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Introduction: Love thinking

We tend to feel that thinking about people we love is the next best thing to being with them. But the history of ideas about the powers of the mind is full of strange accounts that describe the act of thinking about another as an ethically complex, sometimes even a dangerously powerful thing to do. This book seeks to explain why nineteenth-century British writers – poets, novelists, philosophers, psychologists, devotees of the occult – were both attracted to and repulsed by radical or substantial notions of purely mental relations between persons, and why they moralized about the practice of thinking about other people in interesting ways. It explores why, when, and under what conditions nineteenth-century writers found it possible, or desirable, to believe that thinking about another person could affect him or her, for good or for ill. Such a study is designed to shed some light on our own beliefs in our mental powers: when does a belief in our mental powers over another seem delusional, and when might holding such a belief seem in fact an essential part of being a moral person? Studying the ways in which nineteenth-century texts account for the act of thinking about another person may, I propose, provide new insights into the logic of ideas about mental causation, practical ethics, and the sociability of the mind. When are we likely to conceive of "thinking," as did Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1801), "as a pure act & energy…*Thinking* as distinguished from *Thoughts*"?[1] How do we evaluate Elizabeth Barrett Browning's poetic agonies about whether it is right to think about her beloved ("I do not think of thee – I am too near thee," she admonishes) in her *Sonnets from the Portuguese* (1850), and strikingly similar musings in Hannah Arendt's powerful essay, "Thinking and Moral Considerations" (1971): "to think about somebody who is present implies removing ourselves surreptitiously from his company and acting as though he were no longer there"?[2] How might the climax of George Eliot's novel *Daniel Deronda* (1876), in which a woman believes she has killed her husband "in her thoughts," illuminate a long history of debates about thought crime?[3] How did nineteenth-century

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writers balance a commitment to mental freedom with a suspicion of mental force?

As these questions might suggest, I was attracted to the texts I discuss in this book, and motivated to write about them, by a set of philosophical – if that is not too grandiose a term – questions; but I also seek to contribute to our knowledge of the impact of certain ideas in nineteenth-century British culture. In this introduction I aim to sketch out both my philosophical motivations and the historical claims. Some readers may find that I skimp on one, or the other. In any case, the philosophical questions at issue in this study are thoroughly intertwined with its literary interests. For example: my introduction's title, "Love thinking," is borrowed from a long nineteenth-century poem more mocked than read, Coventry Patmore's *The Angel in the House* (1854–1856), a small, meditative section of which is titled "Love Thinking." Patmore's "Love Thinking" muses on the peculiar qualities, and ambiguous value, of a species of meditation about a beloved which does not result in any particular knowledge about him or her. The semantic ambiguities of that phrase, "love thinking" – and the way it confronts us with a choice about the relative weight we place on the first two syllables – will be considered in Chapter 4's discussion of thinking and knowing in the work of Patmore and George Meredith. Do we place emphasis on "love," which renders "thinking" a noun, and "love" modifying it, designating a species or kind of thinking? Or do we scan it differently, as "love *think*ing," in which case it seems to be a description of an act of thinking that Love (a personified being) is doing? Or is it an imperative, exhorting the reader to "love thinking"?

While all of these shades of meaning are at play in Patmore's poem, over the course of this book, "love thinking" comes to designate a set of beliefs about thinking about other people that emerges from the writings I discuss. It designates forms of thinking that are believed to be deeply social and embedded in passionate relationships to others, forms of thinking conceived of as forms of action, which produce not knowledge about but real effects on others. The writers treated in this book are rarely neutral about the effects of thinking. Some, such as the proponents of ethical thought-power we shall meet in Chapter 2 – the panpsychist James Hinton, the theosophist Annie Besant, the psychological mathematician Mary Everest Boole – enthusiastically believed in the power of thought to do good to others. Some, such as Coleridge and Barrett Browning, occasionally worried that thinking about another could constitute an act of domination and inflict damage. Patmore and Meredith were remarkably pessimistic about the value that thinking about the one you love could

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have, intimating that it could do more harm than good. Into these debates I introduce as well a group of thinkers who vehemently denied that thinking could have any effects on anything whatsoever: the Victorian epiphenomenalists. But by the end of this book – assisted in large part by a reading of Eliot's *Daniel Deronda* – I shall argue that this strand of nineteenth-century intellectual life reveals that, illogical as it may seem, there is a deep social and moral sense to entertaining the belief that thinking can affect, even harm, others. I shall elaborate on this idea not only later in this Introduction but also in my Conclusion.

