

Shoddy Scholarship or Something More Sinister? The Real Enigma of Reason

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Preface: This blog was going to be posted on Psychology Today, but the editors were concerned about it creating a controversy that they did not want on their site. So, I was only approved to publish “a brief review” and include a link to this document that explains the full story.

In [*The Enigma of Reason: A New Theory of Human Understanding*](#) (Harvard, 2017; Paperback 2018), [Hugo Mercier](#) and [Dan Sperber](#) claim to offer a novel account of human reasoning. “What reason does,” the book summary explains, “is help us justify our beliefs and actions to others, convince them through argumentation, and evaluate the justifications and arguments that others address to us.” The book lays out an “interactionist” approach to human reasoning and contrasts it to the “intellectualist” approach. The latter is the standard formulation, which assumes reasoning is valuable because it helps humans arrive at more accurate conclusions about the world. In contrast, their interactionist approach emphasizes the evolutionary argument that our ancestral socio-linguistic environment shaped the architecture of human reasoning and reason-giving.

Specifically, the authors posit that there are two closely related components to human reasoning, which they call the “argumentative” and “justifying” functions. The argumentative function allows individuals to persuade skeptical others about one's beliefs, as well as the capacity to determine the legitimacy of others' claims. The justifying function enables humans to generate accounts to themselves so that they can better present their behavior in a socially justifiable manner. In the words of the authors (p. 8), “By giving reasons in order to explain and justify themselves people indicate what motivated and, in their eyes, justifies their ideas and actions.”

Although the book makes a strong case and offers a relatively thorough review of the literature, there is one glaring and enormous problem with it. They claim that this is a new account to explain the dynamics of human reason. But this is simply wrong. And Dr. Mercier (at least) knew this.

As regular readers of this blog know, [the Justification Hypothesis \(JH\)](#) offers almost an identical account of human reasoning. It predates *The Enigma of Reason* in the peer reviewed professional literature by almost 15 years, and has been the subject of many publications and professional presentation ([see here for a list of references](#)). [The JH is the idea that humans are "the justifying animal,"](#) and that human [cognition](#) and consciousness are different from other animals because the problems associated with justifying one's actions and analyzing the justifications and arguments of others in a sociolinguistic environment (sound familiar?).

[In Henriques \(2003, p. 172\)](#), I summarized the Justification Hypothesis as follows: “Effectively justifying one's actions was a new, difficult and extremely important adaptive problem to solve, precisely the type to lead to strong selection pressures and rapid evolutionary change. Solving the problem of justification requires new cognitive capacities, such as self-representation, generating causal explanations for why one behaved a certain way and evaluating the legitimacy of others' actions.” This is exactly the “interactionist” framework for the structure of human reasoning that Mercier and Sperber posit.

Evidence for the overlap increases when we examine the implications of this idea. For example, a major thesis of *The Enigma of Reason* is that the formulation explains key features of human reasoning, such as self-serving (or "myside") biases. In addition, the authors argue that their model accounts for the fact that humans reason better in social contexts with social frames than in purely analytic ones. These are the central elements that Mercier and Sperber argue make theirs a "new theory of human [understanding](#)."

But precisely these features were also addressed and accounted for in the original publication on the JH fifteen years ago. In a section explicitly about how the JH accounts for self-serving biases, I explained that, "According to the JH, people should tend to explain their behavior and the things that happened to them in a manner that affords the most social influence" (p. 173). And in a separate section explaining how the JH accounts for biases in human reasoning capacities more generally, the description offered was as follows: "The JH further suggests that the general reasoning capacity in humans emerged out of determining what is and what is not justifiable in the social context. This gives rise to another implication of the JH. If social reasoning gave rise to general reasoning, then humans should be particularly adept at social reasoning, at least in comparison with other forms of general reasoning. This is precisely the case." (p. 175). In short, the central ideas about human reasoning put forth in *The Enigma of Reason* correspond directly to ideas put forth in the JH over 15 years ago.

A charitable person might wonder if the authors knew about the Justification Hypothesis. In other words, could this striking coincidence simply be a case of a poor literature review? Indeed, that was what I presumed when I first encountered Mercier and Sperber's theory of reasoning in 2013. Their initial account was called the '[Argumentative Theory of Reasoning, and was first outlined in a major publication in Behavioral and Brain Sciences in 2011](#)'. When I became aware of it in 2013, I was a bit concerned that the authors had not cited my work. After all, the parallels between the JH and the theory they put forth at that time were substantial.

But it is a big world out there, and the JH is not well-known in some cognitive science circles, and it was conceivable that the authors simply missed it in their review of the literature. I tend to give folks the benefit of the doubt on such issues. To make the connection and to be sure they were aware of my work going forward, on September 9, 2013 I wrote a friendly note to Dr. Hugo Mercier to inform him about the Justification Hypothesis and how it accounted for human reasoning in a similar way.

In my email to him, I attached two papers. One was the [original 2003 paper](#) in which the JH is presented, and the other was the [2011 chapter on the JH from my book, A New Unified Theory of Psychology](#). In making contact I explained to Dr. Mercier that, "The Justification Hypothesis posits that human reasoning evolved because language created the adaptive problem of "reason giving" (aka justifying, which of course overlaps much with arguing). I employ an evolutionary argument and use the lens to understand modern research similar to the work you have done." (Please note the remarkable similarity between my description of the JH in this 2013 email and the central idea summarizing *The Enigma of Reason* quoted at the beginning of this blog.)

