Reflections on the “Darwin-Descartes” Problem

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INTRODUCTION

My aim here is to discuss some facets of what I am calling the “Darwin-Descartes” problem in the history of the human sciences and in the philosophy of these sciences. Very schematically expressed, this is the problem of reconciling Darwinian evolutionary biology as it pertains to the human species (especially as this is adumbrated in his The Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex (first published in 1871)) with the intellectual (indeed, cultural) inheritance of Cartesian dualism, the doctrine named after its most famous initiator and advocate, Rene Descartes (especially as articulated in his Treatise of Man, 1629). According to this doctrine, human beings comprise corporeal bodies—biological, physico-chemical, material, tangible, bodies (his “res extensae”)—and metaphysical minds (his “res cogitans”), “metaphysical” because intangible, non-corporeal, immaterial entities unavailable for empirical examination by any observational, natural science. In addition to this fundamental doctrine of mind-body dualism, Descartes also postulated a conception of animals as wholly distinct from humans insofar as, lacking the specifically human “res cogitans”—the “thinking thing”—they could only be conceived of as “thoughtless brutes”. The division between animals and man was absolute, something which, of course, contradicted both the spirit and the letter of Darwin’s magnificent scientific accomplishment. How, then, could Cartesian dualism be “handled” in light of Darwin’s evolutionary scheme? Humans are now assimilated into the animal category of “primates”, albeit evolved forms of such creatures: how could this be reconciled, if at all, with the Cartesian insistence upon a radical discontinuity between animal and mankind? Between “thoughtless brutes” and beings endowed with “minds”? Does Darwinian evolutionary biology truly only explain the evolution of the human body and its modern anatomical and physiological forms and functions? If so, then is it “incomplete”, lacking, as it appears to do, as fully developed an account of (the evolution of) the human mind? In other words, did Darwin’s historic achievement fall short of an account of the human being, a being comprised of both body and mind? Or was this qualm simply a product of our failure fully to liberate ourselves from the metaphysical
commitments of the Cartesian conception? But, if so, how exactly, if at all, are such commitments to be transcended? In broad terms, then, these are the interrelated collection of issues comprising what I am here calling: “The Darwin-Descartes Problem”.

Before proceeding with my treatment of several of these topics, I need to address one issue, which is the absence of any sustained discussion of the account given of Darwin and the emergence of evolutionary theories of mind and behavior in the book of the same name by Robert J. Richards, which is, of course, a major contribution to the field. My intention here has been far more modest than to try to cover even a fraction of the terrain which Professor Richards (1987) has so eloquently and expertly surveyed. I wish to focus solely upon one dimension of the legacy of Darwin for philosophy and the human sciences, and that is the problem he wrought, I believe unwittingly, upon all prior efforts to theorize the nature of the human mind. I cannot here defend the trajectory of my own concerns vis-à-vis those of Professor Richards, but I am indebted to a study of his major work on themes which I will be dealing with in this brief treatment, even though our treatments are very different in focus and emphasis.

DARWIN AND HUXLEY ON MENTALITY

Darwin’s effort to embrace the human mind within his evolutionary scheme was not a systematic one. There are several passages in *The Descent of Man* in which he does address the issue, but his conclusion (as in this exemplary sequence of comments) is far from satisfactory—indeed, one could say that such remarks pose, but then retreat, from the core of the problem:

“There can be no doubt that the difference between the mind of the lowest man and that of the highest animal is immense. An anthropomorphous ape, if he could take a dispassionate view of his own case, would admit that though he could form an artful plan to plunder a garden—though he could use stones for fighting or for breaking open nuts, yet that the thought of fashioning a stone into a tool was quite beyond his scope. Still less, as he would admit, could he follow out a train of metaphysical reasoning, or solve a mathematical problem, or reflect on God, or admire a grand natural scene. They would admit, that though they could make other apes understand by cries some of their perceptions and simpler wants, the notion of expressing definite ideas by definite sounds had never crossed their minds. Nevertheless the difference in mind between man & the higher animals, great as it is, certainly is one of degree and not of kind. We have seen that the sense and intuitions, the various emotions and faculties, such as love, memory, attention, curiosity, imitation, reason, &c., of which man boasts, may be found in an incipient, or even sometimes in a well-developed condition, in the lower animals. If it could be proved that certain higher mental powers, such as the formation of general concepts, self-consciousness, &c., were absolutely peculiar to man, which seems extremely doubtful, it is not improbable that these qualities are... again mainly the result of the continued use of a perfect language. At what age does the new-born infant possess the power of abstraction, or become self-conscious, and reflect on its own existence? *We cannot answer; nor can we answer in regard to the ascending organic scale*. (Darwin, 2004, pp. 150–151, emphasis added)
We know, of course, that Darwin made several subsequent stabs at answering the kinds of questions he posed to himself above, but in every case without exception his approach begged a fundamental question: given his (frequent) invocation of the concept of “mind”, to what extent did that commit him to a Dualist position? And, if it did, in what sense could such a position be made consistent with his firmly materialist, biological reasoning about the nature of human beings? Unfortunately, Darwin did not discuss Cartesianism, especially Cartesian Dualism, but his great advocate, T. H. Huxley, most certainly did. In a lengthy paper entitled: “On the Hypothesis that Animals are Automata, and its History”, Huxley elaborated a range of positions in confrontation with Cartesian Dualism, all of which were profoundly informed by his deep commitment to his colleague’s theory of human evolution. He was not, of course, the first to combat Descartes from a “materialist”, anti-metaphysical point of view (perhaps the first was Julien Offray de la Mettrie, in his book, *L’Homme Machine* (1748), some of whose early anti-Cartesian arguments are strikingly similar to some of Huxley’s in his 1902 paper, notably their shared insistence that aspects of mentality are profoundly affected by physical changes and dispositions which the radical mind-body split could not adequately accommodate, if at all).

In his article, Huxley elaborates upon a fundamentally reductionist view of human consciousness, that property of human beings most indicative of, indeed constitutive of, the human mind for Descartes. Huxley cites many contemporary physiologists in a systematic attempt to persuade his readers that the phenomena of consciousness are to be explained—and explained without residue—by reference to the evolved, immensely complex, organization of the brain and central nervous system. But how “without residue”? Huxley’s reductionism was not exactly a mind-to-brain identity thesis, since in several passages he invokes arguments we could best characterize as “emergentist”. That is, human consciousness is not simply to be construed as wholly analyzable into brain events, states and/or processes (of sorts as yet, granted, very poorly understood), but rather as arising from such neural phenomena. (Quite how such a position truly emancipated its proponent from Dualism remained unclear). He also refused to grant in this essay any basic distinction between actions which could be thought of as “acts of free will” from causality, from causal accounts of their origins within the nervous system, postulating a form of argument which we could today perhaps recognize as a type of “compatibilism”. Neither emergentism nor compatibilism were, or are, consistent with a strict interpretation of Descartes’ thought about the “res cogitans” and its relationship to the “res extensa”, it is true, but could they be elaborated into a fully coherent refutation of Cartesian Dualism? Could the beast be slaughtered, entrails and all, hence terminating the apparent contradiction between the Darwinian evolutionary biological theory of the human species and its putatively “mental” endowments as portrayed by Descartes? This was the problem which animated so much subsequent intellectual labor in both the
behavioral sciences (especially early modern psychology) and the philosophy of mind in the twentieth century.

MORRIS AND MEAD ON “NATURALIZING” HUMAN MENTALITY

In his Introduction to the posthumously published lectures by George Herbert Mead, *Mind, Self and Society* (1934), Charles W. Morris made Mead’s project abundantly clear: it is nothing less than a sustained effort to develop a conception of “the human mind” which would rid it once and for all of any “metaphysical” properties or dimensions, and this in the explicit service of expanding the Darwinian conception of mankind. What differentiates Mead’s treatment, argued Morris, is that it avoided the dogmatic ontological anti-mentalism of a J. B. Watson, the founder of Behaviorism in Psychology, in favor of the development of a sequence of arguments which refrained from simply denying “mental phenomena” such as mind and consciousness (phenomena which Watson had compared to “witches” and “phlogiston” in his more polemical moments) and instead attempted to “pacify” or to “naturalize” them, making them fully compatible with the Darwinian perspective in all of its facets.

