Journal of Institutional and Theoretical Economics (JITE) 146 (1990), 355–362
Zeitschrift für die gesamte Staatswissenschaft

Literature / Literatur

Social Psychology: A Review Article.*

by

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Introduction

This book remains one of the most fascinating treatises on human nature. Asch takes his subject seriously. He envisages the aim of human psychology as being to formulate a theory of man based on direct observation and study of human action and experience in relation to the social and physical milieu – to furnish a comprehensive doctrine of man that will provide a tested foundation for the social sciences. All the social sciences start, according to Asch, necessarily from a comprehensive conception of man, but they have formulated their psychological views in a relatively casual ad hoc way, or they have adopted the ideas about men that prevailed at their time. In general, their psychological views were a by-product of other concerns. In contrast, psychology takes as its aim the formation of a rigorous theory of man; it is to the social sciences what physics is to the natural sciences. Social psychology as conceived by Asch is, therefore, not a marginal inbetween discipline: it is as fundamental as physics (pp. xi, 4–5).

Such a view is unusual. Modern psychology seems to be not so much concerned with a general theory of man, it deals predominantly with very specific observations and regularities and tends to conceive its theories as hypothetical constructs which summarize particular observations and arguments conveniently but shun any deeper claim for veracity. This makes current psychology very hard to use for the economist: it tends to appear a bag of – sometimes unrelated, sometimes contradictory, but always very specific – observations and paradigms which can hardly be generalized in such a way as to make them relevant for the understanding of economic institutions and processes in general. The economist is in need of definite statements about general aspects of

* ASCH, SOLOMON: *Social Psychology*. (Paperback reprint of the 1952 edition). Oxford, New York, Tokyo 1987. Oxford University Press. 646 pp.

human activity which can be used to understand the fabric of society – how firms are formed, how labor markets emerge, how product markets function, and so forth. He is therefore thrown back on his homo economicus assumption, which embodies what seems to be the only comprehensive theory of man available that can be used in this way. Asch's treatise may help the economist to assess the relevance and the limitations of such a pragmatic approach in a profound manner and to develop some ideas which go beyond this simplistic conception.

1. Background

The author was a close associate of the gestalt psychologists Max Wertheimer and Wolfgang Köhler at the New School of Social Research in the 'thirties and 'forties and shared their opposition to behaviorism and Freudianism. These two rather incompatible approaches to psychology jointly dominated American psychology at the time. They were both pushing towards a comprehensive model of man. Both worked, in different ways, from the premise of pervasive human irrationality. For the economist, this appeal to irrationality has hitherto remained the trade-mark of psychology. The position which Asch always maintained – that people are capable, under certain conditions, of acting reasonably – seems more akin to economics than to psychology and has remained alien to large part of psychological thinking. Although Asch became famous for some classical experiments in group processes, his theoretical views thus remained a strictly minority position. Even the recent decline of behaviorism and psychoanalysis along with the emergence of cognitive orientations may not have changed this fundamentally. As Asch reminds us in the new introduction, these recent developments might well push towards a 'cognitive behaviorism', bypassing again the phenomena of insight, understanding, and reasonable and purposeful behavior. The new printing of this old book witnesses, however, a new interest in a treatise on human nature which retains its extraordinary force.[1]

2. Doctrines of Man in Society

Asch starts with a review of "Doctrines of Man". First he deals with the impact of Charles Darwin's thought on psychology. Darwin himself realized clearly that the evolutionary process cannot be restricted to anatomical and physiolog-

[1] The British psychologist JOHN TURNER [1987], writes in the context of group theory for instance: "Asch is a difficult writer to do justice to, his thinking is powerful, subtle and rich and remains a fundamental contribution to the problem of the psychological group, perhaps unsurpassed since" (p. 16).

ical facts, but must extend to psychological and social phenomena. The psychological and social characteristics of men are conceived as the product of natural selection and form a continuum with those of the rest of the animal world. (Modern sociobiology has taken up these arguments again). The insight into the psychological continuity of the organic world did not blind Darwin, however, to the unusual characteristics of the human species which make them appear unique: "Darwin's solution of the difficulty was in effect to argue that the lower organisms too have in rudimentary form the characteristics to be found in men. He attempted, so to speak, to bridge the gap by the argument that capacities and tendencies of mammalian organisms resembled those of men more closely than had been suspected." The gestalt psychologists pursued this line of argument further. Subsequent psychology, behaviorism in particular, but also doctrines which postulated very specific and rigid "drives", simply reversed this emphasis in trying to demonstrate that men are not as different psychologically from lower organisms as has been generally supposed (p. 11).

