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Inborn Ideas

Review of ‘The blind storyteller’
by Iris Berent

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All science is either physics or stamp collecting.

– Attributed to Ernest Rutherford, who was a physicist

Iris Berent, a professor of psychology at Northeastern University, asks why it is human nature to be blind to human nature. In *The blind storyteller*, she takes a familiar psychological approach. She seeks to reveal the secrets of mind by exposing its errors. Our mental mistakes, according to this view, reveal the hidden truths about our deeper nature. Berent asks big questions: What sorts of knowledge do we bring to the world, and how does this knowledge get into the way of accurately knowing ourselves? Ultimately, we end up wondering whether we can be a species that perceives reality, and our place in it, without illusions, and, if we cannot, why is that?

Berent presents a remarkable work of scholarly merit. She builds an interesting and coherent case – a story, if you will – for a particular view of human nature and its contradictions. As her story progresses, she shares a wealth of interesting results and insights into human cognition and its development during infancy and childhood. Essentially, Berent claims that nature has endowed humans with two big but false ideas. The first idea is ‘dualism,’ and the second is ‘essentialism.’ Dualism refers to the epistemic conviction that there is mind and that there is matter, that the two inhabit different domains and suffer different fates, but that they can influence each other. Essentialism refers to the belief that a person, like other natural kinds, possesses – or rather ‘is’ – his or her own immutable and material core, which children locate at the body’s physical center. The weird thing about this essence is that it cannot be described, measured, or surgically removed, except in thought experiments. Despite its presumed physicality, the human essence is a metaphysical concept, and this makes any belief in it, in Berent’s view, irrational. The concept of dualism is also

metaphysical, and necessarily so because it postulates the ‘existence’ of the non-physical. Physicalism limits itself to matter (and energy) and claims that ‘mind’ is just a way of talking about what matter does. The metaphysical lies, as the word asserts, beyond the physical. Some (like Plato, Descartes, or your neighborhood theologian) believe that the metaphysical is co-equal with or superior to the physical; whereas others wish to see it eliminated because it cannot even be talked about in any sensible way (Ayer, 1936; Wittgenstein, 1921).

Berent sides with the physicalists. She asserts that both dualism and essentialism are false. As to dualism, most scientists agree that there is no mental life without brain matter (see Reber, 2018, for an extreme argument regarding minimal biological requirements). The brain makes the mind. A coarse version of dualism might view the mind as an immaterial sort of ‘substance’ that can be self-conscious and able to do things (Robinson, 2017). Berent sees evidence for such a view in folk psychology and she argues that it comes to us naturally. In science, a softer kind of dualism can be found. This soft dualism shows itself whenever we talk about the brain and mental life. Many scientists accept talk at different ‘levels of analysis’ where each has its own rightful terminology and conceptual repertoire. Neuroscientists talk like crypto-dualists when they refer to ‘mental’ events associated with – and explaining – observed patterns of neural activation. When heightened activation is observed in the anterior cingulate cortex, for example, neuroscientists may infer that a mental conflict is taking place. Without this mentalistic language, there would be no story (Krueger, 2007). The pattern of activation would be a no more than a pretty picture. We just need some sort of dualism to make sense of the physical world and the phenomena it produces. Yet, neuroscientists, and other ‘hard’ scientists, would not want a total victory for radical

reductionism. Were such a victory achieved, most of us would indeed be mere stamp collectors.

As to essentialism, most scientists see it as a remnant of primitive thinking. Children might take to it naturally but should be educated out of it. The main failing of this doctrine is that no essences have been found. In the biological world, seeds and stem cells might be candidates for being essences, but they fail the test of immutability because, well, they grow and mutate. And they do not reside at the creature's center, as little children imagine them to. Again, this is a coarse version of a difficult doctrine and one that is easy to dismiss. In philosophical debate, essentialism still has its defenders. Making distinctions between essential and accidental properties (Robertson & Atkins, 2018), these defenders use a more elastic approach than the all-or-nothing treatment Berent presents.

Berent's is not just concerned with the falsity of the ideas of dualism and essentialism, but with what they tell us about human nature, which has shaped us to surrender to their charms. She grants that our acceptance of dualism and essentialism has adaptive value, but does not do much to reveal its specific benefits. Her real target is insufficient nativism. Humans and their children are open to nativist ideas, but selectively so. We readily accept, for example, the biological sources of certain emotions. Our jaws clench with anger, and our hands tremble with fear. We recognize our own affective states, in part, by observing our behavior and by feeling our arousal (James, 1894). And so we observe others. Berent's beef does not lie with the folk having the wrong psychology here, but with some constructivist psychologists who question the shared biological bases of some of our affects.

The de- and reconstruction of affect as a nativist affair is a tangent needed to bring the real target into focus. The real target is the nature of 'ideas' and 'knowledge,' to which the

dualist mind denies the property of innateness. Berent renders the drama as a syllogism, which goes like this: The dualist premise is “Ideas are immaterial,” the essentialist premise is “Innate traits must be material,” and together they entail the conclusion that “Ideas cannot be innate” (p. 107). The premises of dualism and essentialism, which Berent considers to be false, force the logically correct, but factually false, conclusion of antinativism. Berent documents this factual falsity with a wealth of findings. Infants bring many prepared conceptions to the kiddie table. They are prepared to learn about phonology, numbers, agency, and grammar, among other things. This preparedness is critical for the acquisition of what we recognize as knowledge, though it is not clear whether being natively prepared to acquire certain types of knowledge is itself a kind of knowledge.

