

# Becoming Becoming Becoming Becoming

Basic Considerations  
for a Psychology  
of Personality

Gordon W. Allport

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*Contemporary Psychology*

# BECOMING

*Basic Considerations*

*for a Psychology of Personality*

BY GORDON W. ALLPORT

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## **BECOMING**

*Basic Considerations*

*for a Psychology of Personality*

***To Pitirim A. Sorokin***

## *Preface*

THE TERRY LECTURER is given the assignment of as simulating and interpreting his discipline as it relates to human welfare and to religion broadly conceived. In the case of psychology the assignment is peculiarly difficult, for the reason that there is no single discipline of psychology. Unlike mathematics, physics, or biology, it is not a unified science, but rather a collection of facts and opinions whose relevance to human welfare and religion depends upon the particular opinions and facts one selects for consideration. Yet despite its diffuseness the psychological mode of thinking is distinctive and is at the present time astonishingly popular.

Each new simplification in psychology tends to be hailed as a triumph of analysis. In recent times either the whole of our mental life or large portions thereof have been "accounted for" by the operation of the reflex arc, by conditioning, by reinforcement; or have been viewed as an associational fusion of sensations, images and affections; or as a dynamic interplay of id, ego, superego; or in terms of some other appealing but skeleton formula. While it is surely the task of science to bring order among facts without needless proliferation of concepts, yet oversimplification brings discredit upon science, and in psychology may succeed only in caricaturing human nature.

Personality is far too complex a thing to be trussed up in a conceptual straight jacket. Starting with this conviction the present essay argues for conceptual open-mindedness and for a reasoned eclecticism. It also attempts to lay certain groundwork that is needed before an adequate psychology of personality can develop.

## BECOMING

I am grateful to the Terry Lecture Foundation for an opportunity to present this material at Yale University in the month of March, 1954. For special courtesies in connection with the series, I should like to thank Professor Leonard Doob, Dean Edmund Sinnott, Mr. Eugene Davidson, and Mr. Reuben Holden. Valuable criticism came from my wife, Ada L. Allport, and from my friend Peter A. Bertocci, Bowne Professor of Philosophy at Boston University. At various points these lectures touch on thorny philosophical issues. Though he could not in good conscience approve my handling of all these issues, Professor Bertocci has given me extraordinarily constructive help. For many forms of assistance in preparing these lectures, I am also deeply indebted to Mrs. Eleanor D. Sprague.

Through many years my friend and colleague Pitirim A. Sorokin has battled valiantly to enlarge the perspective of modern social science. In dedicating these pages to him I hope to express some of the admiration I feel for his scholarship and moral courage.

Gordon W. Allport

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**N**O ONE who attempts to depict the spirit of the age in which we live can possibly overlook the importance of psychological science in the culture of today. It is gradually assuming a commanding influence upon the thought forms of Western man.

Whether we approve the trend or not we see the evidence on all sides. The common man now talks in the language of Freud and reads an ever mounting output of books and periodicals in popular psychology. If he can afford to do so he may have his private psychiatrist; if not, he may be a client of some mental hygiene clinic, of some guidance center, or of a social agency where a psychiatric point of view prevails. In the modern guises of "human relations" or "group dynamics" psychology is penetrating into industry, community organization, and making its appearance even in the field of international relations. Educational practices show its effect, with teachers and administrators conversing in the idiom of Dewey, Thorndike, Rogers, or psychoanalysis. Mass media, and even the arts of biography, fiction, drama and literary criticism borrow themes and techniques from psychology. Adjacent disciplines—especially anthropology, sociology, and political science—often seek their causal laws in the underlying "basic" science of human nature. Even philosophy, the parent of all disciplines, and theology, the "queen science," are to some extent rewriting their principles to accord with the psychological pattern of the time.

In our schools and colleges the demand for training in psychology has reached unprecedented proportions. In the year 1951-52 a total of 2,328 earned doctoral degrees were conferred in the humanities and social sciences in America. Of the 16 fields concerned, psychology was by

far the most popular with 450 doctoral degrees, or over 23 per cent of the total number. History, the second most popular field, fell considerably behind with 317 degrees, or 17 per cent of the total. Then came English with 12 per cent, and economics with 10 per cent. Philosophy had a mere 4 per cent of the total.<sup>1</sup> Thus among disciplines dealing with the nature of man psychology, for good or ill, is the fashion.

### *§ 1. The Case for and against Psychology*

MANY critics look askance at the trend. To some of them psychology seems like an illiterate upstart, given to repeating what literature and philosophy have always said, only saying it less artfully and less profoundly. Lord Dunsany once remarked that psychologists, like road-menders, go down only two inches; whereas poets, like miners, go down a mile. Humanists, even while they show its influence, often deplore what they call the arrogance, the superficiality, and the imperialistic character of modern "behavioral science." Specifically they decry the mechanistic assumptions and brittle experimental methods that are the basis of much modern psychology. After examining the present-day science of man one critic, Joseph Wood Krutch, complains that "we have been deluded by the fact that the methods employed for the study of man have been for the most part those originally devised

1. Federal Security Agency, Office of Education, Circular No. 360, "Earned Degrees Conferred by Higher Educational Institutions, 1951-52."

