Introduction to the Special Issue: The Importance of David Olson's Book "The Mind on Paper"

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In 2016 David Olson published his latest book, an extension and to some degree a critique of his former book "The World on Paper" published by Cambridge University Press entitled "The Mind on Paper" (David R. Olson, *The Mind on Paper: Reading, Consciousness and Rationality*, Cambridge University press, 2016, ISBN 9789-1-107-16289-1, Hardback, 270 pp). This struck me as a singularly important event.

The last time a book of this great importance referred centrally to the "mind" it was the Oxford philosopher Gilbert Ryle's "The Concept of Mind" in which he argued that mind was not a separate kind of substance along with matter as Descartes had thought, nor a Ghost in a machine, but in fact a higher order kind of language, in part a language for talking about language itself. In some respects Olson's book argues much the same sort of thing as Ryle, but with greater precision and with serious referencing to scholarly work since 1945 but also by emphasizing the importance of writing rather than speech for the upper reaches of the mind. I was so struck by the book and its arguments that I decided to invite David and a number of others who might critique his work seriously to a symposium at the University of Calgary to celebrate the 50th year of publishing of the international education journal *Interchange: A Quarterly Review of Education*. This symposium was held in the Senate room in the University of Calgary's hotel Alma in the summer of 2019 and had representatives from around the world chosen by David Olson to critique his work.

Among those attending the symposium were Catherine Ann Cameron from the University of British Columbia and Giuliani Pinto of the University of Florence writing on "Literacies as Contexta: Notational Acts during A Day in the Life". In their paper Cameron and Pinto offer us the fruits of their research into what they refer to as "putting the mind on paper" concerning the ways in which, in an ordinary family life, we parents or caregivers put the mind on paper of a child through our countless literate interactions with them in early childhood and beyond. One of David's former students, Maria Medved, now a clinical psychologist at the

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American University of Paris, argues in her paper “A Psychological Report is Literally a Mind on Paper” that in the psychological assessment process there is a tension between oral and written language since moving from oral reports to written forms has the potential to subtly distort how the minds of others are represented and constructed. Jens Brockmeier, also at the American University of Paris, discusses how writing and narrative might be related. He argues that both are powerful practices of language awareness the examination of which allows us to better understand the cultural nexus of mind and language.

In her paper “Olson’s Domestication of Goody’s Literacy Hypothesis: How can philosophers of language help?” Manuela Ungureanu at the University of British Columbia takes us through a wide-ranging discussion of the relation of Olson’s work to that of many analytic philosophers of language over the last 50 years or so with a view to showing how his work referencing them clarifies and defends Jack Goody’s insights into the impact of literacy on social and psychological change. Tara Callaghan, at St. Francis Xavier University discusses one of Olson’s central themes, namely, symbolic representation. For Olson the key to literacy is the alphabetic symbolic representation of sound that permits one to discover that language is not something just heard and understood, but something with structure: phonemic, word unit, grammatical arrangements, and logical ordering among others. Callaghan working with toddlers and their early understanding of pictures are representations offers many insights into the development of the kinds of pictorial representations that underlie literacy, both alphabetic and presumably such writing as Chinese characters as well.

Howard Woodhouse, at the University of Saskatchewan, argues in his article that Olson’s account of the mind is a cognitivist account that fails to take into consideration both experience and aesthetic emotions. These Woodhouse, along with Whitehead and Dewey, consider central to the possibility of our reflecting on our mental powers via literacy and without which such reflection would be impossible. Sheldon Richmond is an independent scholar who for many years worked in information technology with the Federal Government of Canada and who now writes penetrating book reviews. For this theme issue Richmond offers a critical discussion of Olson’s theory of the origin of criticism in the form of what he refers to as a Socratic architecture. Among other tropes Richmond uses an imaginary email dialogue with David Olson in which he argues that Olson’s approach to literacy suggests a top-down view of both criticism and rationality dependent on the written word. For his part he suggests that criticism and rationality precede literacy and are bottom-up, polycentric and distributed. For his part Richmond thinks that both writing and orality are the source of criticism and therefore of rationality.

