

Possibility Secured, Mechanism Deferred: Emergent Normativity in Bickhard's *The Whole Person*

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Abstract

Mark H. Bickhard's *The Whole Person* advances a naturalistic ontological psychology on which normativity—function, representation, meaning, and value—emerges from organized process rather than being imported into nature from outside. This review assesses the book not as metaphysics but as explanation: granting that it establishes the possibility of emergent normativity, does it show how such normativity works? Its central device, implicit definition, is by Bickhard's own account a purely negative instrument that clears logical ground without constituting anything, so the explanatory burden falls on the substantive models that follow. We argue that this burden is fully discharged at the biological level, where the criterion of representational success is the self-maintaining system's own continuation, and only partly discharged as the account ascends its macro-evolutionary ratchet to mind, persons, and ethics, where the constitutive claim carries more weight with less specification. The promissory note is not empty—Bickhard claims some supported and relatively unique predictions—but it is redeemed more in the currency of consilience than of prediction.

Key Words: naturalism, normativity, emergence, implicit definition, explanation

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The modern sciences have drawn one phenomenon after another into a single continuous picture of the physical world; the person has proved the great holdout. Mind, meaning, and sociality remain, for much of philosophy and psychology, the last territory naturalism has

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been unable to claim, and the obstacle is less a shortage of evidence than a conviction that the world of causes and the world of reasons form distinct orders no continuous explanation can join. Faced with the divide, scholars have generally chosen between a reductive materialism that explains the person away and an anti-naturalism that lifts the person out of nature. Mark H. Bickhard's *The Whole Person*, the distillation of a research program pursued over several decades, refuses the choice. Its wager is that the impasse is an artifact of a mistaken metaphysics rather than a brute feature of reality, and that with the right conceptual tools the person can be understood as among the most intricate of nature's products rather than an exception to them. Bickhard's name for the alternative is naturalistic ontological psychology: an account on which the distinctively human capacities are integrated with, though "not reduced to or eliminated in favor of, the world of rocks and trees" (p. 4). What singles the project out among contemporary naturalisms is its chosen target. Where many concentrate on consciousness or the felt character of experience, Bickhard aims at normativity itself, on the conviction that an account that cannot naturalize function, representation, meaning, and value has not naturalized the person at all.

The argument is integrative rather than eliminative, and it unfolds across four movements before being gathered into a concluding statement of the position as a whole. Bickhard is forthright that what he offers is a skeleton rather than a finished organism, a chain of emergences meant to show that the integration is possible in principle and to mark where detailed empirical and theoretical work must follow; this candor is a methodological commitment rather than a hedge, and it sets the terms on which the book asks to be judged. Where Thompson (2007) approaches the continuity of life and mind through phenomenology and enactivism, and Clark's extended-mind program distributes cognition across body and environment (Clark & Chalmers, 1998), Bickhard works upstream of both: his concern is not the boundaries of mind but the ontological conditions under which normative mentality can arise at all. It is on exactly this terrain that we wish to press a question, and it is a question about explanatory adequacy rather than metaphysical taste. Granting that the book establishes the possibility of emergent normativity, does it also show how such normativity works? Does its central device do genuine explanatory work, or does it issue a promissory note that the substantive chapters are left to redeem? Our contention is that the note is fully redeemed at the biological level and only partially redeemed above it, so that the book secures the possibility of a naturalized normativity more firmly than its mechanism.

The first movement supplies the foundation. Bickhard contends that the recurring failure to naturalize the person is an inheritance of substance metaphysics, the picture on which reality is composed of unchanging stuff: "Substance is what is most basic, and what is most basic does not change" (p. 15). A world of inert, self-identical

substances admits no genuine novelty, and so no emergence of mind or of norm; it is also strictly factual, and thereby installs at the ground floor the very split between fact and value that later philosophy exhausts itself trying to close. The corrective is a process metaphysics in the line of Heraclitus, Peirce, and Dewey, and of Piaget's constructivism, though Bickhard is careful to distinguish his version from the now-dominant Whiteheadian strand, and he takes encouragement from physics itself, in which apparently solid objects increasingly resolve into configurations of underlying process. Here emergence is not an embarrassment to be explained away but the ordinary way of nature: "Everything is patterns of process, and every new pattern exhibits new properties" (p. 20). Against Hume's dictum that no ought may be drawn from an is, Bickhard deploys implicit definition, the device by which Hilbert's axioms fix the terms they employ without any representational correspondence, so that a normative property may be fixed by the organization of a process rather than read off its physical materials. It is worth being exact about what this device is claimed to accomplish, for here Bickhard is more careful than his enthusiasts sometimes are: implicit definition "does not provide any model of any emergence, but simply clears the way for attempting to construct such models" (p. 63). It removes a logical obstacle; it constitutes nothing. The constructive burden therefore falls entirely on the movements that follow, and it is by their success in bearing it that the book must be judged.

At the biological level the burden is carried, and this is the finest sustained stretch of the book. Breaking with etiological theories, which fix a trait's function by its history of selection, Bickhard grounds function in the present, as a contribution to the autonomy of a far-from-equilibrium system, one that, unlike a rock at rest in an energy well, persists only through ceaseless exchange of energy and matter with its surroundings. A candle flame already displays such self-maintenance; a bacterium that swims up a sugar gradient and tumbles when headed down one displays its recursive form, selecting among its own activities so as to sustain the very conditions of its persistence. From this Bickhard derives primitive representation: in choosing one interaction over another, an organism makes an implicit and fallible anticipation that the environment will support it, an anticipation that can succeed or fail by a criterion internal to the organism itself. Here the claim that organization constitutes a norm has determinate content, and it is testable in outline, because the standard of success is supplied by no external observer but by the system's own continuation. Truth and falsity become refinements of biological success and failure, and the normativity of representation grows out of the pragmatic normativity of staying alive. At this rung, implicit definition has been cashed.

