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Psychology between science and common sense: William James and the problems of psychological language in the *Principles*

Saulo de Freitas Araujo

Department of Psychology, University of West Georgia, Carrollton, GA, 30118, USA

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ABSTRACT

The suspicion that language can become an obstacle to human knowledge is not new in the Western intellectual tradition. Following the empiricist legacy, many authors have suggested the perils and pitfalls of common sense language for science. Applied to psychology, this leads to the issue of the reliability of psychological language for scientific psychology. William James, in his *Principles of Psychology*, was one of the first psychologists to address this problem explicitly. The goal of this paper is to situate his position and contrast it with contemporary debates over the status of folk psychology. The results indicate that James conceived of common sense psychology in a very complex manner, and pointed to a kind of illusion that remains ignored in the current literature, with negative consequences for psychology. I conclude by suggesting the relevance of James for contemporary debates in theoretical and philosophical psychology.

1. Introduction

The suspicion that language can become an obstacle to human knowledge is not new in the Western intellectual tradition. Francis Bacon (1561–1626), for example, denounced in his *Novum Organum* four types of idols or false images that assault human understanding and prevent it from reaching a true knowledge of nature: "the first kind are called idols of the tribe; the second idols of the cave; the third idols of the marketplace; the fourth idols of the theatre" (Bacon, 1626/2000, p. 40). Among these, Bacon said, the idols of the marketplace, that is, the illusions that arise from human exchange and common sense language, are the most problematic, because "words retort and turn their force back upon the understanding; and this has rendered philosophy and the sciences sophistic and unproductive" (Bacon, 1620/2000, p. 48). More specifically, Bacon identified two illusory processes that lead science to this state of confusion:

> The illusions which are imposed on the understanding by words are of two kinds. They are either names of things that do not exist (for as there are things that lack names because they have not been observed, so there are also names that lack things because they have been imaginatively assumed), or they are the names of things which exist but are confused and badly defined, being abstracted from things rashly and unevenly. (Bacon, 1620/2000, pp. 48–49).

It is interesting to note that Bacon's warning points to a fundamental problem in the emergence and consolidation of any science, namely, the relationship between common sense parlance, scientific language, and reality. Indeed, if every scientific activity develops from common sense—coming later to correct or even abandon it—and the ordinary vocabulary about objects and events is usually vague and ambiguous, how are we to ground scientific development and prevent science from falling prey to the pitfalls and inaccuracies of common sense?

Applying Bacon's suspicion to the case of psychology, one is led to reflect upon one of its most fundamental problems, namely, the precise definition and characterization of its subject matter. Whether it be defined as a science of mind, behavior, or cognition, psychologists have never reached consensus on the meaning and reference of psychological terms. Is there a special reason for that? Why is psychological language so problematic?

William James (1842–1910), in his attempt to establish psychology as "the science of mental life" (James, 1890/1981, p. 15), was well aware of the pitfalls of psychological language. Throughout his *Principles of Psychology* (James, 1890/1981), for example, one finds him discussing the problems of common sense and the limits of its

E-mail address: saraujo@westga.edu.

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vocabulary, which he deemed to be pernicious for the advancement of a psychological science. However, James also accepted in the *Principles* some ideas of common sense, which renders his position more complex than one might first expect.

A good way to celebrate the 125th anniversary of James's *Principles* is to bring his reflections on psychological language to light, a topic that not only is absent from its previous celebrations (Donnelly, 1992; Johnson & Henley, 1990), but also has been poorly addressed in the secondary literature.[1] Furthermore, given the heated debates over the status of folk psychology in the last decades—especially with regard to the place of common sense psychological vocabulary (belief, desire, intention, etc.) in scientific psychology (e.g., Araujo, 2011; Bogdan, 1991; Christensen & Turner, 1993; Fletcher, 1995; Greenwood, 1991a; Hutto, 2009; Hutto & Ratcliffe, 2007; Ratcliffe, 2007; Roth, 2013; Stich, 1996; Stueber, 2006)—it would be interesting to contrast such discussions with James's reflections. Here, two questions are of paramount importance. First, how exactly did James deal with the problem of common sense psychology? Second, how is James's position relevant for contemporary debates?

My goal in this paper is to answer both questions. In so doing, I want to show not only the relevance of James's theoretical reflections in the *Principles* for current discussions in the philosophy of psychology, but also the importance of bringing the history of psychology and the philosophy of psychology into dialogue.

