . . I see it in your face’” (773). On other occasions, the face is seen as an indicator of long-term dispositions. When Clennam was a child, Mrs
Clennam could see him looking at her “with his mother's face” (859) and therefore knows that he will, as she thinks, take after her. Little Dorrit is able to see that “there was neither happiness nor health in the face that turned to her” (857). The narrator comments of Mr Chivery that, “As to any key to his inner knowledge being to be found in his face, the Marshalsea key was as legible as an index to the individual characters and histories upon which it was turned” (346). Changes in the flow of events can be signaled by changes in characters’ faces. In the climax of the novel, Mrs Clennam's face is, at first, as inscrutable as ever: “Her face neither acquiesced or demurred” (837), and “Her face was ever frowning, attentive, and settled” (839). However, as events unravel and get beyond her control, “Mrs Clennam's face had changed. There was a remarkable darkness of colour on it, and the brow was more contracted” (841).

Many of the most powerful moments in the novel involve descriptions of facial expressions. In the scene in which Little Dorrit is meditating on London Bridge and is caught unawares by Young John Chivery, “She started and fell back from him, with an expression in her face of fright and something like dislike that caused him unutterable dismay . . . It was but a momentary look, inasmuch as she checked it . . . But she felt what it had been, as he felt what it had been; and they stood looking at one another equally confused” (260). Here, her facial expression inadvertently reveals her true feelings and both she and Young John are shocked by the result. In marked contrast, facial expressions can also serve a dramaturgical function. Characters self-consciously use them to present to the world the sort of self that they want the world to see. “With these words, and with a face expressive of many uneasy doubts and much anxious guardianship, he [Mr Dorrit] turned his regards upon the assembled company in the Lodge; so plainly indicating that his brother was to be pitied for not being under lock and key” (269). However, these efforts can be unsuccessful: “Do what he could to compose his face, he could not convey so much of an ordinary expression into it, but that the moment she saw it, she dropped her work and cried, ‘Mr Clennam! What's the matter?’” (465). Characters are continually attempting to read faces as cues to action. Clennam “suffered a few people to pass him in whose face there was no encouragement to make the inquiry” (118). This face-reading may be only partially successful. A character may find out something of what another is thinking, but not the whole story. “As she [Little Dorrit] looked at him [Clennam] silently, there was something in her affectionate face that he did not quite comprehend: something that could have broken into tears in a moment, and yet that was happy and proud” (885). This example brings out the differences between characters and readers as interpreters of facial expressions. Here, Dickens's implied
reader comprehends more than Clennam does. This balance between the implied reader and other characters is always present: sometimes characters and readers are equal, at times characters comprehend more than readers (at least initially), and at other times, as here, they comprehend less.

In addition, a facial expression can serve almost as the kind of nonverbal communication that is the subject of the next section. Clennam has difficulty following Mrs Plornish’s train of thought because she is rather inarticulate: “He was at a loss to understand what she meant; and by expressing as much in his looks, elicited her explanation” (178).

Nonverbal Communication

Another way in which social minds are made publicly available to each other is through nonverbal communication. This may be defined as the intentional use of the body to communicate information. There is a surprisingly large amount of it in the novel. It generally occurs between characters who know each other well and who therefore form an intermental unit. An example is the Dorrit family. Little Dorrit “looked in amazement at her sister and would have asked a question, but that Fanny with a warning frown pointed to a curtained doorway of communication with another room” (284). Tip “asked her the question with a sly glance of observation at Miss Fanny, and at his father too” (505). He also gives Fanny “a slight nod and a slight wink; in acknowledgement of which, Miss Fanny looked surprised, and laughed and reddened” (536). Within such a unit, nonverbal communication is an efficient supplement to speech. “In answer to Cavalletto’s look of inquiry, Clennam made him a sign to go; but he added aloud, ‘unless you are afraid of him.’ Cavalletto replied with a very emphatic finger-negative, ‘No, master’” (821). This is a cooperative, beneficial unit. Fanny and Mrs General form a conflicted, competitive unit but the signing is just as efficacious. When “Miss Fanny coughed, as much as to say, ‘You are right’” (661), Mrs General knows exactly what she means.

The choreography of the nonverbal communication in this novel is beautifully judged and often extremely subtle. So much so that the absence of any sign can sometimes be sign enough. Within people of the same social class, who understand each other well, the significance of doing nothing can be well understood. “Ferdinand Barnacle looked knowingly at Bar as he strolled upstairs and gave him no answer at all. ‘Just so, just so,’ said Bar, nodding his head” (614). In addition, a refusal to admit to an understanding of nonverbal signs can be as significant. Plornish, “having intimated that he wished to speak to her [Little Dorrit] privately, in a series of coughs so very
noticeable” (326) that Mr Dorrit must be aware of their meaning. Mr Dorrit nevertheless refuses to admit that he understands Plornish. To do so would be an admission that he knows that Little Dorrit works to support him. At the end of the novel, Mrs Clennam is reduced to a cruel parody of communication. “Except that she could move her eyes and faintly express a negative and affirmative with her head, she lived and died a statue” (863).

One example of the absence of a sign is worth dwelling on because it raises interesting issues relating to the concept of action. Meagles tactlessly praises Gowan's connections with the Barnacles in Doyce's presence. “Clennam looked at Doyce, but Doyce knew all about it beforehand, and looked at his plate, and made no sign, and said no word” (248). It is clear from the rhythm of the prose, the emphasis of each clause, that Doyce makes a conscious decision to do nothing. But this decision differs little, in cognitive terms, from a decision to perform an actual physical action. In addition, it must be remembered that this is a social situation in which certain actions are expected, such as showing interest by nodding, smiling, and agreeing. Doyce's refusal to do any of these things is a nonaction that has a dramaturgical function. He is demonstrating that he is unhappy with Meagles's remarks. But who is he demonstrating this disapproval for? I would suggest that it is primarily for Clennam, who may well be expecting disapproval-action, but will also pick up on the significance of nonaction. To an extent, also, it is for Meagles too, who will perhaps insensitively be expecting approval-action, but may, perhaps Doyce is hoping, interpret the nonaction as approval. In effect, Doyce is doing nothing in order to manage these conflicting expectations. Again, characters' interpretations and readers' interpretations will differ. The reader will know immediately what Doyce means; Clennam will pick up on it pretty quickly; Meagles is, Doyce will anticipate, likely to misunderstand the silence.

The pair formed by Clennam and Pancks may, at first sight, appear to be a distinctly unpromising illustration of the use of signs within an intermental unit. I referred above to characters with inscrutable faces, and Pancks is one. “With his former doubt whether this dry hard personage were quite in earnest, Clennam again turned his eyes attentively upon his face. It was as scruffy and dingy as ever, and as eager and quick as ever, and he could see nothing lurking in it that was at all expressive of a latent mockery that had seemed to strike upon his ear in the voice” (322). When Pancks speaks highly of Casby, “Arthur for his life could not have said with confidence whether Pancks really thought so or not” (462). The difficulty that Clennam has in reading Pancks's mind becomes particularly important when Clennam does not know whether Pancks's interest in the history of the Dorrit family is well meant or not. His activities “caused Arthur Clennam much uneasiness
at this period” (367), and “awakened many wondering speculations in his mind” (323).

However, over time, Clennam comes to know Pancks’s mind better. “Between this eccentric personage and Clennam, a tacit understanding and accord had been always improving . . . Though he had never before made any profession or protestation to Clennam, and though what he had just said was little enough as to the words in which it was expressed, Clennam had long had a growing belief that Mr Pancks, in his own odd way, was becoming attached to him” (637). Note the emphasis on the fact that their relationship does not rely on words. During the conversation in which Pancks tempts Clennam to speculate (638–43), much is understood, or partly understood, between the two men, but little is actually said. It is not even explicitly stated that Pancks has been successful in persuading Clennam to invest in Merdle. Later, the understanding between Clennam and Pancks becomes sufficiently intermental for them to be able to communicate by signs. “Mr Pancks in shaking hands merely scratched his eyebrow with his left forefinger and snorted once, but Clennam, who understood him better now than of old, comprehended that he had almost done for the evening and wished to say a word to him outside” (594). When outside, “Arthur thought he received his cue to speak to him as one who knew pretty well what had just now passed” (595). However, the resulting conversation demonstrates that the efficiency of intermental thought should not be overestimated. Misreadings can occur. When Pancks says that he wants to take a razor to Casby (in fact, to cut his hair), Clennam thinks that he wants to cut his throat!

The Look

A subcategory of the emphasis on the importance of the face is the significance of the look. For minds to be public and available, it is necessary for characters to look attentively at each other in order to pick up the sorts of cues that I have been describing. This may even require staring at the other person. In fact, there is a noticeable preponderance in the text of those three words, attentive, look, and stare. Table 4.1 sets out some comparative usages for these words and their variants in four novels: Persuasion, Little Dorrit, Middlemarch, and Henry James’s The Ambassadors. The numbers in parentheses are adjusted to take account of the total length of the text: that is, the figures for The Ambassadors are doubled because it is approximately half the length of Little Dorrit and Middlemarch; and the figures for Persuasion are quadrupled because it is approximately a quarter of their length. The information is taken from the invaluable Victorian Literary Studies Archive
Web site (http://victorian.lang.nagoya-u.ac.jp/concordance.html). The differences in usage are significant. *Little Dorrit* scores higher than the other three novels in every case but one, and usually by a substantial margin. (The only exception is the number of attention words in *Persuasion*.)

