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The Psychologist as Rational Agent

So much of what Daniel Robinson has to say in this article is so dead on target that I do not see any point in making the article itself the target of textual criticism. Robinson's own target is the present state of psychology, and it seems to me it is a legitimate target. Psychology must find something to do that does not dismiss that which makes psychology of potential permanent importance: the reality of the human being, a reality that makes it appropriate to think of that human being as a self; as a subject that knows, feels, is capable of rational and responsible action; as—let us face it, for after all it gives the discipline its name—a *soul*. Robinson in effect reminds psychologists that they are rational agents and that their research in their field must respect and acknowledge that status. That status is only visible, so to speak, at the macroscopic level: that is where psychology and all other human activity takes place. We know well that the infrastructure that includes our neurophysiology is essential to the functioning of that macroscopic life, but fine-grained analysis of that infrastructure does not in itself reveal the agentic power of the psychologist, of the philosopher—of the human being of whatever kind.

My own discipline is philosophy; properly regarded it is a vocation rather than a profession. But he who lives in a glass house should not throw stones, and philosophy is in much the same situation today as Robinson supposes psychology to be in. Philosophy has long had a subject matter, and indeed has played an important role in providing psychology with *its* subject matter—precisely the human self, subject, soul, and its place in the nature of things. And if philosophy is in a parlous state these days it is in part because the beginnings of psychology as a science are roughly contemporaneous with the beginings of an effort to replace philosophy as a vocation with philosophy as a profession—and ultimately a scientific profession. (Recall that the philosopher and Greek scholar Paul Shorey thought it appropriate to translate the Greek word for sophist as 'professor'.)

In its beginnings the subject we now call psychology was closely associated with the traditional subject matter of the philosophy of that day, but the new subject of psychology was distinguished from philosophy by its aspiration to apply the methods of the natural sciences to that subject matter. More simply put: the new discipline of psychology was an aspirant *natural science*. That aspiration brought with it the possibility of replacing that traditional subject matter with a subject matter more amenable to treatment by the methods of science than was the traditional subject matter psychology shared with philosophy.

The internal strain in the new discipline may already be seen in one of the great texts that established it, William James's *The Principles of Psychology*. The preface to that most readable of textbooks was written in 1890; there, and elsewhere in the book itself, James insists that psychology is a natural science. "Every natural science," he writes, "assumes certain data uncritically, and declines to challenge the elements between which its own 'laws' obtain, and from which its own deductions are carried on. Psychology, the science of finite individual minds, assumes as its data (1) *thoughts and feelings*, and (2) *a physical world* in time and space with which they coexist and which (3) *they know*. Of course these data are themselves discussable; but the discussion of them (as of other elements) is called metaphysics and falls outside the province of this book" (James 1890, I, *v–vi*). He goes on to say that "psychology when she has ascertained the empirical correlation of the various sorts of thought and feeling with definite conditions of the brain, can go no farther, that is, as a natural science. If she goes farther she becomes metaphysical" (ibid. *vi*).

As a person, and a person with a strong philosophical bent, James wished to go farther, and he demonstrates this in various parts of that rich book, for instance, in chapters V, VI, IX, and X of volume I, entitled respectively "The Automaton-Theory," "The Mind-Stuff Theory," "The Stream of Thought," and "The Consciousness of Self." The discussion of the automaton-theory remains today one of the best introductions to what is now usually called epiphenomenalism. The discussion of the stream of thought is notable in many ways, not least because in *Psychology: Briefer Course* James changed the name to 'the stream of consciousness' and so provided a name for one of the most important literary movements of the twentieth century. In all of these chapters James frequently deals with what (from Robinson's point of view) are theories. It is interesting that they are metaphysical theories. It is also interesting that although James ultimately refuses to identify his own position (as a psychologist) with this or that metaphysical theory, his rejection of reductionist theories (such as epiphenomenalism) is more decisive than his rejection of nonreductionist ones. Towards the end of the chapter "The Mind-Stuff Theory," for instance, James concedes a certain explanatory value to the notion of the soul: "to posit a soul influenced in some mysterious way by the brain states and responding to them by conscious affections of its own, seems to me the line of least logical resistance, so far as we yet have attained" (ibid., 181–82). It is the least line of resistance, provided we wish to entertain metaphysical theories; but as psychologists we must stick to experience, and so he goes on to say that the immediately known thing that is in apposition with the brain-process is the state of consciousness and not the soul itself (182).

For those psychologists who find metaphysics repugnant, we may bring the matter back to earth by noticing that such questions as the efficacity of consciousness (whether it is identical with the physical, caused by the physical, or a mere appearance of the physical), the ontological status of the self/human subject, and—yes—the ontological status of the soul have the advantage of keeping in sight elements of the *prima facie* reality/being that give psychology its importance as a science which is not merely a placeholder for an as yet uncompleted neurophysiology.

Daniel Robinson, in the rich "target" that brings us together in the present discussion, is as emphatic as James in insisting that psychology is a natural science and should remain so. But he goes further in the metaphysical direction than James does in this sense, that certain features of human nature that he would make part of the science of psychology cannot be adequately dealt with without bringing in metaphysics—or, as it is probably better called—first philosophy/ontology. Robinson insists that a scientific psychology that is adequate to the reality of the human condition must include four defining features of the human condition: the civic, moral, aesthetic, and transcendental (p 15). These features belong to what he calls at the outset (p 6) the "urgent business" of a proper psychology as distinct from "business as usual," which, although "healthy and productive," leaves out so much that is truly urgent. What Robinson calls business as usual is reasonably close to what James proposed for the *natural science* of psychology. In short, while James is compelled, in certain chapters, to allow metaphysics to creep into the discussion, even though it has been excluded from the book's natural science program, Robinson seems to embrace a program for a truly *psychological* psychology that makes metaphysics an essential part of the enterprise.