Morris wrote:

“By the end of the last century no item of knowledge seemed more secure than the doctrine of biological evolution. This doctrine had dramatically called attention to the factor of developmental change in the world, as physics and mathematics had previously exhibited the element of structural constancy. The implication seemed to be that not only the human organism but the entire life of mind had to be interpreted within the evolutionary development, sharing in its quality of change, and arising in the interaction of organism and environment. Mind had to appear within, and presumably to stay within, conduct.” (Morris, 1967, p. ix)

He continues by noting that it is a primary task “which post-Darwinian currents of thought have made prominent” to “reinterpret the concepts of mind and intelligence”, and that “the outlines of an empirical naturalism erected on biological, psychological, and sociological data and attitudes are clearly discerned, a naturalism which sees thinking man in nature, and which aims to avoid the inherited dualisms of mind and matter, experience and nature . . . teleology and mechanism” (Morris, 1967, p. x). In relation to Mead specifically, Morris wrote: “Watsonism gave the impression of ruling out of court the very contents that a mature psychology must explain. Mead was keenly conscious of this situation, but clearly believed that his own version of behaviorism was adequate to the task . . . Mind was not to be reduced to non-mental behavior, but to be seen as a type of behavior genetically emerging out of non-mental types. Behaviorism accordingly meant for Mead not the denial of the private nor the neglect of consciousness, but the approach to all experience in terms of conduct” (Morris, 1967, p. xvii). Mead himself asserted: “The particular field of social science with
which we are concerned is one which was opened up through the work of Darwin and the more elaborate presentation of Wundt” (Mead, 1967, p. 42). So, here was the check—now, how to cash it?

MEAD, BRENTANO, AND THE REJECTION OF THE CARTESIAN CONCEPTION OF “CONSCIOUSNESS”

Mead’s famous tripartite analysis of human consciousness, distinguishing sensory awareness from reflective awareness and “consciousness of self”, was a major stride in the move to overcome its Cartesian, metaphysical, treatment. Although the basic notion of “sensory awareness”, of the sort shared between humans and other species of animal life, is not fully elaborated, Mead’s major focus was upon what he saw as the specifically human modalities of consciousness, viz., the latter two kinds. His evolutionary account of these emphasizes the constitutive role of symbol systems, primarily linguistic ones. In a stark reversal of the classical Cartesian idea, in which consciousness and thought, as mental phenomena, make language possible, Mead argued that the reverse is true (at least in relation to the second and third modalities of awareness and in relation to most types of human thought and thinking).3

Although we have no evidence that Mead had read Franz Brentano’s (1874) *Psychology from an Empirical Standpoint*, it is striking how Brentano’s Intentionality Thesis supports and sustains Mead’s analysis of “consciousness” and of “thought/thinking”. Brentano noted that many, if not all, “mental concepts” (including the ones studied by Mead) have the property of Intentionality, by which he meant that they were not “free-standing”, but essentially relational. That is, to be “conscious” (except as later logicians have noted for the specifically “intransitive” cases) is to be “conscious of” something, whether that “object” is actually mentioned or not. Similarly, a “thought” is necessarily of or about something, that something is the case, in some form (iconic or symbolic): one can have thought something up, thought something over or thought something through, but one never merely, in a free-standing sense, “has a thought” or “thinks”, in the absence of some mentionable (if not specifically mentioned) grammatical complementizer and object-complement. For the most part, then, to think or to have a thought is not separable from some means of expression, and to be aware or conscious is in most instances constituted by what one is aware or conscious of, and one cannot be aware of or conscious of something in the absence of a concept (or symbolic expression) which expresses the object of one’s awareness or consciousness. By contrast, in non-Intentional cases of nouns, such as (e.g.,) “cup”, although one can indeed have a cup of something (coffee, tea, water, etc.), one can empty the contents and be left with cup *simpliciter*, so to speak. But nouns like “consciousness” and “thought” do not work like this—no expressible content, no consciousness nor thought.4
Contemporary writers, including Stephen Toulmin and William Noble, have elaborated upon these ideas. Toulmin, for example, distinguishes between sensibility, attentiveness and articulateness in his essay, “The Genealogy of ‘Consciousness’”. He observes: “A mother’s eye of faith may very early perceive in her infant a ‘consciousness’ of her identity, presence, and facial expression, but the reliability of her perception is open to discussion, even though nobody was in any doubt whether the child was asleep or awake, i.e., ‘conscious’ in the first sense” (Toulmin, 1982, p. 59). The characterization of “what the infant was conscious of” is not straightforward here, as it would not be in a case such as if one were to say of one’s pre-linguistic infant that it is “watching the President on television” to someone unaware of the infant’s pre-linguistic stage of life. Having no concept of “the President”, the object of the infant’s visual orientation is misleadingly specified at best. As Noble (1987) comments, Toulmin’s argument supports the notion that there is a “tacit linguistic character of conscious attention” (p. 137) and that although “the capacity to see the different facets of the world is an (evolutionary and developmental) ‘achievement’ of a visual system... The awareness of all this perceptual experience is the further (social-interactive) ‘achievement’ of organisms with the capacity to make accounts to each other and to themselves of the features of the world...” (p. 133). In the sensory neurophysiology of vision, the account begins with photons and ends with neurons, but the analysis of the fully human capacity to be aware of what there is around him or her must be extended to encompass a constitutive role for conceptualization. Since the capacity to conceptualize is contingent (for most of us) on acquiring a natural language, and that capacity is contingent upon the evolution of our vocal cords and their associated neural mechanisms, then “consciousness”, even in its most sophisticated form, can still be understood in broadly evolutionary terms. Mead was among the first to make this crucial case, even though some of the details remained to be worked out more systematically, and in relation to so many other “mental predicates”.