In *Little Dorrit*, the act of looking fulfills a number of different functions. The list that follows is a selection. Some of the quotations from the text that are used elsewhere in this chapter reveal other uses of the look. Some of the following examples could equally well have been used to illustrate other functions.

- **Information-seeking:** “Monsieur Rigaud’s eyes . . . were so drawn in that direction that [Cavalletto] more than once followed them to and back from the pavement in some surprise” (46).
- **Information-giving:** When Mrs Clennam talks to Clennam, “Her emphasis had been derived from her eyes quite as much as from the stress she laid on her words” (747). “Their looks met. Something thoughtfully apprehensive in [Pet’s] large, soft eyes, had checked Little
Dorrit in an instant” (544).

- **Warning:** “To Arthur’s increased surprise, Mistress Affery, stretching her eyes wide at himself, as if in warning that this [Blandois] was not a gentleman for him to interfere with” (599).

- **Thanking:** “Mother, with a look which thanked Clennam in a manner agreeable to him” (581).

- **Expressing curiosity:** Blandois and Mrs Clennam “looked very closely at one another. That was but natural curiosity” (403).

- **Bonding:** “There was a silent understanding between them [Little Dorrit and Pet] . . . She looked at Mrs Gowan with keen and unabated interest” (544).

- **Intimidating:** Flintwinch says to Mrs Clennam, “Now, I know what you mean by opening your eyes so wide at me” (850).

- **Controlling:** “As Mrs Clennam never removed her eyes from Blandois . . . so Jeremiah never removed his from Arthur” (602).

The use of the look can be an important element in a character’s whole personality. Little Dorrit looks at Clennam “with all the earnestness of her soul looking steadily out of her eyes” (214). The look is often expressive of the attitude of the looker toward the “lookee.” “The visitor [Miss Wade] stood looking at her [Tattycoram] with a strange attentive smile. It was wonderful to see the fury of the contest in the girl, and the bodily struggle she made as if she were rent by the Demons of old” (65; my emphasis). “Mrs Clennam and Jeremiah had exchanged a look; and had then looked, and looked still, at Affery” (834). However, it can sometimes be that the accusation of staring is more informative about the uneasy state of mind of the “staree” than it is about the alleged starrer. Miss Wade refers to someone in her past who “had a serious way with her eyes of watching me” (727). Fanny unfairly reproaches Little Dorrit for staring at her (665), and Mr Dorrit thinks that the Chief Butler looks at him “in a manner that Mr Dorrit considered questionable” (678). When Mr Dorrit’s mind is collapsing and “his daughter had been observant of him with something more than her usual interest,” he demands peevishly, “Amy, what are you looking at?” (701).

The mechanics are interesting to observe. A look may be combined with the nonverbal communication discussed above: Clennam, “more with his eyes than by the slight impulsive motion of his hand, entreated her [Little Dorrit] to be reassured and to trust him” (121). Characters sometimes see significance in an exchange of looks by others. When Pancks comes to break the news of the Dorrit wealth, “The excitement of this strange creature was fast communicating itself to Clennam. Little Dorrit with amazement, saw this, and observed that they exchanged quick looks” (437). Characters are frequently uncomfortably aware of being the subject of a stare. When Mr
Dorrit goes to see Mrs Clennam, “he felt that the eyes of Mr Flintwinch and of Mrs Clennam were on him. He found, when he looked up, that this sensation was not a fanciful one” (686). Mrs Clennam (perhaps the major starer in the novel) “sat looking at her until she attracted her attention. Little Dorrit coloured under such a gaze, and looked down” (390). Flintwinch comments drily to Clennam, “You’ll be able to take my likeness, the next time you call, Arthur, I should think” (744). Clennam is comically uncomfortable with a look from Flora: “In his ridiculous distress, Clennam received another of the old glances without in the least knowing what to do with it” (194). Occasionally, a look can be so compelling that the lookee has to return it. “Throughout he [Blandois] looked at her [Little Dorrit]. Once attracted by his peculiar eyes, she could not remove her own, and they had looked at each other all the time” (546). Mr F’s Aunt “looked at Clennam with an expression of such intense severity that he felt obliged to look at her in return, against his personal inclinations.” “None of your eyes at me,” she scolds him (590).

Physically Distributed Cognition

I explained in chapter 2 that the term physically distributed cognition refers, as Daniel Dennett says, to our habit of off-loading as much as possible of our cognitive tasks into our environment. Dickens, in keeping with his absorption in the surface, and therefore physical, nature of thought, was acutely aware of this phenomenon. Consider again the passage quoted in my opening chapter in which Meagles comes close to saying that the information that Miss Wade lives in Park Lane is literally contained in the Meagles’s family house. Mrs Clennam’s house is another example of this sort of cognition. Take this description of her room, which she has not left for many years: “Yet there was a nameless air of preparation in the room, as if it were strung up for an occasion. From what the room derived it . . . no one could have said without looking attentively at its mistress, and that, too, with a previous knowledge of her face” (832; my emphasis).

Characters can suffer when taken out of their physically distributed network or when their environment is disrupted. Affery is “sensible of the danger in which her identity stood” (405) partly because of the menacing noises that she hears in Mrs Clennam’s house (which are eventually explained by its collapse). At the climax of the novel, when Mrs Clennam leaves her room, she is “made giddy by the turbulent irruption of this multitude of staring faces into her cell of years, by the confusing sensation of being in the air, and the yet more confusing sensation of being afoot, by the unexpected changes in half-remembered objects” (856). Disoriented by the sudden absence of her
physically distributed cognitive network, Mrs Clennam behaves so strangely while she is stumbling to the Marshalsea to see Little Dorrit that people in the streets think she is mad. The most extreme example is Mr Dorrit, who, after his release from the Marshalsea prison, never loses the feelings of discomfort and unease that he experiences while trying to cope with the absence of that familiar environment. His mind eventually gives way under the pressure. During his breakdown, Mr Dorrit “looked about him, as if the association were so strong that he needed reassurance from his sense of sight that they were not in the old prison-room” (702). Afterwards, “from that hour his poor maimed spirit, only remembering the place where it had broken its wings, cancelled the dream through which it had since groped, and knew of nothing beyond the Marshalsea” (710). Interestingly, Little Dorrit also suffers from the same syndrome, albeit, of course, in a much milder form. She is described as “quite displaced even from the last point of the old standing ground in life on which her feet had lingered” (517). Life in Rome for her “greatly resembled a superior sort of Marshalsea” (565). She has the insight to be aware of what is happening to her and writes to Clennam that “These new countries and wonderful sights . . . are very beautiful, and they astonish me, but I am not collected enough—not familiar enough with myself, if you can quite understand what I mean—to have all the pleasure in them that I might have” (522).

In addition, I cannot resist adding (at the suggestion of Porter Abbott) an extraordinary example of physically distributed cognition from a different Dickens novel, Hard Times (1854): “‘I think there’s a pain somewhere in the room,’ said Mrs Gradgrind [on her deathbed], ‘but I couldn’t positively say that I have got it’” (193).

**Large Intermental Units**

The large units in Little Dorrit include the speculators, the Marshalsea, and “Society.” The speculators who invest in Merdle and are subsequently ruined by him are always referred to as an intermental unit, even though, like most large units, it is necessarily an ill-defined set composed of individuals who have bought into Merdle to varying extents. “All people knew (or thought they knew) that he had made himself immensely rich” (611). “Nobody . . . knew what he had done; but everybody knew him to be the greatest that had appeared” (627). When explanations for Merdle’s death are sought, the entirely spurious physical condition of “pressure” is decided upon, and, in an interesting echo of the language that is used in Middle-march, the narrator remarks that this is “entirely satisfactory to the public
mind” (775). In a chilling analysis of the working of this type of intermental thought, one that lies behind the exploitative functioning of the medium-sized units of the Barnacle family and the Circumlocution Office, Ferdinand Barnacle remarks to Clennam when he visits him in the Marshalsea, “Pardon me, but I think you really have no idea how the human bees will swarm to the beating of any old tin kettle; in that fact lies the complete manual of governing them” (807).

The intermental unit of the Marshalsea prison is referred to by the narrator as the collegians, as in “the Collegians were not envious” of the Dorrit family’s newfound wealth (475). It has a common view on Mr Dorrit in particular: “It was generally understood that you must deduct a few [years] from his account [of how long he has been in the prison]; he was vain, the fleeting generations of debtors said” (105). Clennam is able to read this shared mind. He notices that “It was evident from the general tone of the whole party, that they had come to regard insolvency as the normal state of mankind, and the payment of debts as a disease that occasionally broke out” (128). Distinctions can be made within units, and, when appropriate, subgroups may be delineated: “All the ladies in the prison had got hold of the news, and were in the yard . . . the gentleman prisoners, feeling themselves at a disadvantage, had for the most part retired” (101). Generally, the vision of intermental identity in Little Dorrit is rather different from that in Middlemarch, where the inhabitants of that town manage to retain their subjective individuality while being at the same time part of its group mind. But in the Dickens novel many of the descriptions of joint thought are relentlessly negative and despairing. This is a world in which individuals have a tendency to become “human bees” who lose their identity and gain nothing in return: “There was a string of people already straggling in, whom it was not difficult to identify as the nondescript messengers, go-betweens and errand bearers of the place . . . All of them wore the cast off clothes of other men and women, were made up of patches and pieces of other people’s individuality, and had no sartorial existence of their own proper” (131).

