



# Moving On Our Feet: For a Nomadic Psychology

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## Abstract

Zagaria, Andò and Zennaro have provided a useful analysis of the theoretical precariousness of psychology by looking at a number of its core concepts. They propose that evolutionary psychology could be a unifying approach for the otherwise fragmented discipline. In this response, I argue that although evolutionary psychology provides many interesting perspectives on the mental life of human beings, it is much too soon to jump to a unifying conclusion for psychology on its basis. Before beginning the work of explaining the functioning of the mind in evolutionary terms, we need illuminating descriptions of mental life as such. Phenomenological description should precede evolutionary explanation, and the former will reveal that mental life is intentional and normative – something that evolutionary and other explanatory perspectives have difficulties accommodating. When the subject matter is human mental life, it might be better to live with conceptual confusion than obtaining consensus on a misguided foundation. I agree with the authors that psychology stands on feet of clay, but instead of lamenting the “unsteady building” of the discipline, I suggest we embrace a more nomadic life for psychology – moving about on our feet – given the fact that humans perpetually and historically seem to reflect on their own lives, which is a process that should be kept open rather than terminated.

**Keywords** Intentionality · Normativity · Phenomenology · Evolutionary psychology · Psychologization · Foundations

## Introduction

Zagaria et al. (2020) have provided a very useful analysis of the theoretical precariousness of psychology by looking thoroughly at a number of its core concepts. In so doing, they join forces with the long-lasting industry of psychology critique, which has

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claimed that psychology is in crisis (Vygotsky 1927), suffers from conceptual confusion (Wittgenstein 1953), and might simply be infused with epistemological and ideological problems (see Teo 2006, for a history of some of this critique). By referring to an industry of critique, I do not mean to be pejorative, as I believe that the industry of psychology critique is just as important as the industry of psychology itself, especially given the fact that we are today witnessing a psychologization of society around the world (Madsen 2018). If so, all of us need to look critically at the workings of psychology and especially look for the limits of what can legitimately be psychologized.

I thus find the authors' approach very fruitful, as they have studied a large number of textbooks and demonstrated that there is little to no agreement in psychology about core concepts such as mind, behavior, consciousness or cognition. This seems to reinforce Sigmund Koch's observation made many years ago that psychologists have never been able to agree on their subject matter, so instead they have concentrated their efforts on discussing methods (Koch 1981). Koch referred to this tendency as *epistemopathic*, and in the mid-twentieth century we saw psychologists gathering around statistics and experimental measures, and since then there has been a veritable explosion in quantitative and qualitative methodologies, but with little discussion about ontology and the nature of psychological phenomena.

However, I am more skeptical about the authors' proposed solution: That evolutionary psychology could be a unifying approach for the otherwise fragmented discipline. In what follows, I shall argue that although evolutionary psychology provides many interesting perspectives on the mental life of human beings, it is much too soon to jump to a unifying conclusion for psychology on its basis. Before beginning the work of explaining the functioning of the mind in evolutionary terms, we need illuminating descriptions of mental life as such. As I will discuss below, my main point is that phenomenological description should precede evolutionary explanation, and the former will reveal that mental life is intentional and normative – something that evolutionary and other explanatory perspectives have difficulties accommodating. When the subject matter is human mental life, it might be better to live with conceptual confusion than obtaining consensus on a misguided foundation.

I agree with the authors that psychology stands on feet of clay, but instead of lamenting the clay-like character of the “unsteady building” of the discipline, seeking stable feet of cement, I suggest we embrace a more nomadic life for psychology. This should metaphorically involve moving about on our feet, given the fact that humans perpetually and historically seem to reflect on their own lives, which is a process that should be kept open rather than closed. Paradoxically, the core of psychology might consist in its lack of a core – its foundation might be found in its lack of foundations, or at least in the idea that “we must continually create our foundations, precisely because we lack them”, as Steve Brown and Paul Stenner have put it in a book about “psychology without foundations” (2009, p. 6).

## The Problems of Evolutionary Psychology

I will not focus much in this text on what Zagaria et al. (2020) call the “unsteady building” of psychology. They demonstrate eloquently that this is a fact. Instead, I will

question their ambition of constructing a steady building based on the foundation of evolutionary psychology. I hope that this can serve as an instructional example of how any foundational call is likely to come with certain problems.