Happily David Olson himself brings up the final discussion of this symposium himself in his paper “On the use and misuse of literacy: Comments on “The Mind on Paper” in which he tells us how he attempted to expand on Vygotsky’s claims that “A word is a microcosm of human consciousness” and that “writing brings awareness to speech”.

In the next few pages I wish to critically review the argument in Olson’s book “The Mind on Paper” so that the readers of this Theme issue of *Interchange* might easily follow the background to the papers mentioned above. Other writers including

Hobbes and Ryle's predecessor as Wayneflete Professor in Oxford, R.G. Collingwood, have suggested that human thought and rationality does not precede language but depends entirely, or almost entirely, upon our possession of spoken language. Olson is the first to suggest that serious human thought including thinking about thinking depends not primarily on spoken language but almost entirely on the existence of written language. And if Olson is right namely that mind is essentially the activity of serious human thought in the sense of normative thought made possible by a written alphabetic meta language for referring to language itself then mind in this sense depends almost entirely on our possession of written human language. One measure of an important, perhaps of a great, book is that it forces one to go back and read other books to which it appears to the reader to be related in a variety of ways. In my case it forced me to look again at Ryle's "The Concept of Mind", Northrop Frye's "The Great Code", Ryle's posthumous collection of essays "On Thinking", Vygotsky's "Thought and Language", McLuhan's "Gutenberg Galaxy", Russell's "Analysis of Mind" and an essay by Bertrand Russell commenting on Ryle's book entitled "What is Mind?" and a number of essays including one by myself in another book edited by Olson called "Literacy, Language and Learning" as well as a host of others by writers like Frege, Grice and Dummett and "Mind and Cosmos" by Thomas Nagel. What is astonishing about Olson's achievement in this book is the ease with which he carries an immense scholarship all pointed towards his central argument that includes nearly all of these references and many, many more.

David Olson tries to fill in two gaps in our understanding that have been largely ignored by scholars over the last two or three centuries, namely, the relationship between speaking and writing on the one hand and that of writing in the formation of the human mind. By and large it has been assumed that speaking is the primary fact of importance in language, writing merely being a permanent copy of speaking. And as regard the formation of the human mind, philosophers and psychologists too, have essentially treated it as secondary to human thought, embodied in what is apparently natural for our species, namely human speech. With both of these assumptions Olson disagrees. He sees written language as offering us an unanticipated analytical tool to look into the workings of language and so human thought as well as providing us with new means to develop our understanding of human reasoning and rationality in the form of sophisticated normative developments like logic and grammar both of which in his view depend largely on written language. These developments give us criteria to judge everyday human reasoning and so are at a meta level of human thought.

At one point Olson hints that he would have liked to be able to develop a theory in which human mind is seen as essentially, or perhaps entirely, the result of written language, especially alphabetic language. But while he may have hoped for that as a result, his honesty has only permitted him to go partway with this intention. Instead of a literate theory of the human mind he has provided us on the one hand with a very important theory of the relations between human writing in alphabetic scripts and our present insight into human language and its workings. And on the other hand he has also provided us with a theoretical account of how our insights into the workings of our language are encouraged by alphabetic writing as it enables us to distinguish units such as phonemes and words as well as such grander patterns of

language in the form of reasoning as logical arguments that can be cast as Aristotle did with written Greek—and in our own day as Frege, Russell and Whitehead, did in extending Aristotle's logical argument structures to include mathematical reasoning which Aristotle's valid logical reasoning patterns could not touch. Without writing none of these distinctions, in Olson's view, would likely have been possible. Certainly there is no evidence of such distinctions in any pre-literate culture of which we have any knowledge. Olson summarizes his book as follows: "The basic claim.... is that reading and writing provide both the structure and occasion for talking about language, that talking about language requires a meta-language and that a meta language is the key to the development of a particular form of rationality" (p. 15).

