THE DEVELOPMENT OF PSYCHOLOGICAL STUDIES
AT OXFORD

NOW that the Honours School of Psychology, Philosophy and Physiology has been running for two years, it is perhaps worth while taking a look at the way it is shaping and at the recent development of psychological studies in general.

Most readers of the Oxford Magazine will be familiar, no doubt, with its early history. In 1935 Mrs. Hugh Watts (now Mrs. L. S. Creasy) gave a sum of £10,000 to the University for the development of psychology. Dr. William Brown, the then Wilde Reader in Mental Philosophy, and Dr. William Stephenson were largely responsible for using this sum to found the Institute of Experimental Psychology (of which Dr. Brown became the first Director) for graduate teaching and research. A Diploma in Psychology was begun later, and suitably qualified students accepted. After the war, and after considerable debate, the present Honour School was established and started work in Michaelmas 1947. The first Professor of Psychology (Prof. George Humphrey) was appointed and the Wilde Readership actually became a job in Mental Philosophy. The Professor was to become Director of the Institute and have the assistance at the time of three University lecturers in psychology. Because of the shortage of space, it was necessary to limit very drastically the number of undergraduates taking the School.

What has happened since October 1947? The Diploma course was abolished as being beyond the capacity of the Institute to run concurrently with the Honours courses. With the financial help of the Social Studies Board, it was possible last term to appoint a lecturer in Social Psychology. It was also found necessary to appoint a junior and temporary lecturer in experimental psychology to assist particularly in the running of the practical classes. The total number of undergraduates to be admitted was fixed at not more than twelve per annum, up to eight places were opened to graduates from Oxford and elsewhere, and up to four for graduates from abroad of special merit who were forced to make a late application. The number who wrote the School in 1949 and 1950 was eleven in each case—two choosing the Physiology and Psychology option in each year. The prospective number ending this June is fourteen, with five choosing the Physiology. The number of postgraduates admitted by the Board is now eighteen, nine of these being for the D.Phil.; and about six out of the eighteen require laboratory facilities of some sort at the Institute. Since October 1947 the Board has awarded thirteen higher degrees—two of them D.Phil.s, one B.Sc., and ten B.Litt.s. The stop press item is that the Institute has just overflowed into the basement of 6 Keble Road—now that the Foresters have left it.

It is far too early to say whether the School of P.P.P. has come up to the expectations of its founders, and what it will be like when it settles down. But we can venture a provisional judgment on certain matters. Thus it seems clear that the University was quite right to make the School two-pronged. One of the obvious characteristics of psychology is its close relation to other fields of study. One of its constant needs is for new, fruitful ideas. Psychologists are more likely to produce these ideas if they have had the benefit of a training in a related field. I think that Oxford has got hold of something here which will pay long run dividends. It also seems clear that the scope of the School is wide enough, and at the same time sufficiently “useless”, to ensure that it provides the undergraduates with “a sound liberal education”. If anyone thinks that Psychology is too narrow a subject to do this, then I suspect either that he has not read the course of study in the Statutes, or that he does not know what it means. But though the course is wide, the two sides of it have dovetailed fairly well together, and are much better integrated than the two (or should I say four?) sides of P.P.E. It also looks as if the University did the right thing in making it an undergraduate school. For it is difficult to discover any relevant virtue in graduates as such for the study of psychology; and it seems evident from the examination results and the examiners’ reports that the undergraduates are getting a great deal from the School, and that the standard reached in it is a high one. Thus, out of the twenty-two who have taken Schools, there were five firsts, twelve seconds, four thirds, and one fourth. Both in 1949 and 1950 the Examiners expressed themselves as being generally satisfied with the results. The external examiner in Psychology in 1949 (Prof. C. A. Mace) began his additional report as follows: “As external examiner I have naturally been interested to compare the performance of candidates in the new School with that of candidates in other examinations with which I have been concerned (in Cambridge, London, the North Midland and
the Scottish Universities). I can say with some confidence that the general level of P.P.P. candidates has not been surpassed in any of these other examinations, and that in some respects this performance has been outstanding."

