The Human Mind Project
Report and interview with Mattia Gallotti

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This report is divided in two parts. Firstly, I will give a sketch of the workshop on *Language, Literacy, Literature & the Mind,* organized by *The Human Mind Project* in Senate House, London, on March 9^{*th*}, 2016. Secondly, Mattia Gallotti, Research Fellow in Philosophy and Project Manager, will respond to our questions about the aims and objectives of the *Project*.

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1   *Language, Literacy, Literature & the Mind*

The one-day workshop *Language, Literacy, Literature & the Mind* took place in Senate House, London, on March 9th, 2016. Its aim was to investigate, in an interdisciplinary fashion, the role of spoken and written language, education, literacy, narrative and storytelling in the historical, cultural, and cognitive life of the human mind. This workshop was the sixth organized by *The Human Mind Project* (hosted by the School of Advanced Study of the University of London), and followed the events on *Meanings of Mind* (London, UK, May 23rd, 2014), *Theory of Mind and the Social Mind* (Noto, Italy, September 16th, 2014), *Computers and Mind* (Edinburgh, UK, November 21st, 2014), *Social Change in the Brain Age* (Pavia, Italy, September 10th-11th, 2015), and *Collective Intelligence* (London, UK, October 14th, 2015).

The workshop was divided in three sessions composed of two thirty-minutes talks. Each couple of talks was followed by a joint Q&A session. As explained by *The Human Mind Project* Leader Colin Blakemore, this particular choice was made to trigger a lively interdisciplinary conversation.

In the first part of the meeting, chaired by the Project Manager Mattia Gallotti, Sarah Churchwell (School of Advanced Study, University of London) and Charles Fernyhough (Durham University) took the stage. Churchwell, who works mainly on the American Twenty-first Century literature, gave a talk entitled *Beyond Symptomatic Reading*, in which she challenged the idea that literary works are subtended by presumptions and ideological sets which only a symptomatic research can uncover. On the other hand, according to Churchwell, the meanings of art texts are not reducible to mere information; rather, they are describable in metaphorical terms. These metaphors are not to be understood as something which obstructs the comprehension of art works, but as heuristic devices useful to help the readers to obtain a multifaceted understanding of them.

The talk given by Scott-Philips (*The Evolutionary Origins of Human Communication and Languages*) tried explaining the peculiarity of the human language. Firstly, he pointed out that every form of communication is endowed with intentionality, and that human beings desire not only to communicate messages, but also their intentions. Secondly, Scott-Philips described the human language as a set of conventions which make it flexible, powerful, and suitable for cultural development. Thirdly, he used the categories of determinacy, indeterminacy,

showing and meaning to classify different kinds of human expressions. For example, a sentence like "The train departs at 7 pm" is determinate and meaningful per se; the showing of the wristwatch is also determinate; a sentence like "Juliet is the sun" suggests a meaning in an indeterminate fashion; art works like paintings are able to provide direct experiences in a way that is precluded to ordinary language.

The second session, chaired by Barry Smith, Director of the Institute of Philosophy, was constituted by the talks by Charles Fernyhough (Durham University) and by Sophie Duncan, Evert van Emde Boas, Laurie Maguire, and Jacqueline Thompson (University of Oxford). Fernyhough's talk (*The voices in our heads*) dealt with the topic of inner speech, i.e. what happens when a speaker talks with herself. Different kinds of inner speech can be distinguished: it can be expanded (if a full conversation is developed), condensed (if the speech is telegraphic or shortened), monologic, or dialogic. Inner speech involves the representation of oneself not only as the speaker, but also as the interlocutor; however, if the interlocutor is confused with a second and autonomous entity, different types of hallucinations are likely to pop up. Hallucinatory inner speech is not an uncommon phenomenon: for instance, some people, while reading a novel in their heads, experience voices in their minds, and, once the reading is over, continue to see the world through the characters' eyes.

