

Psychology for Philosophers

Review of Jerry A. Fodor, *Psychological Explanation: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Psychology*. New York: Random House, 1968, Pp. xxi + 165. \$1.95.

Most readers who approach this small volume with foreknowledge of its author's bright promise as a major philosopher of psychology will be keenly disappointed at its tenuous relevance to the psychology they know. Their dismay will be inappropriate, for this book is not addressed to the psychological scientist. Instead, the targets of its sophisticated dialectic lie deep within the esoterica of modern philosophy, and possibly its greatest value for the working psychologist is to exhibit just how remarkably wide a gulf has arisen between these two disciplines on matters of supposedly common concern. I fear there is a hard reality here which must be faced by those of us who begrudge the massive philosophic illiteracy within our ranks: the lusty, contentious, creative vitality of analytic philosophy's frontier days (circa early 20th Century) has become largely dandified into a ballet of manners.

To be sure, latter-day philosophy still retains a reassuring reserve of hardcore sanity, as Fodor nicely demonstrates in the first and best of the four essays which compose this book. Under the provocative title "Is psychology possible?" he rebuts certain strange notions about the nature of psychological explanation which have dominated the recent Philosophy-of-Mind movement. The latter is an autumnal offshoot of ordinary-language philosophy which, by pervading overlong fallow psycho-philosophical soil, has remained verdant despite the advanced withering of its parent stock. To date, Philosophy of Mind has fulsomely displayed both the virtues and the perversions of its progenitor: a remarkable and wholly exemplary skill at baring the subtle nuances and hidden suppositions of everyday mentalistic concepts, alloyed with a fanatical insistence that ultimate truth about mental phenomena is already embodied in popular discourse about such matters. According to this approach, for example, it is literally senseless to regard perceiving, remembering, and believing as processes because questions about how long it takes to perceive, remember, or believe something sound queer in everyday English. Again, it has been denied (cf. Austin, "A plea for excuses") that yawning is generally either voluntary or involuntary behavior, because as ordinary language describes it, I yawn neither voluntarily nor involuntarily in most cases, but just yawn, period. Again, Fodor's own example from Ryle: "There is no more of an epistemological puzzle involved in describing how infants learn perception recipes [for recognizing tunes] than there is in describing how boys learn to bicycle. They learn by practice and we can specify the sorts of practice that expedite this learning"—i.e., common-sense already knows all there is to know about the acquisition of perceptual and

motor skills. And, most importantly-for large sectors of psychology would need to close shop if this argument were sound-it is widely insisted that naturalistic accounts of human action are logically absurd (not just factually inadequate) because persons act out of rules and motives which are reasons for behavior rather than causes thereof.

What underlies all this nonsense is commonsense mentalism's profound unawareness of the detailed mechanisms which connect, compose, and generate the internal events which everyday introspection parses in such gross and blurry categories. Whereas it is precisely the development of technical resources for exact study of such details which has made modern psychology a genuine science, philosophers of mind have exalted ordinary-language ignorance into a willful incomprehension of scientific psychology. Nevertheless, it would be a blunder for us simply to ignore this movement. Despite its spasms of monumental silliness, it has fingered the pulse of truly important issues, and we need its expertise in the logic of mental concepts to avoid repeated stumbling over our own feet on our trek back into the inner organism. For its message to be enlightening rather than destructive, however, Philosophy of Mind must first disgorge its cud of misconceptions about the reach of natural science, and "Is psychology possible?" deftly concocts the needed emetic out of this movement's own terms and argument paradigms. It's a pity that only the philosophically experienced reader is likely to appreciate the lean, supple elegance with which Fodor administers this therapy.

Though no less philosophically adroit, Fodor's last three essays seem to me to be rather less successful than his first, largely because they probe just the soft tissue of the problems addressed and never cut to bone. Thus in "Behaviorism and mentalism," where we might expect an examination of psychology's main methodological divide, we instead find 'behaviorism' put forward as the linguistic claim that "for each mental predicate [there is of logical necessity] at least one description of behavior to which it bears a logical connection," and rejected in favor of the contrary thesis ('mentalism') that this generalization is at most contingently true. Though germane to certain philosophic disputes, this interpretation of the behaviorism/mentalism contrast is totally irrelevant to psychology proper, since for us these labels have tokened controversy over psychological science's admissible data base and theoretical constructs. Moreover, Fodor does scant justice even to his own ends here, for he neither clarifies what is to be understood by "mental predicate" nor attempts to harden the necessary/contingent distinction (no longer thought by many philosophers to be an illuminating dichotomy) into an adequate anvil on which to forge meaningful philosophic conclusions. Most unhappily, he abets long-standing misconceptions of 'behaviorism' by allowing his use of this term to drift from his initial definition of it toward the popular but historically inaccurate view that behaviorist psychologies approve only concepts which are operationally reducible to the data language.

Space does not permit me to say much about Fodor's remaining essays ("Materialism" and "The Logic of Simulation") except to rate their worth as middling to the first two and to grumble that here again Fodor displays a first-rate philosophic proficiency with which he doesn't really do anything. Even his stand on the psychological significance of behavior simulation—that artificial mimicking of a psychological competence counts as explanation for its organic prototype just so far as the former embodies a correct functional explanation of the latter—is promise without fulfillment; for he says nothing about the conditions under which transcriptions of simulation programs into organismic models yield plausible theories of the real thing.

But it would be petty to close on such a querulous note. We are fortunate to have a philosopher of Fodor's talent working our side of the street. Now that he has purged his distress over current philosophical confusions *about* psychology, we can hope that his next book will get on with our badly needed philosophy *for* psychology.