Theoretical context

After explaining what is meant by the phrase intermental units, I will attempt to illustrate their importance in the novel by analysing their functioning in an example text, Charles Dickens’ *Little Dorrit*. I hope to show that it is not possible to understand this novel without an awareness of these units as they operate within its storyworld. They are the chief means by which the plot is advanced. If you were to take all of the intermental thought out of *Little Dorrit*, a good deal of the subject matter of the novel would be lost. So, given the importance of this subject to the study of the novel, it seems to me that it is necessary to find room for it at the centre of narrative theory.

Speaking very broadly, there are two perspectives on the mind: the internalist and the externalist. These two perspectives form more of a continuum than an either/or dichotomy, but the distinction is, in general, a valid one.

- An internalist perspective on the mind stresses those aspects that are inner, introspective, private, solitary, individual, psychological, mysterious, and detached.
- An externalist perspective on the mind stresses those aspects that are outer, active, public, social, behavioural, evident, embodied, and engaged.

The social mind and the public mind are the synonyms that I will use to describe those aspects of the whole mind that are revealed through the externalist perspective.

It seems to me that the traditional narratological approach to the representation of fictional consciousness is an internalist one that stresses those aspects that are inner, passive, introspective and individual. This undue emphasis on private, solitary and highly verbalized thought at the expense of all the other types of mental functioning has resulted in a preoccupation with such concepts as free indirect discourse, stream of consciousness and interior monologue. As a result, the social nature of fictional thought has been neglected. But, as the neuroscientist Antonio Damasio suggests, “the study of human consciousness requires both internal and external views” (82), and so an externalist perspective is required as well, one that stresses the public, social, concrete and located aspects of mental life in the novel.
As the following table shows, some of the concepts that are used to analyse the workings of fictional minds tend to fit easily into one or other of these perspectives.

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<th>Internalist perspective</th>
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<td>private mind</td>
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Some of these pairs oppose each other precisely; in other cases the pairings are a little looser. Some of the terms that may be unfamiliar to narrative theorists are defined below. The term *aspectuality* refers to the fact that the actual world is always experienced under some aspects and not others. The story-worlds created by fictional texts are equally aspectual. They are necessarily experienced by the characters who inhabit them only ever under some aspects and not others. Within the internalist/externalist framework, I see focalization and aspectuality as complementing each other. Focalization occurs when the reader is presented with the aspect of the storyworld that is being experienced or presented by the focalizer at that moment. But the concept of aspectuality is a reminder that, meanwhile, the storyworld is also being experienced differently, under different aspects, by the other characters who are not currently being focalized in the text. Any of those other characters could have been focalized if the narrator had chosen to do so. The term *continuing consciousness* stands for the process whereby readers create a continuing consciousness for a character out of the scattered, isolated mentions of that character in the text. The character continues to exist in the storyworld even when not present at a particular point in the text. The concept of aspectuality links very nicely with the idea of continuing consciousnesses. Other characters’ consciousnesses are continuing while, at any single point in the narrative, one character’s consciousness is being focalized. It is by means such as these that the internalist/externalist framework is helpful in expanding the concept of subjectivity. As the list suggests, the term can be used in both a first person way (subjectivity of self) and a third person way (subjectivity of others). The use of the term *aspectuality* acts as a reminder here too, this time of the existence of the subjectivity of others, as available to us through the use of our theory of mind (our awareness of the existence of other minds which is explained in more detail below).

An important part of the social mind is our capacity for *intermental thought*, which is joint, group, shared or collective thought, as opposed to
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intramental, or individual or private thought (Palmer “Intermental thought”). It is also known as socially distributed, situated or extended cognition, and also as intersubjectivity. Intermental thought is a crucially important component of fictional narrative because much of the mental functioning that occurs in novels is done by large organizations, small groups, work colleagues, friends, families, couples and other intermental units. It could plausibly be argued that a large amount of the subject matter of novels is the formation, development and breakdown of these intermental systems. *Little Dorrit*, in common with many other novels, contains a number of general or universal statements about the typical behaviour of intermental units. For example, when Blandois arrives one evening at a French inn, “There had been that momentary interruption of the talk about the stove, and that temporary inattention to and distraction from one another, which is usually inseparable in such a company from the arrival of a stranger.” (167-8) Later in the text, Mr Meagles admits that “we do, in families, magnify our troubles and make mountains of our molehills in a way that is calculated to be rather trying to people who look on – to mere outsiders” (370). Mr Meagles also explains to Clennam that:

There is one of those odd impressions in my house, which do mysteriously get into houses sometimes, which nobody seems to have picked up in a distinct form from anybody, and yet which everybody seems to have got hold of loosely from somebody and let go again, that she [Miss Wade] lives, or was living [near Park Lane]. (373)

These sorts of statements are quite common in fictional discourse, although traditional narrative theory has taken little account of them because of its preference for the internalist perspective. (However, for work by postclassical narrative theorists on distributed cognition, see Margolin and Herman).

Within the real-mind disciplines of psychology and philosophy there is a good deal of interest in the mind beyond the skin: the realization that mental functioning cannot be understood merely by analysing what goes on inside the skull but can only be fully comprehended once it has been seen in its social and physical context. For example, social psychologists routinely use the terms mind and mental action not only about individuals, but also about groups of people working as intermental units. So, it is appropriate to say of groups that they think or that they remember. As the psychologist James Wertsch puts it, a dyad (that is, two people working as a cognitive system) can carry out such functions as problem solving on an intermental plane (27). You may be asking what is achieved by talking in this way, instead of simply referring to individuals pooling their resources and working in cooperation together. The advocates of the concept of distributed cognition such as the theoretical anthropologists Gregory Bateson and Clifford Geertz, the philosophers Andy Clark and David Chalmers and Daniel Dennett, and the psychologists Edwin Hutchins and James Wertsch all stress that the purpose of the concept is increased explanatory power. They argue that the way to
delineate a cognitive system is to draw the limiting line so that you do not cut out anything which leaves things inexplicable (Bateson 465). In the MIT Encyclopedia of the Cognitive Sciences, Sperber and Hirschfeld quote Wertsch's story of how his daughter lost her shoes and he helped her to remember where she had left them. Wertsch asks: Who is doing the remembering here? He is not, because he had no prior knowledge of where they were, and she is not, because she had forgotten where they were. It was the intermental unit formed by the two of them that remembered (Sperber and Hirschfeld cxxiv).

In an illuminating essay entitled "Diagramming Narrative", Marie-Laure Ryan refers to the subject matter of narrative as the "evolution of a network of interpersonal relations" (29) and shows convincingly how diagrammatic representations of these networks in specific narratives can add a great deal to our understanding of the narrative process. It seems to me that fictional minds generally and social minds in particular could benefit from this sort of approach. For example, the complex, overlapping relationships formed by different intermental units can be thought of as resembling the patterns made by the circles in a Venn diagram. Such a diagram would show clearly how the membership of some groups are included within larger ones, some have no membership overlap at all with others, some have a partial overlap and so on.

The basis of this essay is attribution theory (Palmer "Attribution theory"): how narrators, characters, and readers attribute states of mind such as emotions, dispositions, and reasons for action to characters and, where appropriate, also to themselves. How do heterodiegetic narrators attribute states of mind to their characters? By what means do homodiegetic narrators attribute states of mind to themselves and also to other characters? And, with regard to the issue of characterization, how does an attribution of a mental state by a narrator help to build up in the reader a sense of the whole personality of the character who is the subject of that attribution? Attribution theory rests on the concept of theory of mind. This is the term used by philosophers and psychologists to describe our awareness of the existence of other minds, our knowledge of how to interpret our own and other people's thought processes, our mind-reading abilities in the real world. Readers of novels have to use their theory of mind in order to try to follow the workings of characters' minds. Otherwise, they will lose the plot. The only way in which the reader can understand a novel is by trying to follow the workings of characters' minds and thereby by attributing states of minds to them. (For more on theory of mind and the novel, see Palmer Fictional Minds and especially Zunshine Why We Read Fiction). Of particular importance to the concept of the social mind is the fact that this mind reading also involves readers trying to follow characters' attempts to read other characters' minds. A basic level of minimal mind reading is required for characters to understand each other in order to make life possible. At the next level up, characters who know each other well form intermental pairs and small groups. Because they are more likely to know what the other is thinking than total strangers will, they will
find it easier to engage in such joint activities as problem-solving and decision-making. These small groups will obviously vary greatly in the quantity and quality of their intermental thought. In addition, individuals may be part of larger groups that will also have a tendency to think together on certain issues. In all of these units, large and small, the individuals that belong to them will, of course, frequently think separately as well. It is this balance between public and private thought, intermental and intramental functioning, social and individual minds, that novels are preoccupied with, and Little Dorrit is no exception.

