

The Blind Storyteller

How We Reason About Human Nature

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The Blind Storyteller is a recent and very up to date volume about human nature and the way we reason about ourselves. The book is based on scientific experiments from neuroscience and psychology and offers a fresh look on the biases and errors that we make when we reason about our human nature. The author supports the idea that the cause for our blindness is rooted in our own human nature.

Dr. Iris Berent (I.B.) is an experimental psychologist and professor of Psychology at Northeastern University in Boston, Massachusetts, USA. Her expertise is in core knowledge, experimental phonology, language and reading. She is one of the founders of experimental phonology using experimental psychology methods along with neuroscience to study phonological competence.

I.B.'s work has had great support from the National Institute of Health (NIH) in the United States and the National Science Foundation. She is also a Fellow of the Association of Psychological Sciences. The author has published several scientific papers in journals such as *Science* (Marcus & Berent, 2003: 53-55), *Journal of Cognitive Neuroscience* (Gervain, J. et. al., 2012: 564-574) as well as in other prestigious publications.

Berent is also the author of *The Phonological Mind* (Cambridge, 2013).

The Blind Storyteller gives us a new understanding about human nature and how the mind works by taking us through the fields of anthropology, linguistics, philosophy and the author's cutting-edge research.

The book is composed of two equal parts preceded by a short *Preface* and a CODA that contains mainly the reasons for writing this volume and the conclusions. Part one is called WHAT WE KNOW and along with the second part called WHO WE THINK WE ARE are the bulkier parts of the book. The last section is called CODA and under it we find the last chapter with the number sixteen by its title "*Why it all matters.*" The first part of the book talks about what we think we know about ourselves. For instance, the research question is answered: are infants born with knowledge about what objects are, or do they learn from experience? Laypeople believe that this core knowledge about objects, number, agents, or language is not innate, but science is showing the opposite. At the same time, laypeople accept that emotions are innate, but ideas are not, which is a misconception. This subject is covered during the second part of the book where the author touches on who we think we are. The biases that we have due to our blindness has huge social consequences when we think we can read someone else's feelings from their face or when we believe that psychiatric disorders are passed on genetically, and we think that they are predetermined.

The beauty of the volume is that the approach to how we as humans reason about our own nature is written from a scientist's perspective and that its theory "is firmly grounded in science" (p 291).

The author supports the idea throughout the book that although cognition is nevertheless useful and humans have made a

huge step in the evolutionary process due to it, there is a downside to cognition. It blinds us, since we look at life through the lenses of our thoughts that become our inner world which is full of blind spots. Each one of us sees the world and perceives reality through our own mind, which makes life experiences unique, different, and distorted. Therefore, I.B.'s conclusion is that blindness is born from the human nature itself.

Cognition is not a container or a unitary place, according to I. B., but "an orchestra with many instruments and mostly are unconscious". This orchestra forms our core knowledge, which is what objects, agents and living things are, and refers to what we cognize. One of the original ideas of the researcher is that core knowledge is innate and hard-wired from birth in all of us humans and in some of our nonhuman previous ancestors.

"Core knowledge is the facts" (p 14), as the author says, and is innate, we are born with the facts. There are two cognitive principles that the researcher is using to define theoretically her ideas about core knowledge and innateness, dualism and essentialism. When it comes to how we think about objects and agents, we are governed by dualism, meaning that we possess an immaterial mind that is different from our bodies. This philosophical principle has been defined by the well-known philosopher René Descartes (*Cogito, ergo sum*). The second principle, called essentialism, means that living things have a material essence of their own. Every living thing "is born with a material essence that defines it as such" (ib.). The example given by the psychologist is that core knowledge is useful for evolutionary reasons, for example if you are a baby, you see your mother as a single entity, you do not see her as a collection of many body parts. But, this exact same quality makes us blind to the world. The example given by I.B. from a philosophical perspective is that of Oedipus (*Oedipus Rex*) who ends up

marrying his mother although his father has tried to avoid the consequences by abandoning him when he was a child, after having heard the horrors that were prophesied by the Oracle.

