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Reply to target article: “Inventing the Subject; the Renewal of ‘Psychological’ Psychology”.

As an outsider, I am not usually so impolite as to ask psychologists why they treat their subject in the way they do. I seldom ask them why they split into the smallest possible units, never approaching the big questions that the hordes of students, who, every year, flock into study the subject expect to hear discussed – the questions that, from an outsider’s point of view, form the central meaning of the word ‘psychology’. But when I hear Professor Robinson openly shouting about this form inside the sacred enclosure, calling the resulting discipline ‘fragmented, complacent, self-congratulatory and intellectual arid’, I would like to add a rousing cheer.

Of course he is right that they are in pursuit of an imaginary neutrality. And, as he says, there could never be a neutral, ‘purely descriptive science’ of anything, let alone of ourselves. Of course he is right that attempts to impose such neutrality are primarily a systematic avoidance of psychology’s frightening central topics, which are primarily concerned with understanding our motivation.

Those problems are indeed essentially moral, spiritual, political and aesthetic. In psychologists are asked what should be done about such matters, they are liable to say that they are business of philosophers. And indeed, up to and including the time of William James, the overlap between the two disciplines was seen as both philosophical and psychological

business. But professional philosophers today are just as badly caught as psychologists are in the bizarre scholasticism which results when academics are expected to keep producing a ‘product’ – namely, a dozen articles each year. Not surprisingly, in this situation they rule that it unprofessional to consider large questions. So those questions are left to gurus, politicians and televangelists.

At a slightly more rational level, an influential mistake about parsimony seems also to be at work here. Scholars who what to be scientific have the impression that what they should aim is above all an elegantly simple system of explanation, on the model of physics. But when the thing to be explained is complex and incredibly important – for instant, human conduct – it isn’t much use offering tidy stories which do not touch on its awkward details. Fromm the days of behaviourist ratomorphism to the tales about mental modules and Stone Age society now being vended by Evolutionary Psychologists, much time has surely been spent on irrelevant displacement activities of this kind. Refusing to approach the central problems is not economy, it is miserliness. I can only wish Professor Robinson luck. I hope that his call for a truly psychological psychology may be the first swallow of a long overdue summer!