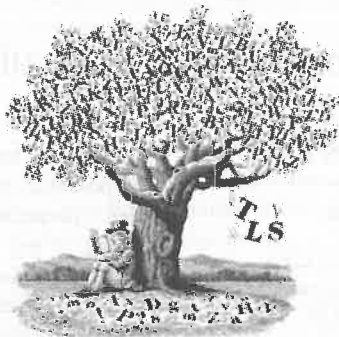


# You and your brain

Sir, – Both Richard Holton, in his review of Andy Clark's *Surfing Uncertainty* (October 7), and Raymond Tallis, in his follow-up letter (October 14) supporting Holton's review, misuse the distinction I drew (1969) between the personal and sub-personal levels of ascription and explanation. Indeed it is persons – not brains – who believe, decide, intend, understand things, thanks to events occurring in their brains, and indeed confusions can result if one incautiously attributes the full-fledged personal level mental states and acts to the specialized sub-systems of brains. The parts of your brain responsible for the pain you feel are not themselves in pain, to take an obvious case, nor does your motor cortex sign the contract; you do. But that does not mean that properly extended (actually, truncated) versions of mentalistic ascriptions to brain subsystems are always mis-



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takes. Far from it: cognitive science has advanced largely because of the growing clarity and specificity of the sub-personal analyses of the informational contributions made by subsystems to larger systems, and what better language to use than the idioms of folk psychology harnessed in diminished (“homuncular”) roles? The tactic was introduced at the very dawn of cognitive science in the title

of a famous article, “What the frog’s eye tells the frog’s brain” (Lettvin, Maturana, McCulloch and Pitts, 1959). “Eyes don’t tell! Only language-using persons can tell!” Ho hum. Haven’t we outgrown the complacent insularity of ordinary language philosophy? Holton and Tallis are not alone; P. M. S. Hacker and Max Bennett devote half a book to perpetuating this mistake (*Neuroscience and Philosophy: Brain, mind, and language*, by M. Bennett, D. Dennett, P. Hacker, J. Searle, 2007) and I devote my quarter of that book to demolishing it in detail. Andy Clark’s book deserves a review by someone who has escaped the Sixties and is ready to take seriously the twenty-first-century issues that confront us.

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