I begin with two chapters that seek to establish a concern with the force of thinking in seemingly disparate kinds of nineteenth-century philosophical prose. The first chapter traces the career of ethical ambivalence about the act of thinking in nineteenth-century mental and moral sciences, focusing in particular on Scottish philosopher James Frederick Ferrier's *Introduction to the Philosophy of Consciousness* (1838–39). The writings of this philosopher may seem an unusual place to start, but it is precisely its writerly qualities that make Ferrier's *Philosophy of Consciousness* so compelling. I argue that Ferrier's strenuous conception of thought as a form of action results from the exemplary, historically significant intersections in his work among idealist and empiricist approaches to the psychology of mental action, and the literary possibilities of philosophical prose in nineteenth-century Britain. The chapter concludes by illuminating the link between British idealism in the 1830s and that decade's wave of interest in mesmerism, suggesting that it might be possible to view mesmerism as early anglophone idealism's social theory. The second chapter explores accounts of the sociability of the mind both in later nineteenth-century accounts of paranormal mental activity and in British idealist philosophy. Bringing together a diverse range of theorists of the force and the ethics of thinking along with innovative Victorian and fin-de-siècle philosophers such as Shadworth Hodgson and J. M. E. McTaggart, I seek in this chapter to provide a context for, and an interpretation of, Victorian debates about "epiphenomenalism": the question of whether the mind can, or cannot, cause things to happen.

The next two chapters examine nineteenth-century lyric poetry and poetic theory as articulations of ideas about thinking about a beloved person. Chapter 3 explores the relationship between poetic uses of second-person pronouns, and anxieties about intimacy. It focuses on the paradoxes that ensue when poets from Samuel Taylor Coleridge to Letitia Landon, Elizabeth Browning, Christina Rossetti, and Alice Meynell utter "I think of thee" – or more provocatively, "I do not think of thee." Chapter 4 explains how Victorian prosodists theorized the relationship

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between thinking about another and poetic rhythms. I evoke a context for an episode in Patmore's *The Angel in the House* in which a woman claims, rhythmically, "He thought I thought he thought I slept." I focus on the reverberations of this episode in George Meredith's *Modern Love* (1862) and in other poems of the era, and I explain its relationship to Victorian theories of poetic rhythm which viewed rhythm as the pulsation of thought from mind to objects.

In moving from philosophical prose to literary genres, this study does not give priority to philosophy over literature: this is not a study, by and large, of influence. The diversity of genres under scrutiny here is designed rather to establish the persistence of a concern with the effects of thinking of a person, as this concern takes shape in the distinctive genres – including philosophical prose – of nineteenth-century British writing. Indeed, in posing the questions "what are the ethics and effects of thinking about other people, and how did nineteenth-century writers give shape to this issue?" before a range of forms of writing, I have had several aims. The first is of course to underscore the intertwining of the literary and philosophical dimensions of my topics: the literary forms speak to philosophical issues, while the philosophical texts reveal the ways in which philosophical ideas happen in writing. As we shall see in Chapter 3, for example, an ethics of thinking about another person emerges in and through a poetics of address, while in Chapter 1 we shall see the ways in which James Frederick Ferrier's understanding of the agency of thinking unfolds in and through the agency of words. But my second aim is to open anew some questions about the work of genre, both in nineteenth-century culture, and in contemporary nineteenth-century literary studies. We may be inclined to view, for example, the work done by the shorter nineteenth-century poems discussed in Chapter 3 as fundamentally different from the work that the philosophical writers discussed in Chapter 2 cut out for themselves. However, we may be laboring under the weight of a twentieth-century understanding of "poetry" as a genre, with which the particulars of poetic practices may in fact be at odds.

Furthermore, as urgent as it is to think about the relation between the forms of philosophical prose and the forms of nineteenth-century verse, it is equally crucial to scrutinize the form of the Victorian novel in relation to the other forms of writing that took thinking about other people as their topic. It is for this reason that *Thinking about Other People* moves to the novel in its last chapter. My final chapter considers the intersections among ethics, psychology, and strategies of narration in Eliot's *Daniel Deronda*. I seek to explain why George Eliot regarded belief that thinking

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about someone might make something happen to them as simultaneously factually false and ethically efficacious. I demonstrate how Eliot's curious attitude towards the omnipotence of thought emerges in and through the novel's parsing of cause and effect, and through its ways of representing – and sometimes refusing to represent – the act of thinking. My analysis of this novel thus elaborates on two things that I find throughout this study: a tenacious pattern in nineteenth-century writing which could be described as a simultaneous attraction to and repulsion from belief in the belief that thinking about someone can affect him or her; and a persistent embedding of that ambivalence about thinking within the very forms of writing. *Daniel Deronda* renders vividly the ways in which thinking about not only other actual people, but also literary characters, can occasionally make them real.