An emphasis on social minds will inevitably question these twin assumptions: first, that the workings of our minds are not accessible to others; and, secondly, that the workings of our own minds are unproblematically accessible to ourselves. This essay will, in the main, question the first assumption and will make much less reference to the equally questionable second. To adapt Porter Abbott’s vivid phrase unreadable minds, I will be discussing the readable minds that are to be found in Little Dorrit. However, I must stress that I am certainly not saying that minds are always readable. Sometimes, they are; sometimes, they are not. In Little Dorrit, I will argue, on the whole, they are. But in different sorts of novels, different levels of readability and unreadability will apply.

I will now illustrate these general remarks by focusing in the next section on the intermental unit of the Dorrit family. This involves looking at some of the individuals within that unit (for example, Mr Dorrit and Fanny) and also at some of the sub-units within the family (for example, Little Dorrit and Mr Dorrit, and Little Dorrit and Fanny). In the following section I will consider the most important intermental pair in the novel – the relationship between Little Dorrit and Clennam. I will examine this relationship from both points of view: that is, Clennam’s knowledge of Little Dorrit’s mind; and Little Dorrit’s knowledge of Clennam’s. I have assembled a large amount of evidence relating to the functioning of intermental units in Little Dorrit. What is presented in this essay is only a small sample. It is the second in a series of three essays on the subject of social minds in this novel. The first, called “Social Minds in Little Dorrit” focused on physically distributed cognition, some of the specific ways in which social minds communicate with each other (such as the face, sign language and the look) and the large intermental units in the novel. This essay will attempt to focus in particular on the ethical implications of characters’ mind-reading within small intermental units by considering the relationship between cognitive attributions and moral judgments. Characters try to read other minds for a variety of motives – selfishness, altruism, curiosity, ambition and so on. Like intramental thought, intermental thought is morally neutral in itself. It is not necessarily good or bad, although, of course, specific examples may well be. The third essay will look at some of the other small intermental units in the novel such as the Meagles family, Clennam and Mrs Clennam, Mrs Clennam and Flintwinch, and Little Dorrit and Pet.
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 in a group. Groups often have a clear self image in the sense that it is important to the individuals that comprise it that they identify themselves as belonging to that group. Some families are like this; others are not. The Dorrit family definitely has a strong self image. The narrator refers on several occasions to the Dorrit family intermental unit by using the word family in very significant contexts. 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). A few pages later, the same phrase, “family dignity” (551), is used again. These phrases refer to the shared consciousness within the family of their alleged importance and social standing. An important element in this shared consciousness is the 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 that these outsiders’ awareness of the significance of the Dorrit name can be difficult to enforce.

This internalization of the conflicting perspective of another is decidedly Bakhtinian. He called it the “word with a sideways glance” (32). Mr Dorrit is so excessively self-conscious about the family history that, for example, he takes objection to the Chief Butler looking at him “in a manner that Mr Dorrit considered questionable” (678). This uneasy anticipation of the word, or gaze, of another occurs a few pages later 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). Interestingly, Fanny also unfairly reproaches Little Dorrit for staring at her (665).