Fortunately the experience of the last two and a half years has been sufficient to show up some of the shortcomings of the present set-up. First and foremost, the present premises of the Institute at 34 Banbury Road are totally inadequate for the purposes. They are inadequate, in particular, in two respects. The lecture room is also the laboratory and the laboratory facilities are virtually confined to one room. What is required are (a) a lecture room and separate laboratory, where apparatus can be left in situ between classes; and (b) some specially designed rooms for special kinds of experiments (e.g. a soundproof room), and some small rooms, or cubicles, when privacy is required. It is not an exaggeration to say that the Institute fails to provide the facilities necessary for teaching experimental psychology at an Honours standard. The staff of the Institute are constantly battling against odds, and what they have done in the past few years is an achievement very much to their credit. Matters are equally strained when it comes to providing adequate facilities for the small body of postgraduates doing experimental work. It is quite right, therefore, that a new building for the Institute should be very high up on the list of priorities for the next building quinquennium.

Though the scope of Psychology is wide enough for an Honour School, there are two respects in which the course of study can be criticised. Firstly, psychology has two main sides or aspects — the biological and the social. One can go into it by considering the individual as an organism, or by considering the individual as a member of a community. The emphasis in P.P.P. is heavily on the former, and a critic could justly claim that it is far too much so. The Board of Studies was not unaware of this defect, and the recent appointment of the Lecturer in Social Psychology was expressly designed to meet it. The trouble is, perhaps, that the balance can only be adequately corrected by giving undergraduates an appreciation of other disciplines in the Social Sciences, e.g. Social Anthropology or Sociology. Unfortunately this is out of the question at present. Secondly, the critic could protest that the training fails to give undergraduates what we would expect them to obtain from an Honours course in Psychology, viz. the ability to understand people. In this respect our Oxford graduates are no better than any intelligent and sympathetic layman. How to deal with this deficiency is a complex and controversial matter. But there is one step that would be of some immediate assistance. Undergraduates cannot obtain much insight into the motives of ordinary people unless they also obtain some understanding of abnormal psychology, and so become sensitive to the sorts of behaviour difficulties that different sorts of people exhibit under stress. But they can only gain this insight through a much closer study of the abnormal than is possible at present. Obviously they require instruction from an appropriately qualified lecturer in psychopathology who is in a position to use clinical facilities for the purposes of his teaching.

Though the two prongs of the School are quite well integrated, there is still room for improvement. Consider the Philosophy and Psychology alone. The philosophy taught at Oxford is practised, for the most part, by philosophers who have no technical equipment in psychology or any other related science, and whose competence is generally restricted to a knowledge of history and language, especially ordinary English. The consequence is that the philosophical climate is not as congenial as it might be for undergraduates reading psychology. They experience philosophical difficulties that are not satisfyingly aired and dealt with; and so they tend either to spend too much energy trying to relate the two subjects, or to give up the struggle altogether. Obviously there is nothing immediate that can be done about this.

It is not unfair perhaps to say that the general standard of psychological work in this country is rather low at the present time. One of the reasons for this is that the subject has not attracted its share of able personnel. It is part of the business of the new Honour School to correct this tendency and to attract the able man by presenting the subject as the tough and exciting one that it is. Moreover, it would be generally agreed that we know vastly more about the machines that run our civilisation than about the people who plan and man them; and that we know much more about the attitudes and aspirations of fifth century Athenians or the distant Aorese than we do about the present-day inhabitants of Cowley or Garsington. I take it that it is also part of the business of the new School and postgraduate centre to do its small share to correct this anachronism.

B.A.F.

In view of its success, the exhibition of works by Toulouse-Lautrec at the MAISON FRANCAISE, 72 WOODSTOCK ROAD, will be extended for another week until Saturday, March 3rd.

Opening times: 10.0 a.m. — 1.0 p.m.
2.30 p.m. — 5.30 p.m.

Closed on Saturday afternoons and Sundays.