

“What’s That You Say?”

George E. Marcus

Though I am sympathetic to the program of research that John Hibbing advances, I raise four issues with the claims he presents. I argue that political science has not been slow to adopt an interest in biology. I argue that like all perspectives on how to advance knowledge, neurobiology must win its place by generating demonstrable results central to our understanding of politics. In agreeing with Hibbing that some hold misperceptions, I note that this is hardly uncommon, even if it is unwelcome in a scientific community. And, finally, I note that narratives of explanation often serve a variety of masters. While those derived from science are meant to restrict the consideration of competing narratives to those that are testable with empirical data, even members of scientific communities find that other claimants have some sway. Among the non-scientific purposes that narratives serve are: achieving simplicity; sustaining communities of mutual agreement; and advancing indulgent doctrines of ennoblement.

It should surprise few that I am sympathetic to the trajectory of research advanced by John Hibbing. Notwithstanding, sometimes authors say more than they intend and sometimes less than is required.

By claiming he is taking on “misperceptions” Hibbing is leaving some ambiguity about his audience and about some of the claims he advances. Perceptions are fragmentary observations pertaining to some features of the world (none of us can see all that the world offers, limited as we are by the reach and design of our senses). Hibbing, by adopting the term “perception,” seeks to engage a wide audience, an audience that extends well beyond our discipline. But in that broader domain, the character of discourse is broadly argumentative. And in such wider settings, claims of all sorts fly back and fourth. And in that realm, claims are more likely to be speculative than based on scientifically valid evidence. Claims more often recruit some logic, often specious, to advance the cause. Claimants often seek to gain some traction by recruiting an authoritative spokesperson (and by denigrating the character of those holding forth to the contrary). However, if the claims Hibbing takes up are matters of science, then the term “perception” is a misnomer. The term for explanation in scientific discourse is theory (or, more narrowly, hypothesis). Are the ten listed “misperceptions” theoretical in character and hence subject to the anonymous rigor of data? Or are they opinions?

Hibbing begins his essay by advancing two claims that I wish to challenge. First, he argues that “political science is far behind other social sciences in incorporating neuro-

biological concepts, techniques, and theory” (p. 475). Which other social sciences are doing better in this regard? To take but one counterexample, the turn to neuroscience to understand emotion began in political science in the early 1980s, a time years before some in psychology began to do the same and decades before some economists did so. I haven’t examined sociology or anthropology for any interest in the neuroscience of emotion, but I doubt Hibbing means to claim they led the way.

It is worth noting that among Hibbing’s references is an article that Albert Somit and Stephen Peterson published in 1998 summarizing three prior decades of research in biopolitics.¹ Maybe there is some magic in the neologism “neurobiology” that differentiates it from biopolitics, or for that matter the enduring interest in human nature and politics that engaged Roger Masters, James Davies, or John Orbell, to take but a few of many who were active in years previous. Or for that matter, Descartes, Hobbes, Hume, Aristotle, Plato, and so many others. If this new interest is a wave, as Hibbing argues, it is but one of many. Of the many are those that have previously lapped our shores. It is safe to predict that many will land on these shores in the years ahead.

Second, Hibbing offers the claim that the efforts “to get the larger discipline to incorporate biological techniques have been only minimally successful and many traditional scholars view the movement as counterproductive and possibly dangerous” (p. 475). If we grant that observation as accurate, though little evidence is advanced beyond the vaguely anecdotal, so what? Isn’t that to be expected? Why is this a cause for concern? As Hibbing recognizes, “normal” science is designed to resist any claims unless sustained by sound and repeated evidence that is capable of testing the merit of claims, old as well as new. That some will resist out of interest in securing their established ways

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and accounts and that some will remain apart out of trepidation for the unknown career consequences of taking up a new trajectory is hardly an array of concerns specific to neurobiology. So why would we seek to make neurobiology safe? If neurobiology has any leverage to offer it will certainly result in new and overturning insights.

The fundamental premises of Hibbing's essay are that some hold demonstrably false beliefs—"misperceptions"—and that they will readily set these aside once clear evidence to the contrary is advanced. Here let me turn to my third and fourth critical points.

One aspect that is common to all ten of the stated misperceptions is their simplicity, a feature reflecting two well-known facets of human nature. First, we all find that simple narratives are easier than complex narratives to convey and to share, thus enabling us to bind into communities of shared belief and feeling. Second, as most know, the limits of working memory are characterized by Miller's rule of seven plus or minus two, which tells us that working memory can only handle about seven items.² Conscious awareness has very limited representational ability, hence it is no surprise that the normative and empirical combine to entice us with the seductive attraction of simplicity. Hence, it comes as little surprise that the perceptions Hibbing takes on each are presented in the form of simple cause and straightforward effect.

For example, consider two of the ten from Hibbing's list, numbers 6 and 7. These "misperceptions" argue that invoking biology produces ideological "bias." We could alternatively say that biological approaches have an "agenda." Hibbing notes that research tells a more complicated story. Research seldom satisfies the ideological needs of partisan adherents. Hibbing makes the important point that science leads us to findings that often corrode conventional wisdoms, especially such simple didactic assertions as these.