MATERIALIST VERSIONS OF MIND AND MENTALITY AND THEIR DISCONTENTS

In a very different intellectual tradition, one much more directly beholden to the Vienna Circle’s program for “unified science”, itself given a major boost by the success of Darwin’s evolutionary biology of mankind, we encounter a succession of reductionist-materialist accounts of the mind and the mental in the philosophy of mind and philosophy of science. Carnap and Fiegl, for example, both promulgated physicalist versions of mind, albeit in different ways and with different arguments, and the central-state materialists, David Armstrong, Ullin T. Place and J. J. C. Smart, reacting against what they all saw as Gilbert Ryle’s inadequate treatment of a range of “mental phenomena” in his classic work, The Concept of Mind, often alluded to the evolutionary significance of their efforts. Elsewhere,
I have attempted in some detail to subject such theses as these thinkers have advanced to critical scrutiny, so I will not repeat here my objections to their various forms of materialist-reductionist arguments. Rather, I want to elaborate upon one recurring, central theme which all of these approaches appear to share—the transposition of the Cartesian “mental predicates” from the “metaphysical mind” or res cogitans to the brain and the central nervous system. Instead of “minds” doing our thinking, understanding, remembering, intending, believing, pondering, dreaming, etc., their locus of attribution shifts stipulatively to the brain and CNS. This move, of course, is one which Huxley was attempting in his early foray into this intellectual territory. However, it was, and remains, a move fraught with logical problems and obstacles. I have referred to it elsewhere, disparagingly, as a mode of Neural Cartesianism (Coulter, 1997), and Bennett and Hacker, in their monumental recent work, Philosophical Foundations of Neuroscience, have developed the argument, coining the expression: a “mereological fallacy” to identify the move and the logically anomalous status of its ramifications in contemporary reductionist and materialist thought about the mind-brain-conduct nexus. Note, however, that the rejection of such “materialisms” as have been espoused does not in any sense whatsoever imply a return to Cartesian dualism. Far from it. The groundwork is laid for a radical reorientation in our thinking about mind which is wholly consistent with the core principles which inspired and motivated the materialist position(s): the rejection of mentalistic “metaphysics” and the embrace of Darwinian principles.

MORE ON LANGUAGE, MIND AND EVOLUTION

I now turn to a topic closest to my own scholarly concerns: the nature of, and the analysis of, the human capacity for linguistic behavior and its evolutionary explanation. And, in this connection, we are confronted with some truly bizarre contortions in the history of the behavioral—in this case, communicative, linguistic—sciences. I find these contortions enormously interesting, not so much for how they illustrate the ways in which scholars and analysts, theorists and philosophers, have attempted to reconcile their own pet conceptions with the demands placed upon them by the larger intellectual agendas within which they are supposed to have answers, to thrive, and to make sense, but especially because of the ways in which they insulate themselves against areas of inquiry which, contrary to their preconceptions, might actually have keys to the issues they confront—but not on their terms.

