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Reply to target article: “Inventing the Subject: The Renewal of ‘Psychological’ Psychology”

In an important sense Robinson’s paper is investigative and open and despite the academic character of the exercise it is clearly stated that we are not to expect any ready-made solutions or the alternative theory or theories, which convinced me that it was also necessary to try and capture the imaginative and inspiring spirit of the paper. Hence I shall now refer to certain views expressed by persons who have made an acknowledged contribution to the history of ideas.

Matthew Arnold (1966: 6) in his essay ‘Culture and Anarchy’, which stands as a landmark in English literary history, states: ‘The whole scope of the essay is to recommend culture as the great help out of our present difficulties, culture being a pursuit of our total perfection by means of getting to know, on all matters which most concern us, the best which has been thought and said in the world, and through this knowledge, turning a stream of fresh and free thought upon our stock notions, which we now follow staunchly but mechanically, vainly imagining that there is a virtue in following them staunchly which makes up for the mischief of following them mechanically. This and this alone, is the scope of the following essay.’ It is to be noted that the term ‘culture’ is used here in the sense of the universal and sublime and not in the way we normally tend to use it today.

Susan Haack (1998: 56–57), speaking of Charles Peirce Saunders and defending his common sense realism, says: ‘I think of his metaphor of a cable of reasons, adapted from Reid, replacing the Cartesian metaphor of a chain, of his metaphor of the mind as a lake, of which the cognitive is only the thinnest surface …’. This also reminds me of the novelist and philosopher Iris Murdoch, who during an interview suggested that humans were far too complex in ways that psychological theories could do justice to and that one should try one’s hand at writing novels and then compare the experiences. I believe there are two principal factors that contribute to the richness and meaningfulness of this literary genre. One factor has to do with the dimension of time and history, the making and breaking of lives and communities. This should also remind us of what Aristotle said about the development of character – the creation of what one might call a moral, mature balanced mind – that it requires a lifetime. The other factor is the contextual pattern which weaves and merges the particular and specific with the ever-extending and in some sense endless context to provide a sense of meaning and engagement.

What we have been speaking of here is a realism that contemporary psychology has largely neglected or only taken
up in bits and parts. It may be legitimately said, when psychology goes about its business in ignorance or indifference of this essential realism it runs the risk of creating pseudo-knowledge while it rests secure and complacent in its nest of that 'unfailing methodology' – what Matthew Arnold would call 'stock notions and habits', while Robinson refers to 'business as usual'. In this context let me also add that I basically agree with the view that if we are really seeking 'business as usual'. In this context let me also add that I would call 'stock notions and habits', while Robinson refers to nest of that 'unfailing methodology' – what Matthew Arnold pseudo-knowledge while it rests secure and complacent in its psychology goes about its business in ignorance or up in bits and parts. It may be legitimately said, when psychology goes about its business in ignorance or indifference of this essential realism it runs the risk of creating pseudo-knowledge while it rests secure and complacent in its nest of that 'unfailing methodology' – what Matthew Arnold would call 'stock notions and habits', while Robinson refers to 'business as usual'. In this context let me also add that I basically agree with the view that if we are really seeking possibilities of reinterpretation. To take one example, I would think that some of the recent studies in infant and child development (Trevarthan 1998, Stern 1985, Hobson 2002) are most likely to interact positively with any new vision of psychology. Robinson's ideas in the form of the renewal of "psychological" psychology and the inventing of the subject offer some hope in this direction. Let me connect some of my thoughts and what I have written earlier (Cawasjee 2001, 1996) to Robinson's proposal for a 'new psychology', implicitly suggesting the potentialities inherent in Robinson's project and simultaneously putting forward the case for the institution of a teaching programme along these lines. I have already referred a number of times to the idea that psychology has to define its goals in terms of the unified entity of the individual, that psychology is primarily the study of the 'total individual being, living and acting in the world – the common sense realism of life'. Elsewhere I have argued (Cawasjee 2001: 33–48) for a concept of 'the picture of the world' which I see as a counterpart to the unity of the individual. It is close to the idea that the world exists for us as an inter-connected whole – an idea voiced by philosophers such as Wittgenstein and Heidegger (ibid.: 33–36) and supported by various contemporary philosophers and thinkers. But I believe it is so not only in the cognitive sense but is
always there as an abstraction giving meaning to all the elements and particulars in our lives. I have even suggested that there is a form of transcendence in the meaning creating process linking the particular and the picture of the world, a process that is extended and enriched when we share our real world with the others. But I believe that this process is also there in some form in imaginative works such as writing novels. It could be said of ‘the picture of the world’ that it suggests what Wittgenstein (1966: 6, 45) described as ‘The feeling [Das Gefühl] of the world as a limited whole is the mystical’, though I am not so sure about the word ‘limited’. Heidegger’s (1978: 176) phrase ‘Being in the world as a whole’ seems to suggest both ‘the picture of the world’ and its counterpart ‘the unity of the self’. For me it is also important that ‘the picture of the world’ is linked to the individual’s subjective mode of being because it says something about the individual’s history and the constitution of the self, which of course must not be interpreted as simply culture relativism (Cawasjee 1996: 40–78).

