THE IMPORTANCE OF PSYCHOLOGY—I

It is a paradoxical situation that, whereas Oxford has the strongest philosophical school in the world, and psychology has in the past developed under the aegis of philosophy—many of the great philosophers having been eminent in psychological attainment—yet psychology has encountered more difficulty in breaking away and finding its own level in Oxford than in any other university. This is illustrated by the fact that Oxford is the only great university in the world which still has no laboratory in experimental psychology. The only appointment that is devoted to psychology, namely, the Wilde Readership, is so arranged that the duties of the Reader exclude the study and teaching of experimental psychology. In Oxford even the word 'psychology' is not used; the title is 'The Wilde Readership in Mental Philosophy,' and it is described in the conditions of appointment of the Reader as 'The study of the human mind by observation, exclusive of methods of experiment.' At Cambridge there has recently been appointed a professor of experimental psychology, and in all the American universities there are Chairs in this subject.

Again, in every university in the world except Oxford psychology may be taken as a separate subject, and examinations are set in that subject. In London University, for example, the student may take Psychology as a single Pass in the B.A., B.Sc., or he may take the Honours Degree in Psychology, B.A., B.Sc., or he can even take a doctorate in that science. At Oxford the only way in which a student can show his knowledge of psychology is indirectly in some of the 'Greats' papers—and he does so at his peril—or in taking psychology as a special subject in 'Greats.' I myself followed the latter course near thirty years ago, but I do not think it helped me at all, and I do not know of anyone who has done it since. Later students have been wise in their generation, and have realised that it is better to keep relatively clear of psychology in their philosophical studies.

The chief reason for this is undoubtedly the great strength of the Oxford philosophical school, and the distrust of psychology as a growing science. There may be other reasons, too, which weigh in the scales, reasons arising from the nature of the science itself and its difficulties. We have to bear in mind that psychology covers a very wide field, and only by considering it from the point of view of different departments can we do it adequate justice. As I mentioned above, our sister university of Cambridge has a professor of experimental psychology, which means that at that university there is specialisation along experimental lines; but actually the experimental aspect of psychology is still quite a small part of the entire science, and even professors of experimental psychology give lectures on parts of the subject which do not lend themselves to the experimental method.

On the other hand, it is experiment in psychology which has marked off a definite field of investigation such as may be dealt with in relative abstraction from more general philosophical considerations. Speaking historically, I think we may regard the rise of experimental psychology as the beginnings of a school of psychology independent of philosophy, in the same way that physics, chemistry, botany, zoology, and other sciences are independent of philosophy. In that sense experimental psychology is of very great importance. The method of experiment is the method of observation under pre-arranged conditions—that is to say, under conditions which can be controlled. An experiment can be repeated under the same conditions at different times, and so lends itself to the process of verification—a process all-important in science. Further, experiment always aims at quantification. It is the employment of measurement in psychology that is producing such advances in the subject at the present day. Measurement was originally introduced into the study of experimental psychology by G. T. Fechner, Professor of Physics in Leipzig, who was also interested in psychology. He devised the psycho-physical methods, which are the fundamental basis of experimental psychology technique. Since his day the use of the method of measurement of elementary mental abilities by means of simple tests has developed to a great extent, and mathematical investigation of relationships between different forms of mental ability has itself become almost a science. It is by the introduction of simple mental tests that it has been possible to link up experimental psychology with the whole do-
main of statistical investigation. Statistical and mathematical methods now have full play within the science of experimental psychology.

The results of all this are theoretically important in that special relationships have been discovered between measures of intellectual function and other more specific mental activities. They are of practical importance, too, in that they admit of direct application in the domain of vocational guidance. The discovery and the measurement of the fundamental and characteristic powers of the individual point to the profession for which he is best suited. A further practical application lies in distinguishing categories or degrees of mental defect, and here it links up with another very important branch of modern psychology, namely, medical psychology.

The advance of medical psychology has been mainly along non-experimental lines, but has been definitely scientific, being based completely on unprejudiced observation. In the effort to understand mental symptoms and to retrieve them, investigators have found it necessary to go more and more deeply into the minds of their patients, to analyse them over prolonged periods, and for considerable lengths of time, with the result that they have discovered that things are by no means always what they seem in psychological matters, and that the fundamental forces at work in the mind are often very different from the forces which appear manifest on the surface. This is well illustrated by the fact that the symptoms observed by the medical psychologist are often unintelligible until the previous history of the patient has been brought out, when points of contact are found between the symptoms and the earlier experiences, giving an adequate explanation of such symptoms, and also sufficient to clear them up.

Out of these observations there has arisen a general hypothesis of unconscious mental activity. The general viewpoint of modern medical psychology is that mind in its essence is unconscious. The conscious part is a very partial manifestation, and introspection or direct observation of what is in the mind is quite insufficient to explain the real state of affairs. Medical psychology has linked itself up more and more with the biological method of approach, and along those lines psychology has come to be regarded as the continuation of or, as it were, the completion of biology.

The discoveries of medical psychology bear wider import still. They have a direct bearing on non-medical problems, such as education, the development of the mind of the child, also on anthropology, folk-lore, and history and literature. To touch only on the two last, psychology has its obvious interest to the historian because of the influence of personalities upon historical events and tendencies. Psychology can show how the individual experiences of persons who have directed the course of history have reacted upon their own conduct; sometimes mental abnormality, slight or more pronounced, in individuals, has influenced the destinies of societies. Again, psychology evidently has a very close bearing upon questions of literature and the drama. There also it has its own lessons to teach.

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