It is clear from the authors' writings that they rightly see evolutionary psychology as a very broad school of thought (having both narrow and broad senses). They believe that it "fully accounts both for our innate and universal nature and for the crucial role of our social environment. It can explain both our universal nature and our personal individuality" (Zagaria et al. 2020, p. 16). Across the various kinds of evolutionary psychology, it builds on certain fundamental assumptions centered on the idea that "our mind and behavior are significantly shaped by our phylogenetic history" (p. 13). The authors seemingly support a version of Dawkins' idea of the selfish gene, although they operate with a distinction between people's motivations related to sexual desire (rather than gene spreading) and the "aim" of genes to propagate themselves by coding for sexual lust in the brains of organisms. Evolution allegedly selects the genes that code for sexual desire through natural selection.

Here lies the first problem of a gene-oriented evolutionary psychology, which has been pointed out by some biologists and biological anthropologists (see the analysis in Brinkmann 2011, on which the following is based). As Tim Ingold has put it: "Natural selection, in short, may occur within evolution, but does not explain it." (2000, p. 243). From Ingold's perspective, talking about genes having "aims" is a problematic anthropomorphism, and the very idea that natural selection as such works on the genetic materials that co-determine sexual drives in a neural machinery is deeply problematic. According to Ingold, there simply is no such thing as a genotype conceived as a context-independent design specification (p. 234). For it is impossible to factor out what the purely genetically based capacities of humans are (that are thought of, by evolutionary psychologists, as identical in the Pleistocene and today), and what is ontogenetically acquired.

Natural selection, when it works, works on organisms in environments, and not on genes. The evolutionary-developmental process as a whole is primary, and includes both what we conventionally refer to as natural and cultural aspects. In a way, this is acknowledged by Zagaria et al. (2020), who rightly conclude that "*we are naturally selected to be cultural*" (p. 16), but the whole problem with evolutionary psychology in this context is that it is based on the fundamental mistake of assuming that phylogeny is a process separate from ontogeny (Derksen 2010). Natural selection does not "design" organisms, as evolutionary psychologists say, and the role of genes cannot be specified independently of other factors (p. 480).

Thus, the fundamental problem for evolutionary psychology is the guiding idea that that the so-called architecture of the mind was fixed during the Pleistocene. In light of the arguments of Ingold and others, it is not possible to factor out a genetically hardwired baseline of mental functions, supposedly fixed in the Stone Age (of which, to make matters worse, we have very little evidence anyway). Rose and Rose conclude that evolutionary psychology on this note is based on "speculative fantasies" (2000, p. 2), representing something like the antithesis to solid scientific work. In closing this brief critique of evolutionary psychology, I should say that there are additional problems in the evolutionary perspective such as the tendency toward circular (and thus unscientific) explanations of the type (apologies for the caricature): Humans display a certain form of behavior; we want to know why; evolutionary psychologists answer

“because it has been selected for”; and if we raise the question about how we know this, the answer is that it would not exist unless it had been adaptive (Brinkmann 2011). This adds to the problematic project of using evolutionary psychology as a foundational paradigm in the discipline, for it cannot easily be falsified, if at all. The problem is that one ends up explaining the existence of something by pointing to its existence. This is not just a problem for evolutionary psychology, but is likely a problem for many other paradigmatic programs in psychology (e.g. psychoanalysis, behaviorism, cognitive neuroscience etc.). Instead, I propose in the next section that we concentrate on how our mental life appears phenomenologically, in order to get rich and deep descriptions before proceeding to speculative explanations.

## Mental Life in Movement

Since the phenomenology of Edmund Husserl in the early twentieth century – and in a way since the investigations of Aristotle in ancient Greece – there has been a line of thought in the human sciences that urges us to suspend our scientific explanations a bit in order to first obtain illuminating descriptions of the phenomena themselves. Merleau-Ponty articulated this nicely in the 1940s:

All my knowledge of the world, even my scientific knowledge, is gained from my own particular point of view, or from some experience of the world without which the symbols of science would be meaningless. The whole universe of science is built upon the world as directly experienced, and if we want to subject science itself to rigorous scrutiny and arrive at a precise assessment of its meaning and scope, we must begin by re-awakening the basic experiences of the world of which science is the second order expression. (Merleau-Ponty 1945, p. ix).

