A Psychologist's Response to Philosophical Analysis: Comments on Freeman's "Objectivity and the Transactional Theory of Perception"

M. S. Lindauer

The College at Brockport

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.brockport.edu/phil_ex

Part of the Continental Philosophy Commons, Epistemology Commons, Esthetics Commons, Ethics and Political Philosophy Commons, Feminist Philosophy Commons, History of Philosophy Commons, Logic and Foundations of Mathematics Commons, Metaphysics Commons, Philosophy of Mind Commons, and the Philosophy of Science Commons

Repository Citation

Available at: http://digitalcommons.brockport.edu/phil_ex/vol3/iss1/9

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @Brockport. It has been accepted for inclusion in Philosophic Exchange by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @Brockport. For more information, please contact kmyers@brockport.edu.
MARTIN LINDAUER

Associate Professor of Psychology
S.U.C. Brockport
Ever since psychology emerged from philosophy as a separate discipline in the late nineteenth century, and consequently broke off all connections with its origins in the early years of this century, there have been few philosophical works that psychologists have read and responded to. The critical analysis of the assumptions, method, content, and concepts of psychology have instead come from those trained and working in psychology (most recently, for example, Bakan, Koch, Piaget, Joyce, and Skinner), rather than from professional philosophers.

This is not to say that philosophers have ignored psychological topics, e.g., consciousness, mind, and the like. (For example, see the writings of Ayer, Broad, Ryle, and Wittgenstein.) Instead, speculative works have been directed more to issues derived from purely philosophical traditions and concerns, and not to specific psychological interests, studies, and data. (A rare and isolated exception to philosophy’s indifference to the stuff of contemporary psychology is Feigl’s 1959 article in the American Psychologist; another philosopher noteworthy for his grasp of current investigations in psychology is R. S. Peters. There are a few others who speak to psychologists in language they can understand.) Because philosophical arguments have not been couched within the familiar framework of psychological research problems, or tied to terms and examples which are understandable by scientific investigators, philosophical writings on psychology have generally been ignored by most psychologists. Philosophical statements of possible psychological relevance and value have been too abstract, i.e., removed from the everyday working world of psychologists.

This state of neglect has existed throughout modern psychology’s development, and persists today. In a recent unpublished study, Richard Hamlin surveyed 1,249 philosophical books and articles abstracted in Psychological Abstracts from 1927-1968; these account for 0.40% of all articles summarized. Philosophical works relevant to psychology never exceeded one percent of the total number of articles written in any one year. Further, the percentage is declining: the rate during the early years was 0.78%; it is now 0.37%.

Given this situation regarding the relationship between philosophy and psychology, it is quite unusual to find a philosopher not only talking about psychology, but even more remarkably, referring to current theory and research in the area of perception. Professor Freeman’s paper, “Objectivity and the transactional theory of perception,” hopefully represents the beginning of a trend which will increasingly draw philosophy and psychology closer together. The almost complete absence of communication between these two fields, and in general, between psychology and the humanities, is an embarrassment. Psychology’s neglect, if not ignorance of the humanities, sharply contrasts with...
A PSYCHOLOGIST’S COMMENTS ON FREEMAN

Psychology’s close ties with the natural, biological, mathematical, physical, social, and behavioral sciences. Psychology’s failure to take philosophy seriously is especially shocking because of the many historical, and potentially current ties between the two. Both fields are essentially similar in their goals and the means used to evaluate their accomplishments: each asks questions about the nature of man; each examines the adequacy of the answers given; and each is concerned with the methods whereby one can know man. Psychology needs not only the instrumentation and concepts of the hard sciences, but the contribution of disciplines such as philosophy as well. The humanities help scientific investigations focus on the right questions (or hypotheses), and aid in the interpretation of the results which stem from these questions. Some of the current issues which deserve careful conceptual scrutiny are these: the ethics of human experimentation; the relevance of animal research to man; the methods and goals of the clinic as compared with that of the laboratory; and the place of humanistic psychology in a biological science.

The main purpose of this paper is to examine Freeman’s article with respect to its relevance to the broad question raised above: the role of philosophical analysis in psychology. (His paper as a philosophical work is discussed by Dr. Greenstein elsewhere in this issue.) This larger question of philosophy’s relevance will be examined in light of Freeman’s concrete contributions to a variety of psychological issues raised in the context of perception.

