INTRODUCTION: WHAT HAS PHILOSOPHY OF PSYCHOLOGY BECOME?

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The Routledge Companion to Philosophy of Psychology follows Ned Block’s classic anthology, Readings in Philosophy of Psychology (1980/1) by nearly thirty years. The differences between these two books signal the changed character, as well as the dramatic expansion, of the field. In this introduction, we describe some of the prominent characteristics of the Companion and explain how it reflects the current state of the field.

In recent decades and across almost all domains in the brain and behavioral sciences, there has been a steady push towards multidisciplinary collaboration and cooperation. This development means that it has become increasingly difficult to draw nonarbitrary disciplinary boundaries between research programs. Philosophers of psychology have been influenced by and have responded to the growing interdisciplinary nature of the psychological enterprise. As psychological research has become an increasingly inclusive endeavor, encompassing a broad range of inquiries – from molecular-level investigations to social and organizational psychology – philosophy of psychology has grown well beyond its original set of core concerns. Today, the philosophy of psychology has its own agendas and is motivated by concerns which can be distinguished from those problems and questions that informed its roots in philosophy of mind. No longer is philosophy of psychology directed solely towards questions of rationality, modularity, nativism and intentionality. This is probably the most obvious change in the thirty years since the publication of Block’s anthology.

Contemporary philosophers of psychology are engaged with one of the most intense and diverse projects in the history of science. Given the scale of psychological research today, it is useful to maintain some sensitivity to the broader intellectual context which informs our investigation into mental life. We believe that appreciation of the major positions which frame current debates is improved by attending to the historical development of the relevant concepts and methods. In this spirit, the purpose of Part One is to present the necessary historical background for the discussions which follow. It provides a selective tour of the relevant history of psychology and philosophy, moving from the origins of psychology in early-modern philosophy to twentieth-century debates between behaviorists and cognitivists. These essays should counteract
INTRODUCTION

the tendency to see contemporary debates, especially those concerning representation and computation, as straightforward products of the cognitive revolution, allowing students to recognize that the issues at stake have their roots in discussions that date back well before the heyday of cognitivism in the 1960s and 1970s.

Part Two explores the nature of psychological explanation and its relationship to various models of mental life. In the early 1980s, philosophers of psychology had settled into a consensus with respect to the demise of behaviorism and the centrality of cognitivist architectures. This model assumed a functionalist metaphysical framework, a computationalist approach to explanation, and a central role for representation. Part Two reflects developments in the intervening years, by presenting the more critical contemporary approach to psychological explanation, folk psychology and functionalism. Alternative explanatory frameworks to cognitivism are explained and defended in detail. Connectionism and the embodied/embedded framework not only represent novel approaches to cognitive architecture but also present fundamental challenges to the cognitivist views of psychological explanation. This plurality of explanatory frameworks is one of the hallmarks of contemporary philosophy of psychology. Furthermore, philosophers disagree as to precisely how we ought to characterize the target of psychological explanation. The elusiveness of the target of psychological explanation has direct methodological consequences regardless of one’s favored model of mind. These challenges are discussed in detail in Part Two.

Part Three reviews the well-known cluster of questions related to the nature of cognition and representation. The problems addressed here relate to both the architecture within which representational states are couched and to the possibility of naturalizing content. For the most part, these essays fall close to the subject matter of mainstream debates in the philosophy of mind. However, as described in Part Three, philosophers of psychology have also challenged the foundational assumptions which govern these debates.

One of the central concerns in the recent philosophy has been the difficulty of accounting for intentionality. Despite a variety of new metaphors and scientific developments, many of the traditional problems continue to be relevant. So, for example, whether psychological inquiry converges on a theory where minds are understood as symbol-manipulating machines, as statistically driven networks or as embodied-embedded systems, it still faces the philosophical problem of accounting for the role of representation in psychology. Whether one denies the reality of representation along behaviorist lines or rests one’s account on some variant of cognitivism or its alternatives, the difficulty of explaining (or explaining away) the role of representation remains.

Part Four reviews the principal problems which emerge from consideration of the relationship between psychology and its biological basis. The early days of computational functionalism encouraged philosophers to consider the choice of theories independently of the details of implementation. For philosophers of psychology the biological facts of cognition were more difficult to ignore. In recent decades, philosophy of psychology has moved away from a view which downplayed the significance of biological structures and constraints in the development of psychological theories.

xxii
Techniques and insights from neuroscience have moved to the heart of psychological investigation. Philosophers have taken note of the import of the neurosciences. So, for example, modern theories concerning cognitive architecture and the nature of representation generally take a stand with respect to the relevance of constraints that result from the properties of the neural substrate.

