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Brains don't think and organisms don't create cultures or develop spontaneous languages

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A review of
Human Nature: The Categorial Framework
By P. M. S. Hacker

Malden, MA, USA and Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishing
326 pp. ISBN: 978-1-4051-4728-6. $94.95.

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What or who does think and behave? Persons, typically in communities where they acquire language(s) and create cultures. To see why this apparently simple answer is a deeply important insight is to appreciate this brilliant book by one of England's foremost philosophical psychologists. Hacker, now Emeritus Research Professor at St. Johns College, Oxford, is arguably the world's authority on Wittgenstein's (1953) *Philosophical Investigations.* With G. P. Baker, he has published a four volume set, *An Analytical Commentary on the Philosophical Investigations* (Hacker and Baker, 1980-1996). He has also read widely in neuroscience and has published *Philosophical Foundations of Neuroscience* (Bennett and Hacker, 2003) and debated his views in a spirited exchange with two leading American philosophers, Daniel Dennett and John Searle, (see Bennett, Dennett, Hacker, and Searle, 2007).

What is he trying to do and what has he succeeded in doing so well? His aim is to clarify the broad range of concepts required for the study of human beings, which he calls philosophical anthropology. To address these questions, let me take advantage of my hopefully provocative title to this review. Educated laymen, sophisticated science writers and professional scientists can write as follows (Helen Fisher, 2005):

> And love is a drive. Deep in the human brain lie three circuits that evolved to foster reproduction: the sex drive, romantic love, and attachment to a partner. Each is associated with different brain chemicals and each interacts with the others. This, for example, is why casual sex is often not casual. Any sort of sexual stimulation activates dopamine systems in the brain and can trigger feelings of romantic love. And with orgasm comes a flood of oxytocin and vasopressin, chemicals the can create deep feelings of attachment to a partner.

The problem with such statements is that they suggest that these emotions are produced by brain processes, when what the data show is that, on some occasions, when these emotions are reported by the participants, there are correlated patterns of neurohormonal activity. No one doubts that an intact organism is necessary for the production of emotional states or behaviors, but that includes all of the organism's major biologic systems (heart and blood flow to the brain, kidneys and waste removal from the blood, etc.,) as well, and even more important, a real or virtual world in which relevant states of affairs have implications for the well-fare of the person. What produces emotional behaviors is the appraisal of danger, provocation, harm, or good fortune, etc., and no neurological account can substitute for these psychological appraisals in the production of emotions (Hacker, 2004; Ossorio, 2006). Emotions are intrinsically about states of affairs that have implications for the well-fare of persons. Research of the sort reviewed by Fisher and her colleagues have the potential to identify specific ways in which brain damage or abnormalities can produce deficits in normal emotional functioning, but they should not be given the status of "the real story" about love or any other emotion.

Hacker is writing to encourage us all to step back from this reflexive endorsement of an (sometimes) unrecognized philosophical position that is both unnecessary and deeply flawed. Sophisticated and useful research on the empirical connections between brain structures, biochemical and electrical conditions and states neither requires that one confuse the domains of brain processes and psychological/behavioral processes nor that one asserts unproven identity of these two separate domains.

What is his positive alternative to the current conceptual mess that passes for theorizing about brain and behavior? He proposes, following Wittgenstein and others (Kenny, 1976, & Strawson, 1959), to clarify concepts such as substance, mind, body, self,

action, cause, and person and to show the different forms of explanations appropriate to the distinct domains that emerge when careful conceptual clarification has been achieved. His goal is not merely clarification of issues in empirical psychology but for the very terms in which we conceive of ourselves as human beings. He goes about this task with remarkable clarity. In the course of his work, he generally treats the important historical predecessors of contemporary views. What he finds is that all-too-often modern views are rooted in flawed analyses and theories proposed by Descartes, Hume, and their followers. With a neat figure on page 27, he outlines the divisions in philosophical thought to show the general dominance of some version of Cartesian monistic positions (in which theorists assert the dominance either of body/machine or mind/spirit). As Hacker (2007) notes:

> What is most important about current neo-Cartesian views, espoused by many cognitive neuroscientists and self-styled cognitive scientists . . .all of whom conceive of themselves as adamantly anti-Cartesian, is the extent to which the Cartesian conception of the relationship between the inner and behaviour remained intact despite abandonment of the Cartesian conception of the mind. For what was characteristically done was to ascribe cognitive and perceptual attributes to the brain in the course of trying to explain the . . . cognitive and perceptual activities of human beings. (pp. 27-28).

The alternative position, rooted in the conceptual scheme that underlies everyday behavior and in Aristotle and Wittgenstein's analytical work is the rejection of Descartes' conception and its replacement with a notion of living animals as the fundamental objects in the behavioral world. He is at pains to show the ways in human beings and other living animals are similar and different and to emphasize the role of language in these differences. It is human beings who are capable of the cognitive, perceptual, and motivational powers essential to the concept of human agency. Hacker devotes somewhat less space (pp. 285-316) to the explications of the concept of a person than I would have liked. His essential contribution may be summed up in this quotation:

> The nature of a person is rooted in animality, but transformed by possession of intellect and will. So the concept of a person qualifies a substance concept of

> animal of such-and-such a kind, earmarking the individual of the relevant kind as possessing...a distinctive range of powers, a personality, and the status of a moral being." (p 313).

