Let's Not Get *Too* Physical –
Psychotherapy and Ontology, Part I

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Summary

Part I of this two-part article explores foundational assumptions made in psychology and psychotherapy. These assumptions are 'ontological' as they relate to 'being' and the nature of psychological being. I outline ontology as a branch of metaphysics before addressing the question of whether psychological being needs to be ultimately reducible to physical forms of explanation. I critique the reductionist ontology of Stephen Pinker's widely influential evolutionary biology, and suggest that crucial dimensions of human agency and human being are lost in his approach.

A Blank Slate?

For some years I have taught Attachment Theory to humanistic integrative counselling students, most of whom have had little exposure to its main sources – psychoanalysis and ethology. I ask them, 'What makes us the way we are as individuals?', and to date, remarkably few even mention a 'nature'-type explanation, such as 'biologically inherited traits'.

Nurture is a different story. I've heard accounts of parenting, education, socio-economic factors and culture. By the time I encounter them, the students are pretty comfortable with learning and enculturation as key elements in what shapes us psychologically. This would come as no surprise to the eminent Harvard professor of psychology, Steven Pinker, whose seminal 2002 book, *The Blank Slate*, has the secondary title, *The Modern Denial of Human Nature*.

My teaching, and this two-part article, aim to explore the implications of our assumptions about what kind of being we think is sitting opposite us in the therapy room – a set of conditioned responses, a self-actualising being, a neurochemical cocktail, an evolved animal….

How we answer this question will frame our vision of our clients' possibilities and choices, and so will profoundly affect the nature of our work together. In approaching this question, I focus on the *forms of explanation* we adopt with such apparent ease, as this may shed light on what we overlook or systematically ignore in our encounter with this human creature, through our basic 'theoretical' commitments and assumptions.

My exploration here will compromise two essays – this first tackling the necessary philosophy (hopefully with a little humour), and from this developing a critique of Pinker's widely influential stance. In the next issue, we'll move in Part II from Freud into humanistic and existential approaches to the human subject.

A personal inspiration in this enquiry, and an unacknowledged influence on Freud too, has been a strange one – the misanthropic nineteenth-century philosopher, Arthur Schopenhauer. He has become something of a touchstone for me, as he would disagree with virtually everything that frames the practice of psychotherapy, Freudian or otherwise. In this he offers an excellent counterpoint to our values and assumptions as psychotherapists. Schopenhauer writes that

> It is quite natural that we should adopt a defensive and negative attitude towards every

new opinion concerning something on which we have already an opinion of our own. For it forces its way as an enemy into the previously closed system of our own convictions [and] shatters the calm of mind we have attained through this system. (2004, p.124)

Schopenhauer's contrarian perspective has helped me to question the basic commitments, or *ontologies*, of the various approaches to psychology and psychotherapy, which I will try to examine here.

Consign It to the Flames!

Traditionally, *ontology* is regarded as a branch of metaphysics, one of the three fields of philosophy – metaphysics, epistemology and axiology. In the West, since the time of David Hume at least, metaphysics has been strongly critiqued. Hume's famous dictum, 'Commit it then to the flames: for it can contain nothing but sophistry and illusion', though aimed at 'speculative metaphysics' and theology, encapsulates his scepticism regarding any philosophy that goes beyond what is empirically evident (see Studtmann, 2010, p. 5). Hume held that even such fundamental ideas as 'substance' and the 'principle of universal causation' are themselves metaphysical constructs – assumptions beyond anything directly evident or observable in phenomena.

Yet sceptics like Hume notwithstanding, such constructs have generally been regarded as inescapable in explaining the world in which we live. Metaphysics and ontology are almost universally held to be entirely essential in developing any kind of coherent and systematic theory that attempts to go beyond 'mere appearances'.

Schopenhauer, following Immanuel Kant, sees causality as an inescapable and necessary aspect of the *phenomenal* world, the world as we experience it. Time, space, causality and the subject–object distinction frame the very possibility of our having any experience at all. We can soliloquise about 'the timeless' or 'the dissolution of subject–object distinctions', but

as soon as we conceive of and communicate our individual experience, we necessarily do so with concepts woven-through with time, space and causality.

To turn to the dictionaries, metaphysics is 'the philosophical investigation of the nature, constitution, and structure of reality' (Audi, 1995, p. 489); and ontology addresses 'The assumptions about existence underlying any conceptual scheme or any theory or system of ideas' (Flew, 1979, p. 255).

So a theory of human psychology, for instance, must have at least some implicit assumptions as regards what *kind* of being a human is and what *kinds* of phenomena are dealt with in the field of psychology. 'What manner of thing is a psyche?'; 'In what sense might a "collective unconscious" exist?'; 'Are minds and brains different things, and if so, can they interact?'…. All of these are metaphysical/ontological questions.