Next the author discusses the sociological approach to man which starts from the observation that there are great differences among societies which cannot be understood in terms of differences of biological structure. Anthropologists and sociologists conclude from these observations that human character is socially determined. To understand men, it is held, we must understand society. This argument may lead either to social determinism or to the attempt to understand social facts squarely in terms of the psychology of individuals, or, in other words, either to holism or to reductionism.

Here we come to one of the central concerns of this book. Asch proposes that both approaches are misleading. What is needed is neither a holistic sociology nor an individualistic psychology, but rather a *social* psychology: "In this work I shall try to defend the position that the facts of social behavior – such as those of group unity, leadership, and social organization – are as much facts about individuals as the perception of pitch and color" (p. 35). "Only because individuals are capable of encompassing group relations and possibilities can they create a society that eventually faces them as an independent, or even holistic, set of conditions.... Group conditions can act on individuals only because individuals have very definite properties. The individual possibilities of conversation must precede the actuality of conversation; the individual possibilities of a self must precede the actuality of a self that is socially related" (p. 257).

This position differs from the individualistic thesis which starts from the observation that individuals are the only real actors and proceeds to argue that notions like 'group', 'industrialism', 'capitalism', are merely short-hand expressions for innumerable specific activities of individuals that would indeed be fictitious abstractions if referring to anything more than to the sum of the reactions of individuals to one another. (We might add that this applies to economic institutions like markets, firms, or money as well.) The position differs also from the view of social determinism which conceives human beings simply as the instruments through which cultural, economic, and other forces

work. Social facts have, according to that view, their own laws and shape individuals, rather than being shaped by them.

Asch's position is that these two contradictory views start from correct observations but draw unwarranted conclusions. We must constantly face the fact that the individuals are the sole units, but not less important is the fact that each individual is in the midst of an ordered system of social forces that constitute his social environment and which he has not single-handedly produced. "For an adequate formulation of the individual-group relation, we need a way of describing group action that neither reduces the individual to a mere target of group forces of mystical origin, nor obliterates the organized character of group forces in the welter of individual activities.... We need a way of understanding group processes that retains the prime reality of individual *and* group, the two permanent poles of all social processes" (p. 250). Asch's solution is, to put it briefly, that individuals share very definite features: they have an ability to perceive their surroundings, to remember, to think, to feel, to form categories, to communicate, and so forth. They have also the possibility of forming notions of groupings, including human groupings, and to act upon these notions. Since they perceive themselves as group members, and act upon this perception, just as they group other objects and perceptions and base their action thereon, social categories become important determinants of individual behavior. It is as if individual particles are elastically coupled through certain similarites and give rise to patterns and resonant vibrations of the whole body. Such an idea can, perhaps, be more easily grasped today, when notions of synergetics and fluid dynamics have been popularized, than in the 'fifties. Asch thus conceives social categories as being neither less elementary nor more elementary than other categories and sees them as manifestations of the same universal principles of psychological grouping and category formation. This does not require a separate group mind or a special social sense, not even in the minimized form of Smithian "sympathy".

Asch's view is of special interest, it seems to me, to the institutional economist and the economic historian. Both are concerned with understanding the formation of institutions and usually start from an individualistic perspective. We thus find statements like "the firm is just a cluster of individualistic contracts" but we shun – I think rightly – more radical statements like: "A contract is just a cluster of words, and these are, in turn, parcels of sound-waves or patterns of ink." It seems obvious that these features are irrelevant. We start from the fact that the contracting parties share the notions employed in the contract and know what the idea of contracting entails.