Olson begins his extended argument for these views by first looking at early childhood attempts at writing in his second chapter after a brief look at early attempts at writing by earlier cultures in which representing speech was not a central motivation. The crucial step for Olson is the point at which Greeks wishing to represent their spoken language, borrowed signs from a Semitic script, likely Phoenician, to represent what we now refer to as consonants and then, unlike the Semitic script which had no signs for vowel sounds, used other Semitic elements to stand for these. Thus the alphabet was born and shortly afterward the realization that there were distinct words in a language rather than merely continuous sound. On these points he is almost certainly right. But the Chinese also seems to clearly pick out the crucial notion of a word that Olson emphasizes as one of our insights as the first fruit of the development of the alphabet to represent speech. Though the word for the Chinese was embedded in a single sign or character. And while written Chinese is not today an alphabetic script, there are alphabetic elements built in to many of its historical characters.

Because Olson wants to locate the centrally important notion of there being a meta-language developed in alphabetic scripts in order to refer to the properties of language as such, since it is the meta-language that for him provides the essence of the particular form of rationality that he thinks written alphabetic scripts made possible, one might suppose that such forms of rationality are completely missing among the Chinese until they come in contact with Western literary practices. Yet this does not seem to be so. In his great many-volume work "Science and Civilization in China" Joseph Needham, a Cambridge chemist who had been astonished at the rapid competence of his Chinese students, convincingly shows that the Chinese developed many of the scientific advances that we in the West wish to take credit for in their own way and were no way behind us until the advent of Newton. And because of this the Chinese were quickly able to catch up to us as regards those gaps in their knowledge or scientific techniques that had been developed elsewhere. While their emphasis was on practical scientific and engineering knowledge and not theoretical knowledge this was no barrier to their easily learning our different emphases and approaches because of their vast practical grasp. Indeed the history of the study of Chinese literature and writing also has periods in which both grammar and logic were emphasized in much the same way that Olson wishes to describe them as dependent on the written word. Whether something like this is also true for earlier forms of literacy that precede alphabetic writing as in, say Egypt or South and Central America would require further thought and discussion.

One of the great strengths of this book is that throughout its chapters is sprinkled some of Olson's own many achievements as a researcher, psychologist and cognitive scientist. At the end of the second chapter following his brief history of the development of the alphabet he gives us some of his own original research into children's attempts to learn to read and write. It is clear that many puzzles and confusions face children trying to put down their spoken language in a written form or interpret the written alphabetic word. We all likely have anecdotes that illustrate Olson's conclusion here that there is nothing natural about the achievement of grasping the written alphabet as a means to convey spoken sounds and the things it requires us to think about such as the existence of separate words. In my own case I recall a visit to the McMichael Canadian Painting Gallery in Kleinberg outside of Toronto with my parents and our 2-year-old daughter Karen. As we stepped out of the car at the edge of the parking spaces our little girl was met with a sign while holding my father's hand. She stopped, looked at it and said correctly "No Dogs", at which my father nearly fainted. Then the two of them moved to the path to the gallery from the parking lot there was another similar sign. Karen stopped, looked at it and after brief hesitation imperiously said "No.... Cats" and moved on. It actually said "No Parking". Daring to guess and guessing plausibly at the meaning of the signs (i.e. their oral equivalent) recognized as written words are obviously important reading skills.

Olson argues that the process of developing an alphabetic script led to our grasp of the elements of speech not just aurally but also visually and so in due course provided us with meta-representational notions like "word", "sentence", "phoneme", "logic", "valid argument pattern" and the like. These in turn he concludes provided us with the main features of "thought" in reference to language itself and as reflected back on the world. His third section of the book is devoted to "Reading and the Invention of Language about Language" where Olson argues that "consciousness of the important properties of language are a product of the invention and mastery of concepts for referring to aspects of speech suited to a writing system and expressed in a metalanguage (p. 97)."