Freeman’s points may be briefly summarized. (1) The subjective data of experience can reliably reflect the psychological phenomena and processes which underlie the experience. (2) Related to the previous point is a methodological one: both these two points are deeply rooted in the history of psychology: the inadequacies of personal and introspective reports (e.g., their validity) can be overcome. Freeman feels, somewhat tentatively and cautiously, that the intersubjective consensus of verbal reports can serve as a mark of their reliability and validity. (3) The two points above introduce the essential questions with which the psychology of perception begins: How do we know the world, and know that we know? (4) An answer to these questions is given in terms of a contemporary theory of psychology, transactionalism, which has its philosophical roots in pragmatism and Dewey. Of particular interest is the transactionalist’s use of dramatic displays of non-veridical perception, e.g., the illusion of the rotating trapezoidal window. According to the transactionalists, these demonstrations reveal perception’s adaptive and functional nature: one perceives on the basis of calculations, assumptions, and anticipations derived from one’s memories of prior encounters with the world. (5) Freeman criticizes the transactionalists, mainly because they overgeneralize from illusionary to veridical perception. Because non-veridical perception is too infrequent an event, argues Freeman, such events are too limited to serve as a basis for a theory of normal perception. (6) As an alternative to transactionalism, Freeman offers critical realism. This emphatically phenomenological orientation is a sophisticated successor to naive realism, which has failed as an explanation of perception because it can not satisfactorily account for non-veridical perception. Both naive and critical
realism share a faith in the veridicality of perception. However, only the latter has the advantage of being able to distinguish non-veridical from veridical perception (on the basis of logical criteria which need not be a concern of this paper, although a faith in intersubjective consensus is critical).

One can now go beyond this summary of the psychological aspects of Freeman's paper, and discuss their implications toward the more general issue of philosophy's relationship to psychology. It will be argued that Freeman's treatment of the psychological aspects of perception reflects a general problem which typifies most philosophical discussions of psychological topics, namely, the absence of sufficient attention to psychological details. It is the thesis of this paper that when philosophers talk about psychology—and want psychologists to listen—they must be adequately informed and knowledgeable about contemporary psychology. In short, it is philosophy's naivety about psychology which leads to psychologists' skepticism and neglect of philosophy. The absence of psychological sophistication will be demonstrated in several ways in the context of Freeman's paper. A closer look at the points Freeman has raised will reveal the kinds of difficulties psychologists have met in attempting to relate philosophical writings to their work, and as a consequence, remaining indifferent to philosophy.

It is recognized that a full and extensive treatment of perception, transactionalism, and the philosophy of science, psychology, and method, were not Freeman's goals in his paper. Thus it is not completely fair to fault him for his omissions. Yet an examination of one philosopher's particular shortcomings in one concrete instance may serve to reveal more general reasons for the limitations of most philosophical discussions of psychology. If there is to be any hope for a rapprochement between the disciplines of philosophy and psychology, and the encouragement of a viable exchange of ideas between the two which can be of benefit to psychology, one may feel justified in discussing the failure of philosophical psychology within the boundaries of Freeman's paper.

There are several "psychological gaps" in Freeman's paper. Psychologists will be startled by Freeman's resolution of one of the most essential dilemmas of perception—the subjectivity of data—with a statement of faith: our perception of the veridicality of the world can be trusted. Yet this concluding affirmation is for working psychologists a starting point in their inquiries. For the research psychologist, the reliability of consciousness can not long remain even a working assumption, but must at least be met as a technical issue in designing a study. The critical nature of this issue is seen both historically and contemporaneously, in the rejection of personal reports by many psychologists in favor of behavioral, animal, and physiological data. The evaluation of the status of consciousness on the basis of intersubjective consensus will not do for those psychologists who must grapple with this issue in their research and theories. Thus consensus may simply indicate the uniformity of error. Further, a reliance on phenomenology alone may mask real problems. For example, if perception psychologists were to attend to subjective reports only, the characteristics of the physical world and the retinal image (i.e., the distal and proximal stimulus), which can be measured
A PSYCHOLOGIST'S COMMENTS ON FREEMAN

and related to perception, would be neglected. There is another important omission in Freeman's presentation. The psychologist-reader knows that the transactional theory of perception has been under strong attack, and may well wonder why Freeman has not alluded to its logical and empirical shortcomings. These include the question of how two people whose past experiences differ can ever agree on what they see, since the transactionalists hold that each person's perception is influenced by his past experiences. Further, research indicates that animals, children, and adults respond similarly to non-veridical demonstrations, yet have divergent (if any) expectations regarding perceptual forms. Nor does Freeman mention alternate explanations of the transactionalist's demonstrations. These rely more on ordinary than on dramatic conceptions of perception. For example, the trapezoidal window effect may be dependent on linear perspective space cues; or alternately, the ambiguity of shape stems from the structural absence of a "good figure." Without at least suggesting these developments in perceptual research and theory, the reader may feel that Freeman has constructed a "straw man," thereby making his case specious.

