

The Dead Hands of Group Selection and Phenomenology -- A Review of Individuality and Entanglement by Herbert Gintis 357p (2017)

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ABSTRACT

Since Gintis is a senior economist and I have read some of his previous books with interest, I was expecting some more insights into behavior. Sadly he makes the dead hands of group selection and phenomenology into the centerpieces of his theories of behavior, and this largely invalidates the work. Worse, since he shows such bad judgement here, it calls into question all his previous work. The attempt to resurrect group selection by his friends at Harvard, Nowak and Wilson, a few years ago was one of the major scandals in biology in the last decade, and I have recounted the sad story in my article 'Altruism, Jesus and the End of the World—how the Templeton Foundation bought a Harvard Professorship and attacked Evolution, Rationality and Civilization -- A review of E.O. Wilson 'The Social Conquest of Earth' (2012) and Nowak and Highfield 'SuperCooperators' (2012).' Unlike Nowak, Gintis does not seem to be motivated by religious fanaticism, but by the strong desire to generate an alternative to the grim realities of human nature, made easy by the (near universal) lack of understanding of basic human biology and blank slateism of behavioral scientists, other academics, and the general public.

Gintis rightly attacks (as he has many times before) economists, sociologists and other behavioral scientists for not having a coherent framework to describe behavior. Of course the framework needed to understand behavior is an evolutionary one. Unfortunately he fails to provide one himself (according to his many critics and I concur), and the attempt to graft the rotten corpse of group selection onto whatever economic and psychological theories he has generated in his decades of work, merely invalidates his entire project. Although Gintis makes a valiant effort to understand and explain the genetics, like Wilson and Nowak, he is far from an expert, and like them, the math just blinds him to the biological impossibilities and of course this is the norm in science. As Wittgenstein famously noted on the first page of Culture and Value "There is no religious denomination in which the misuse of metaphysical expressions has been responsible for so much sin as it has in mathematics."

It has always been crystal clear that a gene that causes behavior which decreases its own frequency cannot persist, but this is the core of the notion of group selection. Furthermore, it has been well known and often demonstrated that group selection just reduces to inclusive fitness (kin selection), which, as Dawkins has noted, is just another name for evolution by natural selection. Like Wilson, Gintis has worked in this arena for about 50 years and still has not grasped it, but after the scandal broke, it took me only 3 days to find, read and understand the most relevant professional work, as detailed in my article. It is mind boggling to realize that Gintis and Wilson were unable to accomplish this in nearly half a century.

I discuss the errors of group selection and phenomenology that are the norm in academia as special cases of the near universal failure to understand human nature that are destroying America and the world.

Those who wish to read all my articles please consult the ebook here [Philosophy, Human Nature and the Collapse of Civilization -- Articles and Reviews 2006-2016](#) by Michael Starks 662p (2016)

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In the years after the Nowak, Wilson, Tarnita paper was published in *Nature*, several population geneticists recounted chapter and verse on the subject, again showing conclusively that it is all a storm in a teacup. It is most unfortunate that Gintis, like his friends, failed to ask a competent biologist about this and regards as misguided the 140 some well known biologists who signed a letter protesting the publication of this nonsense in *Nature*. I refer those who want the gory details to my paper, as it's the best account of the melee that I am aware of. For a summary of the tech details see Dawkins Article The Descent of Edward Wilson <http://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/magazine/edward-wilson-social-conquest-earth-evolutionary-errors-origin-species>. As Dawkins wrote 'For Wilson not to acknowledge that he speaks for himself against the great majority of his professional colleagues is—it pains me to say this of a lifelong hero —an act of wanton arrogance'. Sadly Gintis has assimilated himself to such inglorious company. There are also some nice Dawkins youtubes such as <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IBweDk4ZzZ4>.