The cognitive importance of the shared consciousness of the family is emphasized throughout the text. In another reference to the workings of the intermental family mind, the narrator describes Little Dorrit sighing by referring to “the whole family history in that sigh” (648). The following passage is a remarkable one because 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 recreate 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)

A good sign of the existence of an intermental mind is the heightened awareness of individuals of the thinking of others within the unit. That is, family
members are more likely to know what the others are thinking than non-family members are. Their theory of mind tends to be more successful than the norm. 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 very well that it is “often running in his mind that other people are thinking about [the Marshalsea], while he is talking to them” (647). Further evidence of the presence of cognitive intermental functioning is the fact that, within an intermental mind, individuals are easily able to understand the sign language of others within the unit. Words are often unnecessary. For example: Tip “asked her the question with a sly glance of observation at Miss Fanny, and at his father too” (505). Also, Tip gives Fanny “a slight nod and a slight wink; in acknowledgement of which, Miss Fanny looked surprised, and laughed and reddened” (536).

As with many intermental units, though, generalizations should be employed with care. Intermental cognitive functioning is very complex. Most units have a core membership but are fuzzy around the edges. Significantly, when Wittgenstein explained the concept of fuzzy sets in Philosophical Investigations, it was the notion of family resemblances that he used to illustrate the point (32). The Dorrit family is a good example of fuzziness. The consciousness of the family credit is shared by the core family of William, Fanny and Tip. It is not characteristic of the other members of the family who, for very 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 behaviour. These behavioural patterns often 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 example 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). She 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). Similarly, it is said of her 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 intramental state of mind, but it also refers to her awareness of the intermental thinking of the prison population.) However, much of this intramental shyness arises from her treatment by William, Fanny and Tip. Its origins are intermental. As the passage quoted above makes clear, it is laid down as family law that Little Dorrit is to be treated in a certain way, and has 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” (556-7). The intermental cognitive functioning is often clearly revealed in the joint actions that arise from these family disposi-
tions 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 through without her” (480). And they fail spectacularly by completely forgetting her and leaving her behind!

Such family customs are often very revealing about the nature of that family when they are noticed by 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 how revealing certain joint patterns of behaviour are: for example, which members of it are excessively over- or under-valued. The family treatment of Little Dorrit is also clear to the narrator, who comments 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). This is a very moving description of the way in which individuals may acquire and internalize some of the characteristics of the intermental unit to which they belong, and of how painful this internalization process can be.

Intermental units also often function in similarly characteristic ways towards 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 towards Clennam, based mainly on his scepticism regarding 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 has some inking of their shared hostility because of their unsubtle joint behaviour. However, when reading Little Dorrit’s letter from Italy, he learns more, 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 Clennam and it is not clear that Frederick has any view at all on the matter. (In Porter Abbott’s terms, his is most definitely an unreadable mind!)

It is often very rewarding to consider the sub-units that develop within a larger intermental unit. These relationships tend to illuminate the workings of the larger unit and, in turn, are themselves more comprehensible when seen within the wider context. Within the relationship between Little Dorrit and her father, much is often left unspoken. This reliance on silence, like sign
language, is another clear sign of intermental communication (see Palmer, forthcoming). They understand each other but do not make this knowledge of the other explicit: 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 clear 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 that she knows and so on.

Much of the relationship between father and daughter is expressed by the narrator in terms of the sign language that I referred to earlier: “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 very 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 their relationship has not changed.

Sign language also works well between Fanny and Little Dorrit because they too form an intermental pair within the larger unit of the whole 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). Amy is very quick to pick up on behavioural 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 with her after she tells 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, Fanny’s feelings will be hidden from others, but Amy will know of Fanny’s subsequently concealed feelings, having been shown them once. The text makes explicit Little Dorrit’s feelings of love for Fanny:

Always admiring Fanny’s beauty, and grace, and readiness, and not now asking herself how much of her disposition to be strongly attached to Fanny was due to her own heart, and how much to Fanny’s, she gave her all the sisterly fondness her great heart contained. (557)
When considering the attribution of reasons for actions (either first or third person), psychologists distinguish between attributions that focus on the individual ("he/I did that because he’s/I’m that kind of person") and those that focus on the context ("he/I did that because that’s what you do in that kind of situation"). Indeed, they refer to our tendency to overvalue the former and undervalue the latter as the fundamental attribution error (see Palmer *Fictional Minds* 244-46). It is noticeable that, in explaining that Little Dorrit is not attributing to herself the reasons why she loves Fanny, the narrator refers to the two sorts of attributions that she has chosen not to make. One relates to herself ("due to her own heart"); the other to the context ("how much to Fanny’s"). In an interestingly indirect way, the narrator is making the point that Little Dorrit is too modest to acknowledge explicitly to herself that her love for Fanny can only be due to her own loving nature because Fanny’s nature is so unlovable in so many ways. In other words, the narrator is implying that the fundamental attribution error would not apply in this case if Little Dorrit were to engage in self-attribution. Speaking more generally for a moment, there is an intriguing tension between the psychologists’ concept of the fundamental attribution error and the need for novelists to focus on the specificity and individuality of their characters. A novel in which characters behave how everyone else is likely to behave does not sound like a compelling page-turner!

