

## IS PSYCHOLOGY POSSIBLE?

TO ask such a question, when we consider the publicity and importance which is accorded nowadays to psychology, may appear rather startling, if not absurd. Yet, as the late Professor Münsterberg observes, "to reach a clear understanding as to the true meaning of psychology is a more difficult task than the solution of any special psychological problem."<sup>1</sup> Of late years there has arisen a great deal of criticism not only concerning the foundations on which this science rests, but also in regard to its very aims and scope. The student of psychology is at the outset confronted by a perplexing variety of "schools," each claiming right of way to the general exclusion of all others. Quite recently this discordance was voiced in no measured terms by Professor Spearman. "It is generally agreed," he writes, "that nowadays psychology has arrived at a very undesirable degree of disunity. Each school, if not each individual, seeks to establish the science independently both of his predecessors and even of his colleagues. The result is that all alike have come into general discredit. Psychology is a byword of reproach among other sciences."<sup>2</sup> Even Professor McDougall, whose writings on Psychology are so widely known, seems infected with this feeling of discontent; for in a recent publication<sup>3</sup> he remarks: "Even now after some forty-five years of sustained effort I am not sure that I have made any progress, have learned anything of human nature." He further adds that he inclines to the view current among the Oxford philosophers of his day that such a knowledge is impossible. "The science implied by the word 'psychology' is beyond our reach, no such science exists and no such science is possible. . . . The present condition of psychology is deplorable." Not a few philosophers will, I think, be inclined to agree with McDougall.

On the other hand, by way of contrast to such lamenta-

---

<sup>1</sup> *Psychology General and Applied*, 1923, p. 8.

<sup>2</sup> *Character and Personality*, September, 1935, p. 11.

<sup>3</sup> *Psycho-analysis and Social Psychology*, 1936.

## BLACKFRIARS

tions, we have the spectacle of a vast body of psychologists, social workers, medical psychologists, educationalists, industrialists, and others, who quite confidently look to psychology for assistance in the solution of many problems which arise in the daily life of human beings. It cannot be said that *all* this effort is in vain, nor that its results are negligible.

How has this situation arisen? What lies at the root of this discontent with psychology? One factor is undoubtedly that to which Professor Spearman alludes, namely the individualism of psychologists, who hold personal and generally exclusive views as to the meaning and purpose of psychology.

To trace this problem to its sources in the past would mean writing a history of psychology during the last half-century or so—a task which even in outline cannot be attempted here. There are however certain outstanding factors which it may be helpful to consider. In the first place, modern psychology arose in the latter part of the last century as an experimental study of the phenomena of mental life. From this standpoint the aim of psychology was clearly defined. Instead of speculation concerning the nature of the soul or the nature of mind and mental processes generally, attention was directed to all those states of consciousness which could be methodically observed and experimented upon, in the hope of discovering scientific laws. We find, therefore, the work of psychologists directed mainly to the observation, description, and explanation of the phenomena of sensation, memory, feelings, judgment, volition, and so forth. Psychological laboratories equipped with all kinds of apparatus for experimental research came into existence, following the lead given by Wilhelm Wundt who in 1879 established the first psychological laboratory in Leipzig.

Early experimental psychology was largely physiological, dealing with sensations and the repercussions of psychical phenomena on respiration and the circulation of the blood; but by degrees other phenomena, such as those of attention, memory, and the higher intellectual processes, came under consideration. We need not dwell at length on details. The point of view was clear enough and few disputed the current conception of psychology as the experimental science of

## IS PSYCHOLOGY POSSIBLE?

mental processes, or generally speaking of the mind. Its aim was quite disinterested and did not go beyond its self-imposed limits. Like other natural sciences, its first concern was with the facts themselves; it had no immediate interest in utility or any practical applications. If others found that use could be made of the discoveries of psychology, if the experimental technique could be applied to other problems, that was another matter of no particular concern to the experimental psychologist.

This state of affairs, however, did not continue, for alongside of the exclusively experimental work other psychologists began to turn their attention to practical problems. A leader in this direction was undoubtedly William James, whose inclinations were nevertheless more in the direction of philosophy than of experimental science. His classic treatise *The Principles of Psychology*, published in 1890, included chapters on the instincts and emotions of man, on habits and the formation of habits, on volition, and on many other topics which at that time had not been taken up by the pure experimentalists. In short, James put "life" into psychology, whereas the experimentalist, like anatomists with the human body, had taken life out of mind, dissecting it into its component elements and structures, studying all these by themselves and out of relation to the human being as a whole.

