

Murray, D.J. (2005). HUMPHREY, George (1889-1966). In J.R. Shook (General Editor). *The Dictionary of Modern American Philosophers*. (Vol 2, pp. 1193-1194). Bristol, UK: Thoemmes Continuum.

George Humphrey was born on 17 July 1889 in Boughton, Kent, England. He studied classics at the University of Oxford, and psychology at the University of Leipzig with Wilhelm Wundt. After teaching classics at St. Francis Xavier University in Canada from 1916 to 1918, he pursued a PhD in psychology at Harvard, and received it in 1920. He then served as assistant professor of psychology at Wesleyan University in Connecticut from 1920 to 1924, during which time he wrote a popular account of contemporary findings in experimental psychology entitled *The Story of Man's Mind* (1923). This book included reference to findings of the three major schools of psychology at that time: behaviorism, Gestalt psychology, and psychoanalysis.

In 1924 Humphrey became the Charlton Professor of Philosophy at Queen's University in Kingston, Ontario, Canada, with a mandate to introduce experimental psychology into the curriculum. In 1939, he helped found the Canadian Psychological Association and hired Donald O. HEBB as Queen's first lecturer in experimental psychology. During this period he also wrote two science fiction novels - entitled *Men are Like Animals* (1937) and *Go Home, Unicorn* (1935) - under the pseudonym "Donald Macpherson." During his years at Queen's, Humphrey established the academic foundation for the separation of psychology from the philosophy department, which took place in 1950 after his departure for the University of Oxford. In 1947 he became Oxford's first professor of psychology, and in 1948 he became the first Director of Oxford's Institute of Experimental Psychology. In 1956 he retired to Cambridge, England, where he died on 24 April 1966.

The pattern of Humphrey's lifetime research reflected his concern with integrating the separate approaches of the various schools. In writing *The Story of Man's Mind*, he had found that he could not deliver a popular account of problem solving by adults, or even of the normal flow of adult mental associations, without recourse to the notion that all thought was guided by motives of some kind. In a second popular book, *Directed Thinking* (1948), he suggested that psychoanalysis might provide a rationale whereby even conflicting thought processes could be shown to have an underlying logical structure if the motives underlying them possessed common elements. Humphrey's *Thinking* (1951) is the most detailed account in English of the research on human mental problem solving that had been carried out in Germany by the Würzburg School, by Otto Selz, and by the Gestalt psychologists. Their experiments all demonstrated the importance of motivation ("set") in determining the sequence of thoughts.

Humphrey had also found, in writing *The Story of Man's Mind*, that any attempted description of a mental experience had to take into account the spatiotemporal and emotional background ("context") of the experience. He extended this observation to include classical conditioning. Having demonstrated experimentally that land snails can learn not to respond defensively to a sudden stimulus that is frequently repeated, he argued that a dog in a Pavlovian experiment, in which the dog had to learn to salivate at the sound of a metronome, first had to learn not to respond defensively to the metronome. He also showed that, if a person had learned to respond defensively to a particular tone because that tone had been regularly associated with an unpleasant stimulus, that same tone failed to evoke a defensive response if it formed one of a sequence of arpeggiated tones. The need to integrate discussions of background contexts into learning theory was emphasized in his book *The Nature of Learning* (1933). This book also helped pioneer the homeostatic approach, according to which organisms are viewed as "systems" that maintain not only physiological, but also psychological, equilibrium by correcting anomalous aberrations from a normal state.

In *The Story of Man's Mind*, Humphrey illustrated the role of experience in determining adult conduct by citing a case-history concerning a child who had been abandoned in France in the 1790s and who had been discovered, at about the age of ten, unable to walk, talk, or behave like

non-abandoned ten-year-olds. This story, first told by J. -M. G. Itard, was translated by Humphrey and his first wife, Muriel Miller Humphrey, in *The Wild Boy of Aveyron* (1932).

#### BIBLIOGRAPHY

*The Story of Man's Mind* (Boston, 1923).

*The Nature of Learning in Its Relation to the Living System* (London, 1933).

*Directed Thinking* (New York, 1948).

*Thinking: An Introduction to Its Experimental Psychology* (London, 1951).

#### *Other Relevant Works*

Trans. with Muriel M. Humphrey, *The Wild Boy of Aveyron*, by J.-M. G. Itard (New York, 1932).

*GO Home, Unicorn* (London, 1935).

*Men are Like Animals* (London, 1937).

#### *Further Reading*

*Bio Dict Psych by Zusne*

Blackburn, Julian. "George Humphrey," *Canadian Journal of Psychology* 11 (1957): 141-50.