Turning to the other end of the social scale, it is a noteworthy feature of Mrs Merdle’s conversational style that she constantly refers to the demands of “Society.” This is the shorthand used for a network of different, overlapping subgroups such as the “Hampton Court Bohemians” (440) that Mrs Gowan belongs to, and “the Circumlocution Barnacles, who were the largest job-masters in the universe” (441). Gowan is well aware that he belongs to this network, remarking to Clennam that “I belong to a clan, or a clique, or a family, or a connection, or whatever you like to call it” (451). Mrs Merdle uses the mention of Society in order to enforce and reinforce ideological norms on others. However, it can be difficult for individuals to know how to
put these norms into practice in particular circumstances. When Mr Merdle complains that he does not enjoy Society events, she points out that he has to pretend: “Seeming would be quite enough” (448). Similarly intermental difficulties tend to arise during crises. “On the first crash of the eminent Mr Merdle’s decease, many important persons had been unable to determine whether they should cut Mrs Merdle, or comfort her” (873). Luckily for her, they choose the latter.

I mentioned above, in the sections on the expressiveness of the face, the use of nonverbal communication, and the importance of the attentive look, that much can be left unsaid when a character knows fairly well what another is thinking. This is true of cooperative and constructive intermental units such as Clennam’s relationships with Pancks and Doyce, as well as more dysfunctional examples such as the relationship between Little Dorrit and her father. Here too, a good deal is often left unspoken. However, the unexpressed nature of much of the intermental functioning in the novel is even more apparent in the conflicted and destructive small units that exist within the norms established by the large unit of Society. These units are characterized by shared thought that is based on pretence and, in particular, on the pretence that intermental understanding is absent. On the contrary, though, these units rest on a network of shared assumptions that make their vicious verbal jousting possible.

Two of an entertaining bunch of examples are the relationships between Fanny and Mrs Merdle and between Fanny and Mrs General. In the former case, Fanny and Mrs Merdle understand each other so perfectly that the real subjects of their conversations need never be made explicit. It is in this way that the two of them spend the second half of the novel (“Riches”) pretending that they never met in the first (“Rags”). Indeed, “The skilful manner in which [Mrs Merdle] and Fanny fenced with one another on the occasion almost made her quiet sister [Little Dorrit] wink” (566). In a good example of the competitive nature of encounters fought under the rules of Society, the discussion between Mr Dorrit and Mrs Merdle over the engagement between their offspring becomes a zero-sum game, a “skilful seesaw . . . so that each of them sent the other up, and each of them sent the other down, and neither had the advantage” (657). The conversation between Mrs Merdle and Mrs Gowan over the engagement between Gowan and Pet is a more cooperative affair, but is still governed by the same rules: “Knowing, however, what was expected of her, and perceiving the exact nature of the fiction to be nursed, she [Mrs Merdle] took it delicately in her arms, and put her required contribution of gloss upon it . . . And Mrs Gowan, who of course saw through her own threadbare blind perfectly, and who knew that Mrs Merdle saw through it perfectly, came out of this form, notwithstanding, as she had gone into it,
with immense complacency and gravity” (444). What is happening here is that there is one apparent or surface intermental understanding that is based on a lie (the marriage is regrettable), while the real understanding (the marriage is to be welcomed) must never be explicitly acknowledged.

The Dorrit Family

One of the ways in which a group of people can be identified as an intermental unit is a strong sense among those people of being part of that group. Such a group often has a clearly defined self-image in the sense that it is important to its constituent individuals that they identify themselves as belonging to it. Some families are like this; others are not. The Dorrit family definitely has a strong self-image. During Frederick’s unforgettable outburst to William in which he complains about the family’s treatment of Little Dorrit, he refers to the “family credit” (538). Earlier, Mr Dorrit had “felt that the family dignity was struck at by an assassin’s hand” (511). The same words, “family dignity,” are used again several pages later (551). These phrases refer to the shared consciousness within the family of their alleged importance and social standing. They contain a strong sense of them and us, insiders and outsiders. The outsiders have to be made aware of the importance of the family name, and the insiders are uneasily aware of outsiders’ skepticism on this point.

The following passage is a remarkable one. The word “family” is repeated four times in such quick succession that the phrases containing the word, and referring thereby to different aspects of the workings of the Dorrit intermental mind, comprise eleven words out of a total of forty-four. The passage attempts to convey by means of this repetition a sense of the creation of what may be termed the family ideology: “It was the family custom to lay it down as family law, that she was a plain domestic little creature, without the great and sage experience of the rest. This family fiction was the family assertion of itself against her services” (280; my emphasis). The background to the phrase quoted earlier about Mr Dorrit feeling that the family dignity had been struck at by an assassin’s hand is that he is excessively self-conscious about the recent family history. Fanny knows well that it is “often running in his mind that other people are thinking about [the Marshalsea], while he is talking to them” (647). As with many intermental units, though, generalizations should be employed with care. This sort of cognitive functioning is complex. To repeat, most groups have a core membership but are looser around the edges. Significantly, Wittgenstein used the notion of family resemblances in the Philosophical Investigations to illustrate the fuzziness of
concepts (1958, 32). The consciousness of the Dorrit family credit is shared by the core family of William, Fanny, and Tip. It is not characteristic of the other members who, for different reasons, are much more peripheral: Frederick and Little Dorrit.

The workings of the Dorrit mind in action are evident in characteristic shared patterns of behavior. These behavioral patterns can relate to individuals who are either inside or outside of the unit. The passage quoted above that referred to the family four times in three lines is a good illustration of the former. From an intramental point of view, Little Dorrit is referred to as “retiring,” “unnoticed,” “overlooked and forgotten” (all in one paragraph on page 337), and is regarded in Venice as “the little figure of the English girl who was always alone” (520) and who always “asked leave to be left alone” (519). However, much of this intramental shyness arises from her treatment by William, Fanny, and Tip. Its origins are intermental. It is laid down as family law that Little Dorrit is to be treated in a certain way, and should have a certain function within the unit as a plain domestic creature who does not possess their wisdom. It is a central element in the shared consciousness of the core family. Little Dorrit is intramentally aware of the place allotted her. It is stated that she “submitted herself to the family want in its greatness as she had submitted herself to the family want in its littleness” (556–57). Intermental cognitive functioning is often revealed in the joint actions that arise from these family dispositions to behave in certain ways. In the John Chivery affair, “Little Dorrit herself was the last person considered” (257). Of the triumphant leaving of the Marshalsea, the narrator states that “This going away was perhaps the very first action of their joint lives that they had got though without her” (480). And they fail spectacularly by completely forgetting her and leaving her behind.

Family customs can often reveal a lot about a family to outsiders. When Clennam hears Little Dorrit being praised by her uncle, Frederick Dorrit, he resents the family tone of voice: “Arthur fancied that he heard in these praises a certain tone of custom, which he had heard from the father last night with an inward protest and feeling of antagonism . . . He fancied that they viewed her, not as having risen away from the prison atmosphere, but as appertaining to it; as being vaguely what they had a right to expect, and nothing more” (134). It is quite common, I think, for outsiders being introduced to a family to see at a glance what is revealed by joint patterns of behavior: say, which members of it are excessively over- or undervalued. The narrator comments of the family treatment of Little Dorrit that “She took the place of eldest of the three, in all things but precedence; was the head of the fallen family; and bore, in her own heart, its anxieties and shames” (112). The narrator also describes Little Dorrit in the act of sighing by referring to
“the whole family history in that sigh” (648). Both are moving descriptions of the ways in which individuals may acquire and internalize some of the characteristics of the intermental unit to which they belong, and how painful this internalization process can be.

Intermental units can also function in similarly characteristic ways toward individuals who are outside of the unit. Such mechanisms as scapegoating are powerful tools for defining group consciousness. William, Tip, and Fanny develop a common antagonism toward Clennam, based mainly on his skepticism toward their core value, the family credit. Fanny says of him that “He obtruded himself upon us in the first instance. We never wanted him” (507). Clennam is well aware of their shared hostility because of their unsubtle joint behavior and comes “to a clearer and keener perception of the place assigned him by the family” (573). Again, though, it should be stressed that the peripheral members do not share these communal attitudes. Little Dorrit is in love with him and it is doubtful whether Frederick has any view at all on the matter.

It is often rewarding to investigate the subunits that develop within an intermental unit because they tend both to illuminate and be illuminated by the social dynamics of the larger group. Within the relationship between Little Dorrit and her father, much is often left unspoken. They understand each other but do not make this knowledge of the other apparent: he because he is emotionally dishonest; she for reasons of delicacy and a reluctance to confront that dishonesty. “For a little while there was a dead silence and stillness” (271) between them, “They did not, as yet, look at one another” (272). In that silence, it is apparent that she knows that he has encouraged young John Chivery to court her for his own selfish purposes, he knows that she knows, she knows that he knows, and so on. Much of the relationship between father and daughter is expressed in terms of gesture: “To see her hand upon his arm in mute entreaty half-repressed, and her timid little shrinking figure turning away, was to see a sad, sad sight” (123). Like Fanny, Little Dorrit knows about how her father’s mind works, in particular on the question of the family credit: “She felt that, in what he had just now said to her and in his whole bearing towards her, there was the well-known shadow of the Marshalsea wall” (530). As is to be expected over the course of a long narrative, their relationship changes: “From that time the protection that her wondering eyes had expressed towards him, became embodied in action, and the Child of the Marshalsea took upon herself a new relation towards the Father” (111). The shared cognitive functioning within this intermental pair is flawed, however, by his dishonesty. He pretends that there has been no change.