HISTORICAL CONTEXTS: IDEALISM, IMAGINATION, LIBERALISM

The constellation of issues at the heart of this book – debates about the effects and the ethics of thinking about others, beliefs in mental causation and mental action at a distance – is manifestly not a set of concerns with a clear start date and termination, as my sense of these concerns as ongoing theoretical issues should imply. Nevertheless, the way in which the texts and authors discussed here range across the entire nineteenth century – from some of the early writings of Coleridge at the beginning of the century, to the writings of the philosopher J. M. E. McTaggart at the end – requires some explanation. I shall argue throughout this book that one crucial context for the strand of thinking about thinking is the history in Britain of idealism: the philosophical tradition that emphasizes the priority of the human mind in accounts of knowledge and reality, and that is generally taken to designate the philosophy of Plato, Neoplatonism, and the writings of German philosophers who flourished at the end of the eighteenth century – Kant, Fichte, Schelling, Hegel. The distinctive history of the uneasy assimilation of continental idealist philosophy in England and Scotland begins – for better or for worse – with Coleridge, whose work remained throughout most of the century the most singular inspiration and source for generations of British intellectuals.[4] And it for all intents and purposes ends with the writings of McTaggart and a handful of others in the 1920s, after which idealism ceased to play anything more than a minor role in British intellectual life. The novelist May Sinclair began her *A Defence of Idealism* (1917) by professing some "embarrassment"

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over the timing of her task: "You cannot be quite sure whether you are putting in an appearance too late or much too early."[5] Throughout the century leading up to Sinclair's *Defence*, idealist philosophy – or philosophies – often seemed not only too late or too early, but always slightly external to what were often seen to be more authentically native, British modes of intellectual inquiry: empiricism, common sense, materialism, utilitarianism. The introduction of "German" ideas, both inside and outside of the universities, took place unevenly and uneasily: the low points in this history would include, for example, the travails of the philosopher James Frederick Ferrier – subject of my first chapter – at the University of Edinburgh in the 1840s and 1850s, when he had to defend himself against charges of being an un-Scottish Hegelian by claiming he couldn't understand Hegel himself.[6] My book is not a history of British idealism in the nineteenth century – indeed the most influential of the Victorian idealists, T. H. Green and F. H. Bradley, form very little part of the story; and it is emphatically not an account of the influence of any of the sources for nineteenth-century idealisms, neither continental philosophy nor Platonic revivals.[7] But the distinctive history of the uneven assimilation of idealism into British intellectual life provides a crucial context, and partial explanation, for some of the contours and motivating forces of debates about the power of thinking about other people in nineteenth-century writing. It is in order to explore and define this context that my first chapter focuses on Ferrier's *Introduction to the Philosophy of Consciousness* (1838–1839). Ferrier most frequently appears in literary studies as one of the leaders in the controversy over Coleridge's plagiarisms from Schelling in the *Biographia Literaria*, but he was himself a highly original, sometimes flamboyant philosophical writer. Through his early writing, I argue, we can see the ways in which the grafting of German idealist ideas about the priority of mind onto British empiricism resulted in some strangely literal accounts of the mind's power in and on the world around it.

Focusing on Ferrier, McTaggart, and other idealists as crucial parts of the context for beliefs about the act of thinking about another person has the advantage of reminding us how influential forms of idealism were in nineteenth-century British culture, in spite of our sense of their uneasy marginality. Romantic literature's relation to idealism and to philosophy generally is a hoary old yet enduring topic of scholarship and criticism, as is the debt to the German idealists (via Coleridge and Carlyle) of nineteenth-century American transcendentalism. Yet idealism's role in later nineteenth-century British intellectual life and literature has not often been on the agenda.[8] We have grown accustomed to thinking of