I have in mind here, in particular, the entire Chomskian apparatus. Famously, Chomsky embraced what Toulmin (1972) has designated as a dismissal of evolutionary zoology and cultural history as “irrelevant to our understanding of language”, sweeping aside the whole Darwinian account of organic evolution as “one vast tautology” (p. 451). One can find this sort of argument propounded in
one of Chomsky’s earliest works, *Cartesian Linguistics*, in which, as Greenspan and Shanker (2004) characterize his position, he was propounding what they refer to as a “Big Bang” theory of the origin of the human linguistic capacity: “modern human beings alone—suddenly acquired the capacity to speak sometime in the Pleistocene, for reasons that will forever remain unknown” (p. 161, emphasis added). The idea that our capacity for linguistic behaviors (speaking, reading, writing, and, of course, the varieties of activities which “inhabit” such glossed categories) resulted from some sudden genetic mutation—or “saltation”—has become, even among our latter-day committed Chomskians such as Steven Pinker, a peculiar aspect of the intellectual history of their subject, now rejected by the new cohort of theoretical linguists.

What happened here? And what sort of evolutionary account of our linguistic capacity (or, as I would prefer to say, linguistic capacities in the plural) can be given?—the key, since Mead and others of his persuasion, to the evolutionary understanding of so many traditionally-conceived of “mental” capabilities of our species? This is a central issue for much contemporary debate. I have to confess that I have axes to grind here, horses in this race, so what follows will comprise my own reasoning about this most contentious issue, reasoning informed by those whose arguments have influenced me, among them Stephen Toulmin, Rudolf P. Botha, Roy Harris, Stuart Shanker and Peter Hacker. However, the major influences of J. L. Austin and Ludwig Wittgenstein remain among the most potent, notwithstanding the fact that neither thinker had the remotest interest in the problems here under consideration. But that oddity of unforeseeable applicability is one which crops up quite often in the history of inquiry—when Reimann and Lobachevsky were formulating their non-Euclidean geometry, neither of them would have had the faintest idea that their contributions would have a major part to play in post-Newtonian relativity physics.

Where to Begin?

I think with this stark comment: is (any) language a *system*? Is “it” a coherent order of phenomenon to count as an *explanandum* for evolutionary theorizing? Or is “it” unsuitable for such a generic program of inquiry? I think the latter. But this is far from proposing that evolutionary theory can have nothing to say about our human capacity to speak. But what is it to *speak*? That is, for me, a primary question. For those in the neo-Cartesian tradition of Chomsky and his colleagues and successors, to speak is to be a master of a system (whether this is, as originally proposed, to be a master of a generative syntactical system, or, as in the contemporary currency, to be a competent user of a system of “semantax”). In all cases, the notion that a natural language is a sort of “system” is the basis of all subsequent theoretical argumentation. But suppose that a natural language is not best (or not ever!) to be adequately construed as a “system” of any sort? What then?
For example, if any language is a system, then what might count as the initial “input” into any such “system” of lexical items and their combinatorial rules for sentence-formation? A thought? That was Chomsky’s initial postulate, but it is confounded by the Brentano-Intentionality Thesis articulated earlier in this discussion. It is on pain of circularity that a “thought” might be an “input” to the expression of an “utterance” (or a “sentence” with a sense).9

Then there is the major critique of any and all forms of application of “generative” theorizing, derived as it was from an extension of recursive-function mathematics, to linguistic phenomena put forward by Gordon Baker and Peter Hacker (1984) in their polemical work, Language, Sense and Nonsense (a work which, sadly, was much neglected due to its harshly polemical tone—but, to my mind, not on account of any discernible logical problems with its major lines of argument).

That a language is a system is, first and foremost, an abstraction from its uses. But any such abstraction such as the Chomskians propose, is basically a codification of some of its properties which are, at best, amenable to some form of formalization. Herein lies a major problem for much current linguistic theory: the continued appeal to the trichotomy of syntax, semantics and pragmatics10. When a child learns how to talk, to speak, he or she is not participating in any sort of endeavor separable from, distinct from, inter alia, learning how to ask for things, to complain about things, to tell the time, to engage in a myriad of linguistically-constituted practices, especially those which Austin taught us to conceive of as “speech-acts”, probably a derivative from Wittgenstein’s concept, “language-games”. Where does this leave the idealized notion of a Language-Acquisition Device (or: LAD) so current in contemporary theorizing? I suspect—nowhere.