In support of Hibbing's point let me cite an important paper by neuroscientist and psychologist John Cacioppo and his colleagues, Wendi L. Gardner and Gary G. Berntson.³ Therein, they advance the finding that across many attitudes people show a "positivity offset" and a "negativity bias." The first claim, in lay terms, means that in the absence of any knowledge of the reward or punishing character of a stimulus, people are curious and will be open to exploring it, thus displaying a positivity bias. Unbiased individuals would presumably be neither inclined to avoid nor inclined to approach a stimulus of unknown value. In that regard it might be said we are liberal given that we are inclined towards the new and unknown. However, the second claim of a negativity bias describes us as displaying a consequential stronger reaction to punishment than to reward. This suggests a conservative character to our species. This complexity undoes the simple theoretical claim that the biological nature of humans is "liberal" or "conservative." The conclusion—that human

character, however we study it, is complicated—leads to my last point.

Most, perhaps all, of the perceptions Hibbing lists are not primarily scientific claims, though he treats them as such. It would be nice if our perceptions rested provisionally on the latest meta-analysis of soundly-crafted empirical data. It would be nice if we readily "updated" our perceptions whenever new findings recommend. But perceptions serve many functions, and the goal of securing the best evidence on them has not been one of the highest concerns for many in the scientific community . . . except of course for you and me. Hibbing acknowledges that some resist new methods and new findings out of conservative impulses seeking to protect extant methodologies and bodies of literature, but there is a more compelling source of resistance that speaks directly to the issues at hand.

This brings me to my last point. Humans rely on narratives to offer self-justification for who and what we come to understand about ourselves as well as to comprehend the many circumstances, familiar and generic, we encounter. Preserving the integrity of our many narratives is critical to our functioning in all realms of our existence, public and private. Our established narratives support our notions of autonomy and restraint. They account for actions taken and for those left undone. They explain the orderliness of the social fabric in its many folds. They account for the fissures man-made or natural that breach our expectations. But in my reading, the first seven of the listed "misperceptions" reflect old and deep presumptions about human freedom.

From its early construction, many Western narratives have been tied to a specific conception of freedom. That conception holds that only disembodied "free will" expresses freedom and it is that capacity for freedom, so defined, that exemplifies our higher nature. Given that presumption, it follows that any claim that our capacity for judgment is embedded in biology and thereby subject to the "laws of nature" implies a loss of freedom. For we would then be bound to follow the dictates of our bodies. It is not surprising then to find many Western narratives, those official such as religious doctrines, and those lay, often populated with spirit beings, those creatures unhindered by any body imperatives, such as wraiths, ghosts, ghouls, souls wandering or not—in sum, imagined spectral beings of all sorts. Of course, there are notions of freedom that do not rely on a mind-body dualism. Isaiah Berlin's *Four Essays on Liberty* offers just one reflection on the alternatives. But the deeply embedded notion of disembodied freedom is widely held and deeply defended.

The conception from which many of these "misperceptions" have sprung is the shining ennobling vision of the disembodied mind. When our beliefs express our core narrative they will be defended not because they rely on

“best evidence,” but because our sense of self relies not on evidence but on belief. Plato, in *The Republic*, foretells how we respond when core convictions are claimed to be false. Plato’s searcher after truth, after ascending to the light returns to the cave. At that juncture in his story Plato asks Glaucon:

Then what do you think would happen, I asked, if he went back to his old seat in the cave? Wouldn’t his eyes be blinded by the darkness, because he had come suddenly out of the sunlight?

Certainly.

And if he had to discriminate between the shadows, in competition with other prisoners, while he was blinded and before his eyes got used to the darkness—a process that would take some time—wouldn’t he be making a fool of himself? And they would say that his visit to the upper world had ruined his sight, and that the ascent was not worth even attempting. And if anyone tried to release them and lead them up, they would kill him if they could ever lay hands on him.

They certainly would.⁴

To Plato’s account we can add the more recent confirmations offered by Leon Festinger and Milton Rokeach.⁵ Science asks a lot of those who hold to its discipline. As the recent film *The Master* shows, our need for coherent narrative is more compelling than the value we assign to the credibility of the empirical claims recruited to sustain any given chronicle. And that remains as true for those within the scientific community as those without. It is not likely that many will be freed from the grip of core convictions even when the evidence is overwhelming unless the core convictions are weakened by circumstances beyond the reach of scientific evidence. Notwithstanding that dystopian observation, I end by hoping that at least some will

take up Hibbing’s encouraging welcome to join with him in that ancient inquiry of who we are.

Notes

- 1 Somit and Peterson 1998.
- 2 Miller 1956.
- 3 Cacioppo, Gardner, and Berntson 1997.
- 4 Plato 516e–517a.
- 5 Festinger et al. (1956), Rokeach (1960; 1964).

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