

Philosophy and Psychology at Oxford

The connection between philosophy and psychology has a long history in Oxford. John Locke (1632–1704) was a student and, for a time, a tutor at Christ Church before leaving Oxford to enter the household of the first Earl of Shaftesbury. Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* is one of the great works of British empiricist philosophy and he is also regarded as the father of English psychology. The first Oxford post in psychology was established in 1898, more than two hundred years after the publication of Locke's *Essay*, when G.F. Stout (editor of the journal *Mind* from 1892 to 1920) was appointed to the Wilde Readership in Mental Philosophy, in the faculty of Literae Humaniores. The Wilde in question was Henry Wilde FRS, an electrical engineer and a notable benefactor who endowed, not only the Wilde Readership and the Henry Wilde Prize (for outstanding performance in Philosophy in Final Honour Schools), but also the John Locke Scholarship in Mental Philosophy (now the John Locke Prize) and the annual Locke Lectures.

After five years, Stout moved to the chair of Logic and Metaphysics at St. Andrews and was succeeded as Wilde Reader by William McDougall, one of the founders of the British Psychological Society, and then by William Brown, under whose leadership an Institute of Experimental Psychology was established in 1936.

Brown had been an undergraduate at Christ Church from 1899, taking Psychology as a special subject in Greats and winning the John Locke Scholarship. Three decades later, he expressed some frustration that these were still the only two ways in which psychology figured in Oxford examinations, writing in the *Oxford Magazine* (11 May 1933), "psychology has encountered more difficulty breaking away and finding its own level in Oxford than in any other university", and in the *British Medical Journal* (30 May 1936), "the whole subject has been a subordinate one within the School of Philosophy". But psychology did achieve independence and in 1947 the first Professor of Psychology, George Humphrey, was appointed and the Honour School of Psychology, Philosophy, and Physiology took its first students. A single-honours psychology course followed in 1969 and today, the Department of Experimental Psychology is part of the Medical Sciences Division.

Since 1947, Wilde Readers have been philosophers, beginning with Brian Farrell, who held the Readership for thirty-two years.¹ Farrell made significant contributions to philosophical commentary on psychoanalysis but his best known paper is 'Experience', published in 1950, just a year after Gilbert Ryle's book, *The Concept of Mind*. Ryle famously rejected dualism about mind and body as being a myth about "the ghost in the machine". Farrell agreed with Ryle on this, but thought that psychologists and physiologists might still worry that their scientific accounts of seeing, remembering, or thinking left out sensations, feelings, and experience. Farrell's aim was to reassure the scientists that there was really no such problem as the one that they thought they faced.

Farrell asked his reader to imagine that psychologists and physiologists had found out all they could about a Martian's sensory systems, or a bat's sensory systems, and yet the scientists still wondered what it would be like to be a Martian, or what it would be like to be a bat. Farrell argued, on philosophical grounds, that the impression that science leaves out the "what it is like" of experience is an illusion and that, in reality, experience is subsumed by behaviour.

¹ From 1947, the Wilde Readership was held by Brian Farrell until 1979, Gareth Evans for just a few months before his death in 1980, Colin McGinn from 1985 to 1990 and Martin Davies from 1993 to 2000. The Readership was then converted to a Professorship and John Campbell was the first Wilde Professor, from 2001 to 2004. Davies returned to Oxford as the second Wilde Professor in 2006.

The question that Farrell thought would worry psychologists and physiologists is, in essence: Do the sciences of the mind leave out consciousness? It is still debated in philosophy of mind and the opposing positions are well represented by Oxford alumni. Daniel Dennett, whose DPhil (1965) was supervised by Gilbert Ryle, has defended a position similar to Farrell's in many articles and books, including *Consciousness Explained* (1991). In contrast, Thomas Nagel, who completed the BPhil in 1960 and then a Harvard PhD, argued in a famous paper, 'What is it like to be a bat?', that the objective sciences inevitably leave out subjective truths about conscious experience. David Chalmers, who studied mathematics at Oxford (1987–8) before moving to the USA for doctoral work in philosophy, and who gave the 2010 John Locke Lectures, has also defended a resolutely non-reductionist view of the "what it is like" of experience in *The Conscious Mind: In Search of a Fundamental Theory* (1996) and *The Character of Consciousness* (2010).

In a critical notice of *The Concept of Mind*, Farrell suggested, "we are reaching the stage where not much work on the mind can be done in future by philosophers who are not also steeped in psychology". Farrell was not completely right about this because, in fact, many philosophers have continued to do first-rate work on philosophy of mind without engaging in depth with the sciences of mind. But Oxford, with its distinctive institutional history, provides an attractive environment for collaborations between philosophers and psychologists, and empirically informed work in philosophy of mind has certainly increased. Oxford philosophers of mind are engaged in research on a wide range of topics at the interface with psychology, including attention and visual perception, the boundary between perception and cognition, belief and delusions, the phenomenology of thinking, the limits of introspection, agency and decision making, the unity of consciousness, and the relationship between neuroimaging and philosophy of mind.²

² This note was written for the *Oxford Philosophy* newsletter, Summer 2011.