If there is no such practice, nor identifiable set of practices, comprising “learning to speak”, “learning a first language”, which could be set aside from, observed separately from, learning how to do things with words, as Austin beautifully articulated this point, then there is no discrete explanandum for which to search for an evolutionary theory. In other words, the very idea of seeking for an explanation (a fortiori, an evolutionary explanation) of something called “Language” turns out, not to be a huge intellectual challenge, but a source of conceptual confusion.

SPECIFICS ABOUT THE EVOLUTION OF THE HUMAN CAPACITY FOR SPEECH

Greenspan and Shanker and Stephen Toulmin will emerge here as my main sources for a constructive account of such a question, but it will probably not satisfy those who still search for what in my judgment is a chimera—the evolution of a “module” for something called Language, or “the organ” of the “Language faculty”. So be it. But here are some ideas which I think are wholly consistent with an evolutionary perspective, but which avoid the fallacies of “mentalism” and of “linguistic reification”, both of which confound our genuine search for an answer (or answers) to evolutionary questions about specifically human capacities such as
linguistic behavior and the putatively “mental” consequences of such capacities. Elaborating upon insights originating in the Darwin-Wundt-Mead suggestion that linguistic practices developed from pre-linguistic gestural signing, a development facilitated by the evolutionary descent of the larynx, they argue that, not only would vocal gestures ramify exponentially the range of communicative expression, they would (at least in part) free up the hands for engaging simultaneously in other tasks, including elaborating upon the signs being vocally articulated (Greenspan and Shanker, 2004, pp. 161–166). The Chomsky-Pinker insistence upon the uniqueness and complexity of a Universal Grammar, based upon claims to have discerned the existence of the same grammatical patterns (albeit at a very high level of idealization and abstraction) in all human languages, gave rise to the “nativist” hypothesis that all language-using populations share an identical innate endowment which could not have been the product of the accretion of adaptationally advantageous sub-components. Such a “faculty” would have had to have emerged in its totality—hence, the “Big Bang” thesis. Toulmin (1972, pp. 447–477) discussed this hypothesis of a “one-shot genetic saltation” in some detail. He contrasts two other “native”, “innate” capacities in order to demonstrate that even an apparently internally complex capacity can have an explanation in terms of interactions between less complex physiological endowments and environmental exigencies.

“Consider, in the first place, the physiological basis of the human elbow- movement. It takes a new born infant some months to learn to co-ordinate hand and eye with any exactitude; yet no corresponding learning-period is apparently required in order to co-ordinate the four separate muscles which operate at the elbow. The new-born infant performs the elbow movement smoothly from birth, and apparently spends no time learning to avoid operating these four muscles out-of-phase, and so wasting energy. We can thus speak of the elbow-movement itself as involving a ‘native’ or ‘innate’ capacity, and contrast it with the ‘learned’ ability to co-ordinate hand and eye.... The behavior in question is a smooth spatial motion; its neurological basis is a time-coded sequence of impulses... By looking at the time- sequence of motor impulses alone, however, no one could ever have told that it had anything ‘smooth-elbow-movement-like’ about it.” (Toulmin, 1972, pp. 461–462)

Toulmin develops this point dramatically with a further example. He asks us to consider the capacity of honey-bees to manufacture combs with hexagonal cells. This would appear to require a physiological endowment with something “hexagonoid” about it, if we follow the Chomskian line of reasoning about “innate grammatical mechanisms”. Toulmin observes:

“... we cannot... jump to the conclusion that ‘the form of the hexagon’ is itself somehow ‘programmed into’ the nervous system of honey-bees.... The hexagon is a particularly economical shape. Compress a raft of soap bubbles, and the individual bubbles (or ‘cells’) will take up a hexagonal shape of themselves; they do so, not because the constituent molecules of liquid soap have anything ‘hexagonoid’ about them, but simply because the overall physical ‘energetics’ of the situation makes this the natural equilibrium.” (Toulmin, 1972, p. 464)
The hexagonal end-product can be fully accounted for only by “relating it to the objective external task which is involved in making a comb . . . if the grammatical structure of language were at all comparable to the spatial structure of the honeycomb, language might then turn out to be the behavioral end-product, not of a unitary and specific ‘native capacity’ precisely isomorphic with our actual linguistic behavior, but rather of more generalized capacities, which are expressed in behavior of that grammatical form only when set to work on the appropriate external tasks” (Toulmin, 1972, p. 465).

