

A HUMAN ETHOLOGIST'S PERSPECTIVE ON HUMAN NATURE

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A Review of the Book

Being Human: Bridging the Gap between the Sciences of Body and Mind

by Gerhard Medicus

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In reviewing books, sometimes one knows the author personally. I have known the book's author professionally and personally for thirty years. We have several of the same mentors and many common interests. I'm one of the persons he thanked in the book's Preface. So with full disclosure, what I say below is as much an endorsement of my friend's very interesting book as it is a scholarly review.

Gerhard Medicus is an Austrian born physician and psychiatrist with a teaching appointment in the Department of Psychology at University of Innsbruck. After graduating from university he worked as a research assistant to Rupert Riedl, who at the time was Chief of the Institute of Anthropology and Zoology at the University of Vienna and one of the pioneers in evolutionary epistemology (*Biology of Knowledge: The Evolutionary Basis of Reason*). He also had the benefit of a several year personal friendship with fellow Austrian and Nobel Prize Laureate, Konrad Lorenz (*Behind the Mirror: A Search for a Natural History of Human Knowledge*) in the later years of Lorenz's life. More recently, Gerhard's ideas have been shaped by academic and anthropological field work with his mentors and colleagues Irenäus Eibl-Eibesfeldt ("the Father of Human Ethology") and esteemed evolutionary and anthropological medicine scholar and field worker, Wulf Schiefenhövel. What Gerhard does quite well in this book is to

integrate, update, and synthesize many ideas and concepts that bridge the gap between the sciences of body and mind from a cross-cultural and evolutionary epistemology perspective.

The current book is a well done and updated, English translation of the German version published in 2012. It translates a lot of material published over the past century and previously available only in German. It is Volume 10 in VWB's *Am Zügel der Evolution*, Series Editors Prof. Dr. Wulf Schiefenhövel and Dr. Judith Schuler. Although the book is very scholarly in format and style of writing, there is a minimum of technical jargon terms. Most of them are defined in parentheses when they are first used. This book is not easy or light reading for the non-specialist. It is definitely not a trade book. However, for those persons willing to put in the effort, the material covered in the book rests on a much firmer empirical foundation (i.e., what things are) than much of cognitive science (i.e., what things do).

The book's 12 chapters are divided into three main Parts. There is an adequate Bibliography, Subject, and Author Index. Part I is Contributions to the epistemology of interdisciplinarity in the human sciences. Part II is Behavioral phylogeny in relation to the higher-level systematics of vertebrates. Part III is Contributions to the ethology of specific behavioral areas and capacities, with an emphasis on universal traits in higher mammals and unique traits in apes and humans.

The two chapters in Part I address Medicus' own contributions to bridging the gap and creating dialog between the sciences and the humanities. The six chapters in Part II explore aspects of human behavior from an evolutionary, behavioral biology perspective. Topics addressed include human cognition, phylogenetic and ontogenetic knowledge gain, social behavior, morality, resource acquisition and ownership, gender differences and then whether our ontogenetic behavioral development recapitulates our behavioral phylogeny. Part III addresses more general issues from a cross-disciplinary, biological and anthropological perspective. Topics covered are an evolutionary and epistemological critique [and deconstruction] of "constructivism" (i.e., the world is merely constructed in our minds without reference to the external world), attachment, aggression and lastly, the biopsychology of political behavior. Of particular interest is the in depth discussion of "verisimilitude" (the appearance of being true), which has application to such things as how religious beliefs function in religion.

I'll conclude this review by quoting from Wulf Schiefenhövel's Foreword for the English Edition. He summarizes the strength of the book quite eloquently in words that have as much applicability to theology as they do to science. "New insights do not easily penetrate into the inner sanctum of the established sciences. This is mainly due to the inherent inertia of academic routines, but the established sciences also spend a considerable amount of their resources in shoring up their territories against unwanted external influences. It requires either a powerful flywheel to overcome the deadlock or a patiently led discussion, one of which has the effect of wearing away at the hard rock of petrified official canons, drop by drop. As Kuhn (1962) points out, while the defenders of a particular official paradigmatic position are located at the center of their disciplines, new ideas often come from the outside. Therefore approaches from these external positions, which are usually perceived as violations of disciplinary borders and thus

sanctioned, are vitally necessary if science is to progress . . . Gerhard Medicus' book, a reflection of his lifelong work as a psychiatrist and human ethologist, is a good example of such approaches, of triangulations which have their point of reference outside but whose effects unfold inside the disciplines . . . his book . . . invites us to: "Try this bridge." It spans various waters, leading us to the central questions of the *conditio humana*: Who are we humans? What is our inner state? (p. 9)"

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jay R. Feierman is has degrees in zoology and medicine. Since retirement in 2006, he has studied and published on the evolution of religious behavior.