

Descartes to Early Psychology

Phil 255

Descartes' World View

- Rationalism: the view that a priori considerations could lay the foundations for human knowledge. (i.e. 'Think hard enough and you will be lead to the Truth.')
- A universal, mathematical understanding of nature
- A methodology that rejected authority, relying on 'radical doubt'
- A quest for absolute clarity and certainty (contra the Skeptics).
- Descartes supported these views with extended discussions and arguments, most famously in the 'Meditations'.
- Here are some passages that give a flavour of his discussions...

- In these passages, Descartes:
 - first sets up the method of radical doubt
 - goes on to show that despite this doubt, he can establish that he exists.
 - to ensure that he is not constantly wrong about the world, he argues for the existence of a benevolent God.
- Having established the utility of observation with the senses and its ability to lead us to the truth about the world, he pursues a mathematical understanding of nature.
- In his life time, he published such works (physics, mathematics) first, and later presented his metaphysics.

Problems for Descartes

- Doubting radically enough.
- Knowing what counts as a 'clear and distinct idea' and what doesn't
- His argument for the existence of God...

Descartes' God Argument

- “because this idea of God be maximally clear and distinct... there is no idea more true through itself” (p. 139)
- but, what guarantees that clearness & distinctness is not illusory?
- “it cannot happen that God would ever deceive me” (p. 151)
- So, his argument for the existence of God seems to presuppose God's existence. Hmmmmm....

- Nevertheless, Descartes' view had enormous impact
- Many felt that his view of mind and body as distinct substances was a good one, and adopted his ship metaphor (reading).
- Descartes also claims that mind and body are very different (reading).
- Lyons describes how this view is consistent with:
 - common sense;
 - many religious doctrines (Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, Ancient Greek mythology, etc.);
 - and how it has been deemed essential for providing a motivation for morality and explanations of what makes us human. why?

Beginnings of Psychology

- Psychology grew quite directly, and slowly out of philosophy, especially Empiricism.
- Many of the more empirically oriented philosophers and the philosophically oriented empiricists had similar interests.
- Held that the mind and body influenced one another
 - thus we can learn about the mind by studying the body
- Unlike Descartes, they often held that the mind was intimately shaped by bodily experience.

- In the mid to late 19th century it became clear that studying behaviour could tell us about the mind (e.g. Weber's law, a relation between bodily stimulus (S) and perception (P) ($k\Delta S/S = \Delta P$)), paving the way for experimental psychology.
- The birth date of experimental psychology can be put at the year 1875, when both Wundt and James established labs.
- Wundt was the founder of the Introspectionist 'Structuralist' approach to psychology.
- While dualistic, these researchers clearly acknowledge the difficulties with the interaction between mind and body.
- Pursued psychology as a science of the mind. Why?

Introspectionists

- Their main tool for collecting data was introspection
- They treated introspection just like any other sense. (e.g. a physicist using her eyes)
- Just as in the other sciences, these experiments had to be repeated many times to ensure accuracy, and were generally performed by experts.
- The rules that these experts had to follow in performing their experiments were quite explicit, as any scientific methodology should be (see Lyons extended e.g.).

Theoretical Problems

- Inherit Descartes' the 'interaction problem': how do the distinct substances of mind and matter influence one another?
 - There were theories of how matter can influence matter
 - They were building theories of how mind influenced mind
 - What brings these together?
- Princess Elizabeth raised this issue with Descartes. His reply was analogical:
 - the soul affects the body as gravity affects the body.
- However, the analogy is a poor one, why?

- Descartes suggested the precise location of the interaction (readings).
- But, how the soul effects (and is affected by) those movements still isn't explained.
- Elizabeth's reply: "I must admit that it would be easier for me to attribute matter and extension to the soul, than to attribute to an immaterial being the capacity to move and be moved by a body".
- Another theoretical problem: the assumption that all mental life is conscious mental life.

Practical Problems

- While the theoretical problems were pressing, everyone seems to have gotten used to them.
- It wasn't until the overwhelming practical limitations of introspectionism came to light that dualism faltered. The problem:
 - didn't meet the standards of a science; why?
 - Titchener and Kulpe on "non-sensory conscious thought"

James: Consciousness & Functionalism

- James is interested in the introspective study of adult consciousness. As he notes, “most books adopt the so-called synthetic method”
- However, James thinks it unlikely that our higher states of consciousness are molecular. Why?
- In arguing for holism, James presents what he calls “The fundamental fact”

- James identifies what he feels are four essential properties of consciousness:
 - Every such state is part of a personal set of states
 - Personal states are always changing
 - Consciousness is continuous
 - Consciousness attends to some things and not to others

- He defends this view by discussing seven theses...

First Thesis: Pluralism

- James notes that the set of personal states
 - “As little each-for-itself and reciprocally independent as they are all-belonging-together”.
 - What does this mean?

- Why does this lead him to note that “Irreducible pluralism” is necessary.

Second Thesis: Uniqueness

- Does James think an identical sensation can occur? When?
- What does he conclude from this?
- What are the consequences of this uniqueness for a Lockian view?
- This has interesting consequences for contemporary theories of mind:
 - the classical view would be wrong
 - something more like a dynamicism would be better.

Third Thesis: Continuity

- James says that consciousness is continuous in two senses:
 - belonging together
 - no abruptness
- The first follows directly from his pluralism, and the fundamental fact
- He is interested in this being true regardless of time gaps caused by sleep, anesthesia, or bumps on the head.
- This is why he coins the phrase “Stream of consciousness”, because “consciousness does not appear to itself chopped up in bits”.

- James realizes that his stream analogy does not seem to account for some phenomena.
 - e.g..
- James argues that in fact the analogy holds even in those cases. Why?
 -

Fourth Thesis: Relations

- He compares consciousness to be like a bird's alternation between flying and perching.
- Suggests it is difficult to introspect about the transitive parts
- This difficulty results in two mistaken approaches.
 - The Humean one
 - The Cartesian one
- He thinks we ought to say that we can feel 'and' or 'if' just as we can feel red or cold. Why don't we?.

Fifth Thesis: The Fringe

- He describes what a fringe is by providing a number of examples
- For James these states are cognitive although they have no definite object
- He wants to motivate the importance of the vague and inarticulate for understanding consciousness

Sixth Thesis: Functionalism

- Historically, this is James' most important contribution.
- What is functionalism?
- James is at pains to point out that diversity, vagueness, and 'the fringe' do not get in the way of instantiating some function or other. Why?
- James says "the only images intrinsically important are halting places" and "when the penultimate terms of all the trains ... finally shoot into the same conclusion, we say, and rightly say, that all the thinkers have had substantially the same thought."

Seventh Thesis: Attention

- Why do we ignore most of what bombards us?
- James points out that each of these steps (except perhaps the first) is greatly affected by past experience.
- Why does James argue that functionalism has to be pluralist?

Functionalism & Introspectionism

- Both functionalism and introspectionism were dualistic, centered in philosophy, and considered the mind to be the subject of psychology.
- However, unlike many philosophers, both functionalists and introspectionists were empiricists (they pursued experimental psychology; re-occurring with 'x- Φ ').
- While their approaches to performing experiments were quite different, they shared an interest in making psychology a scientific enterprise.
- James's functionalist school dominated psychology in the 20th century
- Wundt's introspectionists are the intellectual grandparents of those spawning the recent upsurge of interest in consciousness.