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Beyond Dual- and Essential-ism
Reply to Berent

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657 words of text
(excluding references)

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Contrary to Iris Berent's claim, I did not question the idea that dualism and essentialism are false. I made it clear that I share the received view that there is no mind without a physical grounding and that there are no immutable material essences within living things. I did suggest, however, that our usage of different levels of analysis and language when referring to mental versus physical events is necessary and practical. This is what I called 'soft dualism.' Without such differentiation, conversations about mind would be impossible given our current limited understanding about how brains make minds (Cummins, 2000). Essentialism, though most likely false because "no essences have been found" (Krueger, this issue), has pragmatic value because it allows us to think inductively. We know that if some features of a creature have been changed, we can still make valid predictions about other features. A man in a gorilla suit is still a man and will beget human and not simian children if he gets the chance. The problem of essentialism is not its falsity but its misuse, as when people treat social categories as if they were natural kinds, thereby underestimating their malleability and overestimating their homogeneity (Rothbart & Taylor, 1992).

Berent claims that "the collision" of these two false ideas "wreaks havoc" because it entails the false conclusion that there can be no innate ideas – when research shows that there are. This claim raises two empirical questions. First, is it the case that the rejection of nativism "wreaks havoc on our mental lives" (Berent, this issue)? Second, is it the case that humans and their children are vigorously anti-nativist when it comes to cognitive traits? To answer the first question, we need definitions and measures of 'havoc.' To get them is not a trivial task. Noting, for example, that generations of psychologists were non-nativists, we might find that the current crop of nativists asserts that these forebears wrought havoc on

psychological science. How true such an assertion is would be hard to tell as it is in no small part a matter of moralizing hindsight. Strong evidence for the havoc hypothesis would show that rejecting psychological nativism is bad – in meaningful and measurable terms – for those doing the rejecting. I am not aware of such evidence. If there is havoc, I think it is wrought by beliefs about other people, or groups of people, that are both essentialist and false.

To answer the second question, we can look to data on the table. Berent kindly shared a manuscript (Berent, Platt, & Sandoboe, 2020) in which the first two studies are particularly relevant. In both studies, respondents considered a thought experiment in which a person is physically replicated to perfection. They then rated the likelihood on a 7-point scale that various cognitive and noncognitive traits (preferences or capacities) would transfer to the replica. With perfect nativism, all ratings should be a 7. But this is too much to ask. How low would ratings have to be in order to signal a rejection of nativism? Arguably, they should be below the midpoint of the scale of 4.5. The empirical means were near, if slightly *above*, this midpoint for cognitive traits, whereas the means for non-cognitive traits were significantly higher. The evidence thus indicates that people see cognitive traits as relatively less transferable to human replicas than noncognitive traits. This result is too weak to support a categorical conclusion that people reject nativism with regard to cognitive traits. It would be like saying that Michael Jordan is a short man at 6' 6'' because Shaquille O'Neal stands at 7' 1''.

While I consider these clarifications important, I reiterate my view that “The Blind Storyteller” (Berent, 2020) is a significant achievement. Delving into “some of the burning debates in psychological science and laypeople’s intuitions” (Berent, this issue), it is sure to

stimulate theory and research as well as the ways ordinary people look at themselves and their children.

References

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