As Dreyfus and Taylor made clear in their recent book in which they advanced an existential phenomenological outlook, the basic phenomenological approach (at least in Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty) is realist (Dreyfus and Taylor 2015). It is not realist in a representationalist sense, where we can copy the world in our representations, but rather in a pragmatic sense, where we can cope more and more effectively with the world (p. 142). They thus find in phenomenology a critique of the epistemological tradition that posits a split between subject and object, and instead they argue that our first understanding of reality “is not a picture I am forming of it, but the sense given to a continuing transaction with it.” (p. 70). The epistemological riddles (how can I know anything?) arise when we forget that we have a preconceptual and prereflective familiarity with the world. Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy demonstrated how this familiarity springs from our living, moving, and sensing bodies. Through bodily practices and our “motor intentionality” we inhabit and know the world in a primitive way – this is where lifeworld phenomena are grounded. These phenomena must be described and understood before it makes sense to seek explanations for their existence.

Using a metaphor, we can say that when we are concerned with how humans live and experience their lives, the sciences may give us maps, but the practical world of everyday life is the territory or the geography of our lives. Maps make sense only on the

background of the territory, where human beings act and live, and should not be confused with it. Phenomenologists are not against scientific abstractions, such as those found in evolutionary psychology, but they insist on the primacy of concrete descriptions of experience – of that which is prior to maps and analytic abstractions. In psychology, such descriptions must take into account that psychological phenomena first and foremost display intentionality or *aboutness*.

Intentionality was a key concept for Husserl, the founder of phenomenology. He took it from Brentano's work, and it has since been common to characterize mental life by saying that intentionality is the mark of the mental. It means that experience is always *about* something – our thoughts, feelings, perceptions, and actions are always directed at something. Something is an emotion, for example, rather than a simple physiological perturbation, because it is directed at something. This directedness involves an attempt to understand whatever is the object (of thoughts or emotions). According to Nussbaum, feelings (like psychological phenomena in general) thus entail “a certain sort of vision or recognition, as value-laden ways of understanding the world” (2001, p. 88). We feel joy when the coveted object is at hand; fear when it is threatened; grief when it is lost; gratitude when someone does something good for the object; anger when it is damaged; envy when someone else has it; and jealousy when somebody has a closer relationship with it, etc. (p. 87).

Without intentionality we cannot understand any psychological phenomenon as such. But, as Crowell (2009) importantly points out, “intentionality is not simply the static presence of a ‘presentation’ in a mental experience (*Erlebnis*) but a normatively oriented *claim to validity*.” (p. 13). In colloquial terms, this means that what we experience can only be “about” something (intentionality), because there are more and less correct and valid ways of experiencing it (normativity). For example, we may see a dangerous snake in the forest, but – on closer scrutiny – it may turn out to be an innocent branch, and our intentional orientation toward the object involves a normative underpinning of trying to “get it right”. We may react with anger, because we believe that our rights have been violated, but it might turn out that the perpetrator was in good faith. Intentionality and normativity are thus two sides of the same psychological coin. Thoughts, feelings, and actions are psychological phenomena because they are directed at objects, situations, people or ideas, and they can only be considered as such because there are more and less correct ways of being so directed. There is an internal connection between “aboutness” and “correctness”. In a nutshell, mental phenomena like thinking, acting, feeling, learning, perceiving etc. are being done by persons, and can therefore be done more or less well according to different normative standards some of which are local (like customs of civility) and some of which are universal (like the normativity of mathematical operations).