Another issue to which psychologists would negatively respond is Freeman's preoccupation with illusions, that is, he takes the transactionalists to task for overlooking veridical phenomena. Yet a greater familiarity with the psychological literature, in perception as well as other areas, would indicate that most scientific investigations rely on illusions, or similar artificial phenomena. That is, the bizarre, extreme, or unusual, whether obviously illusionary or not, are used to highlight a phenomena; they serve to disentangle the subtleties and complexities of normal and everyday experience; and to unmask the presence of functions that might otherwise be hidden. Thus in perception one frequently works with such unrealistic and artificial stimuli as lines, dots, nonsense materials, line drawings, and the like. An "unnatural" approach to psychological phenomena is used in other areas as well, e.g., psychotic patients in mental hospitals are studied for the light they may throw on normal personality functioning. In other words, the study of the non-veridical is not the study of the non-lawful; both veridical and non-veridical phenomena exemplify the same laws, although the latter may more clearly reflect them. Thus it is unfair of Freeman to single out the transactionalists for doing what most scientific investigators do. This narrowness of argument is another error of philosophical analysis which a more thorough grounding in psychology would prevent; its presence discourages psychologists from taking philosophers seriously.

As one looks further at the psychological points raised in Freeman's paper, there are other features which would distress a psychologist. Mention should be made of the blurring of the distinctions between sensation, perception, interpretation, and other cognitive events. None of these terms, especially perception, is adequately defined for psychological purposes. Yet each term evokes different psychological concepts. Nor does Freeman indicate that a controversial and debatable aspect of transactionalism is its emphasis on learned as opposed to innate determinants, i.e., the influence of memory as opposed to stimulus characteristics.
Another major difficulty is Freeman’s slighting of the surprising and creative qualities of veridical perception, an achievement which can be just as dramatic as illusionary phenomena. That is, the so-called ordinary and accepted phenomena of form, space, movement, and their constancy—topics of perception to which the illusions of transactionalism refer—also generate profound issues regarding the nature of perception. For example, experienced movement is actually based on retinal conditions in which no actual movement is present; three dimensional space is represented as two dimensional on the retina; and retinal representations of form are tiny, reversed, inverted, unorganized, and vary with distance. In all these examples, perception is veridical even though the experience does not match the retinal conditions which underlie it. Perception amazingly corresponds to the real world even though its proximal basis is ambiguous, shifting, and distorted. Accomplishing these normal perceptual events is as surprising and as challenging as their more dramatic counterparts, the illusions. Yet Freeman’s focus on illusions, and his theory of critical realism, with its non-questioning attitude toward veridical perception, tend to simplify and ignore the equally wondrous and not-so-obvious phenomena of ordinary perception.

If psychologists are to take critical realism seriously (or indeed any philosophy)—which is to say, make philosophy relevant to their work—psychologists must first be shown that it has a firm and full grasp of the issues that trouble psychology. The philosopher should be thoroughly familiar with the psychological literature. Otherwise, philosophical arguments will be discounted by the psychologist without the serious consideration they deserve, irrespective of their merits on a logical and conceptual basis, because of their naivety and unsophistication on psychological matters.

In addition, philosophical analysis would prove more useful if it were shown how a psychological problem can be translated or lead into workable terms. That is, philosophical arguments should suggest heuristic models from which research hypotheses could be derived. Philosophical treatments of psychology must not only be presented within the familiar terms of contemporary psychology, as argued above. The psychologist also wants to know how he can go ahead and work with the phenomena which have attracted philosophical analysis. The psychologist not only tests the falsifiability of an hypothesis; he also wants to derive hypotheses which can be tested. As argued throughout this paper, philosophical analysis without the context of psychological content will not be heeded by psychologists. One is thereby concerned with the “workableness” of philosophical contributions.

It has been suggested in this paper that philosophers who wish to be heard by psychologists—a goal which has been perhaps too unquestioningly assumed—need to do more homework: they have to become more knowledgeable about the concrete substance of psychology. Perhaps this is an impossible goal. It may be presumptuous to assert that philosophers writing about psychology take the trouble and time to become adequately proficient in another subject (say at the level of comprehension attained by Scientific American or Science). Why not instead argue that psychologists should learn more about philosophy (probably a
A PSYCHOLOGIST'S COMMENTS ON FREEMAN

more hopeless demand than the original request)? In defense of this arrogance on the part of psychology, it should be kept in mind that, at least historically, the role of philosophy was to examine and evaluate other disciplines. (The present status of philosophy, with its emphasis on linguistic analysis, is unfathomable to most psychologists. For example, one psychologist-critic, Rozeboom, has called a recent philosophical work of this type a "dandified . . . ballet of manners." Others feel that it is premature for philosophy to undertake a formal analysis of psychological terms, the empirical base of which is constantly changing.)

If one browses through about a shelf-full of books by philosophers with the word "psychology" somewhere in their titles, hardly any refer to the concrete world of research with which a psychologist plys his trade. This condition, and the reasons for it as presented in this paper, have prevented psychologists from understanding and positively responding to philosophical themes. The goal of relating philosophy to psychology, through a greater degree of awareness of current psychology on the part of philosophers, is admittedly a tough one. Yet if philosophy has any plans to communicate to psychology in a way that would be both welcome and useful, in a manner it has not done for one hundred years or so, the paper suggests the problems that have to be overcome. Freeman's paper, despite severe shortcomings from a psychologist's point of view, represents the beginnings of a philosophical move toward psychology, hints at the general directions to be followed, and the pitfalls to be avoided.