

# Essays in General Psychology

*Seven Danish Contributions*

*presented to Henrik Poulsen*

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## Introduction

The seven articles to be found in this volume are rewritten versions of lectures that were originally held during a symposium at the Institute of Psychology, University of Aarhus, Denmark, between the 24th and 25th September, 1987. The title of the symposium was "The General Foundation of Psychology" and it was held in order to mark the 60th anniversary of Professor Henrik Poulsen, Dr.Phil.

Several criteria were used to decide whom to invite to speak. One was that the work of the persons concerned had to have been inspired by Henrik Poulsen's activity as a researcher and teacher. Another that they had to be engaged in the field of general psychology and in problems concerning the theoretical and methodological foundations of psychology. It was also required that the lectures should reflect the contemporary developments within Danish psychology, which in some ways are different from the mainstream of academic psychology in the rest of the Western World.

Finally, we decided for practical reasons that the symposium should involve no more than seven lectures, in order to allow time for discussion. Fortunately, many of our colleagues whom it would have been fair to ask to give a lecture, participated eagerly in the discussions. We take this opportunity to thank them.

Danish university psychology has a long tradition for being a psychology of consciousness - an experientially oriented or so-called phenomenological psychology. One can speak of a specific phenomenological Copenhagen-School in psychology: see for example Rubin (1949), Tranekjær Rasmussen (1956), From (1957), and the reviews by Moustgaard & Petersen (1986) and Moustgaard (1987).

During a time when the main part of international psychology has been concerned with man as a biological organism and as an animal amongst animals, with man "seen from the outside" so to speak, Danish psychologists have been true to the humanistic foundations of psychology and have taken as their starting point the specific ways in which man experiences and acts in the world. There is thus a strong tradition within Danish psychology of respecting the enormous wealth of man's experiences. Our training has stressed the necessity of avoiding the conceptual short-cuts offered by various brilliant but too simple theories of man's experiences. This is something we are proud of, a core in our identity as psychologists.

There has, however, also been a more negative side to this tradition. One problem has been a tendency to define the science of psychology in much

too comprehensive terms. If psychology is the study of conscious mental life, then everything that one can be conscious of is appropriate subject matter for our science. Absolutely everything in which man takes an interest, including all the other sciences, thus comes under the realm of psychology. In this way psychology strangely comes to encompass everything, and in a way, therefore, nothing. Psychology becomes trivial.

One has fallen into a pit dug by philosophical idealism where the world and the consciousness of it cannot be distinguished from each other.

A classic solution to this problem is to introduce a distinction between the world and the consciousness of it, a distinction based upon the idea that behind the world of which we are conscious lays another world of which we are not conscious. This is the actually existing material world; the world of physics and its invisible atoms. The natural sciences can now occupy itself with this material, but invisible world, while psychology can engage itself in describing and explaining the conscious, experienced world.

Here, however, one found oneself stranded upon an extreme anti-realism, which also is filled with problems. It is impossible on the basis of anti-realism to interpret the data from psychological research as revealing reality, and it is, therefore, difficult to connect practical psychology with academic research.

In many ways this special form of Copenhagen-phenomenology resembles German Gestalt Psychology which it was inspired by, and which it generally in the international literature has been treated as part of. In the Anglo-Saxon literature, German Gestalt psychology has often been treated as a school of psychology opposed to Behaviourism because of their differences concerning the admissibility of experiential reports as part of the empirical foundation in a proper scientific psychology. This methodological difference, important as it is, has to a certain extent overshadowed the basic philosophical agreements between the two schools, where the philosophical notions of physicalism and logical positivism have served as the common frame inside which their discussions have been conducted.

Thus, as Schultz (1988) has pointed out, there is a common philosophical foundation for the philosophical idealism of the Copenhagen Phenomenologists and Behaviourism which one was otherwise extremely opposed to. However, there is a paradox in the anti-realism exposed by the Copenhagen Phenomenologists, when they on the one hand asserted that physics is included in the realm of phenomena, and that a notion of objective or material reality was "meaningless", and when they on the other hand claimed that reality, as the cause of phenomena, consisted of in principle unrecognisable atoms.

The critique of positivism, as it was turned into a political programme in many universities throughout Europe in the late sixties, thus had a different flavour in Danish psychology than most other places.

These problems and contradictions have in recent years contributed to a widespread awareness of a crisis within Danish psychology and strong interest in theoretical and philosophical problems, for example manifested as discussions in the journals *Udkast* (1973-) and *Psyke & Logos* (1980-).