Gintis has also failed to provide the behavioral framework lacking in all the social sciences. One needs to have a logical structure for rationality, an understanding of the two systems of thought (dual process theory), of the division between scientific issues of fact and philosophical issues of how language works in the context at issue, and of how to avoid reductionism and scientism, but he, like nearly all students of behavior, is largely clueless. He, like them, is enchanted by models, theories, and concepts, and the urge to explain, while Wittgenstein showed us that we only need to describe, and that theories, concepts etc., are just ways of using language (language games) which have value only insofar as they have a clear test (clear truthmakers, or as eminent philosopher John Searle likes to say, clear Conditions of Satisfaction (COS)). I have attempted to provide a start on this in my recent writings, such as *The Logical Structure of Consciousness (behavior, personality, rationality, higher order thought, intentionality)* (2016) and *The Logical Structure of Philosophy, Psychology, Mind and Language as Revealed in the Writings of Ludwig Wittgenstein and John Searle* (2016). Those interested in all my writings in their most recent versions may consult my e-book *Philosophy, Human Nature and the Collapse of Civilization - Articles and Reviews 2006-2016* 662p (2016). I will now give a brief presentation of this framework. Since I have explained this table and its use in describing behavior in great detail in many recent papers and several books, available on this site and others, I will not repeat it here.

After half a century in oblivion, the nature of consciousness (intentionality, behavior) is now the hottest topic in the behavioral sciences and philosophy. Beginning with the pioneering work of Ludwig Wittgenstein from the 1930's (the Blue and Brown Books) to 1951, and from the 50's to the present by his successors Searle, Moyal-Sharrock, Read, Hacker, Stern, Horwich, Winch, Finkelstein etc., I have created the following table as an heuristic for furthering this study. The rows show various aspects or ways of studying and the columns show the involuntary processes and voluntary behaviors comprising the two systems (dual processes) of the Logical Structure of Consciousness (LSC), which can also be regarded as the Logical Structure of Rationality (LSR-Searle), of behavior (LSB), of personality (LSP), of Mind (LSM), of language (LSL), of reality (LSOR), of Intentionality (LSI) -the classical philosophical term, the Descriptive Psychology of Consciousness (DPC) , the Descriptive Psychology of Thought (DPT) –or better, the Language of the Descriptive Psychology of Thought (LDPT), terms introduced here and in my other very recent writings.

The ideas for this table originated in the work by Wittgenstein, a much simpler table by Searle, and correlates with extensive tables and graphs in the three recent books on Human Nature by P.M.S Hacker. The last 9 rows come principally from decision research by Johnathan St. B.T. Evans and colleagues as revised by myself.

System 1 is involuntary, reflexive or automated “Rules” R1 while Thinking (Cognition) has no gaps and is voluntary or deliberative “Rules” R2 and Willing (Volition) has 3 gaps (see Searle)

	Disposition*	Emotion	Memory	Perception	Desire	PI**	IA***	Action/Word
Cause Originates From****	World	World	World	World	Mind	Mind	Mind	Mind
Causes Changes In*****	None	Mind	Mind	Mind	None	World	World	World
Causally Self Reflexive*****	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
True or False (Testable)	Yes	T only	T only	T only	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Public Conditions of Satisfaction	Yes	Yes/No	Yes/No	No	Yes/No	Yes	No	Yes
Describe a Mental State	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes/No	Yes
Evolutionary Priority	5	4	2,3	1	5	3	2	2
Voluntary Content	Yes	No	No	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes

Voluntary Initiation	Yes/No	No	Yes	No	Yes/No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Cognitive System *****	2	1	2/1	1	2 / 1	2	1	2
Change Intensity	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	No
Precise Duration	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes	Yes
Time, Place(H+N,T+T) *****	TT	HN	HN	HN	TT	TT	HN	HN
Special Quality	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	No	No	No
Localized in Body	No	No	No	Yes	No	No	No	Yes
Bodily Expressions	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Self Contradictions	No	Yes	No	No	Yes	No	No	No
Needs a Self	Yes	Yes/No	No	No	Yes	No	No	No
Needs Language	Yes	No	No	No	No	No	No	Yes/No
FROM DECISION RESEARCH								
Subliminal Effects	No	Yes/No	Yes	Yes	No	No	No	Yes/No
Associative/Rule Based	RB	A/RB	A	A	A/RB	RB	RB	RB
Context Dependent/Abstract	A	CD/A	CD	CD	CD/A	A	CD/A	CD/A
Serial/Parallel	S	S/P	P	P	S/P	S	S	S
Heuristic/Analytic	A	H/A	H	H	H/A	A	A	A
Needs Working Memory	Yes	No	No	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
General Intelligence Dependent	Yes	No	No	No	Yes/No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Cognitive Loading Inhibits	Yes	Yes/No	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Arousal Facilitates or Inhibits	I	F/I	F	F	I	I	I	I

Public Conditions of Satisfaction of S2 are often referred to by Searle and others as COS, Representations, truthmakers or meanings (or COS2 by myself), while the automatic results of S1 are designated as presentations by others (or COS1 by myself).