The four-voices talk (*Endorphins, Cognition, and the Literary Response to Tragedy*) presented an experiment in which the authors studied the reactions of a group of subjects while watching the film *Stuart: A Life Backwards*. In particular, the experimenters targeted the role of endorphins in the psychological, physical, and social experiences of pain and pleasure aroused by interaction with tragic art works. The talk triggered an interesting debate about the relation between the physical aspects of the aesthetic involvement on the one hand and its experiential aspects on the other.

In the third session of the workshop, chaired by Colin Blakemore, Greg Currie (University of York) and Sophie Scott (University College London) took the spotlight. Currie, whose talk was entitled *What and How do we Learn from Fictional Stories?*, addressed two related long-standing topics. The first concerns the interaction of truthful knowledge and deception in fictional stories. The second regards the relation between literature on the one hand and mentalizing and theories of mind on the other. Scott (*Speech on the Brain*) offered a deep neuro-scientific analysis of the cerebral basis of social laughing.

2   *An interview with Mattia Gallotti*

Mattia Gallotti took up the position of Coordinator and Manager of *The Human Mind Project* in the School of Advanced Study of the University of London in

2014.

He studied economics at Bocconi University and philosophy at the London School of Economics, before being awarded a Ph.D. in philosophy from the University of Exeter. As a doctoral candidate, he held visiting fellowships at the University of California at Berkeley and the Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology, in Leipzig. He then carried out postdoctoral research at the Jean Nicod Institute, in Paris, and the Italian Academy for Advanced Studies at Columbia University, in New York. He has developed a keen interest in issues of research management and governance in academic environments, and have done consultancy work for Nesta (UK's social innovation charity foundation). As a Research Fellow in Philosophy, he is interested in questions at the interplay of the philosophy of mind (social ontology) and cognitive science (social cognition).

What's special about *The Human Mind Project* and what distinguishes it from other projects on the human mind and brain?   One way to think about the mission of *The Human Mind Project* is by opposition to better funded, much bigger research programs such as the American *BRAIN Initiative* and the European *Human Brain Project*. We should be careful in defining exactly what the "opposition" is. In a nutshell, the root idea of those projects is that, if you come up with the best possible simulation of how the brain works, that will tell you what the human mind is. This kind of approach implies very many metaphysical assumptions about the nature, the function, the mechanisms, the processes of the mind. Our alternative approach is to actually pause, slow down, and look backwards at foundational questions about the nature and function of the mind. Why so? Well, there now is such a critical mass of data and insights from the neurosciences that we are now in a much better position to address foundational questions about the mind, instead of speeding things up and investing ever more resources in the study of the brain. It should be clear that "opposition" does not mean that we are taking a critical stance on the neurosciences. The Project Leader of *The Human Mind Project* is world renowned neuroscientist, and the first Interdisciplinary Chair of Neuroscience and Philosophy of the University of London. What I'm saying is that it is time to develop a more critical and dispassionate approach to the hype surrounding brain studies and what the neurosciences can tell us about the mind.

So you seem to refuse a strict reductionist approach to the human mind.   I wouldn't say that *The Human Mind Project* refuses or rejects physicalistic approaches to the mind. We are all naturalists of some sort without endorsing forms of reductive eliminativism.

As is clear from the workshop on *Language, Literacy, Literature & the Mind,* one core aim of the *Project* is to encourage an interdisciplinary approach to the human mind, one that integrates the arts and humanities into the broader study of the mind. How are you trying achieving this broad dialogue? The study of the mind has always been intrinsically interdisciplinary. Since the cognitive revolution in the nineteen-fifties, the study of the mind has developed at the crossroads of multiple fields of enquiry including philosophy, linguistics, psychology, neurosciences, artificial intelligence, and so on. However, the arts and humanities, as well as the social sciences, have only been marginally involved. The interdisciplinary agenda of *The Human Mind Project* will be achieved by putting together people from different backgrounds for a lively discussion on topics and methods that will not be confined to the natural sciences. The School of Advanced Study, at the University of London, has been at the forefront in this respect. We are a higher education institution with the mission to promote research facilitation in the arts and humanities.

