

# Mind, Reason and Imagination

*Selected Essays in Philosophy of  
Mind and Language*

JANE HEAL

*St. John's College, Cambridge*



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# Contents

<i>Preface</i>	<i>page</i>	ix
<i>Sources</i>		xi
1 Introduction		1
PART I: MIND, THEORY AND IMAGINATION		
2 Replication and Functionalism		11
3 Understanding Other Minds from the Inside		28
4 Simulation, Theory and Content		45
5 Simulation and Cognitive Penetrability		63
PART II: THOUGHT AND REASON		
6 Co-Cognition and Off-Line Simulation: Two Ways of Understanding the Simulation Approach		91
7 Semantic Holism: Still a Good Buy		115
8 Other Minds, Rationality and Analogy		131
PART III: INDEXICAL PREDICATES AND THEIR APPLICATIONS		
9 Indexical Predicates and Their Uses		153
10 On Speaking Thus: The Semantics of Indirect Discourse		174
11 Lagadonian Kinds and Psychological Concepts		196

PART IV: THINKING OF MINDS AND INTERACTING WITH PERSONS

12	What Are Psychological Concepts For?	225
13	Moore's Paradox: A Wittgensteinian Approach	250
14	On First-Person Authority	273
	<i>References</i>	289
	<i>Index</i>	297

# 1

## *Introduction*

Much philosophy of mind in the analytic tradition, as practised in the last few decades, has been in the grip of a mistaken conception of the nature of psychological judgements and concepts. In its haste to repudiate metaphysical dualism about the mind it has been tempted to assume too much similarity between psychological concepts and those of natural science. It has overlooked the centrality of the fact that other people are not just objects we may try to predict and control but fellow creatures with whom we enter into dialogue and with whom we make joint decisions. Important ramifications of these facts, for example what they show about how we arrive at our views about others' thoughts, about the logical shape of psychological concepts and about the nature of persons, have thus gone missing in much recent philosophy of mind. These, in brief, are the themes of this collection of essays. The book is aimed primarily at philosophers, but I hope that philosophically minded colleagues in psychology and other human sciences may find something of interest here too.

We have thoughts about others' thoughts. We have views about what others perceive, think, feel, care about or intend. And where we are ignorant about such things we often try to find out more, since knowing these kinds of things about each other is important to us for many reasons.

These facts suggest many questions, among them these three:

- (1) How do we arrive at such psychological judgements about others?
- (2) How should we explain psychological concepts and what it is to possess them?
- (3) What is the nature of the beings, persons, to whom the concepts apply and who are the subjects of the judgements?

The first question is about the process, the heuristic route, by which we arrive at our views about what is going on in others' minds. The second question is about what it is to think of a being as a thinker. The third question is ontological, and it asks what is the real nature of the beings thus thought about. The papers in this collection start from the first question and move from there to consider ideas relevant to the second and third.

The reflections initiated by our three questions form part of a long-running debate. When we think about other people do we call on the same intellectual tools and strategies as when we think about the non-human world? If we do not, why is this so and what significance does the fact have? These issues have been the focus of explicit philosophical thought since the eighteenth century at least, when the growing elaboration of the human intellectual world led to more self-conscious differentiation among branches of enquiry and to consideration of the relations between them.

These essays, however, are not directly concerned with the history of ideas. The views advocated here are broadly in sympathy with the *Verstehen* approach of those who think that human and non-human aspects of the world do merit different approaches. But there is here no discussion of Vico, Kant, Dilthey, Weber or Collingwood, nor of others working in the *Verstehen* tradition who have developed and built on their thought. The risk of not exploring the historical dimension of the debate is that we shall reinvent the wheel. Insofar as there is an excuse for running this risk it is that there is always the need to make old and valuable ideas live again by rediscovering them and re-expressing them in an idiom which makes apparent their implications for current problems. And the direction of approach in these essays is not from philosophy of history or of the social sciences, where discussion of these themes has previously tended to be located, but rather from the interests and concerns of recent philosophy of mind, philosophy of psychology and philosophy of language.

In the rest of this introduction I shall outline the shape of the collection in a little more detail, indicating which topics are treated and where. The papers are divided into four groups. The first considers the heuristic question of how we arrive at judgements about others' thoughts.