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Victorian Britain as a realm of science, but it was also a realm of metaphysical speculation. To at least one Victorian observer, it seemed as if philosophical speculation had been accelerating throughout the century, and that "metaphysics" was on its way to becoming a household word. "The increase of attention to Speculative Philosophy in the British Islands during the last twelve years is very remarkable," wrote David Masson in his 1877 updated version of *Recent British Philosophy* (1865). And he went further to say that protests against philosophy's neglect that were "already antiquated in great measure before 1865…are now certainly quite past date." "The public have acquiesced more rapidly than might have been expected in such a matter," he marveled.[9] In our own era, literary criticism has unfortunately absorbed contemporary Anglo-American philosophy's disdain for most of its nineteenth-century precursors. There is little in nineteenth-century studies resembling the conversation between philosophy and literature that exists in eighteenth-century British studies. And while the philosophical writers discussed here – the idealist Ferrier, the unusual epiphenomenalist Shadworth Hodgson – may never be as familiar to literary scholars as Locke, Hume, and Adam Smith, they were implicated in the literary culture of their era as much as the eighteenth-century philosophers. Chapters 1 and 2, which focus primarily on the philosophical writers crucial to this study, may feel different in texture and emphasis from the chapters on poetry and fiction. At play are not only differences of genre, but also the differences between writing about poets amply familiar to readers, and philosophical writers less well known, not only to readers of literature, but also to historians of ideas. Because some of these writers deserve to be better known to literary readers, I have included more matter of an expository nature about their lives, careers, and ideas. It is hard to resist the appeal, for example, of a philosopher (Ferrier) who seriously proposed translating Tennyson's *In Memoriam* into prose in order to test its ideas. Tennyson, for one, was amused.

One of the singular features of the dissemination of idealist ideas in nineteenth-century British intellectual life, however, is the extent to which it actually took place through the writings of poets. This is a way to think about some aspects of the extraordinary uses, through to the end of the century, that readers and writers made of Coleridge and Shelley, both of whom hover throughout the chapters of this book. One nineteenth-century historian of American transcendentalism noted that in both England and America, Coleridge was "the source of more intellectual life than any individual of his time." He claimed that Coleridge had "disciples who never heard him speak even in print, and followers who never

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saw his form even as sketched by critics. His thoughts were in the air."[10] Later nineteenth-century disciples of Coleridge often expressed a personal and passionate attachment to the man and his ideas: the Victorian epiphenomenalist Shadworth Hodgson dedicated one of his books to the long-deceased Coleridge, calling him "my father in philosophy, not seen but beloved."[11] Such personalization of a philosophical influence followed Coleridge's own, distinctive tendency to cleave to philosophical ideas as embedded in relations with others, which goes some way to explain why he lurks so distinctly in the background of the strand of thinking about thinking about others at the heart of this book.[12] As John Beer has demonstrated, the Coleridge who was the object of fervent reverence and love in the Victorian era was above all the later Coleridge of the *Aids to Reflection* (1825).[13] In that fragmentary, meditative prose work, Coleridge counsels reflection upon the conditions of thought and language as means to discovering the transcendent principles of Christianity within. But that Coleridge was not separable from earlier Coleridges who are equally relevant to the strand of thinking about thinking studied here: Coleridge the theorist of the imagination as "a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM"; Coleridge the theorist of ghost, those manifestations of "the modes in which our thoughts…become at times perfectly *dramatic*."[14] Coleridge's writings will appear most extensively in this book in Chapter 3, where I discuss the vicissitudes of the second-person addresses in his poem "This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison" in the context of that chapter's analysis of thinking in the second person in nineteenth-century poetry; but his presence will be felt intermittently throughout Chapters 1, 2, and 3.

In Chapters 3, 4, and 5, it is Percy Bysshe Shelley who haunts some of the authors I discuss. Shelley's Victorian reception was as passionate and as diverse as was Coleridge's: relevant to the authors I discuss is a Shelley who has been thoroughly spiritualized, idealized, and Platonized. Looking back on her long life, the Catholic convert Alice Meynell noted, remarkably, that "the influence of Shelley upon me belongs rather to my spiritual than my mental history. I thought the whole world was changed for me thenceforth."[15] In a publication of the Shelley Society in 1887, the Reverend Stopford Augustus Brooke turned "Epipsychidion" – Shelley's defense of extramarital sex – into a manifesto of the poet's "clasping at last its ideal in the immaterial world of pure Thought."[16] As we shall see, "Epipsychidion" is the poem most frequently alluded to in later nineteenth-century texts that ponder the ethics and effects of thinking about a beloved other. But throughout the century Shelley's writing served as a kind of testimony to

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the agency of thinking (in particular *Prometheus Unbound*, and *The Cenci*, in which "thoughts" themselves no less than people seem to have the power to murder). "I am as one lost in a midnight wood," says Giacomo, son of the evil Count Cenci, "who dares not ask some harmless passenger / The path across the wilderness, lest he, / As my thoughts are, should be – a murderer."[17] The significance of the figure of the drowned Shelley as a magnet for ideas about the murderous power of thinking about another person in George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda* shall be explored in Chapter 5.

