

EPIPHENOMENALISM AND THE CONTRADICTIONS OF ITS CRITICS

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Locke (1966) takes up the cudgels from Burt (1964) to castigate the treatment which consciousness receives from behaviourists. Unfortunately his argument is marred by logical errors which reduce its impact to a *non sequitur*.

He argues that: 'if the behaviourist *could not help* believing and saying what he says, that is, if everything he thought and did were determined by forces outside his control, then how can he claim that what he is asserting constitutes knowledge or truth? If everything he does is determined by forces outside his control, the same must apply to his espousal of the theories of epiphenomenalism and psychological determinism. No proponent of psychological determinism can claim to have reached any conclusion on the basis of objective evidence which he is free to judge and evaluate; all he can assert is that he was forced to believe in and to assert his theories by his past conditioning, his childhood environment or the like. If men are not free to judge and to judge their judgements and to reach conclusions based on their assessment of the facts of reality, then no conclusion reached by anyone could make a valid claim to truth, including the theory of psychological determinism'.

In this argument, note first that the term 'truth' is question begging. Scientists do not use the term in Locke's sense at all; we are under no delusion that our theories 'make a valid claim to truth', but adopt a much more pragmatic test, e.g. that they give rise to testable deductions which are in fact verified (in some cases) by experimental evidence. Philosophers used to make assumptions about the 'eternal truth' of their more speculative pronouncements, but this practice has fallen into desuetude; it is difficult to see why Locke should wish to revive it. Pragmatic interpretations of 'truth' certainly do not require consciousness for their acceptance; a computer could be programmed to assess successful and unsuccessful consequences of actions, such as those encountered in laboratories, just as they have been programmed to deduce consequences from theoretical statements.

Note next the importance Locke attributes to psychological functions, such as believing; 'how then is the behaviourist to explain the fact that *he does believe* the theory to be true and at the same time *does behave* as if he believes it to be true, i.e. that he asserts it at all and that there is some empirical connexion between his beliefs and his public statements?' I certainly do not believe my theories to be true; I should say that they have a certain heuristic value, give rise to testable predictions, and will no doubt in the near future be supplanted by better theories. There is no epistemological difficulty to this; my attitude to the theory is governed by the reinforcement received (to put it crudely) in the matter of verification. The more successful predictions are made from the theory, the more firmly will I become attached to it; Skinner's well-known experiment on superstition in pigeons exposes

the fundamental basis of this process, as well as containing a warning against taking such theories too seriously, even when apparently successful.

How then about the main point of Locke's statement, to wit, '... that the doctrine (of epiphenomenalism) makes nonsense of the argument for epiphenomenalism and of anything its proponents might say'. If anyone did indeed claim that this doctrine was true in some absolute sense, one would have to agree that he was talking as much nonsense as anyone propounding the opposite claim. But considered as a heuristic theory, leading to certain testable consequences and verified by certain observations, it does not seem to be more nonsensical than alternative theories, and possibly less so; too few experimental observations are perhaps available as yet for it to be possible to hold any very strong views. But on the grounds of alleged 'contradictions' the doctrine must be absolved; unless we start by assuming the truth of theories opposed to epiphenomenalism, it may be regarded as perfectly self-consistent.

It should hardly be necessary to answer Burt's point that 'such a doctrine makes nonsense of the work of the educator, the psychotherapist, the moral reformer, the legislator and the historian...' (Burt, 1964). The educator wants to produce a given result, say that of making his pupils speak colloquial French with ease and in good Parisian accents; the psychologist designs a modern language laboratory to test different methods for achieving this goal, on the assumption that behaviour is predictable, and that certain antecedent conditions will have certain consequences. How does that 'make nonsense' of the work of the educator? The therapist wants to rid his patient of his facial tic, or his phobia, or his alcoholism; he uses the methods of negative practice, of reciprocal inhibition or of aversion therapy, based on behaviouristic principles as verified in the laboratory. His success does not seem, to me at least, to 'make nonsense' of the work of the psychotherapist; it seems, for the first time, to make it possible for the psychotherapist to do in fact what his patients have for so many years begged him to do, and which he was unable to do. In any case, a theory is not untrue because it 'makes nonsense' of cherished beliefs; these beliefs are simply irrelevant.

Throughout Locke's paper runs the apparent belief that epiphenomenalism and determinism are the same, or imply each other, and that the alternative to determinism is some form of 'free will'—whatever that might be. Both beliefs are wrong. One can be an epiphenomenalist without believing in determinism, or a determinist without believing in epiphenomenalism; there is no essential logical connexion. And the alternative to determinism is not free will. Heisenberg's principle, which has sometimes been adduced by opponents of determinism as disproof of that doctrine, does not carry any implications of free will, as a look at the mathematical statement rather than the usual verbal paraphrases will make abundantly clear; at most it opposes chance or chaos to complete determinism. It is doubtful if this alternative will please exponents of free will any more than does determinism. Free will is not a meaningful alternative because it is not a doctrine which can be stated in a logically consistent and experimentally testable form; it is a poetic expression of human aspiration, not a scientifically useful concept (Eysenck, 1961).

The confusion implicit in the notion of free will is expressed most clearly in the quotation from Locke (1966) given in the first paragraph of this reply, where he claims that only if men are free to judge and reach conclusions based 'on their assessment of

the facts of reality' will their conclusions be in accord with truth. But surely their judgements and conclusions are constrained precisely by these 'facts of reality', and they are also constrained by attitudes, preferences, and personality factors which are partly inborn and partly acquired through environmental pressure. The former factors are useful in assessing the heuristic value of theories, whereas the latter probably bias any such assessment; in either case it is difficult to see what meaning could possibly attach to any claims that people are 'free' to judge and to assess the facts of reality.

In summary, epiphenomenalism is not a very good theory, but it is the best we have. Determinism is a useful heuristic doctrine, acceptable until there is some good evidence which forces us to give it up. Neither is likely to be 'true' in any absolute sense, and neither involves us in logical contradictions of the kind suggested by Locke. Fortunately all this is not very important; the relation between philosophical preconceptions and fruitful scientific work is weak at best, and probably non-existent.

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