Fanny and Little Dorrit also form an intermental pair within the larger unit of the whole family. The latter is quick to pick up on behavioral cues
from her sister: she “became aware that Fanny was more showy in manner than the occasion appeared to require” (549). As a consequence of their intimacy, Fanny shares secrets with her. She tells Little Dorrit how she always knows when a man is interested in her (558). She also explains in great detail the reasons why she and Mrs Merdle will pretend that they have not met before (551). When Fanny cries after telling her that she is engaged, “It was the last time Fanny ever showed that there was any hidden, suppressed, or conquered feeling in her on the matter” (654). From that time onward, her feelings will be hidden from others, but Amy will know of them, having been shown them once.

As shown in the discussion of large cognitive units, Fanny and Mrs Merdle understand each other so perfectly that the real subjects of their conversations need never be openly referred to. The relationship between Fanny and Mrs Merdle’s son, Sparkler, is much less well balanced. Fanny toys with Sparkler, and her knowledge of his mind, such as it is, enables her to calibrate the torture perfectly. Her control over him, while enjoyable in itself, causes problems in terms of Fanny’s acute awareness of the perceptions of others. “Miss Fanny was now in the difficult situation of being universally known [to be the object of Mr Sparkler’s affections], and of not having dismissed Mr Sparkler . . . Hence she was sufficiently identified with the gentleman to feel compromised by his being more than usually ridiculous” (645). She is aware of the intermental consensus, presented in the passive voice, that identifies her relationship with Sparkler as a serious one. She knows that such a consensus can solidify quickly and cannot thereafter be easily changed. Fanny therefore jumps quickly to Sparkler’s defense whenever Gowan ridicules him. The enslavement has consequences for Little Dorrit too, as she realizes how their two minds are working: “Thenceforward, Little Dorrit observed Mr Sparkler’s treatment by his enslaver, with new reasons for attaching importance to all that passed between them” (651). “Little Dorrit began to think she detected some new understanding between Mr Sparkler and Fanny” (651). She notices that “Mr Sparkler’s demeanor towards herself changed. It became fraternal” (652).

The bulk of this section has analyzed intermental units that are characterized by conflict, competition, exploitation, dishonesty, solipsism, and selfishness. The ideology of the Dorrit family credit, despite the complete absence of evidence for it, is imposed on others in order to devalue them. Their joint exploitation of, and dishonesty toward, Little Dorrit is morally reprehensible, as is their attempted scapegoating of Clennam. In addition, Fanny in particular forms conflicted and competitive pairings with others such as Mrs Merdle and Mrs General. This bleak picture is in stark contrast to the nature of the intermental unit formed by the relationship between Little Dorrit and Clennam, which is examined now.
Clennam and Little Dorrit

Intermental units can be approached in a number of different ways. One is simply to trace the development of the relationship as a whole over time. Another is to examine it in terms of the variation in focalization: in this case, the relationship is mostly focalized through Clennam. A third is to examine the degree of intermental thought: individuals may understand each other perfectly, imperfectly, or even (as with non-units such as Lydgate and Rosamond) not at all. It may be that different units will be illuminated by different sorts of approaches. In the case of Clennam and Little Dorrit, I will evaluate a few general aspects of their relationship before concentrating first on Clennam’s knowledge of Little Dorrit’s mind and then on her knowledge of his.

As the reader would expect of the central romance of the novel, Clennam and Little Dorrit share a good deal of their thinking: not all, but a good deal. The following excerpt from her letter to him gives a flavor of the complexity of the self-conscious theory of mind that is involved in their relationship: “It looked at first as if I was taking on myself to understand and explain so much . . . But . . . I felt more hopeful for your knowing at once that I had only been watchful for you, and had only noticed what I think I have noticed, because I was quickened by your interest in it” (608). This is written by someone who is well aware of the workings of her own mind and the mind of the one she loves, and how the two minds can function together. As is often the case, though, their mind reading is not perfect. A common characteristic of theory of mind involving two people who know each other well is that one will often know that something is wrong with the other, but not know precisely what: “She feared that he was blaming her in his mind for so devising to contrive for them, think for them, and watch over them, without their knowledge or gratitude; perhaps even with their reproaches for supposed neglect. But what was really in his mind, was the weak figure with its strong purpose” (211–12). In this case she knows that something is on his mind, but she is wrong about what it is. (As we will see, something similar happens with Anne Elliot and Wentworth.) Near the end of the novel, after they have been apart for some time, he sees something in her face although he does not know exactly what it is: “As she looked at him silently, there was something in her affectionate face that he did not quite comprehend: something that could have broken into tears in a moment, and yet that was happy and proud” (885).

There is a paradox that commonly arises in narratives with a comic structure. On the one hand, the central couple in a comedy often exhibits a high degree of intermentality. This is what one would expect when people are attracted to each other and are on the same wavelength. On the other
hand, there is often a huge gap or blind spot in their joint mind reading that relates to the most important matter of all—their feelings for each other. In the case of this novel, Clennam does not know that Little Dorrit is in love with him; she does not know that Clennam is in love with her. “She was quicker to perceive the slightest matter here, than in any other case—but one” (544). There are interesting parallels here with the development of the relationships between Anne and Wentworth and Dorothea and Ladislaw. There is a certain logic to such intermental breakdowns in the relationships of lovers. It may be that they will have a tendency to put the other on a pedestal and think something along the lines of “he/she is so wonderful that he/she will not be interested in me.”

Mind reading involves reading one’s own mind as well as reading the minds of others, and both can be unreliable. Little Dorrit’s first-person attribution is accurate because she knows that she is in love with Clennam. However, for the majority of the novel, Clennam is not aware of the most important fact about the working of his own mind: that he is in love with Little Dorrit. Efficient first-person attribution is as necessary as the third-person sort for successful participation in an intermental unit. For any unit of this sort to function properly, with a fair degree of accuracy and concern for the feelings of the other, the individuals within it have to try to come to a reasonable working knowledge of their own feelings as well as the feelings of the other in order to make informed and sensitive ethical judgments about how to behave. Clennam becomes aware that his feelings for Little Dorrit are complex, and this awareness leads him to exercise the sort of care in dealing with her feelings that I will be describing. Nevertheless, he sometimes hurts her because he does not yet know that he is in love with her or that she is in love with him. Toward the end of the novel, Clennam finds his private thoughts “remarkable” to him (787), suggesting that he is aware of the fallibility of introspection.

The issue of control often arises even within beneficial intermental units. There is evidence from the beginning of the novel that Clennam attempts to influence Little Dorrit’s mind: “He wished to leave her with a reliance upon him, and to have something like a promise from her that she would cherish it” (140). He is concerned, though, that the Little Dorrit who exists in his mind may not be the one who exists in her own. “To make a domesticated fairy of her . . . would be but a weakness of his own fancy” (305). The feeling will not go away. “Something had made her keenly and additionally sensitive just now. Now, was there someone in the hopeless unattainable distance? Or had the suspicion been brought into his mind, by his own associations?” (309). Clennam is showing a sensitive awareness of his and her aspectuality. He is acutely conscious of the possibility that his Little Dorrit could become
a “domesticated fairy” and thereby lose contact with what he thinks might be her own conception of herself. He knows that he is using her for his own emotional needs by creating an image of her in his mind that may not fit her own self-image. Importantly, he does not wish to do so. Unfortunately, though, he then overcompensates by talking about himself as much older than he is, and thus inadvertently hurts Little Dorrit’s feelings. The narrator comments that he would not talk of himself as though he was old “If he had known the sharpness of the pain he caused the patient heart, in speaking thus!” (432). To make matters worse, Clennam does not realize that reinforcing the age gap by calling her a child is equally hurtful. “A slight shade of distress fell upon her, at his so often calling her a child. She was surprised that he should see it, or think such a slight thing” (208). Again, this may be a familiar sensation. Many of us have inadvertently hurt someone close to us by unsuccessfully trying to second-guess their feelings. As is said of Oedipa and Mucho, the married couple in Thomas Pynchon’s *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966), “Like all their abilities to communicate, this too had a virtuous motive” (30).

In any event, despite these difficulties, Clennam’s theory of mind is, in ethical terms, far superior to that of the Dorrit family. In a number of passages early in the novel, we see Clennam fully understanding Little Dorrit’s love for her father. “Evidently in observance of their nightly custom, she put some bread before herself, and touched his glass with her lips; but Arthur saw she was troubled and took nothing” (122). “He understood the emotion with which she said it, to arise in her father’s behalf; and he respected it, and was silent” (126). “He gathered from a tremor on her lip, and a passing shadow of great agitation on her face, that her mind was with her father” (306). He is considerate about her poverty. “He was going to say so lightly clad, but stopped himself in what would have been a reference to her poverty” (208). Little Dorrit becomes aware that he knows her mind well. “Can you guess,” said Little Dorrit . . . looking at him with all the earnestness of her soul looking steadily out of her eyes, ‘what I am going to ask you not to do?’” (214). He guesses correctly that her request is to stop giving money to her father and brother. She tells him that “I know you will understand me if anybody can” (523). And she is right. “He saw the bright delight of her face, and the flush that kindled in it, with a feeling of shame . . . The same deep, timid earnestness that he had always seen in her, and never without emotion, he saw still” (826). Their nonverbal communication is noticeably efficient. “She started, coloured deeply, and turned white. The visitor, more with his eyes than by the slight impulsive motion of his hand, entreated her to be reassured and to trust him” (121). He can read her emotional behavior (starting and turning white); she can read the intention behind his gesture.
The following small detail beautifully encapsulates the closeness of their mind reading: “‘Little Dorrit,’ said Clennam; and the phrase had already begun, between these two, to stand for a hundred gentle phrases, according to the varying tone and connection in which it was used” (213). I think many readers of this book will have had personal experience of the use of a private language within a close relationship.