For Olson consciousness is of two main kinds, consciousness at the level of sentience, the kinds that all animals presumably have or sentience and consciousness mediated through language, especially language about language, or sapience. This meta representational consciousness comes about because such meta representational concepts "allow one to talk about thought, to turn thoughts into objects of discourse, to make them objects of consciousness." (p. 79) An interesting observation Olson makes is that the subtleties of meta representational concepts is enormous. There are connected notions like, for example, "asks for", "wants", "promises", "intends", "explains", "understands". And other equally connected meta representational notions like: "say, tell, insist, proclaim, declaim" or "thought, feel, infer, construe, grasp, understand...." As Olson rightly says, "One may be surprised to find on looking into a common thesaurus that the bulk of the worlds in the language are not about objects of nature but about language and communication." I have not made the experiment myself but I have no reason not to believe him. Certainly if true this would be strong evidence for Olson's view of the central importance of meta representation to our concept of mind.

Olson's discussion continues in this vein showing how our species over a long time constructed the metalanguage that enabled us to distinguish words, sentences (that is grammatical relations among words), relations among sentences (i.e. logic), prose that enables us to produce complicated pictures of the world including scientific ones, and to think about all of these meta representational entities, that is to reason both about the world and our linguistic representations of our language about the world and language itself. I won't develop Olson's further discussions here nor comment on them in any detail. What seems to me to be important in Olson's larger development in this book is that he offers an answer to those who, like Thomas Nagel in his "Mind and Cosmos", wonder how we might develop an account of the human mind that does not reduce to a mere physical account of everything in the sense of physics and chemistry but yet does not postulate a mental substance or stuff along the lines of Descartes. Nor does it imagine, as perhaps Turing had done, that the mind reduces to a program instantiated in a computer. Nagel himself inclines to a "neutral monist" position, namely, that there is a primary kind of stuff that is neither physical nor mental but that depending on its organization is to be described correctly as either physical or mental. William James and his circle of Early American pragmatists, by Bertrand Russell and by Nagel at the present time, held this view. At least one author, R. G. Collingwood, suggests that a human being is a unitary being in which the physical and the mental are united seamlessly but that how we know about each is quite different. For Collingwood what we know about the human being, as a body is entirely due to our third person scientific accounts in the form of physics, chemistry, physiology and the like. And what we know about the human being as mind is what we know from the first person scientific accounts of each of us reflecting on what we know to be true consciously. Collingwood and Olson agree that without language there is no thought and so no mind though there may be sentience and they appear to agree that thought comes in a hierarchical form.

Olson's account is different from any of these in that he appears to suggest that what we know about body is via our third person scientific accounts that are themselves the product of meta representational language and that presuppose the meta representational language in which we locate our understanding of our notions of words, sentences, logical arguments, prose and rational thought including our scientific thought generally. Interestingly, for Olson, since such language is normative in that it is all in the third person, it is available to all. There is therefore no such thing for Olson as a private meta representational language, as Wittgenstein argued for language in general in his "Philosophical Investigations". Though of course the meta representational normative language that enables us to talk about our thinking and reasoning also enables us also to talk about our first person experiences of a conscious kind including our present thoughts and feelings in such a way that we can convey them not only to ourselves but to others.

This is a wonderful book, of which I have only offered hints of its richness, with fresh insights on every page. It should be of interest to school and university educators, to literacy critics, to psychologists and to philosophers. Perhaps the best summary of its importance is Olson's own last paragraph: "The legacies of literacy are seen in the consciousness of language. It all begins with the meta representational concept of "word". Indeed, Vygotsky concluded his magistral "Thought and

Language" with: "A Word is a microcosm of human consciousness"(1986, p. 256). A suitable footnote would add that the meta representational concept of "word" is a microcosm of literary consciousness. Learning to read is an introduction of this new form of consciousness. But it is just the first step in the long road to the distinctive form of reasoning about reason, the rationality of the modern literate mind."

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