The *Project* also actively seeks to reach out to the public at large. How do you do that? We have designed and built a dedicated "digital platform". The platform was launched in February with the purpose to engage everybody in a discussion about the great challenges in the study of the mind. This is a way for us to facilitate dissemination and invite people to contribute to the life and activity of the *Project* by posting comments on the forum.

How does the forum work? We consult with a large and diverse Advisory Board, while the management of the *Project* is in the hands of a much smaller Steering Group. The plan is to interview all members of the Board by the end of the *Project* and to upload the interviews on to the website. The public will have the chance to post comments in response to others' responses and comments. Think of this as a form of Facebook for academics interested in questions about the minds.

Could you explain how *The Human Mind Project* is funded? The *Project* was launched with seed funding from the School of Advanced Study, University of London. New and additional funding came in last year, when we secured further support from the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE). What HEFCE does is to allocate money to all British higher education institutions (HEIs), as well as to special initiatives which do not quite fit into traditional templates for funding bids. *The Human Mind Project* is a good case in point with its highly interdisciplinary aims and speculative nature. When you put in an application for the "Catalyst Fund" of HEFCE, the verdict will not come out straight away as the result of a "one-shot game". Instead, the application process is a "consultative process", one that proceeds by back-and-forth moves on both

sides. You submit a first outline, wait and see if the funders are willing to take things to the next steps. If they do, you will then submit a complete business case and the consultative process starts. For example, they might get back to you with indications as to the sections of the proposal that they would like you to expand on. We went through four consultation rounds, the process lasted for about a year, and then we got it. Such a relief!

One of the central activities of *The Human Mind Project* is called *Grand Challenge* exercise. Its goal is to identify a certain number of key questions in the study of the mind. Unsurprisingly, the first challenge concerns what the human mind is. If you visit the website of the project, you will come across a number of videotaped answers to this very first question: the neuroscientist and Project Leader Colin Blakemore highlights an interesting parallelism between the mind and the gravity; the psychologist Cecilia Heyes stresses the functional role of the mind; the philosopher Tim Crane draws the attention to the notion of intentionality; the anthropologist Rita Astuti emphasizes an historical and cultural approach to the topic. What would your answer to this question be? I'm probably too young to answer this question. It would take me a few more years to articulate my own take on the problem of what the mind is. To some extent, I'm sympathetic with the approach championed by Tim Crane, which partly aligns with that of my mentor, John Searle. This is the view that, if we aim to improve understanding of the mind, we better focus on "intentionality", that is, the power of the mind to represent things (be "about" things) beyond itself. In my own philosophical work, I have sought to develop this idea in the case of collective intentionality, the capacity of minds to be directed upon objects and states of affairs jointly. Whenever I think about the big questions about the mind, I'm inclined to conceptualize them through the lens of the problem of intentionality.

Could you give us some clues about the next topics that the *Grand Challenges exercise* will address? The members of the board we have interviewed so far answered four questions. Right now if you visit our website you find the answers to the first question, because we will release the others step-by-step, maybe month-by-month. The idea is to come up with a decent number of challenges, say around ten. The very first question is about the definition of the human mind. The next interviews we'll publish are about what it takes to do interdisciplinary work, because interdisciplinarity is the name of the game when you do research on the mind. In addition, we asked about the role of computation science in thinking about the nature and function of the mind. We asked also what funders can do in order to facilitate this kind of researches.

Many BA, MA and Ph.D. students read RIFAJ. Could you give some advice to students and early researchers whose desire is to approach a fundraising-based way of doing research?   First of all, nowadays there is no other way to support independent, high-quality research projects than by applying for grants. Universities are facing financial challenges, therefore researchers are strongly encouraged to apply for grants. When you apply for them, I think you have a fairly idea of what it takes to be successful. Assessment criteria are objective and evaluators accountable. I also would like to report the words of a highly influential academic, who recently claimed that the age of scholarship is over, and we have to be able to secure funding from external sources. Mixed research and management academic positions have been quite unusual so far, but I believe they're going to be more frequent in the future. Being able to read a budget, to organize different kinds of events, to engage with the public, to develop a proactive attitude towards social media, to manage people up and down – all these are going to be common demands on the job descriptions of future early-career academic posts.