A focus on the workings of long-term, stable intermental units such as couples and families can give a misleading impression if it suggests that intermental thought can only occur within such units. In fact, as we know from our real life experience, mind-reading can occur in a variety of situations. It is made easier or more difficult by a variety of factors such as solipsistic characters, people with easily readable minds, familiar or unfamiliar contexts, and so on. For this reason, it is worth considering how the family behaves towards an outsider, Mrs General. Although Fanny and Mrs General form a conflicted, competitive unit, the sign language is still efficacious. When “Miss Fanny coughed, as much as to say, “You are right”” (661), Mrs General knows exactly what she means. Fanny says of Mrs General: “I know her sly manner of feeling her way with those gloves of hers” (666). And she concludes perceptively: “That woman, I am quite sure and confident, will be our mother-in-law” (648). Little Dorrit is also able to decode Mrs General’s behaviour: “The perfect formation of that accomplished lady’s surface rendered it difficult to displace an atom of its genteel glaze, but Little Dorrit thought she descried a slight thaw of triumph in a corner of her frosty eye” (704). Mind-reading also works in the opposite direction. In the following exchange, Mrs General shows that she is clever enough (or sly enough, to use Fanny’s term) to know how to flatter Mr Dorrit: “It always appears to me … that Mr Dorrit has been accustomed to exercise influence over the minds of others” (527). From the point of view of a cognitive approach to the characters in this novel, Mrs General’s choice of words, referring to influencing minds, is significant.
My final example of the relationships between individuals within the Dorrit family unit and those outside is the small intermental unit formed by Fanny, Mrs Merdle and Sparkler. 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 half ("Rags"). Indeed, "The skilful manner in which [Mrs Merdle] and Fanny fenced with one another on the occasion almost made her quiet sister 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 "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 relationship between Fanny and Sparkler is much less well-balanced. Fanny toys with Sparkler over a number of pages. Her knowledge of his mind, such as it is, enables her to calibrate the torture perfectly. Fanny says of her "loved one", "If it’s possible – and it generally is – to do a foolish thing, he is sure to do it" (664). 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 that identifies her relationship with Sparkler as a serious one. She knows that such a consensus can solidify very quickly and cannot thereafter be easily changed. Fanny therefore jumps very quickly to Sparkler’s defence when, for example, 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 analysed 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 towards, 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 General and Mrs Merdle. 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 considered in the next section.

Clennam and Little Dorrit

There are different ways in which intermental units can be classified. One way 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 way is to examine the degree of intermental thought: sometimes they understand each other perfectly; sometimes imperfectly; sometimes not at all. It may be that different intermental units will be illuminated by different sorts of approaches. In the case of Clennam and Little Dorrit, I will consider 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 flavour of the complexity of the very 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 very well aware of the workings of her own mind, the workings of the mind of the one she loves and how the two minds function together. As is often the case, though, the 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 may 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. (211-2)

In this case it is clear that she knows that something is on his mind, but she is wrong about what it is. 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 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 occurs in narratives with a comic structure. On the one hand, the central couple in such narratives 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 is a certain logic to such intermental breakdowns in the relationships of lovers. It is likely 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 want to be interested in me”.

Mind-reading involves reading one’s own mind as well as reading the minds of others, and this self- or first person attribution can be as unreliable as the third person kind. Little Dorrit’s first person attribution is accurate because she does know that she is in love with Clennam. However, Clennam is not aware of the most important fact about the working of his own mind: that he is in love with Little Dorrit. Reliable first person attribution is as necessary as third person attribution for successful participation in an intermental unit. For any such unit 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 describe in the following paragraphs. 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. Towards the end of the novel, Clennam finds his private thoughts “remarkable” to him (787), suggesting that he is aware of the fallibility of introspection.

