

Summary:

I've read Stephen's book proposal and I think this is an exciting and original project, which I would highly recommend you commission for publication. I'll give more specific answers to your questions below but first let me say that the author is extremely well-qualified to complete the project described in the proposal. He is already well published on a number of topics the book will cover. He is among the few philosophers (most of the others being Stephen's colleagues at Warwick) that could write a book of this kind that is equally well informed both about developmental psychology and philosophy.

The tensions Stephen identifies within developmental psychology between researchers in the Vygotskian tradition and nativists are interesting and important but I thought the engagement with the Vygotskian tradition was a little timid. There is a much larger body of work within developmental psychology much of it dealing with Stephen's core themes that doesn't get a mention (e.g. Katherine Nelson, James Wertsch, Charles Fernyhough). I would hope that the engagement with the Vygotskian tradition is more thorough-going when the book gets written.

The book proposal touches on the nativism/anti-nativism debate in places but doesn't directly engage this question. I thought this a missed opportunity. The stress on the importance of social interaction in the Vygotskian tradition is typically understood as supporting an anti-nativist position about development. Interestingly at least some of the researchers Stephen characterises as Vygotskians (e.g. Csibra and Gergeley) give a central to core knowledge in their account of how we develop knowledge of intentional action. If I recall correctly their teleological stance invokes principles of rational action that are not learned but are innately known. Maybe then the debate Stephen is interested in cross-cuts the debates about nativism. It would however be nice to see this issue tackled more directly in the book.

Relatedly I wondered about the modularity of mind and where Stephen stands on this issue. The types of core knowledge Stephen appeals to might be taken to support the existence of modules dedicated to processing information in the different domains Stephen discusses. Richard Samuels has however argued that the claim that there are domain specific bodies of knowledge doesn't necessarily commit you to a modular cognitive architecture in a BJPS article from 2001.

In the Brief Description Stephen says he will also explore relevant research in cognitive neuroscience, but this didn't really show up at all in the description he goes on to give of each of the chapters which mostly describes behavioural studies. There is a certainly a good deal of neuroscientific research that bears on the topics Stephen proposes to discuss, and I would encourage him to engage with this research. For instance Stanislas Dehaene's work on number is extremely relevant to the argument Stephen makes in the chapter about knowledge of numbers. He has some very elegant experiments that seem to show the existence of two neural systems dedicated to processing information about numbers, one dealing with approximate quantities and an exact system dependent on cultural tools such as symbols, counting routines, etc. It would be very interesting to bring this work into contact with the nativist work Stephen describes in the summary of this chapter. In developmental neuroscience there is a strand of research that goes under the heading neuroconstructivism that is also relevant to a number of the topics Stephen discusses. It would be a missed opportunity not to also engage with this work.

1. If you teach a related course, what text(s) are you currently using, and at what level do you teach?

I teach courses in philosophy of neuroscience, cognitive science and psychology but they are broader than the focus of Stephen's book. I would use Stephen's book for particular topics like theory of mind, number or language acquisition.

2. What do you think of the selection, range and level of the proposed contents?

Given the way that Stephen describes developmental psychology, the topics he covers are perfect. The account he gives of developmental psychology is a fair representation of some of the central strands of research taking place today though as I note above he doesn't do justice to the Vygotskian tradition or to the constructivist tradition initiated by Piage which I think is still alive today (e.g. in the work of Amanda Woodward & Jessica Somerville but also in dynamical approaches to development e.g. Linda Smith).

3. Are the contents pitched at an appropriate level for the market?

Hard to say for sure at this stage. I have fixed feelings about calling the book an introduction. It isn't just a survey of the literature but sets up a specific problem and offers a perspective on how this problem can be solved. In this regard it sounded to more like a monograph than an introductory textbook. This is not to say it wouldn't be useful in teaching but I'm not sure it is fair to describe it as an introduction. If he were to turn this project into an introductory textbook I would personally like to see more engagement with other traditions in developmental psych.

4. Is there anything that you would add or remove from the contents?

I've addressed this question above.

5. Can you list the relative strengths and weaknesses of your current text?

Strengths: does an excellent job of synthesising developmental psychology and philosophy. Offers an original perspective on how the two fields are relevant to each other.

Weakness: I would like to see more engagement with research in cognitive science and neuroscience that is relevant to the developmental issues the book tackles.

6. Do you know of any other courses (either parts of a whole or dedicated courses) for which this book would be suitable?

I agree with Stephen that the text would work well in philosophy of psychology course but also for more theoretically minded developmental psychologists. I would like to be involved in the trail run Stephen is giving of the book in Hungary where lots of the research he discusses is being carried out.

7. Would you use this text as a basis for teaching a course in this subject?

Yes

8. What are the strengths and weaknesses of this book?

Already answered this one above.

9. Do you have any comments on the author's/editor's suitability for the task?

Yes - see above.

10. What other competing texts are you aware of (author/title/publisher/price/year if known)? How do they compare to the proposed title?

Jose Bermudez's two books Paradox of Self-Consciousness and Thinking without words cover some of the same issues as Stephen's book will cover and from a similar perspective. These books are not pitched as introductory textbooks but the similarities make me wonder whether Stephen's book will work in this role.

11. Would you recommend that we publish this book?

Absolutely!