

## MODERN THOMIST PSYCHOLOGY

IN a preface to a recent and up-to-date treatise on modern scientific psychology,<sup>1</sup> based upon the teachings of St. Thomas Aquinas, the Viennese psychiatrist, Dr. Rudolf Allers, emphasizes the importance of such a foundation for modern psychology and maintains that no system of philosophy is better suited to this purpose than that of the Angelic Doctor. The peculiar position occupied by psychology, standing as it does between biology and philosophy proper, demands just such a basis. Man is a psycho-physical organism, composed of mind and body, spirit and matter, the ultimate nature and correlation of which cannot be discovered by experience alone. As other psychologists are beginning to realize, the detachment of empirical and experimental psychology from speculative psychology leads to uncertainty and confusion; and the failure to adopt a definite and common-sense philosophy has resulted in a number of divergent schools, each with some vague and uncertain philosophical background.

Dr. Brennan's important work will go far to meet the demand of students for a comprehensive and reliable survey of modern psychology completed by the establishment of the empirical facts upon a sound philosophical basis calculated to enable the reader to gain a satisfactory idea of the science as an organic whole. Thus the author opens with a survey of the general principles and method of psychology of Aquinas. He reminds us of the latter's great regard for facts from which his theories are ultimately derived. "The essential reliability of Aquinas' methods," we are told, "is demonstrated repeatedly by the large measure of agreement between his records of introspectable data and the reports given by modern experimenters." We must not, however, expect to find in the writings of St. Thomas an answer to

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<sup>1</sup> *General Psychology*. An Interpretation of the Science of Mind based on Thomas Aquinas. By Robert Edward Brennan, O.P., Ph.D. (Macmillan; 12/6.)

every problem. "There are some topics that Aquinas did not touch on, and it would be unfair to him to make his teachings solve every riddle that the modern student proposes. Many of these questions have been formulated only in our own times, and we must guard against the unconscious, though quite natural, impulse to alter the meaning of a problem as Aquinas stated it and to coax his text in the direction requisite for adapting it to new problems. To do so would be to endanger the equilibrium of the whole system."

The endeavour to interpret the scientific data philosophically does not imply a mere reconciliation of the science with philosophy, but the recognition, first of all, of the value of the experimental data and their proximate scientific interpretation, proceeding from this to that deeper understanding of the problem which philosophy alone can provide. It is in this light that the author defines general psychology as *the scientific study of mental experience and of the principles on which this experience is ultimately founded*. It is a *scientific study* because it aims at a systematic and reasoned exposition of facts, laws and causes. It deals with *mental experience* or the recognized processes and contents of the mind. In tracing these things to their *ultimate principles* it does not limit itself to the mere description or grouping of mental phenomena, but seeks to determine, by logical method, the existence and nature of further realities on which the functions of mind are more remotely dependent. These latter are the philosophic implications of psychology as an empirical or experimental science; and it is worthy of note that all such inferences are derived initially from facts of actual experience.

The value of psychology lies in the fact that, as Professor C. K. Ogden says, it ultimately provides a basis for many other studies—Ethics, Economics, Aesthetics, Ethnology, Grammar, Politics, and Mathematics. Even Physics is ultimately driven back on hypotheses which are essentially matters of psychological criticism and construction. "One of the important problems of both scientific and philosophic psychology is the knowledge process. To know *how* we

know is in a sense to have the foundation of all science, since, on its subjective side, science is the content of a particular mind. Again," the author continues, "the psychology of cognition furnishes us with a basis for the science of logic which aims to determine the rules of correct thinking and reasoning." In this science, however, we find the basis of the science of education. "Every science, in fact, which aims at controlling or influencing the minds of others, like sociology, jurisprudence, and political economy, has its roots in psychological strata where the workings of the human mind are explored." "Finally we have in philosophic psychology a discussion of the nature of the will-act which has a direct bearing on the science of ethics and natural religion."

Dr. Brennan divides his treatise into three books representing the traditional division of life into three levels, organic, sensory, and intellectual. In each book the first place is given to an account of the data, followed by their philosophic interpretation. The first book therefore treats briefly of Organic Life in general, as observed in the structure and modes of reproduction and its fundamental unit, the cell, and goes on to discuss the speculative concept of life, mechanistic and vitalistic theories. The Aristotelian theory of matter and form taken over by St. Thomas Aquinas is briefly but clearly explained, and shown to be a valid interpretation of the scientifically observed facts.

