Opening this book the philosopher might expect a treatise on self-knowledge. However, despite its title, this is not a book on knowledge of our own minds, or even on self-consciousness in the usual sense of being conscious of oneself. Rather, it is a book on developmental psychology, spelling out the fascinating details of the development of the human mind with a particular focus on the emergence of human consciousness. The question Radu J. Bogdan raises is why, and how, consciousness develops in human beings. His central hypothesis is that consciousness is a bi-product of the executive abilities that a small child develops in response to the complex socio-cultural situation that she finds herself in. The executive abilities, Bogden argues, are assembled by the child’s intuitive psychology, or theory of mind, which allows her to interact and coregulate with others. The origins of consciousness, therefore, are essentially social and not, as traditional philosophy would have it, subjective.

Consciousness, as Bogdan understands it, is a functional notion, and he makes quite clear that the philosophical puzzle of phenomenal consciousness is not on the agenda. What Bogdan is interested in is consciousness in the sense of the subject being related to targets and opportunities in the surrounding world. Bogdan calls this ‘self-consciousness’ since it concerns the self’s mental and behavioral involvement in the world. However, he is also interested in how this ‘extrovert’ consciousness, after the age of 4, develops into an ‘introvert’ version, allowing the child to become conscious of her own attitudes and thoughts and to develop self-understanding. An important – and controversial – idea concerns the relation between extrovert and introvert consciousness: It is not that we become aware of others via an awareness of ourselves (as simulation theorists tell us), nor that awareness of others develops simultaneously with awareness of self (as theory theorists tell us) – rather, Bogdan argues, what comes first is awareness of others. It is thanks to the development of a common sense psychology (based on the intuitive psychology of the small child) that we eventually acquire an ability to turn towards our own minds.

The book is divided into two main parts. The first part spells out the ‘developmental asymmetry’ stressed by Bogdan, how children first relate to the external world and only later to their own minds. The second part sets out to explain this asymmetry, arguing that self-consciousness (in its extrovert and introvert form) emerges as a result of the child’s intuitive psychology, her understanding of others. The book is a wonderful read, full of fascinating empirical findings that philosophers would be well advised to pay attention to. For instance, there is a very interesting discussion of false belief tests, questioning the common assumption that the resources that allow the child to recognize false belief in others also enable her to recognize her own false beliefs. As a philosopher, naturally, it is not possible for this reviewer to judge the extent to which Bogdan’s presentation of these findings is complete, or how controversial his interpretations of the experiments are. But he certainly makes a strong case for the empirical claim that there is a close link between the development of the mind and the social character of human existence.

At the same time, Bogdan’s account raises some philosophical questions. One question concerns the central notion of self-consciousness and how this is to be understood. As noted above, Bogdan’s notion is not the usual one, suggesting awareness of a self or any kind of meta-level awareness. Rather, when he speaks of self-consciousness he simply means the
subject’s consciousness of the world, its targets and affordances, as manifested by her capacity to function as an agent and thinker (although, again, this extrovert self-consciousness later develops into an introvert version). The contrast stressed by Bogdan is with the case of blind-sight, where there is a certain level of recognition and interaction with the world, but where the executive functions cannot kick in and hence self-consciousness goes missing. This is fully in line with Bogdan’s functional construal of consciousness. However, one could ask whether this construal of self-consciousness does not risk trivializing Bogdan’s central claim concerning the connection between consciousness and the executive functions.

A functionalist account of consciousness is an account of access-consciousness, in Ned Block’s sense. A state is access conscious to the extent that it is available for use and guidance by the subject; i.e. to the extent it responds to inputs from the external world, interacts with other internal states and produces certain behavioral outputs. If consciousness is understood functionally, then being conscious is necessarily being a subject that responds in sophisticated ways to external objects and events – ways that are not available to the blind-sighted person for instance. If so, however, the connection with the executive functions would seem to be there from the start, as part and parcel of the functionalist construal of consciousness, and there is no need to undertake any empirical investigations. Indeed, at one point Bogdan implicitly acknowledges this, suggesting that on his functionalist view, executive zombie-duplicates of us ‘must by definition be self-conscious’ (173, emphasis in the original). This seems right, but it also threatens to make Bogdan’s central claim about the connection between executive abilities and self-consciousness true by definition.

What is an empirical claim, of course, is that these executive functions are assembled as a result of the child’s intuitive psychology, her social capacities. This is a substantial empirical hypothesis, and Bogdan marshalls interesting evidence in its support. However, one might wonder whether the thesis is not too substantial. Of course, Bogdan is not making the claim that it is conceptually (or metaphysically) necessary to develop an understanding of other minds, in order to develop an understanding of the world. His claim is developmental, not philosophical. However, there would seem to be empirical evidence against the claim. After all, there are human beings who have a very poor theory of mind, but whose extrovert self-consciousness is not in any way impaired, i.e. people with severe autism. No doubt, autists may have an underdeveloped self-understanding. Indeed, a subject who does not have the concept of belief (as some autists do not) must have an impaired self-understanding, since she cannot have any beliefs about her own beliefs. However, Bogdan’s thesis is not merely that introvert self-consciousness requires the development of a common sense psychology, but that extrovert self-consciousness does. Either the autist falsifies this thesis, or Bogdan would have to make the implausible claim that people with severe autism lack extrovert self-consciousness.

Similar worries arise with respect to animal consciousness. Bogdan makes the controversial claim that self-consciousness may be ‘phylogenetically rare’, and that animals, for the most part, are like the blind-sighted person: They recognize objects and manage to operate in their environments, but they are not able to monitor and control what they register and hence they are not self-conscious. Prima facie, this is very implausible. The tiger that stalks its prey, following its smallest movement, avoiding obstacles while keeping itself hidden – does that animal have the consciousness of its environment that can be compared to the blind-sighted? After all, a blind-sighted person is quite impaired behaviorally, even if she does have some amount of recognition (slightly above chance) of objects in her environment. However, since
Bogdan construes extrovert self-consciousness as involving the higher executive functions, the conclusion that animals lack extrovert self-consciousness is forced on him.

None of this should detract from the great interest of this book. Bogdan is that rare writer who is truly at home both with developmental psychology as well as with philosophy of mind, and who has the capacity to bring together empirical and philosophical findings to throw new light on the central and difficult questions concerning the nature and development of the human mind.

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