If the long rise and fall of British idealism across the nineteenth century provides one framework for this study, a second, related framework is an arc that we can see stretching – again with Coleridge as our starting point – from the early nineteenth century to the early twentieth century, this time with Sigmund Freud as our end point. This is the arc of psychological theories of the agency of imagination from the romantic era to Freud's concept of the "omnipotence of thoughts." To begin at the end: in 1909 and 1910, very much under the influence of late nineteenth-century British anthropology – he cites Herbert Spencer, J. G. Frazer, Andrew Lang, and E. B. Tylor – Freud drafted the essays that became *Totem and Taboo*, a speculative work that considered whether some of the practices and beliefs of the "primitive" phases of mankind could be explained by psychoanalysis. The third essay, "Animism, Magic, and the Omnipotence of Thoughts," concerns magical practices used to make things happen: injure enemies, make people fall in love. In archaic animistic practices, Freud quotes approvingly from Frazer's *The Golden Bough*: "men mistook the order of their ideas for the order of nature, and hence imagined that the control which they have, or seem to have, over their thoughts, permitted them to exercise a corresponding control over things."[18] The psychological logic of such beliefs, argues Freud, is identical to that of neurotic patients who narcissistically overvalue psychic acts, and believe that evil wishes about another person "lead inevitably to their fulfillment" (87). The same belief, he observes, can be found in children: as is the case with many Freudian concepts, "the omnipotence of thought" is simultaneously rendered pathological and primitive, and admitted as part of a normal phase of human development. If it is common for children and "primitive" peoples to believe in the omnipotence of their thoughts only to lose this belief later, that is, the question underlying Freud's analysis is not "how could anyone come to believe that their thoughts have extrapersonal action at a distance?" but rather "how could anyone come to *not* believe that they do?" He opened the door to the possibility of viewing a belief in the power of thinking to affect others as an ordinary psychological phenomenon.[19]

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There is every reason to resist the teleological pull of narratives which trace a direct line from romanticism to Freud. But it would be possible to see nineteenth-century discussions about the effects and ethics of the act of thinking about another person as pieces of a prehistory to the psychoanalytic concept of the "omnipotence of thought."[20] It allows us to situate Freud's treatment of thinking – which he sometimes termed "an experimental kind of acting"[21] – along a spectrum of manifestations of related concerns across the long nineteenth century. This study's strategy is to see the enormously influential vogues for mesmerism and other paranormal psychic powers in nineteenth-century Britain as points along this spectrum.[22] I integrate these topics into the study of British philosophy, not only British idealism (in Chapter 1) but also, as I shall discuss further below, Victorian epiphenomenalism (in Chapter 2). Some of the interest in the force of thinking to affect others derived, as did Freud's accounting of the omnipotence of thought, from nineteenth-century anthropological speculation on various forms of mind-magic – voodoo, witchcraft – discovered both abroad and among the rural at home.[23] Narratives of mind-power abound in nineteenth-century supernatural fiction.[24] In Thomas Hardy's beautiful, mournful tale "The Withered Arm" (1888), a forsaken milkmaid involuntarily jinxes her lover's young bride, whose arm withers under the force of her rival's dream of harm. "O, can it be," the milkmaid, Rhoda Brook, says to herself, "that I exercise a malignant power over people against my own will?" "The sense of having been guilty of an act of malignity increased," notes Hardy's narrator, "affect as she might to riddle her superstition. In her secret heart Rhoda did not altogether object to a slight diminution of her successor's beauty, by whatever means it had come about; but she did not wish to inflict upon her physical pain."[25] Hardy's emphasis on Rhoda's crushing sense of guilt renders "The Withered Arm" not so much a story of rural witchcraft as an account of the dread that your mind could – beyond your conscious control – inflict harm on another. It is a story that walks the road between supernaturalism and psychology.

A renewed sense of the extraordinary ethical value nineteenth-century intellectuals placed on the ordinary activity of thinking has come from literary scholars' recent re-evaluation of the culture of liberalism. Andrew H. Miller has emphasized how and why Victorian intellectuals put a premium on the *display* of thinking itself. Elaine Hadley has written of the ways in which, in the writings of some Victorian liberals – and that of some of their modern exegetes – liberalism itself comes to be defined by and as a "cognitive aesthetic." Victorian "habits of thoughtfulness," she summarizes, "generate what might be called a liberal cognitive aesthetic," "a model of habituated

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