

## On Having Purpose and Explaining It, Too

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I applaud the effort behind this symposium. I agree that teleology is, and has long been, a hidden, but important—even crucial—problem for psychology. I also agree with the spirit of the symposium that cognitive psychology, or at least the information processing version of cognitive psychology, is not significantly different from behaviorism on this, as on many, issues. However, I believe that the symposiasts have oversimplified the problem of purpose in psychology by misrepresenting their historical opponents, resulting in a severely constricted vision of how purpose fits, or does not fit, into the scientific scheme of things. I have organized my remarks under three headings: misrepresentations of British philosophical psychology; misrepresentations of behaviorism and cognitive psychology; and failure to grasp the logical problem of explaining purpose. Along the way, I try to offer alternatives to the treatments of purpose and meaning offered in the symposium.

### Oversimplifying British Philosophical Psychology

Rychlak locates the historical source of opposition to teleological explanations in psychology in John Locke and the later eighteenth century British philosophers. However, his presentation badly misrepresents their views, repeating the widespread “myth of British empiricism” (Norton, 1981). As did Rychlak, I will concentrate on the views of Locke.<sup>1</sup> Rychlak cites a passage from Locke’s chapter “Of the Association of Ideas” from the *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* to show that Locke viewed the mind in a mechanistic, non-dialectical way, suggesting that the quotation expresses the essence of Locke’s psychology. In the parts of the passage cited, Locke speaks of association as

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<sup>1</sup>All passages from Locke’s *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* are drawn from the edition of Peter H. Nidditch (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975); I cite both page number and section number.

wearing smooth grooves in the mind, so that idea leads to idea in a blind, automatic fashion. However, if we set Rychlak's quoted fragments in context, we find that Locke's meaning is very different than that given it by Rychlak.

To begin with, Locke added the chapter on association of ideas only to the fourth and fifth editions of his *Essay*, so that the doctrine cannot be considered central to his philosophy. In any event, he opens the chapter (Book II, Chapter XXXIII, p. 394) by promising to investigate the causes of a "sort of Unreasonableness," or "Disease" that infects human reason. It is usually called "Prejudice," Locke says, but asserts that it is possible to "look a little farther [to] trace this sort of Madness to the roots it springs from," even in the most "sober and rational Minds" (p. 395, section 3). Before proceeding, Locke pauses to emphasize that this "Unreasonableness" really is a "Madness," but one which arises not from "an unruly Passion," but occurs "in the steady calm course of [human] life," deserving to be extirpated: "And if this be a Weakness to which all men are so liable; if this be a Taint which so universally infects Mankind, the greater care should be taken to lay it open under its due Name, thereby to excite the greater care in its Prevention and Cure" (p. 395, section 4).

Locke's diagnosed disease is the association of ideas, and he contrasts it with the proper operations of Reason (p. 395, section 5):

Some of our *Ideas* have a natural Correspondence and Connexion one with another: It is the Office and Excellency of our Reason to trace these, and hold them together in that Union and Correspondence which is founded in their peculiar beings. Besides this, there is another Connexion of *Ideas* wholly owing to Chance or Custom: *Ideas* that in themselves are not all of kin, come to be so united in some Men's Minds, that 'tis very hard to separate them, they always keeping in company, and the one no sooner at any time comes into the Understanding but its Associate appears with it; and if they are more than two which are thus united, the whole gang always inseparable shew themselves together.

Locke goes on to develop the "smooth path" metaphor for association cited by Rychlak. However, association of ideas is far from being the central machinery of the mind as seen by Locke. On the contrary, association is described as a psychological and philosophical evil, that "is of so great force to set us awry in our Actions, as well Moral as Natural, Passions, Reasonings, and Notions themselves that, perhaps, there is not any one thing that deserves more to be looked after" (p. 397, section 9).

Nor does Locke shy away from, or try to dissolve, human purpose or dialectical reasoning. Purpose Locke identifies with will (Book II, Chapter XXI, p. 236, section 5):

... we find in our selves a *Power* to begin or forbear, continue or end several actions of our minds, and motions of our Bodies, barely by a thought or preference of the mind ordering, or as it were commanding the doing or not doing such or such particular action. This *Power* which the mind has, thus to order the consideration of any *Idea*, or the forbearing to consider it . . . is that which we call the *Will*.

In addition to being purposive, Will is described by Locke as being dialectical in nature, enabling us to accept or oppose any idea or impulse.