Taking sensory life next, as a part of mental life in general, the author starts from the fundamental fact of consciousness by which sensory life is differentiated from vegetable life. "This means that wherever there is the conscious factor in living response, it is certain that we are treating with an animal organism. The notion of consciousness cannot be strictly defined. The word comes from the Latin *conscire* which implies a knowing subject along with an object which is known. Whereas mental life may be described as awareness of anything, consciousness is awareness of a particular sort because of its direct reference to self, one's own existence, sensations, feelings and actions. The boundaries of consciousness are therefore more restricted

than those of mental life since this includes the presence of objects clearly seen, others but dimly perceived, and still others of which we are not at all conscious. Obviously this mental life is possible without consciousness. It is with reference to the facts of consciousness, however, that mental science is best approached, for the reason that precisely these kinds of phenomena are or should be the business of the scientific psychologist."

Consciousness, according to this author, can be studied from the standpoint of both content or structure, and of function. "Thought for example is a form of consciousness. As a function, it is an operation of mind. This is its dynamic aspect . . . Consciousness receives what the world has to give and then reacts," and though it is characterized by the manifoldness of its functions it is really one whole experience. The essentially synthetic nature of consciousness should not be overlooked.

There is a certain disagreement among psychologists in regard to the concept of consciousness and to the advisability of making it the starting point of psychology, but, as the author points out, "because there are different ways of looking at consciousness, or—to use the more general term—at mind, we have a real foundation for making formal distinctions of the systems of scientific psychology." Thus mind may be considered as a structure, as an operational concept, as behaviour, as a pattern, or as an unconscious drive.

*The Organic basis of consciousness.* The nervous system is next described and this section is followed by an account of the sense organs and sensation, both general and special. Thence the author proceeds to discuss the internal senses: Perception, Imagination on the cognitive and Instinct on the dynamic side. Instinct is related to the *estimative sense* of the older psychology, and is shown to be purposive in character and to exhibit growth and modification. Various theories of instinct are reviewed and criticized. Memory and emotional life form the subject of a subsequent section. Having dealt with the scientific aspect of sensory life Dr. Brennan proceeds to discuss its philosophical aspect,

beginning with the distinction between biological and sensory life, from which he goes on to discuss the problem of the origin of animal life, theories of evolution and creation.

The third book is concerned with the intellectual life, again in regard to its cognitive and volitional aspects. However difficult it may be to lay bare by experimental study "the workings of our mental mechanisms as they produce an idea or reach a settled decision," nevertheless this does not imply "that the methods of the laboratory are inapplicable to the levels of thought and volition." The concept of intelligence, as the author notes, seems to have been either completely ignored by psychologists, or attacked in a half-hearted manner that could hardly be calculated to give us a correct understanding of it. The work of intelligence testers has, however, revived interest in this problem, as also those investigations into the phenomena of intellectual processes which were carried out in the earlier years of this century by Oswald Kulpe, Marbe and others in Germany and elsewhere. In accordance with the principles of Aquinas, intelligence means the exercise of the ability to think, which is what we understand by intellect. These researches, as well as those of intelligence testers, particularly of Spearman and his school, have done much to rehabilitate the concept of intelligence in modern psychology.

Along with the cognitive functions of intellect a special volitional activity is recognised by the scientific thinker and the untrained observer alike. Volition is a special form of *orexis*, a term now in general use in psychology as the equivalent of "appetite" or appetition. We may distinguish between sensory and intellectual *orexis*. The concept of volition, its various types and characteristics, together with the experimental studies thereon, form the principal contents of this part of Dr. Brennan's treatise, and is followed by a discussion on determining tendencies, imagery, strength of volition to which experimenters such as Ach, Michotte, Prüm, Aveling and others have made notable contributions. Further processes in which volition is con-

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cerned, such as attention and association of ideas, are carefully considered and lead to the study of action, habit and character. The scientific section on volition concludes with observations on the nature of the Ego and of Faculties. The author then proceeds to gather up the scientific data and give them a philosophical interpretation, ending with a discussion of the Mind-substance theory of Aquinas, and the origin and destiny of human mind.

The exposition of the various subjects in this excellent treatise is throughout clear, concise and accurate. If to the more fully informed reader it may appear in parts to be too brief, any deficiency in this respect is supplemented by abundant references to the relevant scientific literature, as also to the writings of Aquinas, principally to the *Summa Theologica*. Here and there, certain statements may invoke discussion and possible disagreement, but into these we cannot here enter. It is noteworthy that this is the first work of the kind in the English language in which the results of modern scientific psychology are synthesized and interpreted according to the mind of Aquinas. It will therefore, one may hope, help to restore interest and confidence in scientific psychology, which is not, as we might be led to infer from much of the current and popular literature, exclusively concerned with problems of mental and moral adjustment.

This volume merits the praise and welcome called for by a piece of valuable pioneer work. Dr. Brennan has attempted, and successfully attempted, an urgently needed synthesis. He has blazed a trail through a wilderness of data which students and teachers of psychology will do well to follow. It is a pioneer trail; let the author not be blamed if he has not yet constructed a finished highway: that will follow, we hope, in due course.

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