WITTGENSTEIN’S “PRIVATE LANGUAGE” ARGUMENT AND ITS RELEVANCE TO THE DARWIN-DESCARTES PROBLEM

My final remarks reiterate a point made earlier—in the history of inquiry one can never tell beforehand what relevance or significance one’s endeavors in a specific field (in this case, logic) may have for an entirely different domain of study (in this case, the Darwin-inspired need to deal with Cartesian dualist conceptions of human mentality). This is precisely what, to my mind, we can note about the later Wittgenstein’s many “logical” analyses of our so-called “mental concepts and predicates”, especially as these grow out of his famous argument against the possibility of a “private language” of mentality and experience in his *Philosophical Investigations*. In essence, he showed that no concept-word or expression can have a meaning, can be intelligible, if it is governed in its use by an *incommunicable* rule—one that is forever private, “internal” and wholly disconnected from the everyday world of actions, communications and public circumstances. Such a word could have no “teaching links” (to use David Pears’ helpful expression) and thus could not be learned; it could never be manifested in interpersonal contexts, and could therefore never satisfy *any* criteria for its correct (as distinct from an incorrect) use. Such a concept is, Wittgenstein argued at length, a chimera. Yet these are precisely the properties assigned to words like “thought”, “pain”, “dream” and so many others which Descartes thought named referents in the most private and hidden recesses of the “res cogitans”—the human mind. Since such properties would, logically, preclude such words from having any meaning (including to oneself), then their *actual* intelligibility in our language(s) has to be grasped on entirely other grounds. Wittgenstein’s logico-grammatical elucidations of these terms displayed their complex but fundamentally *public* and *scenic* criteria for meaningful use. Sometimes caricatured as a “logical behaviorist”, Wittgenstein never denied that people have what could be called “an inner life” whose elements are not always manifested publicly. What he did claim was that any “inner life” as described in *Cartesian terms* was a *logical* fiction. Such a Cartesian “inner theater” was supposed to be the sole and exclusive locus for the referents of our “mental and experiential” vocabulary, but, as Wittgenstein remarked, “the ‘inner’ stands in need of outward criteria”. If no-one *ever* expressed a thought (as
distinct from sometimes refraining from so doing), if no-one ever manifested a pain, ever articulated a hope or desire, ever avowed an intention or a motive, ever reported a dream, then we would lack the basis for the development of any and all of these concepts. Moreover, their actual acquisition never depends or depended upon inspecting the insides of anyone else’s head—indeed, the very proposal that their “referents” give them the sense that they have leads to reification. Even further, Wittgenstein argued, the very notion that a word’s meaning is given by inspecting some thing that it “stands for” is among the most basic errors of logical and linguistic analysis.

It is reported by some biographers that Wittgenstein’s favorite aphorism from Goethe was: “In Amfang War Die Tat”—“In the beginning was the Deed”. Ratiocination comes after praxis. To my mind, nothing could be more congenial to a Darwinian thinker than such an emphasis, and in one fell swoop it leads to the elimination, not of the ordinary concept of “mind”, but of the whole Cartesian edifice of mentalism itself. If there is, au fond, no “thing” to be explained, or to be explained away, then we can proceed to understand humankind without the encumbrance of the last metaphysical obstacle. The biological and social sciences can have a clearer, more amicable, division of intellectual labor than ever before.

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NOTES

1 Such a thesis in its strongest version poses a problem: if mental phenomena simply are neural phenomena (of whatever type) without residue, then we must, by Leibniz’s Law, construe neural phenomena as mental phenomena, and no strict Identity Theorist has given an account of what such a construal might mean. In what sense, say, could electro-chemical phenomena (if such were to be the designated features of the neural side of the identity), which are undeniably physical phenomena, being spatio-temporally identifiable and measurable, be themselves simultaneously “mental” in nature?