Reason, too, is described in purposive and dialectical terms. "Knowledge," Locke says, "consists in a Perception of the Agreement, or Disagreement of our own *Ideas*," and reason is the power "whereby the Mind comes to see, either the certain Agreement or Disagreement of any two *Ideas*" (Book IV, Chapter XVII, pp. 668-669, section 21). Rychlak observes that opposition between ideas was not a fundamental principle of association for the British philosophers. We see here that in Locke's case at any rate it was because "disagreement" was too important a principle to be relegated to association. Locke pokes fun at the mechanistic procedures of formal logic. The mind is "perhaps, better without it" (p. 670, section 4), because "The Understanding is not taught to reason by these Rules; it has a native Faculty to perceive the Coherence, or Incoherence of its *Ideas*, and can range them right, without any such perplexing Repetitions" (p. 671, section 4). Locke discusses at length how one reasons from the statement "Men shall be punished in another world" to the conclusion "Men can determine themselves" (italics omitted). Some of the inferential links described by Locke seem rather dialectical, as we move from "Justice of Punishment" to "Guilt" to "Power to do otherwise" to "Freedom" (pp. 672-673, section 4; italics omitted).

We may conclude, then, that Locke is not the mechanistic associationist that Rychlak and many others have taken him to be. Locke's concept of mind, while empty at birth of ideas, is richly furnished with faculties, including Will and Reason. At this point we can also begin to see the narrowness of vision that constrains the symposiasts. They uniformly assume that purpose must be a cognitive process. Locke's discussion of reason shows that he partly agrees with them on this point. But Locke also speaks on the non-cognitive power of Will by which we control our minds and behavior, directing them — purposively — as we wish.

The case of David Hume is especially instructive in this connection. Hume's depiction of the mind and reason is much closer to Rychlak's account of the British position: thought is reduced to association, described in mechanistic, Newtonian terms, and Will is described as mere impulse. But Hume was clearly aware that the mechanistic mind could not be all that caused behavior. Indeed, since reason was viewed by Hume as a mere calculator, he ascribed it to no causal power at all. Instead, reason, according to Hume, "is, and ought only to be the slave of the passions" (Hume, 1817). Purpose springs not from reason for Hume, but from emotion, which for Hume included sentiments such as sympathy, and moral and aesthetic judgments.

In their contributions to the symposium, Tageson and Slife search for "subject contributed variables" (Tageson) and the "uniquely mental" determinants of behavior (Slife). In Locke and Hume we find precisely what Tageson and Slife want, determiners of behavior that are purposive and that lie completely within the person: innate faculties of Will and Emotion.

### Misconstruing Behaviorism and Cognitive Psychology

As is frequently the case among psychologists, the contributors to the symposium treat behaviorism as a much more unified movement than it in fact was. The only belief shared by all the major behaviorists was that psychology was about behavior (Leahey, 1987a, 1987b), a belief apparently shared by the symposiasts. With regard to purpose, the topic of the symposium, the major behaviorists adopted a variety of viewpoints. Clark Hull did in fact try to explain purpose away, much in the spirit of modern information processing theory. Like information processors, Hull viewed organisms as complex machines whose behavior was governed by the mechanical operation of internal states.

Skinner views the field of operant behavior as the study of purpose (Skinner, 1986), but, like Hull, he tries to rid science of purpose, although by different means. Skinner's approach to purpose is modeled on Darwin's approach to evolution. It seemed to many biologists in Darwin's time that the changes in life forms over the millenia could only be explained by positing a creator whose hand guided evolution to its final end, human beings. Darwin, however, showed that the apparent direction in evolution could be accounted for by natural selection, the action of the environment on variant life forms once they had appeared. Similarly, Skinner tries to eliminate the purposive guiding hand of the soul, or of Will, by a sort of natural selection via reward and punishment carried out by nature on behaviors after they have appeared.

Hull and Skinner, then, try to dissolve purpose, but in very different ways. Hull explains purpose as the outcome of non-purposive mechanisms within the organism, while Skinner explains purpose as the outcome of natural selection on the evolution of behavior.