This brings us to an area explored by the philosopher Gilbert Ryle – author of the beautifully titled *Systematically Misleading Expressions* (1932) – regarding how ontology categorises and divides up the world, and how this might be reflected or confused in language. To say something such as 'The square-root-of-two is in the bath' would involve a 'category mistake', according to Ryle (1949). This is an ontological/semantic mistake, mixing up different kinds of incompatible 'things' – mathematical 'objects' and physical objects. Now although there is an argument about whether mathematical objects can really be called *objects*, and wherein lies their reality, it would seem perverse to say that mathematics or the 'things' it refers to do not 'exist' in some meaningful sense of the word. They just cannot be said to exist in the same manner as bath tubs.

We use the verb 'to be' in so many different ways, and 'being' is the realm of ontology. However, does the world *as it exists in itself* contain the same kinds of distinctions ('natural kinds') as language? And how accurately, then,

can ontology – the discourse on being – represent being itself? For instance, we have words and concepts for things that don't exist, and one word can be used in multiple senses or to indicate entirely different kinds of things. Thus, as Ryle points out, there is some discontinuity between language and ontological categories – and, Schopenhauer would add, a radical discontinuity between ontological categories and the world in itself.

This may seem unnecessarily pedantic and – well – *philosophical*, but it is particularly relevant to psychology and the social sciences, where there has been pressure to 'ground' our theories in particular physical ontologies, as if this foundation could somehow guarantee that we are not 'away with the faeries', spinning fantastical stories about a 'ghost in the machine', to use a phrase coined by Ryle himself in *The Concept of Mind* (1949).

What I hope the discussion above shows, however, is that it is perfectly acceptable to have concepts, such as in mathematics, that have no direct physical referent, are not reducible to physical *types* and yet which are valid and meaningful.

Let's *Not* Get *Too* Physical

One of the founders of sociology, Émile Durkheim, famously held that 'social facts' are *sui generis* (of their own kind, or unique) and, as such, cannot be reduced to, or entirely explained in terms of, other kinds of facts. In 1895 in his *Rules of Sociological Method*, Durkheim wrote that because social facts consist of representations and actions, they cannot be confused with organic phenomena, nor with psychical phenomena, which have no existence save in and through the individual consciousness. Thus they constitute a new species, and to them must be exclusively assigned the term 'social' (Durkheim, 2014, p. 21)

Crucially, one can hold this position while being a devout 'materialist' (i.e. holding that the only

substance in the world is 'matter'), and neither believing in faeries at the bottom of the garden nor ghosts in machines. Despite not being material *in themselves*, social facts need not be conceived of as otherworldly phenomena. One does not need to posit some ethereal realm wherein they abide. They can abide in the 'physical world' without themselves being physical, just as compound interest, though not made of matter, seems to fare pretty well in the material world.

Fodor calls such a position 'token-physicalism' (1994). Type-physicalism, on the other hand, holds that *all* real qualities are physical/material qualities, or roundabout re-descriptions of such material qualities. Therefore all social and psychological statements must ultimately be reducible without remainder to physical statements.

Frequently, though, those who identify as 'materialists' are wedded to such type-physicalist, material-causal explanations of human behaviour, and in my view this can lead to difficulty when we begin to consider human agency, meaning and free will. Amongst others, philosopher Hilary Bok, author of *Freedom and Responsibility* (1998), has argued that 'The claim that a person chose her action does not conflict with the claim that some neural processes or states caused it; it simply redescribes it' (in Sapolsky, 2017, p. 599). Both descriptions, she holds, apply to *the same underlying reality*. Moreover, from the points of view of Robert Sapolsky (of *Behave* fame) and Bok, assertions of 'free will' are not incompatible with a materialist-deterministic view of causality.

It is notable, though, that what such 'compatibilists' mean by 'free will' is something other than what might normally be understood by the term. Steven Pinker, for instance, follows an established scientific and philosophical procedure in order to 'clarify' what is *actually* meant by free will. To this end he 'operationalises' his conception of free will by focusing upon *the function* of the concept of

human responsibility or responsible agency. Pinker writes that,

> we don't need to resolve the ancient and perhaps unresolvable antinomy between free will and determinism. We only have to think clearly about what we want the notion of responsibility to achieve. Whatever may be its inherent abstract worth, responsibility has an eminently practical function: deterring harmful behaviour. (2002, p. 180)

I think we can say with some assurance that while the above may fit the narrative of *some* evolutionary psychologists, it is precisely *not* what is meant by human responsibility for a very large number of ordinary language-users, not to mention humanistic and existential psychotherapists. This operational definition of responsibility is far narrower than is reasonable, with something valuable lost from the conversation. In fact, here, 're-description' becomes sheer misrepresentation of the term's range of meaning. For both Pinker and Sapolsky (see Sapolsky, 2017, pp. 605–9), our 'common-sense' notions of free will are mere phantoms. We live not only in an entirely causal world, but one wherein everything that occurs is the product of determining material causes that do not include human agency, *as such agency is normally understood*.

