

Review of: "An Ontological Turn for Psychology in the age of the Machine and Global Warming"

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Potential competing interests: No potential competing interests to declare.

I begin this commentary with the self-evident observation that any academic or public inquiry is the activity of cooperating human beings. Thus, as with human actions in general, our investigations are done for one or more purposes by members of a particular community on behalf of themselves or on behalf of some other beneficiaries.

Taking this perspective, then, brings up some questions and caveats about the article by Louise Sundararajan. Should psychology strive for decolonization; that is, should psychological inquiries aim to benefit populations that historically have been mistreated and ignored? My own answer, and that of a growing consensus of psychologists, is certainly "yes." As Sundararajan insists, attention to the concepts and values of indigenous peoples is entirely appropriate for inquiries aiming to benefit those populations (but it is also conceivable that results from inquiries done with concepts and values that are not from the target indigenous population can nonetheless benefit that population in certain ways). It should also be evident that indigenous populations must be included in studies aiming to produce results that generalize to the entire human population.

More generally, though, I think it is reasonable that psychology should strive for a proper mix among work that is on behalf of indigenous populations, WEIRD populations, and all humanity. We can then ask if Sundararajan's proposed "ontology of subjects" should entirely replace psychology's traditional "ontology of objects."

In fact, it is not clear to me whether Sundararajan is actually advocating that an ontology of subjects should replace an ontology of objects for all psychological theorizing or if the proposal is targeted specifically for Indigenous Psychology. It is my own view that psychology is best off with a plurality of ontologies, each appropriate to the populations and purposes chosen for study, a position with which Sundararajan might possibly agree.

Furthermore, I think we would agree that no matter what ontology or methodology is used to study indigenous populations, those populations should be treated with respect and understanding, they should be compensated properly for their participation in our work, and atrocities committed against them in the past should not be erased from inquiries that involve them.

A crucial question that arises for me from this article is what is meant by the term "ontology of subjects?" In recent decades theoretical and philosophical psychologists have strenuously advocated for an orientation to psychology that puts human agency and the values that underlie them first and foremost. Also emphasized have been the study of subjectivity in the use of hermeneutic, phenomenological, narrative, and other methodologies that go well beyond the methodologies

associated with an ontology of objects. Importantly, there are other ontological proposals similar to Sundararajan's ontology of subjects in the literature, such as Jack Martin's psychology of persons (Martin, 2020), William Stern's critical personalism (Lamiell, 2021), and hermeneutic ontology (Richardson, 2021), among others. As an example, Martin (2020) writes: " For certain purposes and projects, it may be necessary or desirable to focus on biophysical and/or sociocultural processes or mechanisms that operate at a sub-personal level. However, it is useful to conduct such inquiries with an awareness of the overall goal of understanding persons as entire beings acting in their life situations. Such a realization can help to guard against forms of reductionism, individualism, nativism, materialism, naïve empiricism, and psychologism that restrict, simplify, or otherwise distort the core phenomena of psychological inquiry." These other ontologies also aim to fill the moral vacuum in value-neutral science and enable us to understand ourselves and culturally different others as not reducible to objects that can be manipulated. I would find it extremely helpful if Sundararajan would clarify the differences from these other proposals.

Perhaps one unique aspect of Sundararajan's ontology of subjects involves conceptualizing non-human beings and inanimate objects in nature as having a soul or spirit. The reason Sundararajan offers for doing so is that certain beneficial consequences would result. One such consequence is that the subjects we study would be considered for their own sake and never be used against their will for the purpose of something other than themselves. As one example, Sundararajan suggests that approaching a tree as a being with soul or spirit would create a sense of obligation to compensate nature for removing it from the environment. While believing that a tree has a soul or spirit may facilitate a less exploitative handling of nature, the treatment of trees as a valuable resource that must be preserved for the sake of humans and animals is certainly possible without believing that the trees have souls or spirits. It even seems to be the case that those societies whose populations are least likely to hold supernatural spiritual beliefs, such as the Nordic nations, are those that are implementing the most environmentally conscious policies and interventions.

In summary, I thank and applaud Sundararajan for her leadership in Indigenous Psychology studies, and I am in agreement with much of what she advocates. I think it is important to increase our understanding of indigenous populations, to be moved by their ecological grief, and to include them in investigations intended to generalize to all of humanity. We can also recognize that indigenous populations may wish to develop, for purposes relevant specifically in their own cultures, a psychology that incorporates concepts and methodologies that make sense in their own cultures, even if that psychology does not make sense to persons in WEIRD cultures. On the other hand, I have questions about how the ontology of persons differs from similar ontological proposals in the literature and, if it necessitates beliefs that trees and all other constituents of nature have souls or spirits, I cannot go along with the proposal that this ontology of subjects should be standardly applied to all psychological research and theorizing.

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