

<http://joyuscryonoid.hubpages.com/hub/DeaconIncompleteNature-Review>

Postscript: my take on the Juarrero-Deacon controversy

Since the publication of *Incomplete Nature* over a year ago, the controversy over its originality—particularly its alleged rehash, without attribution, of themes and arguments advanced by Alicia Juarrero in her book *Dynamics in Action*—continues to rage. Since I was taken to task by several commenters (including Deacon himself) for criticizing Deacon's scholarship and uncritically accepting comments stoking the controversy, I have, as promised, made an effort to carefully reconsider the matter. Here is what I have come to conclude.

I have read both books from cover to cover, and I stand by my original claim that Deacon covered much of the same ground covered previously by Juarrero. That ground includes an extended, systematic critique of reductionist attempts to explain (away) mind as a mechanically determined epiphenomenon, but also (and more importantly) the central thesis of both books, which is that a more realistic and potentially fruitful approach is to view intentionality as something that emerges by virtue of hierarchically organized constraints on flow. The question then is whether that ground can reasonably be considered to be 'public domain'—i.e. so well trod that attribution is not needed. To some extent I would say yes: the criticism of reductionism has indeed been covered by many writers, as has the idea that hierarchical organization produces constraints that impede and thus direct flow. I suspect this is how Deacon rationalized not citing Juarrero (and others who deserved credit where none was given).

There are serious problems with this rationalization however. First, it contradicts Deacon's strong claim to originality, which he proudly stakes in the book, and which has been promulgated by his fans. The problem with not citing those who developed similar ideas previously is that it misleads the naïve general reader (Deacon's proclaimed intended audience!) into thinking that the claim of originality covers those ideas. Unfortunately, Deacon fails to carefully delineate which parts of his book are truly original, and which are derived.

The second problem with the 'public domain' rationalization is that in light of certain historical facts it strains credibility. Here I admit that I am privy to a bit of inside knowledge, thanks to having colleagues connected in one way or another to the controversy. The key fact of the matter is that both Deacon and Juarrero attended a conference in Mexico in 2007, where they both presented their work. This was several years after publication of *Dynamics in Action*, and well before publication of *Incomplete Nature*. I don't know whether Deacon actually conversed with Juarrero, but he undoubtedly heard her lecture, and so was aware of her work when he wrote his book. To my mind this is the most damning fact of the matter: Deacon must have been aware that Juarrero had already advanced many of the arguments that he articulated in *Incomplete Nature*. In light of this, his failure to cite her work is unconscionably dishonest. Unfortunately, in the testosterone-saturated, ego-inflated halls of academia, this sort of thing is not at all uncommon.

The situation can be made completely transparent simply by considering its asymmetry, and asking what would have likely occurred had the roles been reversed. Deacon is a male professor at a highly-regarded research University (U.C. Berkeley), whereas Juarrero is a female professor (now Emeritus) at a relatively unknown community college (Prince George's in Maryland). If Deacon had published a book in 1999 and presented it at a conference attended by Juarrero in 2007, and then Juarrero had subsequently tried to publish a book presenting similar ideas without citing Deacon, do you honestly think she would have gotten away with it? Most likely her book would not have been published until she had rectified that scholarly lapse, and then it probably would not have been touted up as a major breakthrough, as Deacon's book has been in some quarters.

So I stand by my original criticism. But, to be fair, we should try to make clear what is original in Deacon's book. As he notes in his comment below, he, unlike Juarrero, makes a concerted effort to move beyond complex dynamic systems

theory, which he in fact critiques for its limitations. He does so by way of Peircean semiotics, which Juarrero does not bring in to her analysis. In addition, he comes up with an original materialist model for the origin of life and mind, involving "autogenesis", which provides a springboard for the development of "telogenesis". So whereas Juarrero was largely concerned with explaining human intentionality, Deacon seeks to explain the origin of intentionality in the universe. Finally, Deacon's claim of originality is staked on the notion that mind would be better (more productively) viewed as a specified absence—i.e., a manifestation of constrained potential—rather than a specific presence. While Juarrero also bases her argument on the causal efficacy of contextual constraint, she does not explicitly make the connection between constraint and absence (the incompleteness alluded to in Deacon's title).

Based on these differences, Deacon and his fans would have us believe that his conception of constraint—the "absential" essence of mind—is fundamentally different than Juarrero's. He and his fans assert that his idea that intentionality is produced by "teleodynamic work" resulting from asymmetrically juxtaposed (i.e. constrained) "teleodynamics" produced by "morphodynamic work" resulting from asymmetrically juxtaposed "morphodynamics" is completely original and unlike Juarrero's idea that intentionality emerges by virtue of "second order constraints" produced by the interaction between context and network dynamics (manifesting lower level or first order constraints). Sorry, I don't see it: from my perspective Deacon's originality here lies mostly in the coining of new words and in saying the same thing in a different (and perhaps in some ways more compelling) way. Moreover, Deacon's own words belie his claim of moving beyond complex dynamic systems theory. Is not "teleodynamics" by definition a form of dynamics, specifically those constrained by higher levels of contextual organization? How do those constraints differ fundamentally from what Juarrero called "second order contextual constraints"?

In his acknowledgements Deacon thanks a group of academic compatriots that convened regularly at his house to discuss the ideas developed in his book, a club that he fondly refers to as "Terry and the Pirates". How fitting is that? As I said in the above review (most of which I wrote before I was made aware of Dynamics in Action and the controversy) when I first read Incomplete Nature I was bothered by the fact that it echoed ideas developed and expressed by thinkers such as Robert Rosen and Stanley Salthe, but without attribution. So when I did become aware of the controversy I was not particularly surprised, as I had already smelled a fish. The tragedy here is that Incomplete Nature is a work of potential importance that is completely undermined by the failure of its author to acknowledge his sources.