The author is supporting the ideas that Oedipus is not necessarily blinded by what he did not know (since he was warned by the Oracle regarding his faith), but by what he thought he knew. He was certain that Queen Merope was his mother, he had never considered the fact that she was not. Oedipus in the author's view, accepted that he was blind to better possibilities in his life (like celibacy or other options). This innate blindness has been picked up from Greek sages when they would support the idea to "*Know Thyself*", which, in I.B.'s opinion, is being aware of your own blindness.

The author carried out several experiments together with other researchers through which they have proved quite the contrary to what laypeople believe in terms of innateness in human beings. Infants up to three-month old have been found to have the innate capacities to provide the number of objects up to about four. Also they have a preference for real words instead of nonsense syllables (they have innate linguistic capacities) and moral judgement abilities (a preference for puppets that appear to help others).

The author details the way the three types of experiments took place and their hypotheses along with the results. All this information is included in *Chapter 3*, where the researcher describes our core knowledge for understanding objects and numbers, *Chapter 4*, where she talks about the social realm, and in *Chapter 5* we find the experiments carried out on language. What is fascinating in Chapter 3, for example, is that not only can infants count (up to four objects), but they also can add and subtract (Wynn, 1992: 749-750). These abilities have also been proven to be true for rhesus monkeys (Hauser & Carey, 2003:367-

401) and even bees (Giurfa, 2019: 720-722), which suggests that the abilities in question are both ancient and innate.

Chapter 4 presents various experiments that explain how infants show selective response to human agents through imitation (Meltzoff & Moore, 1977: 75-78), which has been shown to be already present from mother's womb, *in utero*. As for moral behavior, scientists showed that the earliest time is three months old for infants. The author explains the reasons why she supports the idea that moral cognition is not only socially based, that what is good or bad is defined by society, but that we also have an innate sense of moral judgement. She additionally argues that, although different cultures have various beliefs, the moral systems are similar. At the same time there are other species that share moral judgment, such as apes, the chimpanzees in particular (Sheskin & Santos, 2012: 434-450).

In Chapter 5, the author draws the conclusion that knowledge of language is abstract and innate. The evidence for this conclusion comes from a class of languages that relies on hands and eyes (American Sign Language =A.S.L.) and not on ears and mouth. The author underlined in the chapter that the hypothesis was validated in the case of deaf children born in families that do not speak a sign language. These children live like on "deserted islands" because they were never exposed to an adult community. But when these children were exposed to a community, a new sign language emerged, which shows that there is some knowledge of language that is innate and abstract. Furthermore, children that had acquired ASL stand a better chance to acquire a second language compared to the ones that have no knowledge of ASL.

Therefore, most of the biased beliefs of laypeople involve the concept that language, identifying objects or numbers along with moral judgement are learned in the adult community and

they are not innate. Laypeople were still not convinced that infants have innate abilities, which was the result of scientific research“. Just as like Oedipus we are doubly blind” (p 35).

In sharp contrast to linguistic skills and moral judgement, when it comes to emotions laypeople believe that they are embodied and innate, which a large body of research seems not to support. The field of emotions has been explored in the last twenty years, and there is more and more evidence that emotions are located in the brain and not in the body (embodied), as it is thought by laypeople. A well-known researcher, Lisa Feldman Barret (Northeastern University, Boston, USA), has done a very valuable job in proving that emotions “are not triggered; create them”. In her book “*How emotions are made*”, the author explains how emotions “emerge as a combination of the physical properties of your body, a flexible brain that wires itself to whatever environment it develops in, and your culture and upbringing, which provide that environment.” When I.B. informed the participants in her experiment that emotions are localized in the brain and not in the material body, they were more likely to accept that emotions are innate and universal (p 179).

This completely new perspective on human nature that the author (I.B.) is unveiling is not only very interesting but, in addition, it allows us to understand human nature and ourselves in general much better. The fact that her arguments and conclusions have a scientific standing is even more appealing and worth reading.

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