At the beginning of the present century we find William McDougall in revolt against this narrow conception of psychology, proclaiming that psychology should aim at studying human conduct or human nature as a whole, and insisting on the social character of psychological science. The first notable step in this direction was taken when in 1908 he published his now well-known *Introduction to Social Psychology*, which has since been revised and reprinted in numerous editions. From now onwards the psychological current divided into two main streams, the one continuing the traditional outlook of the experimentalists, but becoming more strictly psychological, the other being concerned with problems of human nature as a whole.

We cannot stay to examine McDougall's psychology in detail, but the main point on which he insisted strongly

throughout was that of the purposive nature of life in general. He firmly resisted the materialistic and mechanical attitude to mind so widely prevalent at this time, maintaining that the real aim of psychology was not merely to study the mind and its structure, but far rather to study human nature as a whole; and to that task he subsequently devoted all his energies. How far McDougall has influenced the subsequent course of psychology is perhaps difficult to say; it is, however, important to note that the general interest in psychology grew when it began to develop on these lines, so that at the present day it may be truthfully said that psychology is less interested in problems of the mind as such than with problems of character and personality. This attitude to psychology has brought about a change in its character as a science.

“A complete psychology,” according to Professor Münsterberg, “must deal with the whole mental life as a system of mental processes to be explained, and must deal in another part with the whole mental life as an expression of personality to be understood in its meaning. The two parts supplement each other.” To that part of psychology which is concerned with scientific explanation Münsterberg applies the term “*causal*,” whilst that which makes “meaning” its chief aim he calls “*purposive*” psychology, adding that “it means very little what name we give to the two aspects of psychical experience, but it means extremely much to keep them clearly separate and to recognize distinctly the principles which control them.” There is no doubt that much of the present confusion of thought in regard to the theoretical aspect of psychology lies in not keeping these two aspects of experience apart, or else in maintaining the one to the exclusion of the other. Another source of confusion may be traced to the widespread interests of practical psychology, which can with difficulty be built up into a system since it is essentially concerned with a multitude of special and often quite disconnected problems, all of which, however, fall within the general conception of a purposive psychology. But here again Professor Münsterberg warns us that “we take a narrow view of scientific knowledge if we claim that it has a

## IS PSYCHOLOGY POSSIBLE?

right to exist only when it can serve our practical interests, and can be applied to the tasks of life. Truth must be respected as valuable in itself. . . . Some have the feeling that psychology loses its dignity when it becomes a handmaid of routine life."

Within the field of "purposive" psychology, as distinct from the purely experimental psychology of the laboratory, there are various lines of study both theoretical and practical, which however have not been grouped into "schools." In it may be included studies of personality, temperament and character, in part theoretical, in part experimental. Psychology of this kind will include, for example, Spearman's *Factor Psychology*, Kretschmer's *Studies of Psychological Types*, and other studies of like nature. Each and all have some valuable contribution to make towards the psychological interpretation of human nature.

So far, however, the psychological horizon, from whatsoever standpoint it may be approached, is limited to conscious mental processes and conscious activity, but with the advent of psycho-analysis a wider field has been laid bare, and the general conception of psychology extended to what for want of a better term we may call, with Freud, *The Unconscious*. If ordinary psychology is the psychology of conscious mental life, psycho-analysis is the psychology of the unconscious mental life, or that aspect of mental life of which the individual is consciously unaware, but which manifests itself in various ways, principally in certain modes of conduct the meaning of which evades ordinary interpretation and can be reached, if at all, only by very special methods of approach.

We hear so much to-day of this and kindred psychologies dealing with the more abnormal aspects of mental life that the word psychology is in danger of being confused with psycho-analysis, sharing with the latter the odium attaching to it. A discussion of the merits or otherwise of psycho-analysis and its variants would be out of place here, but it cannot be too strongly insisted upon that this psychology occupies a totally different place and by no means embraces the whole of the science. It has its own special field and its own special technique, and whilst it can justly be said that it

has greatly extended our knowledge of human nature, there are other parts of this subject where it does not even pretend to enter.

The question, then, whether psychology is possible may be answered in various ways. If we extend the term beyond the meaning given to it by the early experimentalists it may be said that a general synthesis of the available data can scarcely be expected in the present state of the science, until some universally accepted general principles are adopted. For the present, therefore, only a negative answer to the question can be given, but this need not deter us from affirming the possibility of considerable progress in the psychological study of particular problems. What psychology suffers from mostly to-day is not so much the variety of the "schools," but from a certain narrowness of vision among those psychologists who seem capable only of viewing the subject from their own particular standpoint. In all scientific investigation there will be contending theories purporting to explain or interpret the data furnished by observation and experiment, and to this psychology cannot be an exception. The very variety of schools tends to widen our conception of the subject and to increase our knowledge of the mind, for that after all is the fundamental meaning and purpose of psychology.

G. A. ELINGTON, O.P.