Dr. Mercier received my email, and on September 10, 2013, he wrote back the following:

That was an interesting read!

I think an important difference is that your theory is part of a much broader one about the mind and consciousness, whereas we've tried to be more pointed and only talk about one cognitive mechanism

(albeit an important one). We're also stressing more, I guess, the 'reception' side of the story: how reasoning is used not only to produce arguments, but also to evaluate them.

In my reply back, I asked him to keep me informed of any major developments in their work. That was the end of our communication. That is, until I happened upon their book a few weeks ago. In reading it, I learned that their model had indeed morphed in an important way since 2013. In the four years since Dr. Mercier was explicitly made aware of the JH to when it was published in book form (in 2017), their theory went from being highly similar to the JH's account of human reasoning to being almost identical to it. And while *The Enigma of Reason* has over 1000 citations included, the JH is not even mentioned, and none of the works on the JH are cited.

Mercier and Sperber are receiving much attention and credit for promoting this presumably novel idea (see, e.g., [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#)). As such, it is important to set the record straight. Their interactionist-justification approach to human reasoning is not a new idea; the JH encompasses all its key features, and it was published almost 15 years prior.

Even more crucial in terms of academic integrity, the first author was made aware of the JH, along with when and where it had been published. And he read up on the JH and acknowledged the similarities. And their account morphed directly towards it, and yet there was no mention or citation of these facts in their work. Given these facts, I think the authors should be asked to explain the omission and their claim that they are offering a new and original theory of human reasoning. It will be interesting to hear the justifications and arguments they offer for this disturbing state of affairs.

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To see the remarkable parallels between the two ideas, [see this Table](#), which aligns the key claims of Mercier and Sperber's "new" account with the original 2003 article that introduces the JH. I should note that the [2011 chapter on the JH](#) makes the connections even clearer (see especially pages 140-145). In addition, I have generated a [timeline so that folks are clear about what happened](#).

And here is a list of [relevant references on the Justification Hypothesis](#).

Post Script:

Drs. Mercier and Sperber have been made aware of this situation. [Here is a letter that was sent to the Harvard Press publisher and shared with them so that they would be informed of this going public](#).

Here are some additional facts worth considering:

1. Since authoring this blog, I have recently discovered that prior to my originally contacting [Dr. Mercier](#), [he was first author on a 2013 article that included](#) a citation of [Keith Stanovich's \(2004\)](#) commentary on my work. Specifically, Stanovich explores the Justification Hypothesis and the idea of meta-representation, which is an idea that receives an entire chapter in *The Enigma of Reason* (but, no citation of me or Stanovich in this account). Thus, Dr. Mercier had in fact come across the ideas about the JH in the literature, *even before I contacted him*. In other words, there is evidence he was aware of my work when I first reached out to him and only feigned ignorance about it. The only other explanation is that he did not pay attention to a work that he cited directly, which of course would be yet another example of shoddy scholarship.

2. When I informed my family about the situation regarding this book and the JH, unbeknownst to me my brother Tim Henriques, took matters into his own hands and did a review of *The Enigma of Reason* on Amazon, accusing the authors of intellectual property theft. Within few hours of this post, Dr. Mercier responded to Tim's review on Amazon. Dr. Mercier denied all knowledge of the JH. He wrote: *"Although it is possible that Dr. Henriques has some relevant insights, I can assure you that neither of us had ever heard of him or his hypotheses (they really don't seem to be as popular as you paint them to be). To be honest, reading a bit more now, I doubt that there are that many similarities (for example, ours is not a theory of consciousness at all), but even if there were, that is a common enough occurrence (and, then, if we'd known about these ideas, we would have happily acknowledged them)."* This denial by Dr. Mercier has since been deleted from the Amazon Review section, but [here is a screenshot of it](#).

3. Upon seeing this remarkable denial, I engaged in additional consultation about what to do. It was decided at that point to contact Dr. Sperber directly, as it was conceivable that he was not aware of the situation (i.e., it could have been that Dr. Mercier took the ideas and hid his awareness of them from Dr. Sperber). So, with Dr. Joe Michalski (Associate Dean at King's College Canada, who had agreed to mediate if necessary), I reached out to Dr. Sperber to communicate about the situation. We received a defensive, hostile, and dismissive reply. Dr. Sperber replied only to Dr. Michalski because he did not want to dignify a response to me. He claimed the idea that there might be intellectual property concerns "delusional." Remarkably, he also claimed to know directly that there could not have been a problem because he wrote every passage pertaining to justification, and he simultaneously stated that he had never heard of me or read any of my work. Given that every graduate student knows that a literature review is part of a scholar's responsibility in claiming new ideas, this double-sided dismissal and denial was nonsensical.

With their actions and attitudes made clear, the only next step is to share the narrative and associated materials with the public and attempt to set the record straight. Hence this blog and supporting materials.

Here is a link that includes [copies of the email correspondences with Dr. Sperber](#). [Here are copies of the original correspondence with Dr. Mercier](#).