

# **Philosophical and Theoretical Roots of Therapeutic Psychology**

Theoretical Foundations of Psychology (M0542)

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Many theories about mind and body have been under debate since Aristotle and Plato. Philosophers such as Wundt and William James started to do new researches, so structuralism and functionalism developed and they gave birth to a new science called psychology. Many different approaches have developed within psychology. Behaviourism is an early psychological approach, which has been following ideas from functionalism and Darwinism. Cognitive Behaviour therapy is one of the contemporary applications of behaviourism. The psycho-dynamic approach was developed by Sigmund Freud and it has been currently applied in psychotherapy. Philosophy has transformed to a new science and new therapies have been developed, although they still contain old philosophical ideas; the roots of therapeutic psychology can be traced back to Aristotle and Socrates.

The mind and its relation to the body have been questioned by many philosophers. Aristotle (384–322 B.C.E.) believed there is no substantial difference between mind and matter. This perspective is called monism. He considered the difference between mind and body as the difference between form and matter. Plato (427–347 B.C.E.) believed, both mental and physical substances are possible. This perspective is called dualism. Plato believed that the mind and the body exist in two separate worlds. In contrast to monists, dualists believe both mental and physical realms exist, but there is a different view how they interact. Classical dualism originates from the French philosopher René Descartes (1596–1650). Descartes was a revolutionary philosopher for his time and his ideas had a massive impact on science, including psychology. He thought that the mind is controlling the body and not vice versa (Friedenberg and Silverman, 2006, pp. 31-34). Descartes was one of the first who supported reductionism (Gross, 2010, p.37).

The nature-nurture debate also has a long philosophical history. In the seventeenth century, three philosophers, Thomas Hobbes, René Descartes and John Locke, had interconnected ideas

about biological determinism – how far human nature is determined by its animal nature – and about the nature-nurture question. Hobbes was a reductionist who believed, human beings are products of biological nature. Features of this nature are fear, wish for achievement and glory. He argued that society needs to be constructed in such a way to be protected from ‘human nature’ because it can cause war (Smith, 2013).

Descartes thought that all skills and abilities are inborn. Nativism is the philosophical theory, which states that all knowledge is inherited. The opposite philosophical extremism is empiricism. John Locke was an empiricist, who believed that the human mind is a blank slate (tabula rasa), which can be filled by learning and experience (Gross, 2010, p.809).

Empiricists argue that experience is a vital source of all concepts and knowledge. While rationalists argue that there are other important ways in which our concepts and knowledge are gained independently of experience (Markie, 2013).

Wilhelm Wundt was a German physiologist and physician. In 1879 he converted his ‘laboratory’ to a ‘private institute’ and he made a theoretical framework of experimental psychology. Wundt had a huge influence on the development of the psychology as a discipline. However, it was not his idea to make a separate science. He wished to reform philosophy both with the natural and human sciences and he considered his science to be part of the philosophy (Kim, 2008). Wundt emphasized the importance of conscious thought and classification of the structure of the mind. The aim of structuralism is to describe the structure of the mind. Introspection was used to investigate how elements of the mind relate to each other. (Cherry, 2013).

William James was an American philosopher and psychologist in the nineteenth century. He had a long-term impact on psychology. He was skilled in the latest developments in

psychological researches. He made a psychology lab, which was unlike Wundt's, directed toward demonstration rather than research. His point of view directly inspired functionalism. Functionalism was formulated as a reaction to structuralism. According to functionalists, the real task of psychology is to investigate the function or purpose of consciousness rather than its structure. The functionalist aim is to understand human behavioural processes. William James was highly influenced by Darwin's evolutionary theory. (Kolak, Hirstein and Waskan, 2006, p. 19).

William James favoured soft determinism; he assumed there is a distinction between the behaviour highly constrained by the situation and behaviour only modestly constrained by the situation. He also stated that the question of free will is insoluble on psychological grounds, because it is impossible to design an experiment to decide whether or not free will influences human behaviour (Eysenck, 2009, pp. 39-40).

Watson started to cut the ties of psychology with philosophy and to straighten those with biology. Most of the philosophers and researchers before Watson had been using introspection, but he was very critical of it. He argued that introspection reports were unreliable and difficult to verify. He thought psychology must be a purely objective natural science which controls and predicts behaviour. He opposed to describing and explaining conscious experiences and mental states. His ideas were also based on Darwinism. After Watson had discovered Pavlov's work on conditioned reflexes in dogs, he proposed that conditioned reflex could become the foundation of psychology. He was favouring Locke's extreme empiricism that the mind is a blank slate. He stated, learning is the process of classical conditioning and that behaviour is shaped by the environment (Gross, 2010, pp. 38-39).

Methodological behaviourists (like Watson) proposed to ignore inner states. Skinner was a radical behaviourist. He claimed that feelings, sensations and other private events cannot be used to explain behaviour, but they can be explained in an analysis of behaviour through reinforcement theory. The principles of reinforcement theory were invented by him, during his experimental work with rats and pigeons. He thought that almost all behaviour is under control of reinforcement. Behaviourism influenced the practice of scientific psychology in general (Gross, 2010, pp. 15-16).