* Aka Inclinations, Capabilities, Preferences, Representations, possible actions etc.

** Searle's Prior Intentions

*** Searle's Intention In Action

**** Searle's Direction of Fit

***** Searle's Direction of Causation

***** (Mental State instantiates--Causes or Fulfills Itself). Searle formerly called this causally self-referential.

*****Tversky/Kahneman/Frederick/Evans/Stanovich defined cognitive systems.

***** Here and Now or There and Then

It is of interest to compare this with the various tables and charts in Peter Hacker's recent 3 volumes on Human Nature. One should always keep in mind Wittgenstein's discovery that after we have *described* the possible uses (meanings, truthmakers, Conditions of Satisfaction) of language in a particular context, we have exhausted its interest, and attempts at *explanation* (i.e., philosophy) only get us further away from the truth. He showed us that there is only one philosophical problem—the use of sentences (language games) in an inappropriate context, and hence only one solution— showing the correct context.

Gintis starts making dubious, vague or downright bizarre claims early in the book. It begins on the first page of the overview with meaningless quotes from Einstein and Ryle. On pxii the paragraph beginning 'Third Theme' about entangled minds needs rewriting to specify that language games are functions of System 2 and that's how thinking, believing etc. work (what they are), while the Fourth Theme which tries to explain behavior as due to what people 'consciously believe' is right. That is, with 'nonconsequentialism' he's trying to 'explain' behavior as 'altruistic' group selection mediated by conscious linguistic System 2. But if we take an evolutionary long term view, it's clearly due to reciprocal altruism, attempting to serve inclusive fitness, which is mediated by the unconscious operation of System 1. Likewise for the Fifth Theme and the rest of the Overview. He favors Rational Choice but has no idea this is a language game for which the exact context must be specified, nor that both System 1 and System 2 are 'rational' but in quite different ways. This is the classic error of most descriptions of behavior, which Searle has called The Phenomenological Illusion, Pinker the Blank Slate and Tooby and Cosmides 'The Standard Social Science Model') and I have discussed it extensively in my other reviews and articles. As long as one does not grasp that most of our behavior is automated by nonlinguistic System 1, and that our conscious linguistic System 2 is mostly for rationalization of our compulsive and unconscious choices, it is not possible to have more than a very superficial view of behavior, i.e., the one that is nearly universal not only among

academics but politicians, billionaire owners of high tech companies, movie stars and the general public. Consequently, the consequences reach far beyond academia, producing delusional social policies that are bringing about the inexorable collapse of industrial civilization. See my 'Suicide by Democracy-an Obituary for America and the World'. It is breathtaking to see America and the European democracies helping citizens of the third world destroy everyone's future.

On pxiii one can describe the 'nonconsequentialist' (i.e., apparently 'true' altruistic or self-destructive behavior) as actually performing reciprocal altruism, serving inclusive fitness due to genes evolved in the EEA (Environment of Evolutionary Adaptation—i.e., that of our very distant ancestors), which stimulates the dopaminergic circuits in the ventral tegmentum and the nucleus accumbens, with the resulting release of dopamine which makes us feel good—the same mechanism that appears to be involved in all addictive behavior from drug abuse to soccer moms.

And more incoherent babble such as "In the context of such environments, there is a fitness benefit to the 'epigenetic transmission' of such 'information' concerning the 'current state' of the 'environment', i.e., transmission through non genetic 'channels'. This is called 'cultural transmission'" [scare quotes mine]. Also that 'culture' is 'directly encoded' in the brain (p7), which he says is the main tenet of gene-culture coevolution, and that democratic institutions and voting are altruistic and cannot be explained in terms of self-interest (p17-18). The major reason for these peculiar views does not really come out until p186 when he finally makes it clear that he is a group selectionist. Since there is no such thing as group selection apart from inclusive fitness, it's no surprise that this is just another incoherent account of behavior—i.e., more or less what Tooby and Cosmides famously termed The Standard Social Science Model.