An important issue that arises within intermental units is control. This example relates to an early attempt by Clennam 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). Later, because Clennam knows her well enough by now, he realizes that he can control Little Dorrit’s fears by getting her to focus on thoughts of her father (467). Clennam finds it uncomfortable to think about Little Dorrit and John Chivery. He is concerned that his Little Dorrit is not hers. “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 the aspectuality of individuals. That is, every person contains many different individuals within them because they are viewed under different aspects by different people. As Walt Whitman said, “We contain multitudes”. Clennam 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 is aware that gaps of this sort can often supply the emotional needs of the other. That is, Clennam is aware that he is using her by creating an image of her in his mind that does not fit her own self-image. Importantly, he does not want to use her for his own purposes. Unfortunately, though, he then over-compensates by talking about himself as much older than he is, and this inadvertently causes him to hurt Little Dorrit’s feelings. 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 as 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 the feelings of someone close to us by unsuccessfully trying to second-guess their feelings. As the narrator says of the married couple in Thomas Pynchon’s *The Crying of Lot 49*, “Like all their inabilities 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 understanding completely 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 very 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). As stated earlier, when people know each other well, sign language becomes very 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 behaviour (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
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a hundred gentle phrases, according to the varying tone and connection in which it was used" (213). I think most readers of this essay will have had personal experience of the use of a private language within a small intermental unit.

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 honourable 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 I would guess that the ethical judgments made by most readers today would not necessarily be in line with Clennam’s on this issue. Most of us, I think, would regard Little Dorrit’s question as, at the very least, a reasonable one to ask. Because it is likely that the actual reader will be at some distance from the reader implied by this passage in the text, the effect is to make Clennam look heavy-handed and judgmental.

As the bulk of the text is focalized through Clennam, there is less evidence of Little Dorrit’s mind reading than of Clennam’s. But it is clear, nevertheless, that, for large stretches of the novel, she is 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 very 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 also be contextual rather than relying on external indicators such as facial clues and sign language. 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 relationship is very different. At the end of the novel, she realizes immediately that Clennam knows that their relationship has changed. 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”.

Conclusion

An essay by Lisa Zunshine entitled “Theory of Mind and Fictions of Embodied Transparency” is, superficially, on the same subject as mine: characters knowing what other characters are thinking. It is noticable, however, that our two essays are, nevertheless, completely different from each other. They make use of very different areas of cognitive theory; they feature very different example texts; Zunshine’s essay focuses on single moments of insight, whereas this is concerned with longer-term understanding and so on. That our work is so similar yet so different, and also so complementary, is a deeply eloquent statement, it seems to me, on the richness and potential of cognitive approaches to literature.

I stressed at the beginning of this essay that both perspectives on fictional minds, the internalist and the externalist, are required. The narrator of 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, the narrator remarks 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). Employing the externalist perspective that stresses those aspects of the mind that are outer, active, public, social, behavioural, evident, embodied, and engaged, 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). Nevertheless, within this balance, I have emphasised social minds and, in particular, intermental units, for two reasons. One is that they have been neglected by traditional narrative theory. The other is that, in my view, the social minds in this particular novel are more important than the solitary or private minds. It is not possible to understand Little Dorrit without an understanding of the public minds that operate within its storyworld. A good deal of the significance of the thought in the novel is lost if only the internalist perspective is employed. My intention in quoting so frequently from the novel was to show that these social minds are woven into the fabric of its discourse. I hope that the weight of evidence presented in this essay, together with the large amount of other data contained in the two companion essays on social minds in the novel (Palmer, forthcoming), are sufficient to prove the point. As to whether or not the conclusions reached here regarding the social minds in this novel can also be applied to other novels, more research is required. In particular, I hope that the work done in this essay and in the other essays that
I have written on social minds can be used as starting points from which to go in various historical and cultural directions.

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Works Cited


—. “Social Minds in Little Dorrit.” Forthcoming.