One attractive answer to question (1) above is that we are able to arrive at views about others' thoughts in virtue of possessing a body of information about thoughts. We have a theory (innate or learnt, tacit or explicit, well articulated or perhaps more jumbled) about the circumstances in which various states of mind might occur and about what upshots they

might have. We call on this to work out what a person is likely to be thinking and what, as a result, he or she might do. This is often called ‘the theory theory’ and analytic functionalism is one familiar version of it.

But is it plausible that we possess a body of knowledge such as is postulated by the theory theory? To underpin our actual ability to think about others, this body of knowledge would have to be orders of magnitude more complicated than any other, tacit or explicit, which we take ourselves to possess (see Essay 4). Perhaps we ought to bite on this bullet and credit ourselves with this immense achievement? But if we can find a workable alternative account of how we arrive at judgements about others, then there will be no need to do so. And there is such an alternative. Moreover, it turns out to have other advantages as well, such as illuminating the attraction for us of various metaphors (see Essay 3) and helping to explain the logical form of our ascriptions of thoughts (see Essays 10 and 11).

This alternative proposal gives a central role in thinking about other minds to use of our imaginative capacity. It starts from the fact that we not only make judgements about what is actual and infer other judgements from them, but also wonder what would happen if so and so were the case and explore the consequences and ramifications of situations taken to be merely possible. This suggests a possible strategy for arriving at judgements about others’ thoughts. When I want to know what you might think or decide I try to imagine the world as it appears to you and explore some of the further states of affairs and requirements for action implicit in that world. If I am successful in this, I shall (in part) re-create your point of view, your trains of thought and likely decisions. I may thus come to some views on what you are likely to think or do, and I shall do so without calling on any detailed theory about how thoughts interact or what they give rise to. Where such use of the imagination gives me insight into what another is likely to believe or intend, it does so in virtue of the fact that I and that other share the capacity to think about the world in first-order ways rather than in virtue of my possession of a theoretical, second-order, representation of that capacity.

Of the papers in Part 1, Essay 2 was the first written and supplied the starting point for some of the recent revival of interest in *Verstehen*-style themes. Essay 3, which was written somewhat later than the others and for a non-specialist audience, gives an introduction to the contrast between the theory view and the alternative, and also a sketch of one central concern of Part 2, namely the view that we, rightly, take for granted that we are rational, in one sense of that slippery word. It also

links these to an outline of some themes about the nature of human interaction which reappear in more detail in Essay 12. It may thus serve as a preliminary sketch for the view which the collection as a whole seeks to recommend. Essay 4 offers the most detailed account of how ‘theory’ may be understood and why the theory view is implausible. It seeks to spell out what ‘theory’ might mean and what a detailed ‘theory of thought’ would have to be like. It suggests links between the complexities such a supposed theory would need to cope with and the difficulties posed by the notorious Frame Problem of Artificial Intelligence. Essay 5 considers some of the counterattacks by defenders of the theory theory, in particular the claim that attempts to judge others’ thoughts are ‘cognitively penetrable’ and therefore must be derived from theory, and argues that they lack force.

Any reader having a passing familiarity with these debates will be aware that the approach which rejects theory theory has been given a name in recent discussion – namely ‘simulation theory’. And the word ‘simulation’ does occur in the title of two of the essays in this collection. So why have I avoided it in the account given above, speaking instead of ‘the alternative’? And why have I not boldly introduced the word ‘simulation’ into the title of this book? The answer to these questions is to be found in the essays in Part 2 of the collection, in particular in Essay 6. To see what is at issue here it may be helpful to step back and consider the wider context of philosophical reflection on mind and on how persons fit into the natural world.

We observe and interact with material items round us, such as sticks, stones, rivers, plants, volcanoes and clouds. We form views about the nature of the stuffs they are made of and about their structure and behaviour. We do this in part because of the intrinsic interest of the questions. But we do it also because understanding these things will enable us to predict what will happen and will sometimes also enable us to control and manipulate our environment to our advantage, forging tools, growing crops, weaving fabrics, building houses and so forth.