One of the contemporary psychology applications of behaviourism is used for Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT). It is a talking therapy, which can help to manage problems in a positive way. It can help to handle problems by changing the way of thinking and behaviour. CBT works by breaking down problems into smaller parts and it helps to stop negative feelings and negative thought cycles. It is different from other types of talking treatments (such as psychotherapy), because it deals with current problems, rather than focusing on issues from the past. It looks for practical ways to improve the mind state of the participant on a daily basis. CBT is predominantly helpful to deal with problems such as anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), eating disorders and drug misuse. It can be used to treat long-term health conditions, for example arthritis and irritable bowel syndrome (IBS). CBT cannot treat the physical symptoms of these health conditions, but it can help to cope better with them. The number of intervention needed will depend on people's individual problems and objectives. Treatments usually last from six weeks to six months. Researches have shown that CBT is as effective as medicine in treating depression and other mental problems. Because of the structured nature of CBT it may not be suitable for individuals with complex mental health issues or learning difficulties (NHS choices, Cognitive behavioural therapy, 2013).

Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) is one of the most influential, if not the most influential figure in the history of psychology. He is considered the founder of psychoanalysis, which was later extended by many others. Psychoanalysis is about theories regarding human development and about treatments based partly on these theories. Psychoanalysis can be regarded as the first ‘talking cure’ therapy. Freud stated that the mind is divided into three parts. There is the id, which contains the sexual and aggressive instinct and it is located in the unconscious mind. There is the ego; the conscious rational mind. The superego is partly conscious and partly unconscious. It consists of the conscience and the ego ideal. There are frequent conflicts among the id, ego and superego. The ego tries to resolve the conflict, using a variety of protection mechanisms, for example: repression, denial or displacement. Freud assumed there is a preconscious level of mind as well (Eysenck, 2009, pp. 22-23).

Freud focused on how structures of the mind dynamically interrelate; his approach was operational – functionalism (Friedenberg and Silverman, 2006, p. 66). However, the idea of structure is related to structuralism and he was not the first who theorised that the mind is divided into three parts.

Aristotle divided the soul into two parts: the rational and the irrational. He divided the irrational part of the soul into ‘vegetative’ part and ‘appetitive’ part. According to Aristotle, the ‘vegetative’ has no part in reason, while the ‘appetitive’ partly has reason, as it listens to and it can obey reason (Aristotle, Ross and Brown, 2009, p.21). Consequently, it can be stated that Aristotle’s mind division is very similar to Freud’s division of the mind.

According to Glassman (1995, cited in Gross, 2010, p. 20), Freud’s ideas represent basic psychological needs, whereas Maslow’s hierarchy of needs gives a full picture of human needs with self-actualisation on the top of the hierarchy. Psychoanalytic and behaviourist

approaches are deterministic; there are either unconscious forces within (Freud) or reinforcement forces from outside (Skinner). While the humanistic view claims that people are able to choose how to act.

Contemporary psychology application of psycho-dynamic approach is used in psychotherapy, but Freud was not the first, who gave explanations and theories about this approach.

According to August G. Lageman (1989, p. 222), Socrates established some basic points to philosophy, religion and psychology. His basic ideas of 'know thyself' and 'an unexamined life is not worth living' are fundamental to psychology. Considering these ideas 'psychotherapy is a Western rhetorical invention'.

Psychotherapy is a type of therapy, which allows participants to look deeper into their problems and worries. It is helpful to treat bad habits and different mental disorders, such as depression and schizophrenia. Psychotherapy can help by discussing about feelings and problems, but sometimes other methods could be used, such as art, music, drama and movement. Psychotherapists are listening to patients' issues and they can suggest strategies for problem solving. They can help change behaviour and mental attitudes. Some therapists teach specific skills to help tolerate painful emotions, manage relationships more effectively or improve behaviour. Participants may be encouraged to develop their own solutions. It could be one-on-one therapy or a group therapy. In a group therapy, members can support each other with advice and encouragement. There are several different types of psychotherapies and they are proven to be effective. Depending on the disorder and technique used, therapy courses can last for several months or even years (NHS choices, Psychotherapy, 2013).

The mind - body debate has been going on at least since Aristotle. The mind and its relation to the body were also examined by many philosophers. Descartes thought that the skills and abilities are inborn. While John Locke thought the mind is a blank slate. Wundt developed a new science and started to do scientific experiments. His theories and structuralism affected William James, who directly inspired functionalism. He also favoured Darwinism. As a chain reaction, behaviourism has developed from functionalism. Contemporary psychology application of behaviourist explanation is used in CBT. Behaviourism has elements from earlier period, such as John Locke's 'blank slate' theory or Darwin's evolutionary theory.

Freud's psycho-dynamic theory is an alternative to behaviourism. Contemporary psychology application of psycho-dynamic approach is used in psychotherapy. Many elements of psycho-dynamic theory can be traced back to philosophers such as Aristotle or Socrates.

At the end it can be concluded, that psychology is built up from theories from the past.

Consequently, many elements of present therapies are built up from old theories, so modern therapies are not new inventions.



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