

**Psychology as King of the Ghosts:
A Personal Critique**

by

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NEWTON-LE-WILLOWS

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Part One:

King-of-the-Ghosts Psychology

King-of-the-ghosts Psychology

This book has both a dark and a light —lightish — purpose. On the dark side I argue that psychology, not always but often, over-reaches and oversells. It can be fatally wrongheaded about mentality, and seems, on this face, to be the natural habitat of the fraud. Not all psychology, just king-of-the-ghosts psychology — a concept impossible to define crisply. I will say what I mean by king-of-the-ghosts in this first part. The lighter side is autobiographical. This material is not a laugh-a-minute, but it is unbuttoned. Why these two? Because I illustrate in the personal sections how I have been seduced by the ghost-side.

Why should I in particular — indeed, of all people —write a memoir, albeit one more intellectual than personal? I have not lead an interesting life, I am not one of the Big Figures in psychology — and I have never had a breakdown.¹ One answer is that because, after nearly 50 years of doing it, I have some things to say about the nature of psychology. Not only then an *apologia pro vita sua*, but a warning about how psychology has within it the I-suspect-unique potential to go to the bad.

¹ One of the inspirations for this book, in its blend of the personal and the psychological, was Stuart Sutherland's book *Breakdown*.

A warning? Over the past 50 years psychology has blossomed, becoming more rigorous, more various, and more closely integrated with other disciplines, such as physiology, philosophy and computer science. There would seem to be little point in simply cheering on this process. I do, however, see quite a lot of a point in showing how psychology can go wrong and has gone wrong; though this is not a matter of simply pointing the finger at something meretricious. It's more to do with trying to break the grip of an illusion or, more luridly, it's ghost-busting. To this kind of psychology I bid not farewell, but good riddance.

As I said, there is a more immediate reason why I am doing this in an autobiographical style rather than a dispassionately third-person one. It is that the tendency to think about psychology in the wrong way — in a king-of-the-ghosts way — *has been present in me* from the moment I first heard the word “psychology,” and it has taken most of my career to realise this and accommodate to it. It will be clear from the autobiographical section that few people are less naturally hard-headed and scientific than am I. My career has absolutely not been a long battle against the powers of unscientific darkness. For this reason, not because I have any special powers of empathy, I can appreciate why people, from novice undergraduates to venerable researchers, think the way they do; and go wrong the way they do. I have felt the pull in that direction.

This then is the king-of-the-ghosts of the title (a full explanation follows shortly). I have to admit that my target is not a very clear one. Indeed, in this first section of the book it

will be characterised in a metaphor-heavy way. Then in the long autobiographical section it will be rendered concrete and names will be named (or not very carefully concealed). It will seep into the narrative, whilst still being presented impressionistically and personally. I should say too that most of the narrative landscape will be peopled by flesh-and-blood psychology, with the ghost making only intermittent appearances; then filling the screen at the end. I think the ghost is best appreciated in the full context of flesh-and-blood psychology. Then in the final section of the book — ‘Question Time’ — everything will be rendered explicit and defended as best I can.

My position is that there is only one kind of psychology worth bothering with and that is the psychology of *How do we do it?* More precisely, this is the study of our capacities and of the mechanisms that underlie them. This set of capacities enables us to perceive the world, inhibit impulsive reactions to it, plan, feel appropriate emotions, reason; and the rest of it. All this exists against a background of dispositions (e.g., being disposed to aggression). Putting these two together, humans can act freely. Indeed, the idea of our having “free will” seems a perfectly coherent idea to me. Psychology, in short, explains human freedom. It shows how it is empirically possible.² The sort of existentialism-lite that this implies will be examined in the final part.

What about the other kind of psychology? The king-of-the-ghosts kind? This is human psychology regarded as the study

² As contrasted with the Kantian project of saying how something is philosophically (or “transcendentally”) possible.

of *what we are sometimes like and tend to do*. It collects information about what we tend to do and tend to feel. Are we sometimes over-compliant? Do we tend to feel happier after talking to strangers? Do we attribute beliefs to others on thin evidence? Do we lie to ourselves about what our preferences really are? On this kind of psychology there is something — The Mind — that is not a set of capacities, but is an entity that has an essential character to be studied in terms of what we tend to do.