The third and longest movement ascends by way of what Bickhard calls a macro-evolutionary ratchet, a sequence of backbone emergences of interactive knowing, learning, emotion, and reflective

consciousness, each opening the possibility of the next. The spirit is Piagetian: knowing is an interactive achievement, not a passive reception, and encodingsim, the assumption that mind is a register of environmental imprints, is pressed hard throughout, in continuity with his earlier articulation of interactive representation as the more fundamental alternative (Bickhard, 1999). At the neural level an oscillatory and modulatory model displaces the inert switching of classical accounts, with the moment-to-moment process he terms "microgenesis" as the seat of agency. The pivotal distinction is between mind and person: the former names the species-general capacities realized in the central nervous system, the latter a further emergent that is at once developmental and ontologically social. Persons are not self-enclosed but co-constituted with social reality through participation in situation conventions, self-maintaining patterns of mutual expectation that solve the coordination problems of life among other agents (Christopher & Bickhard, 2007); language is naturalized accordingly, not as a code for transmitting inner contents but as a repertoire of operations upon those conventions. The same emergentist logic is then carried upward to action, rationality, and ethics, where ethical failure becomes a violation of the intrinsic ontology of a person rather than the breach of an external rule. This social ontology is, to our minds, among the most valuable and least appreciated contributions in the book.

It is also where the promissory note comes due, and is only partly honored. The book's signal virtue, its refusal to treat any one domain in isolation, is also the wellspring of its principal limitation, for the same totalizing reach leaves many of the constituent models thinly developed; the neuroscience in particular is offered with disarming candor, the author conceding that "we know very little about how all of this is functionally integrated" (p. 180). Our worry, however, is not this empirical thinness, which a book of such scope must be allowed. It is a matter of explanatory structure. At the biological rung, "constitutes" earned its contrast with "causes" because there was an internal criterion of failure; higher up, that criterion must be either inherited or freshly re-derived, and Bickhard's recurring answer, that each new level is one more organization of self-maintaining process, carries progressively more weight with progressively less specification. No general account is given of why organizing a process in some further way should constitute a further normativity rather than merely accompany one, and until such a constitutive mechanism is spelled out, the passage from process to norm risks being secured, at the upper levels, by stipulation rather than by discovery. In fairness, the note is not empty: Bickhard claims "supported and relatively unique predictions" (p. 450), among them an interaction-derived timing constraint on brain function and a developmental enabling of reflective processes. But these aside, the model is redeemed far more in the currency of consilience than in that of prediction, a legitimate warrant but a weaker one, and one on which the program will eventually have

to make good.

Against this must be set the book's most genuine achievement, which is conceptual, and which the same upstream orientation makes possible. Standard naturalisms founder at the mind-body boundary, treating it as a vertical interface at which physical inputs must somehow yield normative representation in a single inexplicable leap. Bickhard names this the Cartesian Gulf, the assumption that mentality is indivisible and arrives all at once or not at all (p. 76, n. 187). In its place he offers a horizontal boundary of emergence, together with a layered hierarchy of such boundaries, so that the person figures not as one unbridgeable gap but as a high-order product of many nested transitions. This dissolves a problem that has defeated more cautious programs. The specialist will feel the cost of the reach within their own field, and the neuroscientist, the linguist, and the moral philosopher will each find the corner nearest to hand drawn more programmatically than they might wish; this is the standing price of synthesis, and Bickhard pays it knowingly. What he secures at a high level of abstraction is the possibility of emergence; the constitutive, mechanism-level detail that would make the account fully compelling is largely deferred, an IOU the book acknowledges rather than disguises.

The fourth movement turns the theory back upon itself in a test of self-consistency rare in works of such reach. A naturalism of persons, Bickhard reasons, is coherent only if it can account for the existence of the very sort of being capable of constructing such a theory. He meets the demand with an evolutionary epistemology of variation and selection, which licenses precisely the speculative, model-building inquiry a strict empiricism would dismiss as idle, and which answers the worry shadowing every thoroughgoing naturalism, that in reducing reason to natural process it saws off the branch on which it sits. The circle closes in the book's culminating claim, that the person is "part of, participant in, and (emergent) product of, the cosmological universe" (p. 459) rather than something standing over against it. The much-lamented disenchantment of the modern world, Bickhard argues in closing, follows not from naturalism as such but from the assumed split between cause and meaning; repair the metaphysics, and meaning returns to its place within nature instead of being exiled beyond it.

The Whole Person is a work of unusual scope and seriousness, and it is candid about its own status: systematicity, its author writes, carries here no claim of finality, and the model is offered with an explicit presumption of currently unknown errors (p. xi). Judged on those terms it succeeds in what it chiefly set out to do, which is to establish that the integration of person and nature is possible in principle and to mark where the detailed work must follow. It is not an easy book. The argument is dense and relentlessly cumulative, and it presumes a reader willing to hold philosophical, biological, neuroscientific, and

social threads at once across several hundred closely reasoned pages. But it reframes the question of the person's place in nature in terms that will be difficult to set aside. Our one closing suggestion is that the program's next move should be downstream, from the possibility of emergent normativity to its mechanism, from the note to its redemption; for it is there, and not in the possibility proof, that a naturalism of persons will finally stand or fall.

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Conflict of interest statement

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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