E.C. Tolman, however, regarded purpose very differently from either Skinner or Hull. While his exact account changed during his career (Leahey, 1987a, 1987b; Smith, 1986), Tolman always respected purpose as a vital, fundamental aspect of behavior. Perhaps most instructive in the context of the symposium is Tolman's earliest treatment of purpose. In his first papers, Tolman denied that we infer purpose as something lying behind behavior, separate from, and giving rise to, goal-oriented behavior. Instead, Tolman argued that purpose is a property of behavior itself, not something separate from it. These views of the early Tolman are not unlike those of Gilbert Ryle's *Concept of Mind* (1949). Ryle attacks the dogma of the Ghost in the Machine, arguing that it is needless to posit inner causes of behavior, when behavior itself can be said to possess purpose, intelligence, and other allegedly "mental" properties. Here, then, is a third approach to teleology not scouted by our symposiasts: To Will, and to Emotion, we may add the hypothesis that purpose is *in* behavior, not behind it.

The problem with the characterization of cognitive psychology in these papers is not that they are wrong, but that they are beside the point. The papers, especially Slife's, give the impression that the goal of cognitive psychology was

to bring purpose back into psychology. Then we discover—quite correctly—that information processing does no such thing. Williams's account of Dennett's concept of "intelligence loans" is cogent and accurate. However, from its beginning information processing psychology has been quite open that its goal is to explain, not accept, teleology. To treat humans as computers is to accept *Man the machine*, and information processing psychologists have accepted this as a virtue, not a defect, of their psychology. Dennett tries to show how purpose might be handled, and homunculi banished, by breaking intelligent, goal-directed behaviors down into parts so simple they can be performed without intelligence or purpose, but he does not apologize for his analysis. Nor do such leading theorists as Stich (1983) or Churchland (1986). Accusing cognitive psychologists of being mechanistic is like accusing Mikhail Gorbachev of being a Communist: the accusation is true but pointless. It is true that information processing psychology treats purpose much as Hull did, but that should be no surprise. What matters is whether or not they succeed, and this is an empirical, not a logical, question.

### The Logic of Explanation

One insight of the Greek atomists was that if atoms were to be used to explain color, they could not *have* color. An explanation is no explanation at all if it contains within it the very thing to be explained. Such "explanations" are really elaborate circular definitions: "Why does this apple look red, father?" "Because it's made of red atoms, my son." "How do we know it is made of red atoms?" "Because it looks red." Color has not been explained here, only labeled.

We face a similar problem with regard to teleology. Since the time of Newton, science has sought to explain what appears to be purposive in mechanistic terms. In this respect, cognitive psychology is in the mainstream of Western thought and science, trying to explain purpose mechanistically. The authors of the symposium, wishing psychology to be a science, seem to accept the burden of *explaining* meaning and purpose rather than just accepting its existence. Williams, for example, wants to explain meaning in terms of unpredictability, the opposite of necessity, but this will not do. Word salad is unpredictable but meaningless, while ritual is perfectly predictable yet charged with meaning. At the same time as wanting to explain purpose and meaning, our authors want to preserve purpose and meaning as irreducible possessions of human beings. In other words, they want to have the cake of purpose, and eat (explain) it, too.

I believe psychologists face a dilemma. If psychology is to be a natural science like the other natural sciences, then it must *explain* purpose and meaning, as the other sciences have, with principles that themselves contain neither teleology nor semantics. This is the attempt of cognitive science. On the other hand, if we wish to regard human beings as telic and meaningful, then we must accept purpose and meaning as human givens, as ultimate bases for understanding,

not themselves to be explained by anything more basic. The claim is not absurd, for all explanation ends somewhere. The physicist cannot say why objects not acted on by an external force travel forever in a straight line: he or she accepts the principle as nature's given, and uses it to explain other things. Similarly, we might accept purpose and meaning as human givens, and use them to explain other things, without regarding them as things needing explanation themselves.

Acceptance of this rival strategy to cognitive science's requires, however, that psychology abandon its physics envy and its pretensions to be a natural science. The case of meaning makes this clear, I believe. In discussing meaning, Williams at first roots it in cultural context, before going on to try to explain it in terms of unpredictability. His first instinct, I think, was correct. Meaning is a social construction by human beings in a particular time and place. It is not governed by the spatio-temporally general principles of natural science, but by the concrete activities of human beings situated in history. Thus meaning escapes the natural sciences.

The final alternative I offer to the symposiasts is to return to and accept the old distinction of the *Naturwissenschaft* and the *Geisteswissenschaft*. The former is the history-less world of things and mechanical causation. The latter is the historically particular world of human beings, full of meaning and purpose. Our authors are timid, conceding humanity to natural science and to explanation: let us boldly proclaim that people are not to be explained or controlled, because they make their own, unnatural worlds.

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