Thus far, it just looks as if I have it in for social psychology. Not really; and anyway my target lies deeper than that. For I shall be arguing that the notion of The Mind as an object of study is an incoherent notion, because there are only *minds*, and minds are points-of-view — individuals' views from somewheres. There cannot be a view from everywhere. More immediately, it seems to me that practitioners of these what-we-tend-to-do studies, which may in fact be no more than a kind of statistical journalism, elevate their enterprise by saying their topic is “the mind.” People do this and this and this *because the human mind is such-and-such*.

You may, by now, have come to the view that this will be a sour book by somebody tired of psychology after nearly half a century of doing it. Not so. My enthusiasm for psychology — for the un-ghostly kind — is undiminished after all this time. Yes, I have sat through seminars and lectures on the ghost-psychology wiping away tears of boredom,³ I have failed to understand more talks on low-level vision and fine-grain

³ This phrase was stolen from James Fenton.

neuroscience than I have had hot dinners, but nearly every time I go to one of our departmental seminars I come away with something, something to think about, and feeling that things are moving forward. The scope for this kind of psychology would seem to be infinite. And it would indeed be so, were it not for one thing: the mind-body problem. By this I mean that to every sane mind two kinds of existence present themselves: a refractory physical world, and a mental world of how-it-is-with me. How are these (causally?) related? What neuroimaging delivers is something that's more like rubbing-our-noses-in-the-problem than a route to dissolving it.

Does all this imply that there will be a lot of laying-down-the-law? Some. And yet I hope my gaudy title will move us away from stern-faced taxonomising towards something more subjective and personal. So, now to explain the title properly.

Why *ghost*? Along with “quantum leap,” “learning curve,” and a few others “The Ghost in the Machine” is one of those sciencey/philosophical phrases that have entered everyday discourse. Probably, Arthur Koestler's book of that title did more to aid the process than did its coiner — Gilbert Ryle in his *The Concept of Mind*. Ryle used this expression to describe his target: the view, associated with Descartes, that the mental is something over-and-above all the various cognitive functions and mechanisms, a *sui generis* free-floating something-or-other. To think that it is such an entity is to have fallen victim to the kind of “category mistake” not unique to this domain.

Accordingly, in Ryle's example, a visitor to a university town is shown around the university — the lecture halls and labs, the residencies and offices — after which he asks: “But where is

the *university*?" As if there were a central something of which these were mere adjuncts.

It is clear that Ryle's point lands in the same ball-park as the kind of worry about psychology I've just been expressing. Yet this does absolutely not mean that I'm any kind of Rylean — any kind of "logical behaviourist." Nobody desires less to hark back to Behaviourism and, indeed, to the indefensible view that all talk of mental life as being a *sui generis* something is a glaring category mistake. I am thinking here of my philosophy tutor Harold Cox casually defusing Ryle's view that "enjoying X" should be cashed out in terms of certain overt behaviours (e.g., not wanting to be interrupted), leaving no phenomenal residue, no "ghost" at all. My position is light years from that; indeed it will emerge in the final part that I am a (harmless) kind of dualist. But Ryle *was* onto something. He was right to say that, when we come to the science of psychology, we delude ourselves in thinking that there is a category "the mental," set apart from vision, hearing, reasoning, memory, emotion, and so forth, about which we can have objective knowledge of the kind we can have about the physical world. None of this is to deny, by the way, that each of us has a sense of self — of a focal point and prime mover of our of mental lives set apart from seeing, reasoning, etc. The denial is about psychology as a discipline not about individual mentalities. I will return to this. Now to complete the explanation of the gaudy chapter title.