In support of this interpretation of our "target," it should be noticed that elsewhere Robinson introduces another feature of human nature that qualifies each of the four features he singles out as urgent business. This feature is implicit in Robinson's claim that our "fundamental belief that physical reality is law-governed, that physical objects and events in some way possess *causal powers*, and that it is these very powers that allow distinctions to be made between real effects and mere coincidences" is grounded on our "immediate, intuitive recognition of ourselves as *agents*. . . ." (p 22). He goes on to say "Knowing immediately that one's own actions express the agentic power one has in bringing them about, one draws the inference that comparable actions by others express comparable powers." In short, the four features of human nature that constitute urgent business for psychology are qualified by a view of causality that is intrinsically antireductionist. And this view of causality is not derivative from the "business as usual" methodologies of science but rather sets limits that such methodologies must not transgress. To put it another way, these four features of human nature, together with this agentic view of causality, are not conclusions drawn from science but rather rational conclusions that set limits on scientific methodologies. In that sense, a truly *psychological* psychology must respect the ontological status of that of which it purports to give a scientific account.

Robinson does not of course claim that the natural science called psychology should transform itself into a metaphysics/first philosophy in order to become a truly *psychological* psychology. But certainly in his discussion of the civic, moral, aesthetic, and transcendental features of human nature and in his discussion of the agentic causality that pervades these four features we find ourselves as much in the arena of philosophy as in the arena of psychology *qua* natural science. Furthermore, within that philosophical arena we find ourselves closer to the arena of a traditional metaphysical philosophy than to a strictly analytic philosophy. One observation of Robinson's that makes this suggestion more plausible occurs in his discussion of the civic dimension of human nature: "Research and theory within Psychology is or should be derivative, the source being a more basic science. The very fact of *civic* life makes clear that the foundational science is not Physics or, alas, Biology. The foundational science is *Political Science* which, itself, is likely to be grounded in a still more foundational science which, without embarrassment, earlier centuries dubbed *Moral Science*" (p 20). For still earlier centuries it was taken for granted that such sciences must be grounded in a still more fundamental science—metaphysics/first philosophy.

I do not wish to suggest that, in his discussions of those four features of human nature and the agentic power that qualifies them, Daniel Robinson is trying to equate a truly *psychological* psychology with metaphysics. I suggest only that in these discussions Robinson is calling upon the psychologist (and all the rest of us) to remember that psychology *as now conducted as a natural science* leaves out a good deal about human nature, and that a sensitivity to the importance of the philosophical approach (in a sense that includes first philosophy) helps us to keep the proper subject matter of psychology in view.

It is interesting that keeping that proper object in view is tantamount to refusing to allow certain reductionist *theories* of human nature that are common to both academic philosophy and academic psychology to be put forward as *true theories* not just about human nature but about nature at large as well. Such theories do not in the least exclude metaphysics/first philosophy from psychology in the spirit of William James. They are rather instances of metaphysics/first philosophy—a metaphysics to be sure of a reductionist/materialist kind, but a metaphysics nonetheless. They are, that is to say, theories about appearance on the one hand and reality/being on the other. In effect such theories propound the claim that the four features of human nature considered so eloquently by Robinson (and the agentic power that goes with them) are mere appearances as over against the being/reality studied and defined by such disciplines as cognitive neuroscience. Some of the theories Robinson subsumes under the heading "business as usual" are of this kind (p 14). All too often the work-a-day use of these theories is to treat the features of human nature that Robinson supposes to be fundamental as if they were mere appearances awaiting scientific explanation. 'Epiphenomenalism' is a term not often used today either by critics or defenders of such theories; but

the spirit of epiphenomenalism has dominated discussions of the old mind-body problem for at least a century.

One vital contribution Robinson makes to a philosophical-cum-psychological understanding of human nature is his epistemological realism. In approaching this topic I should make my own stance clear. I hold the view that any adequate first philosophy must include epistemology in its scope, just as any adequate epistemology must establish our right to the kind of knowledge that first philosophy aspires too. These are of course deep waters, and in making these claims in so brief an essay I can not pretend to plumb them here. I can only say that in the past I have done my best, in many publications, to plumb them—and also, of course, to maintain that such exploration is absolutely necessary to the rational enterprise in general (Pols, *Radical Realism: Direct Knowing in Science and Philosophy* [Cornell Univ. Press, 1992]; *Mind Regained* [Cornell, 1998]). Here I wish merely to make common cause with Robinson's epistemological realism.

Robinson has some things to say about belief that are intrinsic to that realism (p 20ff). If I were to express in my own terminology what I think he means, I should say that belief (in Robinson's sense, in which belief is distinguished from opinion) is intrinsic to direct knowing. Belief of that kind does not call for a justification distinct from itself: the point is rather that any rational justification of belief must include reflexive instances of direct knowing, and so will also include the belief-component that is always part of direct knowing. Deep waters again! And I must leave the matter there and only venture to say that Robinson has brought forward a sense of belief (the *pistic*) that deserves most respectful consideration by both philosophers and psychologists.