Before I can foster this dialogue, however, some conceptual clarification is necessary. In recent debates, different things are meant under the name 'folk psychology.' Sometimes, what is at stake is the ability of lay people to attribute mental states to other people. In other moments, the explanation and prediction of human behavior in daily life is the main target. Another way to frame the debates is to focus on the notions used in such common sense psychological exercises. In any case, in order to avoid conceptual confusion, it is crucial to distinguish between two levels of analysis: the empirical and the philosophical. In the first case, folk psychology (in its different aspects) is taken as a psychological phenomenon to be explained by science. For example, one can ask for the cultural origins and the posterior development of our common sense notions, or else for the cognitive mechanisms underlying our ordinary psychological abilities. In the second case, there is a theoretical reflection on the adequacy of folk psychological terms and principles for scientific psychology (Araujo, 2011).[2] It is only in the latter sense that I am discussing common sense or folk psychology here.

Accordingly, the paper will be divided into four sections. First, I will present James's characterization of common sense psychology as well as his ambivalent position toward it in the *Principles*. Second, I will analyze the problems he saw in ordinary psychological language. Third, I will focus on contemporary debates on the topic. Finally, I will compare James's reflections against the background of such debates.

2. Spiritualism as common sense psychology

According to my goal, the first relevant question one should ask is whether James accepted the existence of a common sense psychology, understood as a set of concepts and theoretical principles to account for mental phenomena. The answer is "yes," he did. This becomes clear in the first page of the *Principles*, where he speaks of "the orthodox 'spiritualistic' theory of scholasticism and of common sense" (James, 1890/1981, p. 15).

This is not enough, however. It is necessary to characterize it, to lay bare its main elements or basic ideas. Here, I will focus on three fundamental characteristics of spiritualism as common sense psychology, namely, the soul or mind theory, the postulate of the causal efficacy of consciousness and ideas, and the derivative conception of emotion.

By defining psychology as the science of mental life, James recognized that its phenomena include such a broad spectrum of states and processes (feelings, desires, cognitions, etc.) that they defy any order or unity. Hence the challenge of finding a unifying principle behind the empirical multiplicity of chaotic events. For him, this is the remote source of common sense psychology and its theory of the soul:

> The most natural and consequently the earliest way of unifying the material was, first, to classify it as well as might be, and, secondly, to affiliate the diverse mental modes thus found, upon a simple entity, the personal Soul, of which they are taken to be so many facultative manifestations. Now, for instance, the Soul manifests its faculty of Memory, now of Reasoning, now of Volition, or again its Imagination or its Appetite. This is the orthodox 'spiritualistic' theory of scholasticism and of common-sense. (p. 15).

The second main characteristic of popular psychology is the postulate that mental phenomena in general have causal efficacy:

> To ordinary common sense, felt pain is, as such, not only the cause of outward tears and cries, but also the cause of such inward events as sorrow, compunction, desire, or inventive thought. So the consciousness of good news is the direct producer of the feeling of joy, the awareness of premises that of the belief in conclusions. (p. 137).

A specific application of the previous postulate will lead to the third component of common sense psychology as considered by James: the traditional conception of emotional states as cause of our emotional reactions, especially with regard to its more intense levels:

> Our natural way of thinking about these coarser emotions is that the mental perception of some fact excites the mental affection called the emotion, and that this latter state of mind gives rise to the bodily expression. (…) Common-sense says, we lose our fortune, are sorry and weep; we meet a bear, are frightened and run; we are insulted by a rival, are angry and strike. (p. 1065).

After the identification of James's conception of common sense psychology, the natural step now is to discuss his attitude toward it. Did he reject or accept it? Here, one can see the complexity and intricacies of James's own struggle with common sense. He wants,

[1] Frederic Bauer's *William James on Common Sense* might be seen as a counter example, since his goal is to offer a new interpretation of James's thinking founded upon the latter's idea of common sense. However, his goals are very distant from mine. Bauer takes as guiding principle James's view on common sense as it appears in the *Pragmatism* lectures, and applies it to James's whole thinking. For Bauer, "seven years before his death, James had an insight that should have changed the direction of his thinking. It was an insight into what he described as 'the perfect magnificence' of everyday, common sense thinking" (Bauer, 2009, p. xii). In this way, Bauer does not discuss common sense psychology as it appears in the *Principles* and neither does he in relation to contemporary debates.

[2] In a different way, Fletcher (1995) proposes an important distinction between two uses of folk psychology in psychological theories. In *Use 1*, in order to describe or explain the common sense psychological attributions, the psychologist must take them seriously, independently of their being truth or false. In *Use 2*, the psychologist employs folk psychology (and its concepts) as a resource to build a general psychological theory that goes beyond its original domain. According to Fletcher, the confusion between these two uses, present in some contemporary debates, has deleterious consequences for psychology.

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