

## Is Dialectical Cognition Good Enough To Explain Human Thought?

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In offering a causal explanation of events it is appropriate to take into account not only the kind of thing involved, but what strands in an extensive causal net are the most important. By making intentional ascription simply a placeholder for things that are beyond awareness (e.g., scripts and excitation patterns), the current orthodoxy in cognitive psychology has apparently made the meshes in its net so big that the human element has managed to slip unceremoniously through. No longer is the person the cause of what comes to pass, rather s/he is the product of mediational structures with problem solving strategies and goal-states of their own.

The four papers before us may be viewed collectively as a concerned reaction to this interpretive framework. Though each article is unique in its own right, they are drawn together by the common conviction that mediational accounts in general are "unsatisfactory as a grounds for the investigation of meaningful human action" (Williams). It is not that the human mind does not process information, or that such information is not heavily dependent upon environmental input; it is simply that what is being processed has a lot to do with how the individual recognizes and integrates things. The boastful contention of some AI theorists that computers have a similar self-generating capacity, i.e., that systems of feedback loops can go beyond the flow of external input to monitor and control what is at work, is viewed by this complement of writers as unlikely, if not absurd. Executive systems may affect the direction of the processing taking place, but computers do not act "for the sake of" particular ends or goals. "They cannot affect the initial decisive act of selecting the master program from among alternatives" (Slife). This requires something external to the cybernetic process: an outside agent—a teleological being.

So where did this mechanistic model of the mind come from? Apparently the culprit behind all this, according to Rychlak, is nothing less than British Empiricism; for it is this tradition, with a tabula-rasa figure as its base, that has left us with the

legacy of believing that learning is the constant repetition of exposure and that proper thinking has to do with the past association of ideas. It is this "linear" explanation in the "demonstrative mode" that has undiscerningly removed agency from consideration by making (1) time the relevant dimension and (2) the medium of thought a sequence over which the subject has little or no control.

But humanity is not fixed by an associated directionality; we do not simply access information stored in some memory bank. On this point, all the contributors are in agreement: humans have a dialectical nature, a metacognitive ability, according to Slife, which not only gives us control over the flow of information but bequeathes to us the power to alter what we don't like. Somewhat reminiscent of more counter-cultural days, humans are different from machines because they can defiantly "opt to do precisely the opposite of what our past experience has been" (Rychlak). We can disrupt old forms and create new ones. The human subject lives in a world of "genuine possibilities" (Williams); a world where s/he is in fact the final cause. This is the graphic message of these "telic" papers.

Now as one who is interested in the ramifications of mediational theory (see Muscari, 1985), I believe that there is good reason to stand behind the major premise of these papers that meaningful human action is beyond the capacity of mediation theory to successfully capture. It is clear by now that one of the outgrowths of recent cognitive thinking is that inasmuch as the transmission, reception and generation of information does not require an interpretation, any willful response on the part of the individual tends to be viewed as a short-term store with no generative function; that is, as a temporary activation of information which is cognitively external to him or her. Mediational accounts may show us how a belief hinges on it being located in some such system or other, but it is doubtful whether such accounts can descend to the depths where practices have their roots to explain those non-epistemic considerations which may force or compel the individual to reject the system itself. (As it is doubtful whether they can appreciate the fact that the role of the human will is not to represent the world, but to make it consonant with what the agent wants).

But though mediational theory has limited and misrepresented the nature of human behavior, it would be remiss of me not to say that I have some misgivings about whether the papers before us fare any better. If psychology today does not properly address the question of how people can alter things, do these teleological papers address with any more judiciousness the issue of how conscious thoughts and mediational structures relate? I ask this because (1) consciousness does not seem to be an isolated and invariable occurrence, and (2) there is an overwhelming mass of information around to suggest that even the most primitive form of awareness contains some kind of mediating element (e.g., pre-experiential sensitivities, input analyzers, etc.). So how do these prior factors and epistemic considerations limit and inform consciousness? The following

papers do not provide an explanation for this concern, but seem more inclined to believe that marching under the banner of dialectical cognition — the unique property of human consciousness which is innately independent of mediational structures — is sufficient enough to explain the nature of human thought.

Though I am certainly impressed by those studies which have shown how people's self-generated likes and dislikes influence the course of their behavior (Rychlak, 1976, 1977), I am not terribly convinced (1) that this implies a dialectical undertow at work, and (2) that the concept of a "dialectic" offers us much insight into the nature of human thought. It would seem to me that the sense of "dialectical" which is being bandied around here, i.e., this unlimited and inner-directed capacity of thought, is only a more fine-grained version of Camus' nihilism or Derrida's deconstructive premise on life. What I mean by this is that the "dialectical" seems to come off better as not a specific mode of thought, but rather a figurative expression that (1) allows us to view the human being as a causally efficacious agent that is not totally annexed by unidirectional mediating structures; and (2) that gives us an opportunity to express the incessant tension in the human mind between two seemingly different dispositional tendencies: integration as opposed to disruption, the logical structure of form in contrast to the free play of imagination.

