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Ian Hacking - "The New Me: What Biotechnology may do to Personal Identity"

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By Eugene Raikhel

I recently came across a video of a relatively recent lecture which Ian Hacking gave at Huron University College, entitled, "The New Me: What Biotechnology may do to Personal Identity." The short (15 min) talk — embedded below — reprises many of the issues Hacking has been dealing with for the past several years (e.g. "[Ian Hacking on commercial genome-reading](#)," "[Genetics, biosocial groups & the future of identity](#),").

Of course, in a broader way, these are the same issues he has been dealing with for the past several decades, an intellectual history discussed in an interview between Andrew Lakoff and Hacking which appeared in a [recent issue](#) of *Public Culture*. Here's the introductory question and answer:

Andrew Lakoff (AL): Your work covers an impressive range of topics — from the history of probability, to inductive logic, the sciences of memory and trauma, styles of scientific reasoning, the concept of race, autism, and more. Can you provide a brief taxonomy of the kinds of problems you're interested in, the topics or questions you've continually returned to, so that we can understand what ties together this seemingly heterogeneous set of problems?

Ian Hacking (IH): In a word, curiosity. I'll start with a taxonomy of things that preoccupy me now. I've been working for decades on three different projects. One is what I call "making up people," which is about the interaction between classifications of people and people. That began with a talk in 1983 at Stanford and is still going on.

Another is "styles of scientific reasoning," which I hope to bring to an end very soon. It is about a relatively small number of distinct ways of thinking about nature and learning how to change it. They rely on the discovery of fundamental human capacities. It has

become, or is becoming, part of what the anthropologist Marshall Sahlins calls the world system. It's everywhere, now. These distinct styles — which are now used in all the sciences to different degrees — evolved primarily in Mediterranean (pagan, Greek, and Islamic) civilizations and then in Europe. Somewhat related practices evolved in China and India, and so on. But this is not a historical project. It is philosophical, directed at how these distinct styles of thinking and acting modified reason, truth, and language. It began with a piece in 1982 called "Language, Truth, and Reason": yes, decades is correct.

A third thing I'm trying to do right now is what I started with as a lad: the philosophy of mathematics. I have never published much about that, but it has been festering. It was the subject of the Howison Lectures here at Berkeley last fall. They were preceded by a closely related set of lectures in the Netherlands, the René Descartes Lectures. I am at this moment trying to finish them up for printing. ([Lakoff 2012](#)).

You can read a longer excerpt of the interview [here](#). Hacking's own most recent updating of his "making up people" concept appears in his article "[Kinds of People: Moving Targets](#)," where he rejects what he calls his own earlier attempts to retain a notion of "natural kinds."

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