What he calls 'altruistic genes' on p188 should be called 'inclusive fitness genes' or 'kin selection genes'. Gintis is also much impressed with the idea of gene-culture coevolution, which only means that culture may itself be an agent of natural selection but he fails to grasp that this can only happen within the context of natural selection (inclusive fitness). Like nearly all social scientists (and scientists, philosophers etc.), it never crosses his mind that 'culture', 'coevolution', 'symbolic', 'epigenetic', 'information', 'representation' etc., are all families of complex language games, whose COS (Conditions Of Satisfaction, tests for truth) are exquisitely sensitive to context. Without a specific context they don't mean anything. So in this book, as in most of the literature on behavior, there is much talk that has the appearance of sense without sense (meaning or clear COS).

His claim on pxv, that most of our genes are the result of culture, is clearly preposterous as e.g., it is well known that we are about 98% chimpanzee. Only if he means those relating to language can we accept the possibility that some of our genes have been subject to cultural

selection and even these merely modified ones that already existed—i.e., a few base pairs were changed out of hundreds of thousands or millions in each gene.

He is much taken with the 'rational actor' model of economic behavior. but again is unaware that the automaticities of S1 underlie all 'rational' behavior and the conscious linguistic deliberations of S2 cannot take place without them. Like many, perhaps the vast majority of current younger students of behavior, I see all human activities as easily comprehensible results of the working of selfish genetics in a contemporary context in which police surveillance and a temporary abundance of resources gotten by raping the earth and robbing our own descendants leads to relative temporary tranquility. In this connection I suggest my review of Pinker's recent book—The Transient Suppression of the Worst Devils of Our Nature—A Review of The Better Angels of Our Nature'. Many behaviors look like true altruism, and some are (i.e., they will decrease the frequency of the genes that bring them about – i.e, lead to the extinction of their own descendants), but the point which Gintis misses is that these are due to a psychology which evolved long ago in small groups on the African plains in the EEA and made sense then (i.e., it was inclusive fitness, when everyone in our group of a few dozen to a few hundred were our close relatives), and so we often continue with these behaviors even though they no longer make sense (i.e., they serve the interests of unrelated or distantly related persons which decreases our genetic fitness by decreasing the frequency of the genes that made it possible). This accounts for his promoting the notion that many behaviors are 'truly altruistic', rather than selfish in origin (such as in sect. 3.2). He even notes this and calls it 'distributed effectivity' (p60-63) in which people behave in big elections as though they were small ones, but he fails to see this is not due to any genes for 'true altruism' but to genes for reciprocal altruism (inclusive fitness), which is of course selfish. Thus people behave as though their actions (e.g., their votes) were consequential, even though it is clear that they are not. E.g., one can find on the net that the chances of any one person's vote deciding the outcome of an American presidential election is in the range of millions to tens of millions to one. And of course the same is true of our chances of winning a lottery, yet our malfunctioning EEA psychology makes lotteries and voting hugely popular activities.

He also seems unaware of the standard terminology and ways of describing behavior used in evolutionary psychology (EP). E.g., on pg. 75 Arrow's description of norms of social behavior are described in economic terms rather than as EP from the EEA trying to operate in current environments, and at the bottom of the page, people act not as 'altruistic' punishers (i.e., as 'group selectionists') but as inclusive fitness punishers. On p 78, to say that subjects act 'morally' or in accord with a norm 'for its own sake', is again to embrace the group selectionist/phenomenological illusion, and clearly it is groups of genes that are trying to increase their inclusive fitness via well-known EP mechanisms like cheater detection and punishment. Again on p88, what he describes as other-regarding unselfish actions can just as

easily be described as self-regarding attempts at reciprocal altruism which go astray in a large society.

Naturally, he often uses standard economics jargon such as ‘the subjective prior must be interpreted as a conditional probability’, which just means a belief in the likelihood of a particular outcome (p90-91), and ‘common subjective priors’ (shared beliefs) p122. Much of the book and of behavior concerns what is often called ‘we intentionality’ or the construction of social reality, but the most eminent theorist in this arena, John Searle, is not discussed, his now standard terminology such as COS and DIRA (desire independent reasons for action) does not appear, he is not in the index, and only one of his many works, and that over 20 years old, is found in the bibliography.

On p97 he comments favorably on Bayesian updating without mentioning that it is notorious for lacking any meaningful test for success (i.e., clear COS), and commonly fails to make any clear predictions, so that no matter what people do, it can describe their behavior after the fact.