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for the study of machines or the study of rats, and are capable, therefore, of detecting and measuring only those characteristics which the three do have in common." <sup>2</sup> Krutch argues for the insights of Hamlet and against the insights of Pavlov.

Neighboring social sciences likewise show alarm. In particular, historians frequently seem to feel threatened by an upstart rival that claims greater precision in interpreting lives and events. At the same time not a few historians employ the rubrics and methods of psychology. Sociologists and anthropologists, unless they capitulate altogether, as some do, frequently take up cudgels against the reduction of their science to psychologism. Some years ago the American Political Science Association appointed a special committee to assess the value of psychology for the science of politics. Its verdict, though not entirely unfriendly, was guarded. Political science, it concluded, should view the contributions of the new psychology *con amore ma non troppo*.<sup>3</sup>

To these and other critics psychological partisans have a ready reply. It is the scientific temper, they argue, that has brought mankind by successive stages from the Stone Age of husbandry to the modern age of electronics and nuclear fission. Why should not the same temper of mind, applied to man's own nature, lead us out of the Stone Age of human relationships in which we are still enmeshed? The more enthusiastic partisans may add: We already know enough about human nature to improve it vastly

2. J. W. Krutch, *The Measure of Man* (New York, Bobbs-Merrill, 1954), p. 32.

3. C. E. Merriam, "The Significance of Psychology for the Study of Politics," *American Political Science Review*, 18 (1924), 469.

in a single generation, and enough to reduce tensions among individuals, within groups, and between nations, if only our knowledge were applied by those who are in a position to use it.

It is true, as most partisans willingly admit, that psychology is not a normative discipline. Up to now only literature, art, philosophy, and religion have given us glimpses of what a mature human society should be. Yet, they argue, these models must be lacking in some particulars, else mankind would not have become so badly mired in anxiety and frustration. Perhaps the models and creeds stand in need of modern restatement or at least of dynamic implementation before they can be made effective in an age of atomic energy and totalitarian peril. Psychology is our chief hope for clarifying man's aims and for discovering the means for achieving them.

The debate could be prolonged, extending freely the case for, and the case against, the psychological revolution that is—whether we approve it or not—now taking place. But it would serve no good purpose so long as the issue is thus coarsely drawn. It is misleading to condemn psychology as a whole, or to exalt it; for psychology is not a unitary thing. Unlike mathematics, physics, or biology, it is not a cumulative science but rather an assortment of facts, presuppositions, and theories, whose relevance to human welfare depends upon the particular theories, presuppositions, and facts we select for inspection. The critic, unless he wishes to be merely cantankerous, should tell us what *sort* of psychology he is condemning; and the partisan, what sort he is approving.

Except for a common loyalty to their profession, psychologists often seem to agree on little else. Perhaps in a

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broad sense, all may be said to be committed to the use of the scientific method—though there is dispute as to the legitimate outer boundaries of this method. Regarding the proper subject matter for study there is less agreement. Some definitions of psychology put the stress on *experience*, some on *behavior*, others on *psychophysical relations*, some on *conscious mental processes*, some on the *unconscious*, others on *human nature*, a few on “*the totality of man’s psychic existence*.”

Since in this essay our interest centers in the growth and development of personality, we shall consider chiefly those psychological doctrines that advance our understanding of the human person, though we shall also have occasion to criticize doctrines that retard understanding. Not every brand—indeed no single brand—of modern psychology is wholly adequate to the problem of man’s individuality and growth. Yet it is to psychology, and to psychology alone, that the assignment falls—the assignment of accounting for the organization and growth of the individual person with all his outreachings, downward, upward, inward, outward. If present-day psychology is not fully equal to the task then we should improve the science until it is.

Other sciences have different concerns. For example, sociology by contrast views the person as a part of his family, his group, his nation; the anthropologist views him as part of a culture. The theologian focuses attention on his spiritual aspects and relates them to a presumed divine scheme. In a similar way political science, economics, and other so-called “behavior sciences” ablate an aspect of personal conduct from the integral nexus of personality, and relate this aspect to some outer frame of

reference. They provide us with a picture of the political man in relation to a political system, or of the economic man in relation to the economic system, but not of the whole man in relation to his own individual system. The biologist, physiologist and biochemist retreat still further, deliberately avoiding the phenomena both of total organization and of consciousness, and thus reduce the person to something less than a complete system for study. To the psychologist alone falls the problem of the complete psychophysical organization. In principle he cannot be satisfied with segments of persons related to outer coordinates. He must consider the system as a whole, and show how part systems are related to one another.