This interest in philosophical problem is, however, not a new phenomenon. There has always been a close relationship between Danish philosophy and psychology. One might even say that psychology in Denmark never totally broke away from philosophy. It has also meant that psychologists have used philosophy as a bridge to the fundamental problems of other sciences, e.g. linguistics and physics, which in Denmark also maintained a close connection with philosophy. A focal point for these connections to philosophy is the Danish philosopher Harald Høffding who, at the beginning of the century, inspired the creation of a philosophical study group from which there evolved three "Copenhagen schools": Linguistics, with Louis Hjelmslev as the main driving force; physics, with Niels Bohr as the dominating figure; and psychology with Edgar Rubin as the main spokesman. As pointed out by Christiansen (1985), the threads of these developments can be traced back to Denmark's greatest philosopher Søren Kierkegaard. This is generally recognised in the case of Niels Bohr, but it is less known that similar threads can be traced to a lesser extent within Danish psychology.

A case in point is the classic problems concerning the epistemic relationship between subject and object. As a relationship between observer and the observed, this was a central epistemological theme in Niels Bohr's work, and his reflections have inspired many philosophers and psychologists. It is by no means a coincidence that three of the contributors to this volume (Engelsted, Moustgaard and Mammen) discuss fundamental problems in both physics and psychology, nor that this theme was keenly discussed during the symposium. To name just one of many testimonies to this connection, the 100 year-celebration of Niels Bohr's birth was marked by several Danish articles in the journal *Nordisk Psykologi* (Nordic Psychology) (see Moustgaard, 1986; Nørretranders, 1986; and Andersen, 1987).

This philosophical orientation and the tradition for mutual interest and communication across discipline-boundaries based on it, needs to be taken into consideration if one is to understand the current developments within Danish general psychology. This trend is closely connected with a devotion to problems of general anthropology and of the phylogenetic development of man as is manifested in the papers of Engelsted and Katzenelson.

A characteristic feature strongly reflected in several of the papers in the present collection is the inspiration received over the last ten years from Soviet psychology, partly via German psychology. It is not so much the Pavlovian and physiologically oriented Soviet psychology that has been influential, but rather the trend, starting with Vygotsky, that has found inspiration in Marx's writings. In doing that, the Russians sought the roots of their theoretical conceptualisations in the classical German philosophy which also was the starting point of Danish psychology. This trend in Soviet psychology has in recent times been represented primarily by A.N. Leontiev (see Leontiev, 1978 and 1981). While Marxist psychology in the Anglo-Saxon world mostly has been considered a radical break with the ruling positivistic and pragmatic traditions, in Denmark it has more often been considered a continuation of a native tradition. There are, of course, differences between classical German idealism and dialectical materialism, but there are also many common features in terms of concepts and ways of formulating problems. Regardless of the degree of agreement and acceptance, the texts of Hegel and Marx have not been considered gibberish by Danish psychologists to the same extent as they no doubt have been by many of our colleagues throughout the rest of the world. Neither has there been a dramatic or irreconcilable conflict between Marxist and non-Marxist psychologists in Denmark as there has been in many other countries. We have generally been able to protect academic fellowship and mutual respect - even if voices at times have been loud.

Whether the inspiration comes mainly from Soviet psychology and dialectic materialism, from the social philosophy of western marxism, from the paradigm shift seemingly occurring within the contemporary natural sciences, from the Kierkegaard tradition, or from a combination of these influences, it appears that at present there is a new understanding emerging concerning the relationship between the human subject and his world. On the one hand this new understanding breaks with the idealistic confusion of subject and object, and on the other hand it breaks with mechanistic materialism's contrast of the subject and its world as independent units, externally related. Apparently, there is now emerging a view of the subject-object relationship in terms of practical activity and interdependence.

This also means that the relationship between theory and practice within the science of psychology is being re-evaluated, as is the case for example in Dreier's and Hem's articles in this volume.

It is this current development in Danish general psychology that the publishers of this volume hope to give the reader a taste of. Henrik Poulsen<sup>1</sup> has been a central figure in this development the last couple of decades and we therefore found it appropriate to use the occasion of his 60th anniversary to hold a symposium on the fundamental problems of general psychology.

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Lars Hem, Niels Engelsted, Jens Mammen

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<sup>1</sup> In the back of this book is a list of Henrik Poulsen's published works from 1960 - 1989.

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