While neuroscience has loomed large in recent psychology, biology has figured in a range of other important ways in psychological inquiry. For decades, ontogenetic and evolutionary biological considerations have influenced psychological theorizing. These factors continue to shape discussions in philosophy of psychology. Thus, developmental and evolutionary considerations feature prominently in many of the chapters in this Companion. The contributions to Part Four reinforce the view that if one is seriously engaged with working psychology, it is no longer the case that one can safely ignore evidence from the biological sciences.

While contemporary philosophy of psychology encompasses results from biology and the other sciences, purely philosophical considerations continue to figure centrally. As philosophers have shown, perceptual experience remains one of the most intractable problems for a theory of the mind. However, philosophy of psychology has access to resources which potentially hold the possibility of moving beyond the kind of impasses that plague unaided philosophy of mind. Unlike the metaphysically oriented literature of the 1990s, the strategy for addressing the problem of consciousness in philosophy of psychology involves direct engagement with empirical investigation into the nature of attention and perception. Philosophy of psychology supplements and constrains a purely metaphysical or phenomenological approach to the problem of consciousness. Rather than taking our intuitions as the sole data for a discussion of the nature of conscious experience, philosophers of psychology have a substantial inventory of scientific evidence to draw upon.

A productive approach to consciousness involves breaking the problem into its components. Part Five surveys some of the ways that philosophers of psychology have pursued the divide-and-conquer approach to consciousness. Attention, introspection and the temporal components of experience are distinguished from the emotions. These, in turn are distinguished from perceptual experience in the sensory modalities and in dream states. By taking an incremental approach to the problem of consciousness, philosophers of psychology can attend more carefully to distinctions obscured by blanket terms like “consciousness.”

Philosophical curiosity extends well beyond the confines of debates over the nature of cognition, representation and consciousness. The kinds of concern that continue to bring philosophers to the study of psychology, often involve problems concerning personhood, moral agency and the nature of the good life. As the field matures, philosophers of psychology are connecting in substantial ways to moral philosophy. The contributions to Part Six demonstrate the relevance of philosophy of psychology to vital normative questions. Here, these questions are tackled directly and without apology.

The present volume reflects what we believe are some of the most fruitful lines of investigation in contemporary philosophy of psychology. Given the selection of topics
INTRODUCTION

and emphases, some words of justification may be in order. As we indicated above, this Companion is organized in a way which departs, to some extent, from more traditional accounts of philosophy of psychology. In the past, the field was thought to focus on four central notions: intentionality, rationality, nativism and modularity. While these topics are crucial and are covered in detail here, they do not exhaust the range of topics which now fall within the scope of the field. It is easy to understand why philosophers of mind emphasized these four topics. However, by including a selection of subjects which is more representative of the contemporary state of play, we are hoping that the broader philosophical community will be encouraged to recognize the rich diversity of contemporary philosophy of psychology. However, this volume is not intended solely for philosophers with an interest in matters of mind, but also for philosophically inclined psychologists. We hope that this volume provokes and stimulates psychologists and that they will find a great deal here that is directly relevant to their research.

To understand what philosophy of psychology has become and where it is headed, it is useful, once again, to orient ourselves by reference to Block's classic anthology. That anthology was divided into a volume of classic papers in philosophy of mind, followed by a sampling of important papers in philosophy of psychology. Much of the most important work in philosophy of psychology had been oriented towards the concerns of traditional philosophy of mind. So, for example, in his introductory essay Block emphasizes what he sees as the central conceptual innovation: the Turing machine. From the perspective of the late 1970s, the development of the digital computer held the promise of fundamentally reshaping our view of mental life. The prospect of a new approach to fundamental questions concerning rationality and intentionality drew many philosophers of mind to examine conceptual problems in psychology.

Over the past three decades of philosophy of psychology, one of the most important developments has been the expansion in the range of themes and topics. Increasing interdisciplinarity in philosophy of psychology in the intervening years has meant that Block's characterization of the field as “the study of conceptual issues in psychology” is no longer satisfactory (p. 1). Today, the philosophy of psychology is more than simply the analysis of the concepts employed by psychologists. It has become a collaborative effort involving the contributions of psychology, linguistics, neuroscience, engineering and other disciplines. As this volume shows, the collaborative turn has not subordinated philosophical investigation to the natural sciences; philosophers have not become the “underlabourers of the sciences” in Locke’s sense. Instead, while retaining a focus on the problems that bring us to philosophy of psychology in the first place, the collaborative turn has meant an increasing sensitivity to the actual results, methodologies and practices of scientific investigation. Our choice of topics in this Companion reflects this collaborative approach.