

Philosophical influences on psychology



Who is nowadays not interested in the human behavior? In fact, this interest is not a new thing and the philosophical influence started in the 18th century in France. This interest of philosophical ideas on psychology can be traced back to the ancient Greeks where Aristotle and Plato have dedicated themselves in this field.

Starting with the man who invented the defecting duck, Jacques de Vaucason and started a debate in France and beyond on what it signified (Massaro, 1986). The mechanical bird was such a marvel to behold at that time and together with other machines the mechanical duck came to influence the direction that psychology was to take. Also, the notion of mechanism has its roots in physics. Galileo saw the universe as a body of particles that affected one another through physical contact. However, Isaac Newton saw that movement was by forces that influenced attraction and repelling by revising Galileo ideas.

The mechanical clock was the perfect embodiment of the spirit of the mechanism because the clocks influence on human thought had no comparison. And, due to the clock invention life become more orderly and regularized. Furthermore, the precision and regularity associated with the clocks lead to the comparison of the universe to a clock. Rene Descartes, a French philosopher, was among the scientists that agreed with that notion.

As a result of viewing the universe as a clock- like machine, the concept of determinism and reductionism were developed. According to Chew, everything that happens is determined or is a consequence of the past

events. Reductionism is where everything is understood by reducing something to its core components (2002).

The development of automata initiated the idea of seeing man as machine. After all, machines developed in the 17th century could imitate human activities with precision. Descartes also adopted this idea and argued that humans were but machines fashioned by God. Therefore, life was subject to mechanical laws. To strengthen the concept of man as a mechanical being, Charles Babbage developed a machine that could imitate the human mind functions (Descartes, 1912).

It was also in the 17th century that empiricism developed where experimentation and observation characterized the pursuit of knowledge. Rene Descartes was central to this new direction that psychology was taking. Descartes solved the mind-body question by saying that the mind controlled the body, but also the body had control over the mind. However, the philosopher rejected the previous position where it was theorized that mind influenced the body. Instead, he proposed that both the mind and body were connected. Not only Descartes solved the mind-body question but he also credited with the theory of reflex action, which is where an object outside the body can bring about an involuntary response (Descartes, 1912). The mind and body are in a continuous interaction where the former provides information on the external environment and the latter produces physical motion. Descartes was also responsible for developing the doctrine of ideas. Under this doctrine, there are two kinds of ideas generated by the mind. The first is derived ideas and the second is innate ideas. Derived ideas are

interaction with external stimulus. The innate ideas, on the other hand, are solely of the mind (Descartes, 1912).

By the mid-nineteenth century, the philosophical thought in Europe changed to incorporate positivism and the philosopher who credited with this new direction and came up with the doctrine of materialism is Auguste Comte. In his arguments, the Frenchman only relied on the observable and what can be proven (Comte & Lenzer, 1975).

John Locke is another prominent philosopher that laid down the foundation for modern psychology and he was interested in knowing in what way the mind gains knowledge. Per him all thoughts were from sensual experiences and that was a rejected to Descartes' idea about innate thoughts (Locke & Nidditch, 1975).

The first methodical discourse on association was published by David Hartley. According to Hartley (1791), contiguity was the central law of association. Through contiguity, he attempted to expound on the process of reasoning, emotion, memory, as well as, voluntary and involuntary action. Hartley also proposed that for the associations to happen, the repetition of ideas and sensations is vital. With this proposition, he differed with John Locke.

Moreover, Hartley accepted Locke's idea of external stimuli and its impact on knowledge and ideas. He said that children grow while also accumulating various experiences of the senses and establishing mental connections. And, in that way, children will have accumulated sufficient experiences and connections for the development of higher systems of thought by the time

they attain the legal age (Hartley, 1791). Like the philosophers before him, Hartley also viewed the world in mechanistic lenses. He attempted to explain how the physiological processes happen in the brain.

Hartley utilized the idea of Isaac Newton to explain the mind and the nervous system. Essentially, Newton had stated that impulses in the physical world tend to pulsate. Therefore, Hartley proposed that the nerves were just compact structures and not hollow tubes as Descartes had said. The transfer of impulses from one part of the body to the other was possible when the nerves which were solid structures vibrated. Hartley's principles are important in psychology as they highlight an attempt to use the mechanical model to comprehend the functioning of the human brain (Hartley, 1791).

James Mill goal was to show that the mind was nothing more than a machine and free will is not achievable (Schultz, 2015). Just like John Locke, Mill argued that the mind only acted out of external stimuli. In one of his arguments, the philosopher stated that the mind worked in the same way as a clock. In other words, the mind is mechanical and predictable. According to Mill, the mind is subject to external stimuli and cannot act spontaneously. Also, he suggested that an analysis of the mind was possible that breaking down the mind into its constituent parts could help understand the mind better (Schultz, 2015). Furthermore, Mill stated that the mind was devoid of any creative function. Essentially, Mill believed associations were literally passive and automatic.

James accepted John Locke's idea on the mind being an empty slate. Therefore, he applied this approach to his son John Stuart Mill through

rigorous training. He was kept in seclusion away from other children (Good, 1942). All in all, Stuart Mill experienced a harsh upbringing. Stuart Mill's writing contributed significantly to the psychology science which before that was almost non-existent. He discounted his father's ideas about the mind being mechanistic and passive. Instead, he believed the mind had a significant role to play in association of ideas. Stuart Mill's major influence was current research on the subject. Stuart Mills believed that matters regarding the mind could be understood through scientific inquiry.

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