The information we have on these matters is organised in the various natural sciences. Each has its own distinctive subject matter and range of concepts and theories. But despite their contrasts, there is no mystery about how they fit together. Each has, so to speak, places where the findings of the others dovetail in. The special science of geology tells us about the Earth and the various stuffs and structures in its crust including, among other things, volcanoes with their magma chambers and craters. If we then want to pursue in more detail why and how magma is formed and at what point the pressures in the interior of a volcano will result in



eruption, then we can call on the insights provided by the more general sciences of physics and chemistry. Similarly, genetics tells us about the heritability of characteristics. But if we want to know about the processes in more detail, then other biological sciences unravel that for us in terms of DNA and amino acids. And the behaviour of the complex molecules studied by those sciences is, in turn, illuminated by yet other disciplines. Common to all these interlocking sciences, the framework in which they fit together, is a vision of the universe as an immensely complex material assemblage developing through time in a law-governed way, under the impetus of the forces inherent in its fundamental constituents. These constituents and forces (space, time and the various forms of matter and energy which occupy them) can be described without any mention of values or of thought. They are norm-free and mindless.

We also observe and interact with people. They too are material items in our environment, the behaviour of which may impinge on us. How do they, and the ways we talk and think about them, fit into the world-view sketched above? One view congenial to analytically and scientifically minded philosophers combines two thoughts: that human beings are a kind of natural item and that psychological thinking is a kind of natural scientific thinking. It tells us that talk of perception, thought, feeling or decision is talk of items or processes in human beings which have distinctive causes and which in turn lead their possessors to behave in distinctive ways. The view anticipates that ordinary thinking about people and their thoughts will dovetail into scientific psychology and that this in turn will interlock illuminatingly with the brain sciences.

Various ideas come together to recommend this outlook and to make it seem an attractive option for a scientifically literate philosopher. One is that it secures our right to be realists about the psychological and does so in a way which is obviously compatible with the natural sciences. Another merit of this approach is that the conception of psychological notions as one sort of natural scientific notion has considerable plausibility. It is plain that what other people do is important to us and that we are often interested in predicting and controlling it. People's thoughts, feelings and deliberations are what lead to them doing what they do. Psychological states and happenings are the factors in the light of which we predict and explain others' behaviour. These commonplace remarks seem to support exactly that account of the meaning of psychological claims which sees them as claims of one particular special science.

Suppose now a philosopher who is sympathetic to the view of the psychological sketched above, and the motivations for it, but who comes

to be suspicious of one central element in it, viz. the claim that we actually possess that knowledge of the workings of the mind with which it credits us. How might such a philosopher explain our ability to arrive at views about others' thoughts? What is wanted is a position which reconciles our lack of theory with our ability to make judgements about other minds, while changing the rest of the picture as little as possible.

Such a position is provided by one articulation of the imagination-invoking approach. On this articulation our use of imagination is presented as merely a heuristic device. It is something we find useful because we have not yet worked out the full theory of mind. But (on this view) there is no difficulty in supposing that such a full theory could exist and that we might come to know it. The question of whether we use theory or imagination is thus taken to be an empirical one. And, this articulation adds, what goes on when I use imagination heuristically is that I conduct an experiment on myself. I find out what happens in myself when I 'take my inference mechanisms off-line' and feed them with certain 'pretend beliefs and desires'. It is this complex of views which now goes under the name 'simulation theory'.

There is, however, another way of spelling out the non-theory view. This questions much more of the suggested naturalistic account of the psychological, starting with its assumption about the role and importance to us of psychological judgements. It is true (says this second proposal) that other people are material objects in our environment, that our interactions with them are of great importance to us and that sometimes we predict, control and use them as we do sticks and stones. But it is not true that this mode of interaction with them is our sole or most central one. I may do something with a stone, for example place it to wedge the door open. I might 'do something with you' in that same sense, viz. place your comatose body to wedge the door open. But the more usual sense in which I 'do something with you' is the sense in which I discuss with you whether it would be a good idea to use the stone to wedge our door open, and in which we might then co-operate to push the stone into place. When I conduct my own deliberations with a view to improving my own grasp on the world and taking sensible decisions, I cannot but take myself to be rational. So in order to see others as joint deliberators I need to credit them with the same capacity. And if other people are for us centrally beings with whom we may converse and co-operate, then what we need to know about them, and they about us, are facts which help us to locate each other as possible partners in dialogue and action. If we take psychological thoughts and remarks to occur in this context, then

we shall be led to a very different articulation of the anti-theory theory view from the ‘simulation’ idea sketched earlier. This second articulation will see it as an a priori matter that we use the method of imagination, and it will stress also the way in which the method turns out to embody a presupposition of shared rationality.