It is interesting that Berent presents the crucial (and factually false) conclusion as a valid inference. She does not claim that infants explicitly deduce this false inference from false premises, nor does she have to. It is enough to show that at least one of the premises is false to see that the inference is factually false – even if logically valid. One may then leave it as an as-if argument. Children’s thinking is coherent, as it would be if they reasoned explicitly and logically. One is tempted to conclude that the ability to reason by *modus tollens* is innate.

Again, Berent rejects both premises. Dualism is false, she asserts, because there is nothing that is immaterial. Therefore, ideas cannot be immaterial. Essentialism is false because no essences have been excised from living or dead creatures, measured and weighed. One might say that essentialism is such a bad idea that it is not even false. If the only reality is physical, there is no point claiming that certain selected things, such as innate ideas, are material. Berent boldly defends her claim that essences must be material, and as she does she

launches a spirited attack on theories of embodied cognition. The embodiment paradigm is staked on the claim that there is a readily perceptible materiality of all mental life. Berent counters that computations and abstractions lie at the core of reasoning and feeling, and that these processes are also material even though they do not meet the criteria of embodiment. She methodically works through these arguments and the evidence, enlightening the reader with many compelling descriptions of research on infant cognition, social learning, and language acquisition.

Consider one example of each. Infants readily comprehend what an object is. This understanding is inferred from their being surprised when an occlusion is removed only to reveal empty space instead of the part of the object that had been occluded (Valenza, Leo, Gava, & Simion, 2006). Infants also know that their social worlds are populated by agents who act in non-mechanistic ways. They are surprised and look longer when a billiard ball starts moving without being launched by another ball, but appear to understand that a person can initiate movement without contact (Spelke, Phillips, & Woodward, 1995). Finally, infants are – as is well known – ready to learn grammar (Chomsky, 1968), and they have phonological preferences regardless of the language spoken around them (Berent, Lennertz, Jun, Moreno, & Smolensky, 2008). So there is a good case for the idea that some human capacities are native rather than learned. Why is it then that the idea of innate knowledge strikes many folks as so strange?

The damage done by dualism – if we agree that dualism is false – is easy to see, and the argument that a dualist epistemology is itself a nativist piece of core knowledge is compelling. But why is essentialism a problem? And why is the – to use a popular term – intersectionality of dualism and essentialism the chief cause of our blindness to our own

nature? Berent insists that the naïve belief in essences comprises the idea of their materiality. She defines essentialism as “the intuitive belief that every living thing possesses an immutable material essence” (p. 103), which grounds the premise to her syllogism that “Ideas are immaterial.” This premise, which Berent declares to be “utterly irrational” (p. 113) entails, again by *modus tollens*, the conclusion that ideas cannot be essences.

This argument begins to strain when Berent turns a discussion of beliefs about the afterlife. If the afterlife is to have any meaning in the sense that it is ‘you’ who gets to enjoy (or endure) it, then it would have to be your essence that travels to the other side. Which part of your material self will make the trip? Perhaps none. Berent does not refute the idea that it is the immaterial soul or disembodied consciousness that people fancy in the afterlife. But now we have a clash between dualism and essentialism. Metaphysical afterlife beliefs are necessarily dualistic, but they cannot be essentialist if essences must be material. If, however, an immaterial soul is a person’s essence, a dualistic afterlife phantasy may be had. This wish fulfillment requires, however, that the definitional materiality of essences is given up. Berent knows that the “immaterial notion of agency [and other psychological traits] presents a problem for Essentialism” in light of the concurrent claim that “living agents possess a material essence” (p. 237). Seemingly giving up the fight, she concludes that “our concept of the afterlife is doomed to permanent oscillation between these two poles” (p. 237). It is hard to see why this doom should be so devastating. The doom would lift if essences were allowed to be immaterial, as, I suspect, many folk – and Plato – believe they are.

People wish to be able to recognize themselves in the afterlife. Their pre-mortem identities are therefore critical. Berent reports that most people wish to see their true selves as “good, immaterial, and singular” (p 241). They also cherish the notion of having

metaphysically free will, a claim that Berent demolishes with the findings of pertinent recent research. The belief that “when it comes to my moral self, it’s my immaterial mind that is the real “me,” (p. 261) is exposed as a grand illusion. Following Hume and James, many have looked for the singular, unique, and essential self, but all in vain (Krueger, Heck, & Athenstaedt, 2017). Parfit (1986), whom Berent cites, retreated to the view of thinking of the self as a bundle of ideas rather than an ego with an identity. Most neuroscientists, one suspects, would agree.

During the final pages of the book, Berent intelligently, but with some visible tension, struggles with the task to square the circle. Having shown that humans readily endorse dualistic and essentialist beliefs, and having studied the consequences and contractions of these beliefs, she resigns herself to the conclusion that “the push and pull between these two forces appear to shape every aspect of our mental lives” (p. 267). Perhaps she is being too pessimistic. If beliefs in essences may include essential ideas or immaterial “forms,” the blind storyteller can wrap up her tale with some cohesion even if the story is pure phantasy.

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