Hacker's route to the development of key concepts relevant to the categorial framework for human nature involves a lot of underbrush clearing that has developed over the history of philosophy. Psychologists will often not be quite so interested in some of the details of this work, but the big picture is important to seeing why brains don't think and organisms don't create human cultures. He begins with work on the two concepts of substance (things and stuff) because human beings are living substances. Following Strawson (1959), one might say that persons are the kind of objects or individuals to which both physical and mental predicates are applicable. Hacker finds this formulation not sufficiently multifaceted (see pp 310-314 for more detail).

Brains think only in a metaphorical sense. Rather brains belong to the domain of organismic parts, and the analysis of brain processes and structures has no direct place for purely psychological notions such as wanting, seeing, making judgments, etc. Not that Hacker is asserting that wanting, etc., would be possible without the organism having an intact, appropriately functioning brain and the rest of the mammalian embodiment that humans do. At this point much more is needed to provide a positive account of just how the constraints between our brain states and processes limit and facilitate psychological functioning. A neuropsychological friend (N. Kirsch, January 9, 2008) has suggested that a likely fruitful path of investigation lies in thinking about intrinsic social practices such as language, deliberate action, and emotional expression and examining the capacities that a person must have to engage in these. With such capacities identified, one could ask just what neural structures and processes seem essential to permit or support these capacities and thus to support such human accomplishments. "Permit" and "support" do not involve the attribution of causal powers but they are not mere correlations either. Engaging in such work does not commit one to an unprovable identity of brain states and psychological states.

The most interesting parts of his analytic work concern the concepts of causation, human powers, agency, and related forms of explanation. Accustomed as psychologists are to treating the Hume-Mill analysis of causation as the final word, it may come as a surprise to see that one of the root notions of cause is that of a person, as an agent--

making something happen in the world. He makes a useful set of distinctions among the various prototypes of causal description/explanations into agent causation with several subtypes and event causation, which is also multifaceted. In the discussion of powers, he quickly identifies several misconceptions and succeeds in laying out a positive vision. A crucial point made is that the exercise of powers presupposes opportunities to do so and these include the multitude of states of affairs that mature persons can distinguish in their real worlds.

His discussion of agency includes a valuable articulation of the various types of human needs and their distinction from wants or reasons for action. The concept of need is conceptually connected to pathology. "Failure to satisfy the absolute needs of a sentient creature is detrimental to its welfare" (p. 133). Not all needs automatically generate wants (e.g., as is the case with oxygen deprivation through CO poisoning) nor are all wants rooted in needs. The confusion of these two fundamental concepts within social-personality psychology is a long-standing problem that generates much pop psychology foolishness.

His discussion of the distinction between the explanation of human actions by mental causes versus by reasons and purposes is particularly clear and effective. Malle (2004) and Ossorio (2006) are among the few within psychology who show a firm and consistent grasp of the importance of this distinction. As Hacker notes:

> Although human behavior is characteristically explained by reference to its purpose. . ., the prejudice against any form of explanation by other than causal has inclined modern thinkers to suppose that, although explanations by reference to purpose *looks* teleological, it is not. It is actually an explanation of actions in terms of human agent's *having* purpose—which causes the appropriate behavior. [On this account, desires and beliefs] become *causally efficacious mental states*. Those mental states [are taken] to be identical to brain states. . . But this is neither scientific nor even true. The contingent identity thesis is a blank cheque on a non-existent bank. (p. 197).

His discussion of the variety of human reasons and of why they require a normative context is rich and detailed. The crucial point is that reasons enable us to understand why a person does what s/he does in an idiographic rather than

nomothetical manner and that is essential to the pragmatic business of conducting everyday life.

Hacker intends to continue his work in two additional volumes on the cognitive and cogitative powers and also on the affective and moral powers. A small down payment on his reasoning about emotional concepts and their kin has been published in 2004. As I struggle to give a full picture of his contribution, I am reminded of one, perhaps the only, volume by a psychologist that strives to cover much of the same terrain. Peter Ossorio (2006) in his final volume, *The Behavior of Persons*, saw many of the same limitations in contemporary psychological and neuroscience theory and conceptual work. He found that he had to start fresh, by going back to our ordinary folk psychology but with tools from mathematics and from philosophical conceptual analysis. What makes his conceptual work perhaps even more interesting to *psychologists* than Hacker's is that he integrates four major concepts—persons, behavior, language, and the real world--into one systematically articulated and connected conceptual system. The audacity of this move, which he worked on for over 30 years, is breath-taking and the results have provided fresh impetus for both advances in psychotherapy, assessment of pathologies, as well as advances in the understanding of man-machine relationships, the indexing of complex knowledge, and the change of large organizations (see the Wikipedia entry on Descriptive Psychology for a brief overview). So if psychologists are prone to dismiss work like Hacker's as merely quibbles about words, they should be well advised to examine the implications of taking words seriously and being held responsible for meaning what we say. Who knows, someday we psychologists may recognize in the work of scholars such as Hacker and Ossorio that we already have a unified conceptual system that integrates the multitude of facts that we now send forth in our publications. Their two volumes deserve the attention of every psychologist who cares about the conceptual clarity and fundamental soundness of the discipline.

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