However, in a troubling and difficult scene, there is a breakdown in the communication between them. Little Dorrit confides that she does not understand why, after spending so long in the debtors prison, her father still has to pay off his debt before he is released. Clennam cannot understand why she does not understand that it is the honorable thing to do. The narrator remarks that “It was the first speck Clennam had ever seen, it was the last speck Clennam ever saw, of the prison atmosphere upon her” (472). I refer to this passage as troubling and difficult because it is possible that the ethical judgments made by most readers today would not necessarily be in line with Clennam’s or the implied author’s on this issue. My interpretation of this sentence, guided by its beautiful cadence, is that the implied reader is being invited by the implied author to identify with Clennam’s disapproval. It may well be that the actual readers of Dickens’s period would have been readier to accept that invitation than the actual readers of today, who may, I think, be more likely to regard Little Dorrit’s question as, at the least, a reasonable one to ask. How is it, they might ask themselves, that people who steal money are penalized only once by the prison sentence and do not have to pay back the money, while people who owe money have to suffer both penalties? Because the actual reader may be at some distance from the implied reader in this case, the effect could be to make Clennam look heavy-handed and judgmental. In terms of readers’ responses to Little Dorrit, the effect is rather paradoxical. A familiar criticism of Dickens is that he makes his heroines into saints. These days, we would like more imperfections. However, the “flaw” that he gives Little Dorrit in an attempt to humanize her is unlikely to be seen as such by modern readers.

As the bulk of the text is focalized through Clennam, there is less evidence of Little Dorrit’s mind reading. Nevertheless, for large stretches of the novel, she is obviously well aware of Clennam’s feelings. In addition to some of the examples given above, she knows immediately that something is wrong with Clennam after he gives up thoughts of Pet. She asks if he has been ill (431), and she knows about his anxieties about growing old. “He never thought that she saw in him what no one else could see” (432). There is a noticeable emphasis on the face in her mind-reading of Clennam. She can read his facial expressions with ease. “As she made the confession, timidly hesitating, she raised her eyes to the face, and read its expression so
plainly that she answered it” (211). “Do what he could to compose his face, he could not convey so much of an ordinary expression into it, but that the moment she saw it, she dropped her work and cried, ‘Mr Clennam! What’s the matter?’” (465). Intermental units are not sealed off from the rest of the storyworld, and Little Dorrit is perceptive when she sees Clennam interacting with others. When Pancks comes to break the news of the Dorrit wealth, “The excitement of this strange creature was fast communicating itself to Clennam. Little Dorrit with amazement, saw this, and observed that they exchanged quick looks” (437). Knowledge of others can be contextual as well as relying on external indicators such as facial clues and signs. She understands his awareness of her feelings about her father because she knows the sort of person that he is. “Little Dorrit had a misgiving that he might blame her father” (208). I said earlier that William Dorrit is too frightened to recognize and acknowledge change in his relationship with Little Dorrit. This one is different. At the end of the novel, she realizes immediately that Clennam knows that it has altered. As a consequence, “He hesitated what to call her. She perceived it in an instant” (825), and reassures him that she still wishes to be known as “Little Dorrit.”

**Clennam and Mrs Clennam**

This is a dysfunctional relationship in which there is evidence only of the most basic kind of intermental thinking. What they know about each other is the sort of person that the other is, their character or personality, their dispositions to behave in certain ways. He knows her to be cold, arrogant, and unbending. She knows him well enough to identify what she regards as weakness in him. But it is precisely this knowledge that fuels her hostility toward him and drives them further apart. Clennam knows that his mother has a secretive disposition and he guesses that she has a secret that might be connected in some way to Little Dorrit. But these are circumstantial or contextual guesses based on his knowledge of her character. They do not arise from any knowledge of her detailed thought processes as they occur in everyday contexts. Clennam is well aware that Mrs Clennam does not have any sort of intermental bond with him. “He touched the worsted muffling of her hand—that was nothing; if his mother had been sheathed in brass there would have been no new barrier between them” (76). As a sensitive man, he feels the lack of any connection deeply. In consequence he has little desire for her company: “He had no intention of presenting himself in his mother’s dismal room that night, and could not have felt more depressed and cast away if he had been in a wilderness” (203). Clennam is watchful
in her presence, forever unsuccessfully seeking clues to her state of mind.
“Mrs Clennam glanced at her son, leaning against one of the windows. He observed the look” (92).

Clennam is a character who believes in social minds. For him, it is an ethical decision to be as open as possible in his cognitive functioning. He thinks that people should be capable of empathy and he tries to empathize with his mother: “A swift thought shot into his mind. In that long imprisonment here, and in her own long confinement to her room, did his mother find a balance to be struck” (129). What little knowledge he has of his mother’s thought processes leads him to try to achieve a reconciliation with her. She rejects the offer. Indeed, the conflicted conversations that result reveal fresh complexities. “You knew I would. You knew me’ she interrupted. Her son paused for a moment. He had struck fire out of her, and was surprised” (87). Although she is acknowledging that he knows what sort of person she is, the key point is that he is surprised. He still does not know her well enough to be able to predict her emotional reactions. There is a lack of balance in that Clennam is trying to find a meeting of minds and his mother is not. His mother’s rejection of an open relationship is echoed in the behavior of Gowan, which I will examine later. However, to put this relationship in context, it is worth noting that Mrs Clennam can be surprisingly sensitive to the thought processes of others. This seems particularly true of Little Dorrit. She tells her, “You love Arthur. (I can see the blush upon your face.)” (859). When Little Dorrit later recoils from her, she seems to care, responding, “Even now, I see you shrink from me, as if I had been cruel” (860).

Clennam and Flora

Clennam usually displays a sensitive awareness of the aspectuality of individuals and of the fact that identities are situated. I have mentioned that he is aware that he may be using Little Dorrit by creating an image of her in his mind that might not fit her own self-image in order to supply his own emotional needs. However, he is noticeably less aware of a similar sort of problem that arises in his relationship with Flora. For about twenty years, the image of Flora that is present in Clennam’s mind is of the young Flora. This image takes no account of the passing of time. He neglects to make any adjustments to anticipate what an older Flora might be like. The inevitable happens. Clennam’s previous, young Flora dies instantly as soon as he meets the older one. “Clennam’s eyes no sooner fell upon the subject of his old passion than it shivered and broke to pieces” (191). Interestingly, Flora realizes what has happened. “I know I am not what you expected, I know that
very well. In the midst of her rapidity, she had found that out with the quick perception of a cleverer woman” (195). However, what is so amusing about Flora’s character is that she keeps forgetting what she has so perceptively noticed. She keeps morphing into young Flora, thereby attempting to transform Clennam correspondingly into young Clennam. This, of course, causes the older Clennam great discomfort. “In his ridiculous distress, Clennam received another of the old glances without in the least knowing what to do with it” (194). However, Flora’s sympathy for Little Dorrit and her whole-hearted interest in Clennam’s happiness eventually press her to stay in older-Flora character.

Flora’s mental functioning is locked into a dialogical relationship with Clennam’s. To use Gregory Bateson’s formula as described in chapter 2, for increased explanatory power, the way to delineate Flora’s cognitive system is to draw the limiting line so that you do not cut out anything that leaves things inexplicable. That means not leaving out of account either young Flora or older Flora, either Clennam’s Flora or her own Flora. Together, these different Floras comprise her situated identity.

Mrs Clennam, Flintwinch, and Affery

The business partnership of Flintwinch and Mrs Clennam, frequently referred to by Affery as “the clever ones,” is a fiercely conflicted and competitive relationship. Their conversations are games of chess that anyone overhearing would find difficult to follow (a sure sign of a high-functioning intermental unit). The closeness of their joint thinking is frequently emphasized by Flintwinch’s recriminations during their regular arguments: “It doesn’t matter whether you answer or not, because I know you are, and you know you are” (224). Flintwinch knows what she is thinking, she knows that he knows, he knows that she knows, and so on. Their minds are transparent to each other. He remarks to her, “Now, I know what you mean by opening your eyes so wide at me” (850). He even shouts at Mrs Clennam, “But that’s the way you cheat yourself” (851). He is saying that his third-person attributions of her states of mind are more accurate and reliable than her own first-person ones. Nevertheless, despite these very real tensions, they form an alliance, knowing that they are stronger together than they are alone. “Perhaps this had originally been the mainspring of the understanding between them. Descrying thus much force of character in Mr Flintwinch, perhaps Mrs Clennam had deemed alliance with him worth her while” (225). Each uses his or her knowledge of the other’s mind to further his or her own interests.

Both try to exercise control over others by their watchfulness, their use of the look. When Mr Dorrit goes to see Mrs Clennam, ”he felt that the eyes
of Mr Flintwinch and of Mrs Clennam were on him. He found, when he looked up, that this sensation was not a fanciful one” (686). “As Mrs Clennam never removed her eyes from Blandois . . . so Jeremiah never removed his from Arthur” (602). The power of the look is an outward manifestation of their control. This look is employed with regularity on Affery in order to subjugate her to their joint will: “Mrs Clennam and Jeremiah had exchanged a look; and had then looked, and looked still, at Affery” (834).

Both recognize that the other is a strong character. In a telling phrase, strongly reminiscent of Middlemarch’s desire to swallow Lydgate whole, Flintwinch tells Mrs Clennam that “The peculiarity of my temper is, ma’am, that I won’t be swallowed up alive” (224). When two people are in such a close relationship, to the point where it can be said that an intermental mind has been formed (even in the case of a conflicted unit such as this), the fear of being swallowed up, of losing one’s individuality, can be a pressing one. This is, in fact, what happens to Affery. At a conference that I attended once, I noticed that one of my hosts was becoming uncomfortable with my talk of social minds and intermental units. When I pressed her she admitted as much, explaining that she found repugnant the idea of having her freedom as an independent individual curtailed by being in such a unit. By contrast, others will welcome the intimacy and love that can arise within them.