Material states of affairs, may, however, according to Pinker, be re-described in the language of an *appropriate* sociology or psychology. This would be a sociology or psychology which is 'consilient' with biology/neuroscience/evolutionary theory. 'Consilience' means that the theories brought together have 'harmonious' theoretical principles, devoid of significant paradoxes and anomalies.

It is a challenge, however, to reconcile the ontologies of different theories in a way that does not exclude much that is *significant and meaningful*. Certainly, in the realm of psychology and psychotherapy, there has long been the danger of disposing of the baby with the bath-water. Let's remember Behaviourism, with Watson's and Skinner's desire to do away with the *unnecessary* notion of 'mind'.

Pinker's depiction of consilient reductionism is that,

> Good reductionism (also called hierarchical reductionism) consists not of replacing one field of knowledge with another but of connecting or unifying them. The building blocks used by one field are put under a microscope by another. The black boxes get opened; the promissory notes get cashed. (2002, p. 70)

While ostensibly trying to assuage any worries we may have about reductionism, he also comments that 'The mental world can be grounded in the physical world by the concepts of information, computation, and feedback' (ibid., p. 31). *Nothing noticeably human lost there then*! Though I'm sure that how he might go on to depict ethics and human values in these terms may not appeal to those of us who view human relationality somewhat differently.

Pinker also appears to affirm that 'human nature differs only in degree of complexity from clockwork' (ibid., p. 126). The metaphor of clockwork and/or machines is recurrent in Pinker, and is presented as something of a scientific orthodoxy. In fact, it dates back at least to La Mettrie in the eighteenth century, and certainly gives us insight into Pinker's ontology of the human. It also raises significant doubts about whether such a type-physicalist theoretical frame could possibly achieve consilience with any psychology or psychotherapy that affirms meaningful human agency.

Additionally, I believe, Pinker's hierarchical reductionism overlooks how it is possible to have a materialist outlook yet encompass fundamentally differing but *valid* ontologies – that is, *relevant* ways of conceptualising, categorising and understanding *different* kinds of phenomena. The fact that one believes the world is made only of material stuff does not in itself delimit how one conceives of this stuff, its

qualities and its interactions. Even a 'hard science' such as physics fails to meet Pinker's criteria for hierarchical consilience. Relativity and quantum theory each fail to deal with phenomena which are adequately addressed by the other. Currently, they each have their own operational domain and, crucially, radically different but *workable* ontologies. Unification of the theories is an aim for some, but its absence does not negate the value of existing theories. In general, even in physics there is a recognition that theories and their concomitant ontologies are 'effective' rather than absolute (see Smolin, 2013. loc. 1861).

Nor, finally, does Pinker's hierarchy address the phenomenon, pervasive in science, of 'emergent qualities' – that a set of elements *en masse* and in interaction can produce qualitative features that are not present in the elements themselves. To give an example, the combination of the gases hydrogen and oxygen, in a particular ratio, produces water, which has important qualities not present in hydrogen or oxygen. Just try feeding your plants hydrogen and oxygen separately.

Emergence, then, constitutes a serious stumbling block to any atomistic, zoom in/zoom out, epistemology. Goodbye, the microscope; hello, socially and psychologically emergent qualities.

The above, though, is more than simply a philosophical debate about which type of theory works best. Ontology is the ground on which not only theoretical but practical superiority is asserted, and it is a highly partisan argument. In *The Blank Slate*, for instance, Pinker holds that sociobiology has been misrepresented by critics such as Rose, Lewontin and Gould as a crudely reductionist enterprise (Pinker, 2002, pp. 108–35). He depicts the critics as ideologically motivated, launching straw-man attacks which have little to do with the true insights of sociobiology. It is fascinating, however, that *The Blank Slate* itself is prone to precisely such misrepresentations when Pinker looks at forms of explanation that are not in line with a

particular kind of evolutionary psychology and biology.

He portrays the entirety of social science or what he calls the Standard Social Science Model (SSSM) as riddled with blank slate reductionism, with social scientists acknowledging nothing but cultural and linguistic factors and thereby denying the explanatory power of biology and genetics. He employs *ad hominem* attacks on theorists, such as Jacques Derrida, producing parodies of their views. At one point he quotes Walker Percy, that 'a deconstructionist is an academic who claims that texts have no referents and then leaves a message on his wife's answering machine asking her to order a pepperoni pizza for dinner' (ibid., p. 209). What a shame that a scholar such as Derrida could not have attained such a profound insight into an obvious failing in this theory!