In my opinion what I have said about the ‘unity of the individual’ and ‘the picture of the world’ is compatible and in correspondence with the perspectives drawn by Robinson, namely the political/civic, the moral, the aesthetic and the transcendental. Importantly it is to be noted that these domains are part of the same composite individual – that the civic, moral and aesthetic are not independent of one another. As implicit in Robinson’s text they flow into one another. All this may sound complicated and abstract, but there is also the realism we experience that articulates our belief in it.

In relation to the proposal sketched by Robinson and my reflections on it, I am convinced that literature and the arts have a great deal to offer and provide substantial sources that can be effectively used in any teaching programme we may want to develop. In this context let me provide two concrete examples from my own encounters with literary works since reading Robinson’s paper and reflecting on the issues raised concerning the neglected ‘humanity’ of psychology – taking also into view certain ideas which I have been thinking and writing about.

One of the profound issues we have been confronted with has to do with situatedness and contextual immersion vs. cognitive distancing and objective reflection, two parameters that define our mode of contact and relationship to the world. We are often led to assume a subject who is passively and to a large extent ‘imperceptibly’ drawn in by the situational framework but is also an agent who actively distances herself and reflects on the contextual world. To extract these elements and operationalise them in terms of mind functions does not present a realist picture. It is only when it is seen as a part of lived life with a historical perspective that the realism emerges.

It is interesting to note that this very issue has been a prominent theme in the work of eminent novelists such as Dickens and George Elliot, who were also deeply concerned about the political and ethical elements involved in this human condition. This is a very significant point when we consider the differences in the approach adopted by psychologists and philosophers vs. literary creative writers. Amanda Anderson (2001) in her book The Powers of Distance provides a well-documented and engaging discussion of this subject. Again as I see it a good novelist’s mode of presenting this problem captures the necessary realism that is lacking in many of the psychological treatments which seek a form of abstract disengaged mentalism. Anderson also brings attention to (ibid.: 29) the significant fact of how Eliot in her novel Daniel Deronda brings the individual’s aesthetic practices into the realm of detachment, e.g. ‘the self-fashioning of Deronda’s mother’, thereby creating a real-life narrative which is often lacking in philosophical or psychological discourses on this subject. Anderson further exemplifies this when she refers to the Habermas –Gadamer debate on reflection and detachment vs. embeddedness and immersion.

However, philosophers like Charles Taylor (1989: 143, 160–3) [see also Cawasjee (1998: 42–70) on ‘History of Inwardness and Individualism’] have been very influential in driving home the point that the Cartesian–Lockean revolution characterised by disengagement, objectification and control is very significant for our understanding of the modern self and the heightened sense of inwardness that goes with it. There is no doubt that this becomes a significant perspective in our attempts to unravel the civil, moral and aesthetic dimensions of man.

My second example refers to my experience with Wordsworth’s (1991: 86–101) lyrical ballad, ‘The Idiot Boy’. What this literary and aesthetic experience demonstrated for me is singularly important for psychology. It is the fact that every particular event involving a particular individual provides a certain concreteness of experience which is importantly missing in abstract theorising. Not to suggest that theorising has no purpose, but to understand that something very significant is left out when we as detached social scientists are engaged in abstract theorising about other humans.

Being acquainted with the theorising in child development and related theories concerning mongolism and autism, the experience of this poem was quite striking when it felt like being in the presence of a particular individual in a real world. This effect was probably enhanced by the lyric form – the rhythm and rhyme. I think the concrete illustrations provided here are to be seen as possibilities in the adventure of a new psychology or a renewal of psychology. However the future of this venture should not depend on the participants having to be convinced that this cancels out everything else – there is no oath of allegiance, only the belief in the human spirit of play and adventure: to think, to explore and sometimes to shatter the conventional modus.

I entertain the hope that in the near future Robinson’s proposal defined in terms of the civic/political, moral, aesthetic and transcendental will be seriously reflected upon and articulated as a teaching programme that could be incorporated in a psychology curriculum.

For the present I am sure Robinson’s courageous and inspiring paper and the discussion that follow will contribute considerably to at least one major school of thinking in present-day Danish psychology, which Boje Katzenelson did much to organise and inspire some fifteen years back under the banner of anthropological psychology. In recent years Preben Bertelsen has done much to carry this tradition further.
Finally I do wish to add a note of thanks to Dan Robinson for the manner in which he both, accepted my request (in consultation with Preben Bertelsen) to write a keynote paper and gave freely of his time for the discussions that followed at Oxford. I found that his extensive knowledge was only matched by his generosity when he had already committed himself to much else. I am left pondering as to when I last came across the concept of generosity in serious psychological literature.

Retreating back to the present, I am sure Robinson’s courageous and inspiring paper and the discussions that follow – and of course the controversies as well – will contribute considerably to at least one major school of thinking in present-day Danish psychology, which Boje Katzenelson did much to organise and inspire some fifteen years back under the banner of anthropological psychology.¹

References


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