Intermental units are fluid. This one is sometimes a pair but, at other times, it becomes a trio, when “the clever ones” exercise their large degree of control over Affery’s mind. Despite her sluggish intramental functioning, Affery, by her repeated use of this phrase, recognizes the strength of the intermental pair formed by Flintwinch and Mrs Clennam. She asks herself, “What’s the use of considering? If them two clever ones have made up their minds to it, what’s left for me to do? Nothing” (78). “But as ‘them two clever ones’—Mrs Affery’s perpetual reference, in whom her personality was swallowed up—were agreed to accept Little Dorrit as a matter of course, she had nothing for it but to follow suit” (94). Note the recurrence of the phrase “swallowed up” that was used by Flintwinch earlier. The difference is that Affery really is being swallowed up. The unit is so strongly defined that the narrator often drops the quotation marks: Affery is “held in very low account by the two clever ones, as a person, never of strong intellect, who was becoming foolish” (389). She is an example of a character who loses her intramental identity by being subsumed into an intermental unit that contains much stronger characters than her. She becomes as mysterious to herself as she is to others. “In the vagueness and indistinctness of all her new experiences and perceptions, as everything about her was mysterious to herself she began to be mysterious to others: and became as difficult to be made out to anyone’s satisfaction as she found the house and everything in it difficult to make out to her own” (229). Because her personality really is being swallowed up, it
is no surprise to be told that Affery is “sensible of the danger in which her identity stood” (405).

**Clennam and Gowan**

The relationship between Clennam and Gowan is a particularly interesting one. Although the two men form a conflicted unit, it differs from the equally conflicted “clever ones” because it is also unbalanced and asymmetrical. That is to say, it is Gowan who wishes it to be conflicted; Clennam does not and he tries hard to understand the workings of Gowan’s mind in order to make it cooperative. Clennam can see, while watching the unaware Gowan, that “There was something in his way of spurning [stones] out of their places with his heel, and getting them into the required position, that Clennam thought had an air of cruelty in it” (245). At other times, though, despite Clennam’s best attempts, his theory of mind lets him down. He cannot understand Gowan’s dilettante attitude toward the arts and his casual attitudes toward Pet and others. Gowan enjoys Clennam’s struggles to understand him and his resulting discomfiture: “Mr Henry Gowan seemed to have a malicious pleasure in playing off the three talkers against each other, and in seeing Clennam startled by what they said . . . His healthy state of mind appeared even to derive a gratification from Clennam’s position of embarrassment and isolation among the good company” (362). Clennam keeps trying and “tried to convey by all quiet and unpretending means, that he was frankly and disinterestedly desirous of tendering him any friendship he would accept. Mr Gowan treated him in return with his usual ease, and with his usual show of confidence, which was no confidence at all” (451).

To use Anne Elliot’s damning condemnation of Mr Elliot that I discuss in the following chapter, Gowan, despite appearances to the contrary, is not “open.” To adapt the words of the narrator of this novel, it is the usual show of openness, which is no openness at all. Gowan is using his theory of mind dishonestly: he knows that Clennam wants openness; he pretends to be open; he knows that he is not really being open; he enjoys Clennam’s disappointment that he is not. Gowan uses his knowledge of Clennam’s mind precisely to repel the possibility of mutual thought, making this an asymmetrical relationship. Clennam’s disappointment in Gowan leads him into a familiar phenomenon related to first-person attribution: “It would have been so cruel if he had meant it, that Clennam firmly resolved to believe he did not mean it” (453). In the modern phrase, Clennam is in denial. However, it does him no good because Gowan knows well how minds of this sort work and is ruthless in exploiting such weakness. During a later encounter, Clennam is described
as “smarting under these cool-handed thrusts, of which he deeply felt the
force already” (721). Such cruelty requires a refined theory of mind.

Gowan uses this refined mind reading on his wife for equally cruel
purposes. In encouraging Blandois to become a friend, Gowan does so
for the sole reason that he knows that Pet would much rather that he did
not. He “opposed the first separate wish he observed in his wife” (541). The
Jamesian tone of that sentence is a reminder that the relationship between
Gowan and Pet, set as it is in Italy, has marked similarities to the marriage
between Osmond and Isobel Archer in The Portrait of a Lady. To use the term
employed as the title of a book by the philosopher Colin McGinn, Gowan,
like Osmond, likes Mindfucking (2008).

**Little Dorrit and Pet**

During Pet’s growing realization that her marriage will not be the genu-
inely intermental unit that she had hoped for, she has a consolation in the
strong relationship that she forms with Little Dorrit. The narrator points out
that “There was a sympathetic understanding already established between
the two” (563); and also that “There was a silent understanding between
them . . . She [Little Dorrit] looked at Mrs Gowan with keen and unabated
interest; the sound of her voice was thrilling to her; nothing that was near
her, or about her, escaped Little Dorrit” (544). Little Dorrit tells Clennam
that “I loved her almost as soon as I spoke to her” (521). Her love for Pet
enables her to read her mind well. During their first meeting, “There was
a sorrowfully affectionate and regretful sound in [Pet’s] voice, which made
[Little Dorrit] refrain from looking at her for the moment” (496). In addition
to such vocal cues, Little Dorrit’s face-reading works well too. “Little Dorrit
stopped. For there was neither happiness nor health in the face that turned to
her” (857). Little Dorrit is aware of the consensus, referred to above, that Pet
and her family had set out to catch Gowan as a good social connection. How-
ever, “Little Dorrit’s interest in the fair subject of this easily accepted belief
was too earnest and watchful to fail in accurate observation . . . She even had
an instinctive knowledge that there was not the least truth in it” (563).

Part of the reason for Little Dorrit’s skepticism is her perceptive aware-
ness of the dynamics within the Gowan marriage. Although, oddly, she
becomes a favorite of Gowan (544), this does not prevent her from being
unsparing in her judgments of his mental functioning: “Little Dorrit fan-
cied it was revealed to her that Mr Gowan treated his wife, even in his
very fondness, too much like a beautiful child. He seemed so unsuspicious
of the depths of feeling which she knew must lie below that surface, that
she doubted if there could be any such depths in himself” (548). She is also penetrating in her judgments of Gowan’s behavior generally. When the Dorrit family is being insufferably munificent in its patronage of Gowan as a painter, “Little Dorrit was not without doubts how Mr Henry Gowan might take their patronage” (554). And her doubts are justified when he takes it badly. Little Dorrit is also aware of the fact that Pet (like Clennam) is in denial about the quality of Gowan’s mind: she writes, “I believe she conceals [all his faults], and always will conceal them, even from herself” (607).

A rather surprising intermental unit that develops in the second half of the novel is that formed by Little Dorrit, Pet, and Blandois. To both Little Dorrit and Pet, “Blandois behaved in exactly the same manner; and to both of them his manner had uniformly something in it, which they both knew to be different from his bearing towards others” (563). Little Dorrit’s aversion to Blandois is visible and therefore public: “She went down, not easily hiding how much she was inclined to shrink and tremble; for the appearance of this traveller was particularly disagreeable to her” (497). She becomes fascinated by his stare: “Throughout he [Blandois] looked at her [Little Dorrit]. Once attracted by his peculiar eyes, she could not remove her own, and they had looked at each other all the time” (546). Pet is equally repelled by him and knows that he killed her dog. The two women are reduced to a conspiracy and they use secrecy and silence in their communications whenever he is near. “Their looks met. Something thoughtfully apprehensive in [Pet’s] large, soft eyes, had checked Little Dorrit in an instant” (544).

ACTION IN LITTLE DORRIT

When the firm Doyce and Clennam is ruined by the collapse of Merdle’s financial empire, Clennam knows that it is his fault because, under the influence of Pancks, he speculated in Merdle’s schemes without Doyce’s knowledge. He decides to do all he can to spare Doyce. He tells his solicitor, Mr Rugg, that he will publicly accept all the responsibility for the bankruptcy.

(1) Clennam then proceeded to state to Mr Rugg his fixed resolution. (2) He told Mr Rugg that his partner was a man of great simplicity and integrity, and that in all he meant to do, he was guided above all things by a knowledge of his partner’s character, and a respect for his feelings. (3) He explained that his partner was then absent on an enterprise of importance, and that it particularly behoved himself publicly to accept the blame of what he had rashly done, and publicly to exonerate his partner from all participation in the responsibility of it . . .
(4) The disclosure was made, and the storm raged fearfully. (5) Thousands of people were wildly staring about for somebody alive to heap reproaches on; and this notable case, courting publicity, set the living somebody so much wanted, on a scaffold. (6) When people who had nothing to do with the case were so sensible of its flagrancy, people who lost money by it could scarcely be expected to deal mildly with it. (7) Letters of reproach and invective showered in from the creditors; and Mr Rugg, who sat upon the high stool every day and read them all, informed his client within a week that he feared that there were writs out.

