

Book review

HOW MANY NAILS DOES IT TAKE TO SEAL THE COFFIN

R. J. Perry

Killer apes, naked people & just plain nasty people: The misuse and abuse of science in political discourse. Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, MD, 2015.

When I was still a young Turk, starting out under the tutelage of my post-doctoral mentor, Ethel Tobach, I questioned why it was necessary for her to write still another critique of the nature/nurture controversy [a naïveté I shared with the developmental scientist Richard M. Lerner (2006) around the same time]. Forty-six years later her reply still resonates, as this slim but thoughtful and insightful volume, yet another critique of biological (genetic) determinism, makes clear. I am drawn to the important question raised by Lerner (2006). "Why do we have to keep reinterring behavior genetics or other counterfactual conceptualizations of the role of genes in behavior and development? Why is it necessary to continue to drive additional nails into the coffin of this failed approach to developmental science . . ." (p. 337)? Readers of this journal are well aware of the many nails driven into the intellectual coffin of genetic determinism and of behavior genetics: the classical accounts of Gould (1996) and Lewontin, Rose, and Kamin (1984), and the more recent contribution of Wahlsten (2012) whose assessment I had thought (and hoped) would be the final word: "All hope of discovery has been lost...[I]n the realm of behavior genetic analysis of human traits in the normal range of variation, things such as intelligence and personality, *there has been no real progress*" (p. 476, emphasis added). Panofsky's (2014) (see also, Greenberg, 2015) recent history of the "science" of behavior genetics serves as a precis to Perry's passionate discussion of the pernicious implications of biological (in this volume, genetic) determinism of behavior. Both volumes underscore the rampant misuse and misinterpretation of science in the genetic determinism disciplines of behavior genetics, sociobiology, and evolutionary psychology. As Perry points out "... biological determinism claims the status of science ... Science involves evidence [and hypothesis testing, but biological determinism]. . . fail[s] to meet these criteria" (p. 4). It is of interest that these two books are written not by psychologists, but by a sociologist (Panofsky) and an anthropologist (Perry). This fact may account for both authors' stress on the social and political implications of biologism.

Whereas the title of this book suggests it is written for a general audience it would be a good reading in undergraduate and graduate courses in Comparative Psychology, Physiological or Biological Psychology, and Life Span Developmental Psychology. Its

message is an important one fueled by the author's feelings as an anthropologist about the never ending discussions about race and racism. "These multiple versions of biological determinism [ethology, sociobiology, evolutionary psychology, and contemporary behavior genetics] over the years have led to serious harm to many people. They promote. . . the idea that somehow, assisting the weak and disenfranchised is detrimental to progress" (Perry, pp. 2–3). Perry's concluding chapter suggests that these biological determinist disciplines are little more than disguises for a new eugenics. In fact, Perry says, "Eugenics did not die out completely. In the 1970s, it came to the fore in the works of such exemplary figures as William Shockley. "Racial" differences in IQ test scores also became an issue again in the 1960s and beyond [a result of the writings of Arthur Jensen . . . and Charles Murray]" (pp. 55–56). It will come as no surprise to readers of this journal, that "As the twentieth century progressed, geneticists took pains to distinguish their valid scientific research from the eugenics movement . . . As Edwin Black observed, 'Eugenics was nothing more than an alliance between biological racism and mighty American power, position, and wealth against the most vulnerable, the most marginal, and the least empowered in the nation'" (Perry, p.44).

Part of the staying power of these disciplines is the public's unawareness of the implications of biologism (e.g., Denhoed, 2016) and, as Perry points out early in his book (p. 3), the positive picture painted of genetic determinism by the mainstream media and "scholars such as Steven Pinker of Harvard, a darling of the media" (p. 56). Pinker's reputation has drawn the public (and non-critically thinking scientists) into this counterfactual approach to understanding behavioral origins. The best discussion of the reasons for the staying power of genetic reductionism is that of Moore (2008). Reading Moore's article and Perry's book one wonders why this topic is still being debated.

Whereas references to eugenics fell out of favor after the discoveries about the Nazi genocide programs of WWII, its underlying geneticism was reborn first in the guise of sociobiology (Wilson, 1975), which was a blatant attempt at biologizing the social sciences, and more recently as Evolutionary Psychology (e.g., Buss, 1999, 2005). The sociobiology idea of the genetic basis of human altruism has recently been somewhat retracted by its earliest proponent, E. O. Wilson. Although this self-repudiation is comforting news to many critics of geneticism, it does not sit well with all students of behavior (Marshall, 2010) attesting to the lure of these discredited and contrafactual ideas. Being critical of Evolutionary Psychology (EP), the newest iteration of biological determinism, by no means rejects the significance, importance, and reality of evolutionary processes and the role they play in behavioral origins. This view is reflected in the recent development of evolutionary developmental biology (Michel, in press) which focuses on developmental trajectories and how they affect structures which in turn affect behavioral possibilities.

There are many problems with EP, not least being its faulty application of ideas involved in evolution. As Witherington and Lickliter (in press) put it, “After all, evolutionary psychology’s self-proclaimed ‘interactionism’ has been taken to task for promoting a predeterministic conceptualization of behavior and development wholly incompatible with the DS [developmental systems] perspective on epigenesis” (p. 337). In Perry’s terms, EP is “yet another new science of the same old thing” (p. 119). Among the many problems with EP is its postulation of mental modules that humans have inherited from our Pleistocene ancestors. Not only are such modules not defined by evolutionary psychologists but also are never told exactly what they are, where they are in the brain, or how many there might be (Kaplan & Rogers, 2003). In fact, the very concept of such modules is questionable (Fuster, 2000). And of our Pleistocene ancestors, the source of all of our inherited behaviors, Perry points out that whatever evolutionary psychologists say of them and that era is simply a just-so-story. Science knows very little about that period which lasted millions of years. Furthermore, “Advances in the sciences of genetics have torn gaping holes in the ‘hard science’ lab coat of evolutionary psychology . . .” (Perry, p. 143). The sciences of genetics have today drifted away from the deterministic Central Dogma of Molecular Biology (Crick, 1970) to the more modern sciences of epigenetics (Lerner & Overton, in press) and evolutionary developmental biology (Michel, in press) in which genes are understood to turn on and off throughout one’s lifetime, a result of the myriad contextual aspects of the developmental trajectory.

Clearly, then, I like this book very much and recommend it. The biggest disappointment for me was Perry’s failure to develop an alternative approach to behavior development other than reiterating throughout the book the importance of experience and environment. One of the most promising ideas is to be found in Overton and Lerner’s relational dynamic systems proposals (Lerner, Johnson & Buckingham, 2015; Overton, 2013; Overton & Lerner, 2014). Perry acknowledges repeatedly that behavior is complex, and that we simply do not know where it comes from. The relational dynamic systems idea is a major step forward in understanding the origins and trajectories of the development of behavior. It is a uniquely psychological approach to behavior, although of course recognizing that biology—brains, genes, physiology—contributes to behavior but does not cause it. Perry acknowledges this point early in his book (p. 14). This struggle against reductionist thinking will go on until we at last “unfrock the charlatans” as (Hirsch, 1981).

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author has no conflict of interest to declare in accord with the policies of the journal.

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