FIVE YEARS IN THE OXFORD CHAIR

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In 1947 the University of Oxford decided, after considerable debate, to found a Chair of Psychology. There had already been an Institute of Experimental Psychology which had been initiated and directed by the late Dr William Brown and his associate, William Stephenson (a brigadier in the last War); but it was able to grant only a Diploma in Psychology and advanced degrees. It took no part in the undergraduate instruction of the University. The Chair was established at the same time as a new degree course for undergraduates, including psychology as one of its subjects.

In certain ways the Honours School of Psychology, Philosophy and Physiology is unique, at least at this University, in that it forms a special kind of meeting place for the man of the laboratory and the 'humanist'. It is, perhaps, particularly over examinations that the clash of personality and training comes out. The Board of Examiners consists of two psychologists, two physiologists (one external in each), and two philosophers. The Board, as a whole, is responsible for the class in which a man is placed. Philosophers, psychologists and physiologists sit round the same table discussing examination papers in 'Psychology, and either Philosophy or Physiology' and, after the papers have been written, examination results. A physiologist or a philosopher may ask to read a psychological paper; in fact, at the wish of one of the physiologists, it has become the custom for the special paper on physiological psychology to be read by the physiologists. A philosopher or a physiologist may turn up at the practical examinations or the vivae voce in psychology. It is not breaking any professional confidence to say that on one occasion a physiologist thought that the psychologist had been too hard in assessing a paper, and was told that what had been written was fairly routine work for a psychologist. This interchange of ideas and scrutiny of psychologists' work by philosophers and physiologists—the converse also happens at times—helps to give a special flavour to what has become known as P.F.P. The Board of Studies for Psychology, which has general control over examinations for the School and certain other matters, at present includes three philosophers, four psychologists, the reader in mental philosophy (a liaison man!), a zoologist, two physiologists, a neurologist and a head of a college who is a well-known philosopher. Here again Science and the Humanities sit round the same table to discuss the problems of the School and the Institute. Experience up to the present has shown that each side has its own distinctive and valuable contribution to make.

This organization has led to interchange of views not only about particular candidates during vivae and otherwise, but also on points of educational policy. The conflux of disciplines, with psychology as the middle stream, has raised in a more acute form than elsewhere the difficult problem of the relation of the Arts to the Sciences; for, of course, the same problem exists at other universities in the country and for that matter throughout the world. Here, psychology has proved itself a natural interpreter.

Oxford is the home of professional philosophers. It is safe to say that there are more of them to the square mile than anywhere else, perhaps with the exception of the Vatican.
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They have at times had strong views about psychology, particularly experimental psychology. An eminent tutor used to set his pupils an essay in which they were expected to prove that experimental psychology was impossible; and he was not alone at the time in his belief. In fact, when experimental psychology was born with Fechner's *Psychophysik* in 1860, the dictum 'This is all nonsense!' seems to have arisen simultaneously from twenty Oxford colleges. One may guess that it was Freud who originally both inhibited and electrified the notion that something more should be done about psychology in this University. For in 1945 the idea of an experimental study of the mind was still a bit of a novelty in this home of ancient philosophical traditions. All this did not make things easier for a new professor, who found himself the jetsam of an acrimonious debate as to whether he should exist at all. He heard the lions on the shore sniffing round him, waiting for him to make a wrong move. Occasionally he still hears a sniff or two.

Now Oxford philosophy has a long history, a long memory and a strong arm. It reaches its conclusions patiently and carefully; they are honest conclusions, honestly reached. Though rebels and initiators exist, there is nevertheless an important body of immensely old, immensely well-grounded and well-groomed conservatism. With respect to psychology, it must be remembered that many of the objections were originally raised against the futilities of a past that we have now grown out of, and the not so long past extravagances of an early psycho-analysis too wholeheartedly promoted by well-meaning disciples. To some extent it is therefore true that to-day's psychologist would endorse many of the objections with which he has been met. Conservative opinion has feared also that the subject might be too 'easy'. This fear we are in process of removing. It has feared also that undergraduates might take the course 'for the wrong reasons', because they were interested in the morbid, and expected to find it in psychology. One can only say that they have not.

Lastly, and perhaps most important, it has feared that psychology could not provide a discipline stringent and basic enough to contribute to that liberation of the mind on which Oxford has so long and so properly prided herself. During the first year of the chair a very distinguished Oxonian, at that time Chairman of the Board of Studies for Psychology, remarked that if we could 'educate the men' we should have little trouble. This is what we have tried to do. The endeavour has been to make people see nature—human nature—as a problem. Facts there must of course be, and techniques also; but if we can make our graduates look on the world of human beings in the spirit of research, we are satisfied. Thus the whole course is 'research minded'. The amount and the variety of advanced research going on in the Institute has steadily grown since the School of Psychology, Philosophy and Physiology was begun, and now ranges from the electrical phenomena of the eye to the psychology of economic processes. Undergraduates have been described as 'regarding each question as a problem for research'. This, we feel, is as it should be. In the matter of research, as in every other respect, the Institute has enjoyed and appreciated unusually cordial relations with the Oxford hospitals.

The Institute itself is accommodated in half of an old school house together with a 'hut' in the rear. In addition, certain outlying premises are used for research. The University has promised a new building, which will make everybody much happier and bring all staff and research students together, as befits a young and growing department. There are now some forty undergraduates and research students. Owing to the scarcity of space there is a 'ceiling' for the number of undergraduates permitted to read the School, and this also
helps a young department. According to our terms of reference, training is given only in fundamental psychology, not in applications, such as educational or industrial work. The administrative relation of the Institute to the School of P.P.P. has not yet been completely clarified. In practice the Institute works very well as the major repository of psychological work in the University.

We are trying to give the student that spirit of inquiry which the philosophers have so manfully kept alive for so many years. For the rest, Pericles once remarked that that woman is best who is least spoken of for good or ill. That we feel to be true also of a University department—at least a young one!

(Manuscript received 10 June 1953)