(8) “I must take the consequences of what I have done,” said Clennam. (9) “The writs will find me here.” (781–83)

For the remainder of this chapter I aim to show how the presentations of actions contained in this passage are extremely informative about mental functioning. In particular, I will evaluate the discursive purposes that are served by these presentations. The concept of action is an important one in structuralist narratology. Propp’s morphology is basically a classification of different types of actions. The French structuralists of the 1960s onwards based their whole conception of narrative on actions, events, moves, and so on. In this way, the notion of action became the cornerstone of narrative theory, and a good deal of illuminating and insightful work was done on this concept. However, it seems to me that this work was undertaken within the story side of the story/discourse distinction and that there is much more to say about how action is presented or described in the discourse. The question then becomes not so much “What actions are performed?” as “How are those actions described?” I will investigate the latter question in relation to the above passage within the following four conceptual frameworks:

- philosophy of action;
- sociocultural action;
- intermental action; and
- discursive action.

**Philosophy of Action**

The theoretical study of narrative fiction is based on the assumption that there is a distinction between those parts of the discourse that present characters’ actions and those that present their consciousnesses. The former are regarded as statements that describe the surface events of the storyworld such as physical movements; it is thought, by contrast, that the latter convey
interiority, subjectivity, and private flows of thought. This discussion will dispute that dichotomy and will argue that what appear to be simple action descriptions in novels frequently contain a good deal of explicit information about characters’ minds. In fact, it can often be difficult to establish whether a statement refers to an action or to a state of consciousness. In the *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein quotes the sentence “I noticed that he was out of humour,” and asks, “Is this a report about his behaviour or his state of mind?” (1958, 179). (I refer to this in *Fictional Minds as Wittgenstein’s question* [2004, 120–21]). He is drawing attention to the fact that the mental and physical sides of action and behavior coexist and interpenetrate to the point where they are difficult to disentangle. The mental network that lies behind all actions contains intentions, reasons, motives, purposes, and causes, and elements of this network are often present in the discourse that is used to describe an action.

For that reason, there is a continuum rather than a simple dichotomy between action descriptions and descriptions of consciousness. I call it the *thought–action continuum* (2004, 212–14). Here again is the simple example from *Vile Bodies* that was used in chapter 2 in the context of intermental thought: “The three statesmen hid themselves.” A statement such as “they hid behind the curtain” looks at first glance like an action description, pure and simple. This sentence would certainly not be considered as a presentation of consciousness within traditional narratological approaches. But compare it with another, similar-sounding sentence: “They stood behind the curtain.” In the context of the second sentence, the first description, hiding, starts to look rather different. Although it may appear to be merely a description of an action, it contains important information about the mental functioning of the people standing behind the curtain because it explains the *reason* why they are doing so, their *motive* for doing so, their *intention* in doing so. Saying that they are *standing* there leaves open any number of reasons why they would be standing there. It leaves more work for the reader to do. From this angle, the more you look at the word hid, the more like a consciousness verb it becomes. The sentence can be decoded in consciousness terms as follows: the three agreed that it was in their interest to conceal themselves from someone, realized that it was possible for them to do so, and decided together to take the action of hiding. Put another way, the word stood is at the action end of the thought–action continuum while the word hid is nearer the middle; it describes the action but also contains a reference to the mental functioning behind the action. Applying Wittgenstein’s question to “stood,” the answer is that it is a report of their behavior. Applying it to “hid,” the answer is that it is a report both of their behavior and their state of mind. Of course, although the word “hide” explains the reason for the action in a way that “stand” does
not, it still leaves open the reason for wanting to hide. Other, fuller descriptions could reveal yet more detail on the motivation.

The phrase “wildly staring about for somebody alive to heap reproaches on” (sentence 5) is a description of two actions: wildly staring and heaping reproaches. However, both phrases are also descriptions of states of mind: feeling wild and feeling reproachful. They can therefore be placed in the middle of the continuum. “Wildly staring” may also be termed indicative description (2004, 172): it is an action description that, through the use of the adverb “wildly,” indicates the frame of mind behind the action. In making these attributions, readers also rely on what I call cue-reason words (2004, 216–17). These are words that signal that the causal network behind an action is about to be made explicit. “Because,” “so that,” “in order to,” and “for” are common cue-reason words, the last of which occurred twice in the discussion of disposition statements in The Portrait of a Lady in chapter 1. In sentence (5), the description of the action of wildly staring is followed, after the cue-reason word “for,” by the reason why people were doing so. Or take this statement: “Clennam watched her face for some explanation of what she did mean” (365). The first four words describe the action; the words following the cue-reason word “for” explain the reason for the action. As with Clennam’s action of watching, the accompanying mental event is often made part of the description, rather than left implicit. Novels tend to contain few action descriptions that simply describe only the surface of physical behavior.

Part of the work of decoding action statements involves readers following the attempts of characters to read other characters’ minds. The characters in this passage are doing a good deal of mind reading. In order to convey the complexity of this cognitive work, I have set out below a summary of it:

(1) Clennam explains his view of the workings of Doyce’s mind: he is simple and has integrity.
(2) Clennam also explains his view of the workings of his own mind: he has been rash.
(3) Clennam wants to make sure that the public mind will understand his intention to accept responsibility.
(4) Clennam knows that Rugg, as a lawyer, is unhappy about his intention.
(5) So, to achieve his purpose, Clennam has to make sure that Rugg understands his “fixed resolution” to make the disclosure.
(6) Rugg conveys to Clennam that he understands his intention (because he arranges for the disclosure).
(7) Rugg deduces from the letters of reproach and invective that writs will follow.
The public forms a view on Clennam’s intentions: that he is wantonly seeking publicity.

Rugg and Clennam become aware of the public’s view.

In fact, though, this list, detailed as it is, is an oversimplification. For example, item 1 can be broken down into much more detail as follows:

- Clennam thinks that
- Doyce will think that
- the public will think that
- Doyce will think that
- the public will acquiesce in
- Doyce trying to get away with not paying his debts.

As with previous lists of this sort, the thinking here is both intermental and intramental.

The reader of this passage has to undertake this complex theory of mind processing without being able to rely on any explicit representations of consciousness by the narrator because the passage does not contain any, as traditionally defined; instead, it is a presentation of several actions, some of which are speech acts. In the first paragraph, Clennam tells Rugg about the action that he intends to take in the future. The second paragraph is a description of the actions of other people. The third paragraph contains another speech act. However, these descriptions allow the reader to attribute various states of mind to Clennam. He feels the emotions of guilt, remorse, shame, and embarrassment. He knows that the bankruptcy is his fault. Further, he has decided that the right thing to do is to accept the blame. Any analysis of action in the discourse has to take account of the questions of personal responsibility that are at the heart of readers’ responses to novels. (This is the issue that was raised so thought-provokingly by Paris Hilton in chapter 1: “In the future, I plan on taking more of an active role in the decisions I make.”) In the case of a death by shooting, do you describe the action of the killer as the twitching of the finger, the pulling of the trigger, the firing of the gun, the killing of a person, or the murdering of a person? These descriptions differ to the extent to which they ascribe consciousness to the agent, take account of the consequences of the physical movement, and assign responsibility to the agent for those consequences. Clennam is right to accept responsibility for the outcome of his action (bankrupting Doyce), even though that was an unintended consequence of his intended action of investing the money. This question of responsibility is pursued further in the discussion below on the discursive approach to action descriptions.
Sociocultural Action

The following typology of sociocultural action (following James Wertsch, but in part derived from Jürgen Habermas) was first introduced in Fictional Minds (2004, 166–67). There, I illustrated it with examples from Aphra Behn’s Orinokoo (1688). Here, I relate it to the passage under discussion. Wertsch refers to the five categories as alternative types of action, but they can also be regarded as different perspectives on, or descriptions of, the same action. The choice of which perspective or description to use depends on the context and the point being made about that action. Again, this issue is pursued further in the discussion on discursive action.

(a) Teleological action. A person attains a goal or brings about the occurrence of a desired state by choosing the means that have the promise of being successful in a given situation and applying them in a suitable manner. The central concept is that of a decision among alternative courses of action, based on an interpretation of the situation, in order to realize an end (Wertsch 1991, 9–10). Clennam wishes to bring about the desired state of minimizing the effect of the catastrophe on Doyce. The means that he chooses involve making a public disclosure of his responsibility. He has made a decision that this course of action is the best means of achieving his end. The concept of teleological action dovetails neatly with the emphasis within the philosophy of action on the concepts of intentions, reasons, motives, and purposes.

(b) Dramaturgical action. People evoke in their public audience a certain image or impression of themselves by purposefully disclosing their own subjectivity. Each agent can monitor public access to the system of his own intentions, thoughts, attitudes, desires, and feelings. Thus, the presentation of the self does not signify spontaneous, expressive behavior: it stylizes the expression of experience with a view to the audience. A person typically carries out this impression management with strategic goals, type (a), in mind (Wertsch 1991, 10). I have already referred to this type of action in this chapter and the previous one. You may recall that Rosamond Vincy is adept at dramaturgical action. This perspective on action as impression management fits the first and third paragraphs of the passage extremely well. In Clennam’s presentation of his proposed action there is a stylized feel to the language that he uses (sentence 3 in particular). His directly quoted language in (8) also has the air of a public declaration. His course of action is referred to pejoratively by the public in (5) as “courting publicity.”

(c) Normatively regulated action. This refers, not as (a) and (b) do, to the behavior of solitary individuals, but to members of a social group who
orient their action to common values, or the norms that obtain within a social group. The individual may comply with, or may violate, a particular norm or generalized expectation of behavior (Wertsch 1991, 11). This is a reference to the social situatedness of action, and it is also a precise statement of the plots of a large number of novels in which protagonists initially comply with, and then violate, the social norms of their storyworld. Clennam’s motives as explained in sentences (2) and (3) are social norms that regulate his action. The use of a word such as “behoved” (3) is also an indication of how deeply Clennam has internalized these norms.