However, the main problem with chapter 5 is that ‘rational’ and other terms are complex language games that have no meaning apart from very specific contexts, which are typically lacking here. Of course, as Wittgenstein showed us, this is the core problem of all discussion of behavior and Gintis has most of the behavioral science community (or at least most of those over 40) as coconspirators. Likewise throughout the book, such as chapter 6, where he discusses ‘complexity theory’, ‘emergent properties’, ‘macro and micro levels’, and ‘nonlinear dynamical systems’ and the generation of ‘models’ (which can mean almost anything and ‘describe’ almost anything), but it’s only prediction that counts (i.e., clear COS).

In spite of his phenomenological illusion (i.e., the near universal assumption that our conscious deliberations describe and control behavior—at odds with almost all the research in social psychology for the last 40 years), he also shares the reductionist delusion, wondering why the social sciences have not got a core analytical theory and have not coalesced. This of course is a frequent subject in the social sciences and philosophy and the reason is that psychology of higher order thought is not describable by causes, but by reasons, and one cannot make psychology disappear into physiology nor physiology into biochemistry nor it into physics etc. They are just different and indispensable levels of description. Wittgenstein famously described it 80 years ago in the Blue Book.

“Our craving for generality has [as one] source ... our preoccupation with the method of science. I mean the method of reducing the explanation of natural phenomena to the smallest possible number of primitive natural laws; and, in mathematics, of unifying the treatment of different topics by using a generalization. Philosophers constantly see the method of science before their eyes, and are irresistibly tempted to ask and answer in the way science does. This tendency is the

real source of metaphysics, and leads the philosopher into complete darkness. I want to say here that it can never be our job to reduce anything to anything, or to explain anything. Philosophy really is “purely descriptive.”

He is also quite out of touch with the contemporary world, thinking that people are going to be nice because they have internalized altruism (i.e., group selection), and with demographic realities, when he opines that population growth is under control, when in fact predictions are for another 4 billion by 2100 (p133).

He sees a need to “carve an academic niche for sociology” (p148), but the whole discussion is typical gibberish (no clear COS), and all one really needs (or can give) is a clear description of the language games (the mind at work) we play in social situations, and how they show how our attempts at inclusive fitness work or go astray in contemporary contexts. Over and over he pushes his fantasy that “inherently ethical behavior” (i.e., group selectionist altruism) explains our social behavior, ignoring the obvious facts that it’s due to temporary abundance of resources, police and surveillance, and that always when you take these away savagery quickly emerges (e.g., p151). It’s easy to maintain such delusions when one lives in the ivory tower world of abstruse theories, inattentive to the millions of scams, robberies, rapes, assaults, thefts and murders taking place every day.

Again and again (e.g., top p170) he ignores the obvious explanations for our ‘rationality’, which is natural selection –i.e., inclusive fitness in the EEA leading to ESS (Evolutionarily Stable Strategies), or at least they were more or less stable in small groups 100,000 to 3 million years ago.

Chapter 9 on the Sociology of the Genome is inevitably full of mistakes and incoherence—e.g., there are not special ‘altruistic genes’, rather, all genes serve inclusive fitness or they disappear (p188). The problem is that the only way to really get selfish genetics and inclusive fitness across is to have Gintis in a room for a day with Dawkins, Franks, Coyne etc., explaining why it is wrong. But as always, one has to have a certain level of education, intelligence, rationality and honesty for this to work, and if one is just a little bit short in several categories, it will not succeed. The same of course is true for much of human understanding, and so the vast majority will never get anything that is at all subtle. As with the Nowak, Wilson, Tarnita paper, I am sure that Dawkins, Franks and others would have been willing to go over this chapter and explain where it goes astray, but wanton arrogance is an absolute barrier to truth.

The major problem is that people just do not grasp the concept of natural selection by inclusive fitness nor of subconscious motivations, and that many have ‘religious’ motivations for rejecting them. This includes not just the general public and non-science academics, but a large percentage of biologists and behavioral scientists. I recently came across a lovely review by

Dawkins of a discussion of the selfish gene idea by top level professional biologists, in which he had to go over their work line by line to explain that they just did not grasp how it all works. But only a small number of people like him could do this, and the sea of confusion is vast, and so these delusions about human nature that destroy this book, and are destroying America and the world will, as the Queen said to Alice in a slightly different context, go on until they come to the end and then stop.