2 Watson (1913) had proposed that no “subjective terms such as sensation, perception, image, desire, purpose, and even thinking and emotion as they were subjectively defined”
can enter the strictly “scientific” vocabulary of the behaviorist psychologist. Indeed:
“The belief in the existence of consciousness goes back to the ancient days of superstition and magic” (p. 2) and the behavioristic scientist “can do without the terms ‘mind’ and ‘consciousness’, indeed he can find no objective evidence for their existence” (p. 18); hence, one can simply eliminate them from one’s ontology along with “such things as mental traits, dispositions, or tendencies” (p. 98). Thus, Watson’s (impoverished) program for the study of human beings, their conduct and experience, was not purely a program of methodological anti-mentalism: it had strong ontological commitments as well, resulting in the restriction of his enterprise to the analysis of physical stimuli, bodily movements, the production of sounds, sub-vocal articulations, conditioning and other explananda, often honored more in the breach than in their strict observance. (He denied that his was merely a program of muscular physiology, for example (ibid., p. 15), and his conceptual apparatus soon exhibited slippage into intentionalist modes of expression).

3 See his treatment of these issues in his “Thought, Communication, and the Significant Symbol” and “The Nature of Reflective Intelligence”, Chapters 10 & 13 respectively in his Mind, Self and Society.

4 With rare exceptions, such as the intransitive use of “conscious” (meaning: no longer asleep or knocked out) and the use of an expression such as “thought/think that”, such as when a dog may non-discursively be said to have “thought that its master was about to strike it”, as manifested in its non-linguistic behavior such as yelping and running away, perhaps to hide, in the face of its master’s angry raised hand where its master was just fooling around with no real intention of hitting the animal- but of course it cannot be said to have “thought that its master will take it for a walk later in the day”.

5 For an important documentation of this piece of intellectual history, and for an excellent critique of the reactions themselves, see Paul M. Livingston, “Ryle on Sensation and the Origin of the Identity Theory” in his Philosophical History and the Problem of Consciousness.


7 Drawing upon the seminal paper by Anthony Kenny, “The Homunculus Fallacy” in his The Legacy of Wittgenstein, Max Bennett and P. M. S. Hacker develop their critical notion of the “mereological fallacy” in Chapter 3 of their Philosophical Foundations of Neuroscience. Essentially, this is the fallacy of attributing to components of creatures (such as their brains) what can only, logically, be ascribed to the whole living creature, or in the human case, person. Pertainning to concepts such as “thinking”, “understanding”, “recognizing”, “intending”, “being aware of..”, etc., throughout the gamut of the so-called “mental predicates”, it results in the fallacy of the “personification” of brains (or, indeed, of “minds”) and also violates the logical criteria in conduct and circumstance for their rational ascription. Brain events and states cannot, grammatically, logically, satisfy any of the ordinary criteria for the attribution of any of these predicates—only persons, as they act, interact and communicate in their life circumstances, can do that. See also Elmer Sprague, Persons and their Minds: A Philosophical Investigation for further elaborations of this point.

8 Botha has been as consistent a critic of evolutionary theorizing based upon Chomsky-Pinker assumptions as you can find in the literature. Although his essays are cogent with respect to their targets of argument, the main problem with his contributions strikes me as his concessions to his critics before he even gets his counter-arguments underway. For a sample of his work on this issue, see his “Neo-Darwinian Accounts of The Evolution of Language: 3—Questions About Their Evidential Bases, Logic and Rhetoric”; his “Discussing the assorted beasts called language”; his “On Chomsky’s ‘Fable’ of Instantaneous Language Evolution”; and perhaps his best essay: “Are there features of language that
arose like birds’ feathers?”. For a thorough-going attack on Steven Pinker’s Chomsky-inspired evolutionary psychology, see Jeremy C. Ahouse & Robert C. Berwick, “Darwin on the Mind”.

9 On this issue, see J. F. M. Hunter’s wonderful, but much-neglected, essay, “On How We Talk” in his Essays After Wittgenstein. Developing these ideas, see my “Is the ‘New Sentence Problem’ a Genuine Problem?”

10 On which issue, see our “Fetishizing ‘Syntax’ ” (Coulter and Sharrock, 2007).

REFERENCES


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