(d) Communicative action. This is the interaction of at least two persons. The actors seek to reach an understanding about the present situation and future plans in order to coordinate their actions by way of agreement (Wertsch 1991, 11, following Habermas 1984, 86). This is a restatement, within a different context, of the notion of intermentality. Given the close links between thought and action, it follows that action as well as thinking can be joint, group, shared, or collective. It is significant that there is often little difference, in practice, between the two terms intermental action and intermental thought. I say more on this in the following section on intermental action.

(e) Mediated action. This type can be seen as a more sophisticated restatement of type (a). Like type (a), it is goal-directed, but it does not assume that the appropriate focus of analysis is the solitary individual, or that there is a neat separation between means and ends. It takes account of the fact that human action typically employs mediational means such as tools and language that shape the action in essential ways (Wertsch 1991, 12). The passage is obviously about Clennam’s choice of the best means or tools for achieving his ends.

Intermental Action

Intermental or communicative action is described by the discourse analyst Teun van Dijk as interactions between several agents that include all forms of cooperative social behavior such as the use of language (1976, 296). The simplest examples are those cases where two agents together accomplish the same action, while having the same intention. More complex are the cases where the intended actions are the same, but where the purpose is different, and so the joint action is done for different reasons. Alternatively, the purposes may coincide, but the actions may be different (for example, preparing dinner with each agent fulfilling different tasks within the overall action). Some actions can be carried out by either one or more agents, while others,
such as marrying or fighting, must have at least two agents (van Dijk 1976, 298). Although, with regard to the example of fighting, possible exceptions might include such British football club managers as Sir Alex Ferguson and Roy Keane who, as the cliché has it, could start a fight in an empty room.

In my view, it is possible to make use of a looser notion of intermental or communicative action than is employed by van Dijk. You may have noticed that I have been using the term the public when discussing the reaction to Clennam’s declaration. This term designates the intermental unit responsible for the communicative actions that are described in the second half of sentence (4), all of (5) and (6), and the first half of (7). This passage makes no sense if the existence of the public as an intermental agent is not recognized. Sentence (5) in particular is an example of the group focalization that is such a noticeable feature of the intermental activity in *Middlemarch*. Clennam is being judged by a large group in much the same way as Lydgate is by the town of Middlemarch. Much of the public’s intermental construction of Clennam’s actions, first in investing the money in Merdle’s empire and then in accepting responsibility for the loss of the money, is left implicit. If the reader does not try to reconstruct this group cognitive functioning, the public’s behavior will be inexplicable. So, although (4) is quite oblique, the phrase “the storm raged fearfully” can only be understood as a metaphorical presentation of intermental action. This is the case despite the fact that, as many people are involved, there is not the explicit joint understanding and coordination that Wertsch, Habermas, and van Dijk have in mind (although van Dijk concedes the possibility that people may take part in a communicative action for different reasons and purposes).

The group behavior being described in this passage is different from individual action. We recognize this difference in phrases such as “mob rule,” “mass hysteria,” and “groupthink.” As Nietzsche put it in *Beyond Good and Evil* (part four, aphorism 156), “madness is something rare in individuals—but in groups, parties, peoples, ages it is the rule” (1990, 103). In a sense, these are individual actions—it is individuals who are heaping reproaches and sending letters—but in another sense they are also collective. The individual actions make more sense, in this case, when they are regarded as part of a joint action because people have become caught up in a group mind made up of wildness, reproach, and invective. They are behaving differently from the way in which they would behave as individuals because they have become part of this shared mind.

**Discursive Action**

The subdiscipline within psychology known as *discursive psychology* provides
an important perspective on action theory. Discursive psychologists such as Derek Edwards, Grant Gillett, Rom Harré, and Jonathan Potter argue that attributions of mental states to individuals are discursive in the sense that the descriptions arising from these attributions are performative speech acts that occur within complex language games and are always embedded in specific social contexts. Attributions tend to be discursively constructed as apparently factual and objective, but often contain self-interested attributions of motives. “Pure” mental descriptions are rare. A mental state or an action will be described in a certain way and not in other ways for particular purposes, and these alternatives can vary greatly as to how they ascribe agency, impose responsibility, justify behavior, explain motivations, assign praise, deflect criticism and blame, and so on. This approach has obvious relevance to the novel, where mental functioning can only exist within the words of a fictional discourse. Readers have to undertake a continual stream of attribution of mental functioning to characters in order to understand novels, but the descriptions of actions, dispositions, and emotions on which readers rely for these attributive purposes are not neutral. Many different choices can be made by narrators and characters regarding the wording of such descriptions and by readers regarding their interpretations of such wording. These choices have a profound effect, not only on the cognitive attribution of a wide range of mental states, but also on the ethical attribution of responsibility, criticism, praise, or blame.

These psychologists see the mind “as dynamic and essentially embedded in historical, political, cultural, social, and interpersonal contexts” (Harré and Gillett 1994, 25). The fundamental premise of discursive psychology is that “no description of anything is the only one that is reasonable or possible” (Edwards 1997, 8). It is difficult to disentangle pure action description from attribution because descriptions will usually contain hidden attributional cues. Specifically, “descriptions constitute events as understandable sorts of human actions” (Edwards 1997, 6). “Accounts of actions are invariably, and at the same time, accounts for actions” (Edwards 1997, 8). “Versions of mind, of thought and error, inference and reason, are constructed and implied in order to bolster or undermine versions of events, to accuse or criticize, blame or excuse and so on” (Edwards and Potter 1992, 16). These “causal inferences and implications are often handled indirectly via ostensibly descriptive or factual accounts” (Edwards and Potter 1992, 78). Put simply, “attributitional work is accomplished by descriptions” (Edwards and Potter 1992, 91).

A similar perspective may be derived from the philosophy of action. The philosopher Donald Davidson states that “Explaining an action by giving an intention with which it was done provides new descriptions of the action” (1980, 110). Davidson lists various descriptions of the action of writing a
check to clear a gambling debt. “I am writing my name. I am writing my name on a piece of paper. I am writing my name on a piece of paper with the intention of writing a check. I am writing a check. I am paying my gambling debts” (1980, 110). He also states that “Redescription may supply the motive (‘I was getting my revenge’), place the action in the context of a rule (‘I am castling’), give the outcome (‘I killed him’), or provide evaluation (‘I did the right thing’)” (1980, 110). Different discursive purposes, often relating to issues of personal responsibility, may be served by the different contexts within which actions can be placed.

So, what discursive purposes are served by the attributions that have been described so far? The passage is marked by a deliberate and self-conscious use of discourse in order to achieve certain goals. Clennam’s actions are revealed to be situated, public, and social. The narrator shows him to be choosing his words carefully in order to give credit to Doyce’s character (“simplicity” and “integrity”), to emphasize his need to be guided by “respect” for his feelings, to acknowledge the pressure of social and moral norms (feeling “behoved”), and “to accept the blame for what he had rashly done.” In the language of discursive psychologists, he is positioning himself (Bamberg 2005) as the person responsible for the calamity. Also, Clennam’s language in the third paragraph is principled and direct in that he does not portray himself as a passive, hapless, or reluctant recipient of the writs. It is easy to imagine the different ways in which Clennam could have talked to Rugg if, say, his purpose had been to avoid responsibility. Much of the theory on discursive psychology assumes that people generally try to avoid responsibility for bad things, acquire responsibility for good things, avoid blame, and acquire praise. However, while this may be true in general terms, characters in novels tend to be more complex than that. In this case, the whole purpose of Clennam’s discursive construction of his actions is to accept responsibility for a bad thing and to acquire blame.

That the same action can be described in different ways is vividly demonstrated in the second paragraph, where Clennam’s action of disclosure is pejoratively referred to as “courting publicity.” This presentation by the narrator of the viewpoint of the public is completely different from Clennam’s own positioning. It is also worth noting how cleverly the narrator frames the discourse in the second paragraph in order to encourage the reader to come to a negative judgment on the behavior of the public. There is a deliberately exaggerated style to the descriptions of the public’s actions: “storm raged fearfully,” “wildly staring,” “scaffold,” and “reproach and invective.” This exaggeration makes it clear that the apparent justification in sentence (6) (the “flagrancy” of Clennam’s actions, the appeal to disinterested parties, people who had lost money “could scarcely be expected to deal mildly with it”) is
ironic. The reader is made aware that the narrator is indicating that the supposed justifications for the collective actions are insufficient to excuse them. This appeal to an apparently objective moral standard is typical of the kind of positioning that is analyzed by discursive psychologists. An important element in this process is the construction of consensus: “everybody knows that . . .”; “it is understood that . . .”; “we always do that,” and so on. Many other descriptions were available to the narrator to describe the actions of the public. The one chosen leaves little doubt as to how the implied reader is being asked to judge them.

CONCLUSION

Both perspectives on fictional minds, the internalist and the externalist, are required. *Little Dorrit* recognizes this truth. Employing the internalist perspective on those aspects of the mind that are inner, introspective, solitary, private, individual, psychological, mysterious, and detached, it is said of Mr Dorrit that “Only the wisdom that holds the clue to all hearts and all mysteries, can surely know to what extent a man, especially a man brought down as this man had been, can impose upon himself” (275). In order to maintain a balance, the narrator employs the externalist perspective that stresses those aspects of the mind that are outer, active, public, social, behavioral, evident, embodied, and engaged, when commenting of Mr Chivery that, “As to any key to his inner knowledge being to be found in his face, the Marshalsea key was as legible as an index to the individual characters and histories upon which it was turned” (346).