On the other hand, Pinker seems entirely comfortable with a blatantly reductive definition of culture itself, citing Sperber that 'We should understand culture [...] as the epidemiology of mental representations: the spread of ideas and practices from person to person' (ibid., p. 65). However, this rather begs the question of agency and meaning; the complexity of which Derrida and others have endeavoured to engage with… – when not confounded by the ontological complexity of ordering pizza.

If, then, ideas, beliefs and commitments are fundamentally memes that we catch like diseases, what has *thinking* become, and how can Pinker confidently claim any validity for his own thesis? His thesis, if caused in this manner, is not a matter of insight, discernment or even of interpretation – he simply could not have thought otherwise. Even in his world of 'information, computation and feedback', he'd just be a brain being bounced around by prevalent memes (and his biological drives). Unless, of course, he is arrogating to himself a degree of authorship and a 'freedom to think clearly' denied to the rest of us.

To turn to how he cherry-picks his information, one can look to his overview of twentieth-century anthropology and social science, to which he devotes all of seven pages of *The Blank Slate*. He uses the word 'anthropology' as synonymous with the North American tradition of cultural anthropology, beginning with 'the father of modern anthropology, Franz Boas' (ibid., p. 22). Strangely, the whole European tradition of social anthropology from Malinowski onwards is missing. Malinowski, more to the point, founded anthropological *functionalism*, which explicitly looks at how social life functions with regard to fulfilling our individual biological needs and drives. No blank slate here. Functionalism also happens to have played a crucial role in the whole tradition of anthropology, social and cultural. It doesn't however align with Pinker's thesis regarding the nature of social science and is overlooked.

Nonetheless, Pinker feels able to observe that

> Twentieth-century social science embraced not just the Blank Slate and the Noble Savage but the third member of the trinity, the Ghost in the Machine. The declaration that we can change what we don't like about ourselves became a watchword of social science. (ibid., p. 29)

The implication here is that the failing of social science has been to be neither scientific nor rational enough to give up old superstitions about human agency, choice and change.

Pinker's cherry-picking and misrepresentation of the views of social theorists rather supports the point of Thomas Kuhn, Paul Feyerabend, Derrida and others, that science is not simply a rational search for the facts. Psychologists and biologists, along with all other theorists, have their shibboleths and their commitments, and will fight to defend them. This is deeply human; but it means that science does not operate in a hermetically sealed 'clean room' or a theoretically neutral space. It is a form of human discourse, conducted in language, in particular circumstances and with particular motives and values.

Perhaps naturally, Pinker places his discipline at the rational centre of discourse, while marginalising other forms of explanation by reducing them to absurdities – their ontologies don't make sense because of their antiquated commitments to an ethereal 'ghost in the machine'. The battles fought on sociobiology and 'human nature' are relevant here because they illuminate how ontology becomes a foundation for territorial claims.

Biologically based evolutionary psychology, Pinker claims, is able to provide *the* foundation for all psychology. What Pinker and others are pushing for within psychology is to privilege the concept of '*adaptive*, biologically determined behaviour' above that of merely 'learned behaviour'. One significant problem here is that, 'ideological' assumptions aside, it may simply not be possible to determine whether something is biologically adaptive or simply a learned, 'non-adaptive' behaviour. Other thinkers in the field, such as evolutionary biologist Richard Lewontin, however, have said that evolution is more complex than often recognised, and that even biology is not entirely adaptively driven.

Where Pinker's argument may have some weight, I believe, is that at the very least from Lévi-Strauss's structuralism onwards, social theorists have tended to *emphasise* language and culture more than human 'nature', biology or evolutionary adaptation. However, he overstates his case and fails to engage with the complexity and depth of theories that he so contemptuously dismisses.

What I take away from my reading of Pinker's *The Blank Slate* is a deeper wariness regarding those 'public intellectuals' whose lengthy tomes purport to sum up an entire multidisciplinary field of knowledge, when what they have actually done is reduce this field to the dimensions of their own back yard and their own commitments. And here many would argue that complex, diverse and multidisciplinary approaches are necessary for the human sciences; at least if we wish them to remain recognisably human.

In Part II of this article, I'll be exploring and expanding upon such themes further and bringing us to the humanistic and existential traditions in the next edition of *Self & Society*.

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SOME HUMANISTIC WISDOM

"We should not try to 'get rid' of a neurosis, but rather to experience what it means, what it has to teach us, what its purpose is. We should even learn to be thankful for it…. We do not cure it – it cures us."

Carl Jung (1875–1961)