

Philosophy, philosophical psychology and its relevance for  
empirical psychology

In this course of lectures I shall try to show that philosophical considerations have an important positive contribution to make towards the development of the empirical science of psychology.

The negatively critical attitude of some philosophers, such as Wittgenstein, who are concerned only to point out the conceptual confusion which underlies much of the experimental research carried out by psychologists in the past is rejected.

One positive contribution which the philosopher can make to empirical psychology is to show that inhibitions, rooted in traditional philosophical arguments, which prevent the psychologist from entertaining certain hypotheses and asking certain questions which he might otherwise find it helpful to entertain or to ask, are unfounded. An instance here might be my own contention that the thesis that consciousness is a process in the brain is a reasonable scientific hypothesis not to be dismissed on logical grounds alone.<sup>3</sup>

Another and richer source of assistance which the philosopher can provide to the psychologist derives from what is commonly known as philosophical psychology or the philosophy of mind which studies the psychological concepts of ordinary language as distinct from the philosophy of psychology which studies the logical features of the technical concepts and theories of the psychologist. It is with the implication of philosophical psychology in this sense for the empirical science of psychology that this course of lectures will be primarily concerned.

In order to understand the distinction between the philosophy of psychology and philosophical psychology and the case for believing that philosophical psychology has implications for the empirical science of psychology, we need to understand the nature and respective roles of psychology and philosophy. Psychology is an empirical science committed by a long tradition to the application wherever possible of the characteristic methodology of the natural sciences including such features as measurement, experiment, causal-mechanical explanation, explanation by molar-molecular reduction and mathematical models. The

definition of its subject matter is a matter of controversy, the mind, mental life, experience, consciousness and the behavior of organism being principal contenders. Philosophy is not an empirical science; nor apart from formal or mathematical logic, is it a purely formal science like mathematics. It raises questions which are logically prior to the formal-empirical distinction about (a) the concepts we employ in reasoning and thinking (conceptual analysis), (b) the conditions that need to be met in order to justify the claim that a proposition is true or false (epistemology), (c) the principles governing the validity of inferences from one proposition or set of propositions to another (logic).

Philosophical issues arise concerning the concepts, methodology and theory of any branch of intellectual inquiry. Hence the philosophy of psychology conceived as a branch of the philosophy of empirical science concerned with the concepts methods and theories of psychology. Philosophical psychology on the other hand is concerned with the concepts of and theoretical presuppositions implicit in the non-technical psychological language of common sense and ordinary discourse. The relevance of the philosophy of psychology for psychology requires no defence; but what is the relevance of philosophical psychology for empirical psychology?

The view that the psychologist is guilty of logical impropriety, if he fails to use or seeks to modify the psychological language of common sense for his own technical purpose is rejected. Nevertheless four reasons are given why the psychologist needs to study the ordinary non-technical language in his field in a way that other natural scientists do not:

- (i) common sense mentalistic explanations of human behaviour in terms of what a man wants and what he believes about the means of achieving what he wants constitute an efficient and indispensable means of explaining, predicting and controlling the behaviour of other persons in those areas over which a rational connection holds between what a man says and what he does (Section 3).
- (ii) many aspects of the psychological language of common sense in the field of emotion contain important insights into aspects of human behaviour which psychological research has not yet disentangled (Section 7).
- (iii) clinical and social psychologists frequently need to take account of descriptions and

explanations given by patients and other naive subjects of their own mental processes and of the reasons for their behaviour. Such accounts are necessarily framed in terms of the psychological language of common sense. Consequently the psychologist needs to know how to relate such statements to his own technical concepts and theories (Section 4).

- (iv) if, as Wittgenstein's private language argument<sup>9</sup> would seem to imply, the case for believing in the occurrence of private experience cannot be validly argued from a subjective standpoint, the empirical evidence for believing in the occurrence of such experiences must rest on the interpretation of statements made by naive subjects about their own private experiences. Such statements must necessarily be formulated in the psychological language of common sense and require the conceptual analysis of such statements for their interpretation and the assessment of their implication for technical psychological theory (Sections 5 & 6).

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### References

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- (4) G. Ryle - The Concept of Mind, London, Hutchinson, 1949.
- (5) L. Wittgenstein - Philosophical Investigations, translated by G.E.M. Anscombe, Oxford, Blackwell 1955, esp. I, 241-3 pp, 88-9 and II, xiv, p. 232.