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Fundamental Psychological Ideas

By Mortimer J. Adler

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Editor's Note: In view of the great interest in the various schools of modern psychology, Mortimer Adler of the Psychology Department of Columbia University, will deliver a series of four lectures covering this subject on four Wednesday evenings beginning March 5. The accompanying article suggests the difficult problem facing the science of Psychology today and should quicken the interest of all members of the Institute who have been following the lectures on this subject.

In the conclusion to his recently published "History of Experimental Psychology," Professor Boring of Harvard assigns two reasons for the only partial success of the experimental study of mind. One is that "there have been no great psychologists." The other is that "psychology has never succeeded in taking philosophy to itself nor in leaving it alone." In one sense these two reasons are the same. The hypothetical great psychologist now so needed to revitalize the experimental science which started optimistically about sixty years ago would be not only a great experimentalist, an innovator of methods and techniques, but would also necessarily be a profound philosopher of the subject-matter of psychology. He would be a philosopher in his possession of clarifying insight into the conceptual structure of the science of mind, and not in the sense in which so many psychologists have dabbled incompetently with what they have supposed to be the "philosophical implications" of one or another psychological theory. The philosophy of a subject-matter is to be found in the analysis of that subject-matter itself. As Newton, Clerk-Maxwell, and Einstein have contributed to the philosophy of physics through the comprehensive organization or renovation of its categories, and, at the same time, through the radical formulation of its methodology in the light of theory, so this hypothetical great psychologist would found a science of mind upon adequate theory and would render its experimental operations and program intelligible.

The task to be done can be envisaged in the absence of the genius equal to its demands. To define the problem does not require the intellectual imagination needed for its solution; such definition is nothing more than a critical commentary on the defects of contemporary psychology. Plurality of theories is usually taken as a sign of health in a young science; but even a young science must prepare to grow up to a condition of theoretical competence. Diversity in a theory and controversy about fundamentals is always a part of the scientific enterprise; the difference between one science and another is in the intellectual quality and maturity of its theoretical structure. The trouble with experimental psychology is not that it is suffering from differences of opinion, but rather that it is still childish and simple-minded in the way in which it holds and develops these opinions. It is both weak and clumsy in its analyses, and hence the controversies between its several schools are an exhibition of tantrums rather than of enlightening debate.

The lack of a proper philosophy of psychology manifests itself in two defects observable in all current experimental psychology. The first is to be seen in the haphazard character and essential insignificance of so much research, haphazard because the experimental methods and projects are not correlated with theoretical considerations, nor subservient to clearly formulated hypotheses and leading principles, and insignificant because the statistical summaries of experimental data fail to get coherent theoretical interpretation and expansion into generalities and laws. This failure is the result of the second defect, namely, the disorderly conglomeration of concepts which purports to be psychological theory. In the case of behaviorism, there has been an insufficient development of its fundamental category of habit which is everywhere applied without analytic sophistication; in the case of structuralism and freudianism, there is the opposite vice of extravagantly over-elaborate categorial schemes, which require reduction and critical simplification. And in no school of psychological research has logical continuity been established between empirical method and conceptual analysis.

Until the genius whom Boring anticipates arises, the critic of psychology must face the babel of its divergent schools very much as the European anthropologist regards the divergent mythologies held by various primitive tribes with respect to a common set of phenomena, such as the diurnal procession of the heavens. The leading contemporary psychological theories are like so many different myths about the celestial appearances. Their exponents have seized upon one or another fundamental idea; this they have ramified without

sufficient logical insight or skill, being more anxious to believe the idea than to understand it. The idea thus believed and only partially understood becomes one among many myths about human nature, which unfortunately is taken by its devotees as a psychological theory. Such phenomena as are found to exemplify this myth become the facts of human nature. It is not surprising, therefore, that psychological facts should be disputed and that psychological disputes should never end in clarification and illumination. Myths are everlastingly and obdurately opaque.

The critic of psychology, like the anthropological field worker, does not believe any of these primitive or modern myths: he tries to discern the original ideas which the mythomania of credulity has thus transformed. By such criticism the fundamental ideas of contemporary schools of psychology, in conflict over their mythologies and their favorite facts, can be isolated, revealed, and partially understood. A fuller understanding of what psychology is about must await the advent of the great psychologist who will create a single experimental science of the mind.



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