The question then becomes if normativity – as something constitutive of psychological phenomena – can be explained by a scientific “map” such as evolutionary psychology? I believe that answer is no: It is exactly the normativity of psychology that more than anything else creates problems for explanatory accounts such as those found in evolutionary psychology. In order to account for normativity, evolutionary psychology would argue that human normative capacities (such as our powers of reasoning, judgment and morality) are what they are, only because they have been selected for. But this explanation quickly undermines itself. As Nagel (1997) has pointed out, such reductive strategies collapse if the claim is made that whatever we have reason to

believe (morally, logically etc.) is the result of our psychological apparatus as a response to evolutionary adaptation. For if the evolutionary reductionists want to remain consistent, this must also apply to the theory itself. On this evolutionary account, therefore, the only reason I could have to believe this account *itself* would be grounded in natural selection. Thus, if the evolutionary hypothesis itself depends on reason, and if reason is a product of natural selection, then the hypothesis is self-undermining. There must be something more than simply being a product of natural selection to human perception, thinking, and reasoning if we are to trust these capacities. As Nagel says: “I can have no justification for trusting a reasoning capacity I have as a consequence of natural selection, unless I am justified in trusting it simply in itself – that is, believing what it *tells* me, in virtue of the *content* of the arguments it delivers.” (p. 136). I agree with Nagel that normativity cannot be naturalized: Evolutionary psychology might have an interesting account of the causal development of our rational powers (in terms of survival value etc.), but it cannot inform us about the normative validity of what these rational powers tell us. Since I have argued that we should see the whole range of psychological phenomena and powers as having intentional *and* normative components (thoughts, actions, *and* feelings), it follows that evolutionary psychology cannot account fully for them. The attempt to do so is a kind of psychologism, just as it would be psychologism to account for the normativity of mathematical operations in terms of evolutionary psychology.

In the 1960s, Stanley Cavell wrote about Wittgenstein’s (1953) *Philosophical Investigations*:

We know of the efforts of such philosophers as Frege and Husserl to undo the ‘psychologizing’ of logic (like Kant’s undoing Hume psychologizing of knowledge): now, the shortest way I might describe such a book as the *Philosophical Investigations* is to say that it attempts to undo the psychologizing of psychology, to show the necessity controlling our application of psychological and behavioural categories; even, one could say, show the necessities in human action and passion themselves. (Cavell 1969, p. 91).

A psychology that respects the normativity of its phenomena is a de-psychologized psychology. This is much needed, just as it was needed around 1900 to de-psychologize logic. Evolutionary psychology typically operates by psychologizing psychology, i.e., taking normativity away from its phenomena by seeking to explain it in evolutionary terms. But in this way, the distinct features of mental phenomena slip away.

## Conclusion: To Human is a Verb

If the above analysis is valid, then how should we think about psychology – in a de-psychologized version? I believe that psychology should see itself not just as a science concerned with intentional and normative phenomena (which means persons who think, feel, and act for, or in response to, reasons), but also as a normative endeavor in itself. This means that psychology should always study its own workings. In order to understand human life, one should also study the science and practices through which

people strive to understand their lives. Psychology should be inherently reflexive. The problem with a foundational program such as evolutionary psychology that aims to establish itself as a “compelling meta-theory” (Zagaría et al. 2020) is that it seeks to close down this reflexivity. It sees theoretical polyphony as a problem to be overcome so we can create a steady building, whereas the very fact that theoretical polyphony is possible should be the starting point for a general psychology that is aware of intentionality and normativity.

I have referred quite a bit to Tim Ingold above, so I will return to him once more. When writing about persons, he states that:

persons are not beings that move, they *are* their movements. It is in their very patterns of activity that their presence lies. And places are not so much locations to be connected as formations that arise within the process of movement, like eddies in a river current. In short, in such a world names are not nouns but verbs: each one describes a going on. (Ingold 2011, p. 168)

“To human is a verb”, Ingold insists in a related text (2015, p. 115). In order “to human”, we might say, a human being conducts a life with an exercise of one’s normative powers. It is true that we need investigations of how these powers have developed, including those conducted under the banner of evolutionary psychology, but this is very different from demanding that any one approach should form the foundation of scientific psychology. The essence of psychology is found in the lack of essence that characterizes an intentional, normative, and reflexive creature. Rather than constructing stable feet of cement or marble for the edifice of psychology, we could instead embrace the nomadic movements of reflexive thought that enable us to enter into dialogues with Plato and Aristotle, Kant and Hegel, and also Darwin and Steven Pinker. Persons *are* their movements, as Ingold said, and psychology should be its movements too.

## Compliance with Ethical Standards

**Conflict of Interest** The author declares that he has no conflict of interest.

**Ethical Approval** This article does not contain any studies with human participants or animals performed by any of the authors.

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