But even if we recognize the dialectical nature of human thought, is there any reason to believe that mediational accounts could not easily accommodate themselves to something like this? Certainly the works of Tversky and Kahneman (1974), Nisbett and Ross (1980), have provided a compelling picture of human reasoning that is not in accord with well-established deductive and decision theoretic norms; a picture where mental functioning is regulated by multiple and overlapping control systems that are not available to consciousness. In the same vein, Thagaard (1986) has shown us that parallel computation offers a wealth of structures that can handle things like multiple hypothesis, non-propositional data structures and non-linear inferences. It has even been suggested that the dialectical nature of thought may be understandable at the cellular level in terms of inhibitory interaction. Although none of these studies use "dialectical" in the sense that was intended here, still the fact that mediational structures are more diversified and adaptive than previously thought would seem to make the extension of the term to things other than human self-consciousness neither inconsistent nor inappropriate.

Without picking too many holes in their coat, I see a real problem residing within these papers. If the teleological nature of humans is based on consciousness, i.e., the unique property of dialectical cognition, then is there anything left over in non-conscious processes that is dynamic enough to follow the person during the course of his or her life? It would seem to me that if goal-directed behavior does not extend itself to the non-conscious part of the self, then any connection to the person qua person would be superficial in that there would be no sub-phenomenal dimension around that could close the gap between past,

present and future states of consciousness to form a more historical and enduring self. There would be no unity of psychological functions that could be explained by ownership; no identity through change that could carry that often referred to Aristotelian potential into actuality.

On the other hand, if teleological explanation admits that non-conscious processes can be goal-directed, can we not talk about embedded subroutines possessing a rudimentary form of awareness? Or even as possessing the power to alter their goals? Can we not use the language of goal-directed behavior in a way that does not presuppose mind? Or look upon inanimate and unconscious entities, like crystal growth and receding galaxies, as being teleological?

Mediational accounts may be insufficient in explaining the self-catalytic and self-subsisting nature of humanity, but I believe that the teleological explanations before us may be insufficient in the sense that they fail to take seriously how psychological factors interact over time and between levels of organization to yield the thoughts and feelings of which we are aware. Awareness often exceeds consciousness and leaves the person steadfast and unbroken both before and after the event (as choices often go beyond consciousness and still express the subject's will).

If an argument is to reaffirm the human element, it cannot limit itself to simply showing that the mediational type of explanation neither exhausts, nor accurately reflects, the nature of humankind. If the person is to be an intrinsic and embedded factor, rather than something that simply satisfies a mental description or arises out of the organization of physical systems, then it would seem that we must take a harder look at how psychological factors interact to yield different kinds of awareness and play different kinds of roles; how experiences continuously run through our world whether we are conscious of them or not; how memory is forward looking and reconstructive, as well as backward directional and justificatory; how objects to be processed have a particular entry point level that is very much dependent upon the person's receptivity; and how everything from cells to synapses to molecules may be organized or modified by personal factors.

This is not to depreciate consciousness, or make it a side show; for consciousness is still the place where we most appropriately objectify and fulfill ourselves. Nor does this entail that there is no directness of experience or that the subjective character can have no intrinsic properties which specify what it is like to have them. But the fact that we seem to be able to attend to things non-consciously, and are in fact often aware of things while not attending, would seem to imply that there is a lot more personal activity and goal-oriented movement going on in the individual than these papers seem disposed to recognize. What I am or the quiddity of what is me is not always found in the well-lit corridors of our mind.

I might add, in this regard, that I found the paper by Lamiell and Durbeck to be particularly promising in that it offers an explanation of how unconscious

activity can be greatly infused with human meaning. I think that there is something to the fact (1) that the basic level of categorization in mental processing lies somewhere between the cluster of parts which represent concrete relations and the superordinate levels of functional abstractions; and (2) that these prototypes reflect not only the structure of the world due to ecological constraints, but the structure of the particular embodiment that is negotiating its way through the world (cf., Murphy and Medin, 1985; Shepard, 1984). Perhaps what is being disclosed here, contrary to Rosch's (1978) stable exemplars, is not so much that we have a natural way of classifying things, but that we have natural beings who give form to conceptual awareness only so far as they are involved. Perhaps the real message is that mediational theory has no isolated building blocks—no natural concept of elementary things as being real or even significant. That if we are to respect the integrity of a being, then we must come to realize that the designs and purposes, the feelings and experiences that run in the individual, are components of a more primitive self.

Although intentionality seems redundant once we explain our actions in terms of desires and beliefs, the power of the individual to affect what takes place is certainly less limited than mediational theory dictates. The following papers have clearly shown us that it certainly challenges intuitive insight into human behavior to assert that individuals who can focus, select and concentrate on things to form a personal and purposeful view of the world; who can consciously enter into conflict with beliefs to the point of being defiant; and who can represent their actions to themselves in a future tense, nevertheless did not have the power to be the source and explanation of what occurs. Individuals may not be in a privileged position when it comes to the question of whether their judgements are a reliable indicator of their beliefs, but they do appear to be in a position, since judgements come one at a time, to arrive at outcomes that are the object of their decision or preference.

Recent theories of human behavior might be correct to emphasize the constraints which organizational structures and rules exercise over our activities, but they certainly fall short in explaining what makes our actions what they are. Mediational theory may not need ghosts to make it go, but without a sharper distinction between the agent who engages the structure and the structure itself, without more sensitivity to the complexed characterizations of human activity, such a perspective cannot reconstruct a situation as it might have been grasped by the individual. We can certainly thank these "telic" papers for bringing this point right home.

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