

## THE PROBLEMS OF PERSONALITY

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It is my purpose in the present paper to examine the meaning of a topic in psychology which has lately been enjoying a rather remarkable popularity. I refer to what is being called "psychology of personality". While there are few books of the text or systematic sort which include a chapter on personality, there is still no doubt but that a definite chapter on this subject is being organized within the interests of that large group of thinkers engaged in the investigation of psychological and related problems. Certain sources, of course, lie more evidently at the basis of the development of this new chapter than do others. Those of you who have been in no more intimate contact with present-day psychology than through an occasional observation of book notices will recognize at once that this psychology of personality is somehow related to the activities of Freud and his school. Another outstanding, though less spectacular, source of our impetus toward personality study has grown out of the recent enthusiasm for psychological interpretations of social phenomena.

Sociologists and economists have found too wide a gap between the closely reasoned abstractions of conventional psychology and their own somewhat more concrete concerns. Their cries for a psychology of the synthesized and social individual have served as very potent stimuli for the study of personality.

It should be interesting to note just what sorts of facts the chapter on personality contains or is likely to contain. As I have already indicated, writers on personality are likely to keep the synthetic, integrated, psychophysical organism before them in a way which is not done by the general run of writers in psychology. This notion that the study of personality should especially emphasize those problems which arise only when the subject's activities are viewed in their integrated form

is brought out very clearly by Watson<sup>1</sup> in his latest book. He tells us that we may think of the human being with all of his activities as analogous to a gas-engine with its carburetor, its pump, its magneto, and so on. While it may be highly desirable to understand the minutest aspects of human behavior, just as it is desirable to understand the details of the pump, carburetor, and magneto, it is also important to appreciate how the individual as a whole operates, just as it is important to appreciate how a gas-engine runs. There are unquestionably a number of psychologists who would object to making any distinction between a more analytic and a less analytic psychology. They would probably say that if one really analyzes mental activity thoroughly and accurately, one will *ipso facto* have a means of understanding, predicting, and controlling the activity of the individual as a whole. While I doubt whether any one would insist that analysis of mental life is at the present time complete enough for us to build up the semblance of a live individual out of reflexes, sensations, perceptions, and the like, it would probably be urged by the stauncher adherents of analysis that it is a sounder procedure to concern ourselves with the simple aspects of mental life until we have them well mastered, and then to proceed to the more complex. Logically, such a program has a certain appeal, but sciences in the direction of their growth, at least, are not necessarily logical. The demands of the clinician and the social scientist are likely to have far more influence upon the development of psychology than are the plans of the most logical program. I do not know just how fortunate or unfortunate is this fact. I put it forward simply as an argument for the belief that the psychologists of the near future are going to spend part of their time trying to observe and understand the organism as a whole.

Another characterization which might be made of the chapter on personality is that it is concerned more with the persistent trends or tendencies in behavior than it is with the structure of immediate experience. Instincts,

1. Psychology from the Standpoint of a Behaviorist, 1919, pp. 392 ff.

as they are thought of by McDougall; sentiments, as they are thought of by Shand; complexes, as they are thought of by the psychoanalysts; and ambitions, ideals, hopes, and the like, as all of us understand them, would be of interest to the student of personality. The details of vision, of space perception, of memory, would not.

It is also fairly clear that the mental activities in which the student of personality is most interested are those which involve the social relationships of the individual. While all mental activities are necessarily social to some extent, the student of personality is usually interested in those activities which can be adequately described only by emphasizing the social character of the situation.

The desirability of getting the social view of the psychophysical organism is hardly open to debate. The proposition put forward at times, that this is really the only adequate view is, however, an over-statement of the case, to say the least. A social psychology undoubtedly gives better promise of applicability to the solution or interpretation of social problems, but we shall always have with us the seeing, hearing, feeling, remembering organism whose seeing, hearing, feeling, and remembering are being handled by a non-social psychology with an accuracy and adequacy which is to some degree a function of its lack of emphasis upon social issues.

When the psychologist comes across problems such as those of personality which require an unusual recognition of social factors, it would be well, it seems to me, if he kept in mind certain difficulties here in the way of keeping his thinking upon a scientific plane. Perhaps the greatest of these difficulties is the danger of mistaking ethical, social, and political issues for scientific or psychological issues. Social ethics, social hygiene, and political philosophy are of tremendous importance for human life, but the psychologist, even though his interest be primarily in serving them, must recognize that unless the standards of logic be dominant over all other standards his psychology will quickly become propaganda, and cease to function as science.

There is still another even more subtle danger which must be guarded against where social factors are emphasized in the program of psychology. I refer to the danger of assuming, where there are fundamental distinctions from the standpoint of every-day life, that there must also be fundamental psychological distinctions. The mere fact that there are radicals and conservatives, religious and irreligious does not mean that these groups are necessarily important psychological types. It is true that we may describe the radical by means of a psychological terminology, but so may we describe ice-men, and grocerymen, conductors, and policemen, and anybody and everybody in our world. If we did this, we should be merely counting the leaves on the trees.

In speaking of these things, I do not want to give the impression that I am minimizing the importance of recognizing the social factor in many psychological problems. I wish only to point out the difficulty in this case of keeping free, as scientists, from those standards and prejudices, many of them highly valuable in themselves, which permeate every social situation.

A fourth point which is likely to impress one is that the study of personality is concerned with facts that are somehow more intimate than those of the rest of psychology. The polarity between the individual and other things and other individuals comes in for a certain amount of stress. When it comes to this aspect of his problem, the student of personality finds that much of value has already been worked out by introspection. It seems to me that the dialectic of personal growth which has become an accepted part of our traditional psychology may with great profit be written as an important section into our contemporary treatment of personality.

I have been considering personality study in so far as it is concerned with general principles. There is also a differential psychology of personality which is receiving considerable attention. Ultimately, of course, the general and differential psychology of personality may be but different aspects of the same subject matter, but at present, this is hardly true. Those who have been

interested in measuring individual differences in personal traits have, like the intelligence testers, worked on an almost purely empirical basis. The differential psychologist, in enumerating character traits, for instance, is bound to pick out the measurable rather than the fundamentally important.

A final question occurs to me in this attempt to interpret the appearance of a new chapter in psychology. Does this chapter contain, or is it likely to contain, any forms or principles of mental activity comparable in importance for psychology as a whole to the reaction arc, perception, image, idea, and habit? There are those who believe that the science of psychology will have largely to be rewritten as a result of modern studies of personality. Although time forbids an adequate defense of my position, I should like to say that I am extremely doubtful as to the truth of this statement. Most of the so-called new principles which have come into psychology with the recent studies in personality are after all not so very new. The notion of causal relationships between mental phenomena, the importance of unconscious activities, and the conception of conflict put forth so vividly by the psychoanalysts harken back to many historic systems and debates. I should not for a moment deny the paramount importance of the many neglected problems which recent studies of personality by the psychoanalysts and others have pointed out, but what is needed at the present time is not a proclamation that these mechanisms of personality are newly discovered phenomena, unrelated to any psychology heretofore thought of. Rather, there is a need, and I believe it is being increasingly acknowledged, for these personal mechanisms to be set in their proper relationships to that host of psychological principles which have been accumulating since Aristotle.