If we stick to the view that economic institutions are nothing more than the sum of individual endeavors, as we usually do, we run into big problems. This is well known, and much of current research centers around these problems. If for instance we conceive all social arrangements as outcomes of implicit or explicit contracting among individuals, we run into problems when we want to explain serious inefficiencies, since it would always be in the interest of the

individuals to contract these inefficiencies away. If this were impossible or too costly, we would have no inefficiencies to begin with. It is certainly fun, in a way, to conceive various strange laws and customs like widow-burning and ayatollah-worshipping as brought about by a set of individualistically optimal contracts, and it is a challenging task to try to conceive rigid institutions which apparently enslave individuals, like the caste system, in this way. Whether such stories fit what happens in reality is, however, another question. There is, for instance, considerable evidence that simply assigning persons, even on a random basis, to certain groups changes their perceptions and behavior in a significant way (e.g. TURNER [1987]). Those belonging to one "group" will, for example, more likely co-operate with one another, and this is not at all irrational in a pragmatic sense, although it may be irrational in the strict game-theoretic sense. Such strange things as the Alchian conjecture, according to which a set of small firms behaves just like the one big firm which could be formed by putting all the small firms together, appear doubtful in consequence (ALCHIAN [1984], p. 47). Although statements of this sort seem to be dictated by the traditional approach, it may well be that the mere fact of classifying two units as one firm rather than two firms has major implications. If these were important phenomena, we would perhaps gain some understanding of why these classifications matter so much de facto, and also de jure, whereas they seem highly insignificant from a traditional perspective. An advantage of Asch's approach seems to be that he does not require a split personality to deal with phenomena of this kind: they are just the outcome of the fact that persons perceive themselves as group members and act accordingly, just as they perceive themselves tired and go to bed. They share, in a given culture, the notion of a firm just as they share the notion of contract or property.

3. Cultural Relativism

Such a view may appear very relativistic in the sense that everything is tied now to the specifics of the culture we deal with. One of the main topics of the book is, however, to argue strongly *against* cultural relativism (Chap. 13). This is, of course, of particular interest to the economic historian who must rely on regularities spanning space and time. He has no use for a position which maintains that each culture is radically different from each other and can be understood only "from within", as some anthropologists maintain. This would also apply to economists. It would keep afloat the indissoluble fact of "culture" which would be inexplicable in general terms. The institutional economist may also be interested in a way of thinking which makes it possible, in principle, to account for the impact of cultural forces on economic institutions while avoiding the position that cultural phenomena arise from a coincidental concurrence of preferences, verging on a statement like "institutions are what they are because people like them so". It seems strange, even in the days of the ayatol-

lahs, to interpret economic institutions as the outgrowth of general craziness, and Asch sees them as outgrowths of permanent and universal human tendencies working under different conditions.

This position also has important anti-relativistic moral implications. The moral dimension of human experience and action is actually a pervasive theme of the work. It is argued that cognitions, moral judgements, and emotions go together in a systematic way. We may indeed observe that seemingly identical situations are evaluated quite differently in different cultures, but if we look more closely we see that the interpretation of these situations differs. We may even understand how the different evaluations are implied by the different meanings attached to seemingly identical situations. Not only cognitions but also emotions and moral judgements are seen as brought about by universal human tendencies working under different cultural conditions. This view differs, of course, from the view entertained in welfare economics and social choice theory where evaluations are taken as being arbitrary ("unrestricted domain") and where the theorist inserts on top of that his "rational" preference for symmetry, anonymity, positive responsiveness, and the like. A position of ethical relativism seems to me, however, theoretically and ethically not very attractive: why should we care about issues when we declare beforehand that anything goes and how could we conceive of a minimal set of human rights which are to be defended absolutely in the modern world?

4. Utility Maximization

The economist will be particularly interested in what Asch has to say about the more specific issues of utility maximization and selfishness, and there is indeed much that can be learned from the book, mainly under the rubrics "pleasure-pain principle" and "ego-centeredness". Here we read: "One can say of any interest of a person that to follow it gives him more pleasure than to abandon it. The solution is, however, sterile; one is justly suspicious in science of propositions that cannot be wrong. The difficulty with the pleasure-pain principle is not that it is wrong, but that it is undiscriminating... There is an incurable superficiality in the assertion that one eats for pleasure and goes on a hunger strike for pleasure." The pleasure-pain formula "is not so much a theory of motivation but... an attempt to sidestep the need for one" (p. 318). More concretely, the pleasure-pain principle mixes up causes and consequences of actions. Pleasure and pain are seen as the causes or motives of action but often they are the consequences of appropriate actions upon objects of interest. "It is one thing to say that a mother derives pleasure from caring for her child and quite another to say that she cares for the child *in order to* find pleasure" (p. 317). Asch concludes that "the need for achievement cannot be watered down to a need for pleasure or solely the results of success and that the impulse to work and construct cannot be confined to the dimensions of the pleasure-