The difference between these two articulations of the non-theory approach was not at all clear to me at the time of writing Essays 2, 4 and 5. In those papers the ways of setting out the anti-theory view, and the examples given, tend to suggest sometimes one articulation and sometimes the other. Essay 6 represents a mea culpa on this front and aims to set the record straight. Essay 7 starts from the notion of semantic holism and seeks to clarify and defend it. It does so, in part, by exploring the idea that each of us has no option but to take it that he or she is rational. It thus serves to bring out the centrality of this presupposition in our self-conception. Essay 8 pursues a contrast between the uses of imagination postulated in the two articulations and makes a case for thinking that the second is one we can and do call on.

The group of papers in Part 3 starts by turning from philosophy of mind to philosophy of language. A central theme here is that by extending ideas in philosophical logic, in particular our understanding of indexicality, we can forge some useful new conceptual tools. It is at this point that there is, perhaps, the clearest example of something mentioned earlier, namely the value of re-examining older ideas in a new context. Earlier thinkers sympathetic to the *Verstehen* approach did not have accounts of indexicality to hand. But when available they supply a tool for articulating insights which we otherwise struggle to express in more obscure fashion.

Indexical predication is, I suggest, such a tool, and it is the theme of Essay 9. We are used to the idea that the referential element of a sentence may be supplied indexically. What is suggested here is that the describing or characterising element of a sentence can also be supplied indexically. An example would be my saying “She gestured thus” and then myself gesturing in a certain manner. By this complex performance I am able to convey how she gestured. The paper argues that indexical predication is a significant linguistic tool, and one we need to recognise and account for, whatever metaphysical or semantic framework we favour in our philosophy of language.

Essays 10 and 11 seek to exploit the idea of indexical predication to throw light on the logical form of reports of speech and thought and on the nature of psychological concepts. Indexical predication is a particularly useful linguistic resource in situations where we are concerned to report

the occurrence of some intricate and skilful human performance. We may find it difficult to specify in words the nature of the performance, including all the details which might interest us, while finding it easy to produce a reproduction of the performance. The reproduction may then serve as a vehicle by which the nature of the performance may be made manifest to the person with whom we communicate. Pursuing this idea leads to an account of the semantics of indirect discourse which has all the advantages of Davidson's account without the disadvantages.

Extending indexical predication from language to thought yields the idea that a person might represent another's thought in a judgement of this shape "She thinks thus: . . ." where in the gap occurs a thought having the character which that judge aims to attribute to the other's thought. Essay 11 explores this proposal and asks whether it can throw light on question (2) of what it is to possess psychological concepts.

Part 4 returns to philosophy of mind. Rationality has played a central part in the arguments of Part 2, but it is a notoriously difficult and contested notion. Essay 12 offers a more detailed account of it than was attempted earlier. The two final papers centre round first-person authority, outlining a 'constitutive' solution to the problem of how it is possible. It is in these three papers that the themes mentioned in the first paragraph of this introduction, namely our misconstrual of our relations with each other and the distortions this produces in our philosophical accounts of mind, come most explicitly to the fore. An answer to question (3) (What is the nature of the beings, persons, to whom psychological concepts apply?) has been hinted at by the discussion of Parts 2 and 3. It is that persons are (more or less) rational agents, each having his or her own (more or less) unified point of view on the world. These final three papers offer some further sketches of how this idea might be elaborated. Essay 12 argues that adopting it provides a different way of dovetailing psychological talk with the discoveries of natural science from that favoured in the naturalistic 'theory theory' outlook sketched earlier. Essays 13 and 14 suggest also that looking at things from this perspective might help to dissolve some familiar problems in philosophy of mind.