Why *King of*? Because those I diagnose as believing they are experts on The Mind, based on science-lite studies of what we tend to do and feel, are regally positing a ghostly discipline

containing a repository of information on how it is with the subjects — with the workers and the drones. They suffer from ego-inflation. My motivation for using “ghost” here is partly rhetorical, springing from a desire to soften and lighten the tone of what I will be saying. As I said before, I do not wish to taxonomise and lay down the law about who should study what and how. The idea is to say how it strikes me and to sound a warning. And for help in articulating how it strikes me I turned to a poem by Wallace Stevens called *A Rabbit as King of the Ghosts*. The poem is written as if the rabbit were speaking at the end of the day in late summer. There is reference to a cat “slopping” its milk, then to the cat being “forgotten on the moon.” And then the tercet:

*And to feel that the light is a rabbit-light
In which everything is meant for you
And nothing needs to be explained;*

Then later:

The grass is full

*And full of yourself. The trees around are for you,
The whole of the wilderness of night is for you,
A self that touches all edges,*

*You become a self that fills the four corners of night.
The red cat hides away in fur-light.*

I have no wish to “resolve” the poem, nor would I claim to know exactly what Stevens had in mind.

For my purposes the egocentrism or ego-inflation of the rabbit conjures up a possible state of the individual mind, as described by psychologists like Piaget: the confusion between the world as it is *manifest to me from here* and the idea that how it appears to me *exhausts all that can be said about reality*. The trap into which we, as well as what another poet called “Piaget’s babies,”⁴ can fall is the idea that our own mind is the regnant mind — and that’s it. The regnant mind can re-colour a cat (from red to green) and see it as a mere bug. And finally it becomes as solid and fixed as a statue in its false belief (“like a carving in space”). And as I write this I come to think that maybe what Stevens had in mind was the mental hubris of mankind after the “death” of God.

We have then, two things: the rabbit’s false belief that he’s mentally king-of-the-world (paralleling the hubris of some psychology), and the true belief that there is no one mind, but a plethora of rabbit-minds. The false idea is king-of the ghosts-psychology. Why bother with the poem at all? Why not have cooler terms? It’s all a matter of tone. If there has to be any kind of taxonomy then I want it to be a relaxed, impressionistic, and defeasible one written out of one rabbit-mind.

To call this a “subjective” book is not a sly way of evading the possibility that what I am saying may be contradictory, conceptually empty, or empirically wrong. It’s all very well hedging that: “Anyway this is how it seems to me.” Because, somebody is perfectly entitled to reply: “Well that is not how it

⁴ This is William Empson in his poem “Your Teeth are Ivory Towers.”

should seem to you. And if you applied your intelligence properly it would not do so!” When I have done with the autobiographising I will return to these themes more formally and deal with objections.

There are a number of reasons for including an autobiographical section, and the central one is to illustrate how somebody can begin with firm faith in the existence of king-of-the-ghosts-psychology, believing that there is a body of knowledge out there about “what makes us tick,” and then to come to the view, rather late in my case, that human psychology is the study of competences/capacities, not of mental essence. I’m sure this is not the *usual* “trajectory” (as we developmentalists call it). A colleague of mine (ex-Oxford, now Harvard), of my generation and, like me, from an arts background said that he came to psychology because it was wide open, because its — this was not his way of putting it — scientifically un-developed state meant that it was relatively easy to be original. He has certainly made a bigger mark than I have. And I would bet good money that there is a host of people out there in their late teens whose view of psychology is just like my “starting-state” (again, as developmentalists call it). This view is a deeply contradictory one: psychology is like science insofar as it is a body of objective knowledge, but at the same time it is quite unlike science insofar as it is about the warm, welcoming world of people, where there is room for debate in a way there’s not in the mainstream sciences. It is as human as you could wish and it affords wisdom about the ways of everybody from the man in the corner shop to Madam

Bovary. You think it's *interesting*, and everybody agrees with you.

A further reason for including the autobiographical section is that it will, I hope, show how we got to here from 1966. Psychology is fashion-driven, and chronicling the shifts and strata of fashion over the past 50 years should provide a good basis on which to re-consider, re-express, and defend the ideas I have just sketched in.