pain principle. The need is both for the activity itself and the results flowing from it. We may say that action is directed to specific objects, whereas pleasure and pain are often functionally related to action as a by-product" (p. 317–19).[2] Further, the pleasure-pain principle does not state *what* actions and interests are capable of producing enjoyment and what the aims of the individuals are. Economists traditionally take this as tiven. This makes much sense if preferences are independent of economic processes, but if preferences are dependent upon those economic processes which they influence (e.g. questions of labor force motivation), we cannot avoid endogenizing the aims people pursue to some extent, and here Asch's careful discussion may be helpful. It will not provide recipes for a theory of motivation, but it will clear the ground and will offer a general perspective in an area where the utility maximization hypothesis has inherent limitations.[3]

The utility maximization hypothesis shares with other psychological theories such as Freudianism and behaviorism the assumption that the individual is essentially ego-centered. It is implicitly assumed that "the individual is essentially an ego, the center of his world, determined first and foremost by self-interest" (p. 20). Although this is, according to Asch, not a rare psychological orientation, it is not the only one. There are instances of more objective interest, brought about by the situation rather than the needs of the individual. This has certainly been reconfirmed by recent studies of intrinsic vs. extrinsic motivation.[4] These excellent studies appear, however, somewhat schematic in the light of Asch's treatment which points to a subtle balance between task-orientation and ego-orientation rather than assuming that people flip-flop between these motivational states.[5] The economist may be interested to learn that there are other forms of motivation which are not covered by, and are sometimes at variance with, his usual approach which assumes ego-centeredness. (It is after all *my* utility function which I am assumed to maximize.) This may be of interest to the labor economist interested in work motivation, or to the welfare economist, but seems to me of particular importance with regard to the fundamental problem of explaining co-operation.

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[2] JON ELSTER ([1983], Chap. 2) has again recently stressed this point that certain states are "essentially by-products".

[3] By definition, utility maximization implies a given utility function. It has been suggested by various writers that aims may be endogenized in a utility-maximizing framework by assuming that people maximize a meta-utility function by choosing one of several actual utility functions. Certainly such an approach may shed light on some issues, but such a regressive argument shifts the problem to the meta-level without solving it. The other approach, due to BECKER and STIGLER [1977], assumes identical "basic" preferences for all men and attributes differences in actual preferences to different "household technologies". Here we need ideas about how those household technologies are formed which comes down, again, to the problem of psychological motivation.

[4] See e.g. AMABILE [1983] which contains many references on this issue.

[5] See in particular chapter 10.

The explanation of co-operation has attracted much research in game theory. Attempts have been made to explain co-operation from selfishness alone, but it is not clear today whether they will ultimately succeed. It is, again, certainly fun to conceive the most altruistic and self-negating activity as arising from pure selfishness, but this seems, through its individualistic approach, to exclude the reality of groups, firms, and the like. All these notions can only be understood on such a view as shorthand expressions for innumerable individual relations and activities. This rules out a behavioral impact from mere classifications, but these effects seem very real (TURNER [1987]). At the same time, they should not be classified as irrational if we recognize that "the ego needs to have interests wider than itself, not to be always looking at itself, not to be always watching its feelings and looking out for its interests" (p. 320).

5. Concluding Comments

The arguments which I have mentioned here illustrate Asch's vision. Many other things, most notably about group processes, may also be found in the book. The most important aspect of the book is that it suggests a comprehensive view of man, conspicuously absent in current writings. This may enable the economist to integrate whatever he reads in psychology and experimental economics in a more general picture. These observations, arguments, and experiments about human behavior will appear less *ad hoc* after having read Asch and this is a benefit which should not be underestimated.

The book is written in a clear and lucid style which avoids a specialized psychological terminology and relies much on common-sense arguments and empirical and experimental evidence. This phenomenological orientation will make it accessible to the general reader. Even the economist may enjoy it. The only danger (well-known from reading Marshall) is that rather deep observations and arguments appear as a matter of course and go unsavored, especially if read in a hurry.

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