But his ways of viewing the system as a whole are distressingly diverse. Is it governed from without, or governed from within? Is it merely reactive or is it active, mechanically determined or in some degree spontaneous? (It is on this issue, above all others, that we find psychologists dividing.) Some current theories of personality are Aristotelian in their acceptance of entelechy; some—a growing number at the moment—seek an answer, as did Descartes, in the phenomenology of cognition. Many (the Freudians among them) are disciples of Schopenhauer in accepting the primacy of a blindly acting will. Others, the neo-Thomists, see the human person as both a striving and rational being approaching toward, or departing from, an ideal of perfection according to his exercise of freedom.<sup>4</sup> Psychologists gravitate toward one or another

4. Cf. Magda B. Arnold and J. A. Gasson, S.J., *The Human Person: An Approach to an Integral Theory of Personality*, New York, Ronald Press, 1954.

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philosophical assumption regarding the nature of man, often without being fully aware that they do so.

We cannot here attempt to depict all of the current psychological schools of thought with their diverse philosophical assumptions. It will be helpful for our purposes, however, to have in mind two broadly contrasting approaches to the problem of man's becoming. Virtually all modern psychological theories seem oriented toward one of two polar conceptions, which, at the risk of some historical oversimplification, I shall call the Lockean and the Leibnitzian traditions respectively. It is not the total philosophy of Locke or of Leibnitz that is here in question. Rather it is their views on one aspect of man's mind—its essentially passive nature (Locke) or its active nature (Leibnitz)—that I wish to contrast. The same polarity, as I say, is found in current theories of growth and change in human personality.

### § 2. *The Lockean Tradition*

JOHN LOCKE, we all recall, assumed the mind of the individual to be a *tabula rasa* at birth. And the intellect itself was a passive thing acquiring content and structure only through the impact of sensation and the crisscross of associations, much as a pan of sweet dough acquires tracings through the impress of a cookie cutter. Locke insisted that there can be nothing in the intellect that was not first in the senses (*nihil est in intellectu quod non fuerit in sensu*).

To this formula Leibnitz added a challenging supplement: nothing—save only the intellect itself (*excipe: nisi ipse intellectus*). To Leibnitz the intellect was perpetually active in its own right, addicted to rational problem solving, and bent on manipulating sensory data according to its own inherent nature. For Locke the organism was reactive when stimulated; for Leibnitz it was self-propelled. Perhaps it is because Locke was an Englishman that his way of thinking, elaborated by Hume and a host of like-minded successors, became so firmly established in the psychology of Britain and America; whereas Leibnitz' view, developed by Kant, has, generally speaking, prevailed in German psychology and elsewhere on the Continent.

We cannot, of course, expect the entire history of psychology to be neatly ordered to this simple, basic dichotomy. Any given system of thought may well show traces of both historical models, and to a degree both are correct and useful. Yet it will be instructive to pass in brief review the viewpoints in contemporary psychology that are heavily Lockean in their emphasis, and those that are Leibnitzian.

The Lockean point of view, as I have said, has been and is still dominant in Anglo-American psychology. Its representatives are found in associationism of all types, including environmentalism, behaviorism, stimulus-response (familarly abbreviated as S-R) psychology, and all other stimulus-oriented psychologies, in animal and genetic psychology, in positivism and operationism, in mathematical models—in short, in most of what today is cherished in our laboratories as truly "scientific" psychology. These movements, diverse though they may ap-



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pear at first sight, have in common with Lockean empiricism certain fundamental presuppositions.

First of all they hold that what is external and visible is more fundamental than what is not. Since mind is by nature a *tabula rasa*, it is not the organism itself but what happens to the organism from the outside that is important. Even motives, which would seem to be as central and spontaneous as anything within the personality, are regarded as "drives," a mere matter of change in the condition of peripheral tissues, due usually to the excess or deficit stimulation in the body cavities. To account for motives more complex than drives we are told that *drive*-instigated behavior may when conditioned give way to *cue*-instigated behavior. The "cause" remains external to the organism.

Although the principle of conditioning was discovered by Pavlov in Russia, the alacrity with which it was seized upon and developed by American psychologists shows its close kinship with the prevailing Lockean tradition. Learning is regarded as the substitution of one effective stimulus for another or of one response for another. In either event what happens between the stimulus and the response (in what Leibnitz would call the intellect) is regarded as of little or no importance. Even the grudging admission in recent years that so-called "intervening variables" may be needed to render a more adequate account of behavior represents, for the most part, a minimal departure from the S-R model. And we note that the doctrine of conditioning offers a physiological description in place of "organization of ideas." This externalization further helps to account for its popularity.

A further presupposition of Lockean empiricism is that