My initial motivation for writing this book was a purely polemical one. I had come to feel that psychology was becoming a Wizard of Oz, and that it was time to pull back the curtain and reveal the old humbug who can deliver no more than placebo-trinkets — a diploma, a medal, and a pocket watch. The author as Toto. Of course, this is too extreme. It is easy to fall into that way of thinking. How often do we hear the following of kind of thing: “a psychologist” tells us whether a celebrity paedophile is or is not evil, or whether in choosing a female trainer Andy Murray is revealing a degree of mother-fixation, or tells us on the *Today* Programme that Muslim school-girls who wear the hijab have higher (or maybe lower) “self worth” than those who do not? And then, more dangerously, I would consider degrees in psychology. Do we actually *know* enough to fill three years of psychology teaching? Think of all those people in the UK who have First Class degrees in psychology. Are these degrees in any sense the equivalent of Firsts in modern languages or chemistry? They are tests of intelligence insofar as they are tests of memory, writing ability, applied common sense and maths; but what has been memorised? The pros and cons of a lot of

defunct or silly theories, a mosaic of experimental studies that are all in their different ways problematic (a narrative of failed attempts to nail something down), how to use statistical packages to run correlations and tests of significance; and how to dress up approximate, provisional knowledge as if it were science? And to witness the banality of the popular psychology books — the ones written by professors in good universities, I mean, not by Paul McKenna figures — books that explain how experimental psychology has revealed to us that the self is an illusion, that explain the nature of evil in terms of lack of a functioning “empathy circuit.”

This is just blanket negativity. Why should psychologists not have their say? Also, there are some wonderful psychology degrees around and brilliant young people getting them. Popular books can contain wrongheadedness and yet, nonetheless, inspire talented people to dig deeper by taking a university degree. And yet the scepticism about psychology remains. It is eradicable. It is so in me, at least. What seems to ground the scepticism is that psychology will always deliver less than it promises to deliver as long as people are operating on the king-of-the-ghosts side of things. I aim to show how a career in psychology can lead to this view: not so much tearing down a humbug’s curtain as ending up with the refrain: “Search for the humbug inside yourself.”

Now for some consumer warnings. This is not a *researched* book, by which I mean that I will make all kinds of generalisations about psychology which could have been backed up or nuanced after a spot of judicious Googling; but have not been. As I said, my approach is subjective and

impressionistic. These generalisations will often be anodyne and difficult to deny (e.g., *of course* psychology degrees have mushroomed since the '60s, and *of course* psycho-types are all over the media nowadays).

The next consumer warning is about the naming of names. When what I have to say about somebody is neutral or positive or part of an anecdote I will use the person's name. When I am using the individual to make a negative point I will give as little information about them as possible, invent a name for them, and asterisk the *first* mention — such as Dr. Fabian Klein* and Jonquil Haitch.* Similarly for ideas and their acronyms : Phenomenological Analytical Hermeneutical Research Trajectory* (or P.H.A.R.T.*) and for books: *Reasons Why "You" Don't Actually Exist*.*

And finally to the matter of what I earlier called "tone." Despite the subjectivity of the treatment, I will not be telling the reader about my first racing bike and how I felt when the *The Journal of Experimental Child Psychology* rejected my first paper. It will be intellectually subjective, not personally subjective — except here and there when the personal and the professional blend. And the tone will sometimes have more in common with *Adrian Mole* than with *The Prelude*, with the protagonist being more of a *Zelig* than the autobiographical Bertrand Russell.

And now for a caveat-cum-spoiler. In the subsequent narrative, king-of-the-ghosts psychology will mainly appear in the early and late stages — in my years as an undergraduate in Oxford and then as a senior academic at Cambridge. From 1968 to 2012 the ghost will be almost entirely a phenomenon

within this author; though the fact that it reappeared shows it was there all the time working towards a DSc from Ghost College. It will manifest itself in a number of ways, mainly as a tendency to be captured by a vision of what humans are like essentially, a vision borrowed from some charismatic theorist perhaps. This is bad because it generates a kind of ego-inflated superiority to the spadework of experimental psychology and leads one to launch research programs buoyed up only by one's own intellectual crushes. I have to admit though — I hope this will emerge — that a *homeopathic* dose of it gets you going, and may indeed get you running experiments. If these experiments fail (as they probably will) then that's no bad thing. I'm reminded of here of a routine by an American comic, whose name I never caught. Referring to these signs you see in the backs of cars like "Back off, baby on board" he said: "When I see them I always overtake then brake hard. Bounce the kid around a bit. Give it a sense of *reality*." Quite! A good point, and also a rather Piagetian one.⁵ The external world of data is a refractory place.

⁵ The world as a refractory entity to which the child has to "accommodate" looms large in Piagetian theory.