

philosophie .ch
SWISS PORTAL FOR PHILOSOPHY

Swiss Philosophical Preprint Series

74

Kevin Mulligan

Psychologism And Its History Revalued

Added 28/02/2009

ISSN 1662-937X

© Kevin Mulligan

Preprint of 1995 "Psychologism and its History Revalued" (Review of Martin Kusch, *Psychologism: A Case Study in the Sociology of Knowledge*, 1995), *Metascience*, 8, 17-26, with reply by Kusch.

Kevin Mulligan (Geneva)

A hundred years ago Frege had published most of his arguments against psychologism and Husserl was busy writing his *Logical Investigations*, which was to appear at the turn of the century and open with a long onslaught on psychologism. The arguments of these two logicians against the psychologistic view - of Mill, Erdmann and many others - that the discipline of logic, its sentences, or its "laws", deal with psychological phenomena met with widespread approval from those best qualified to judge (for example Lukasiewicz). They set the agenda for most twentieth century work in exact, "scientific", or analytic philosophy. As the century draws to its close, many of the arguments of Frege and Husserl have been found wanting by analytic philosophers and cognitive scientists who are prepared to argue that the laws of logic are just laws of human thought.

Martin Kusch's study of the debate about psychologism within German-language philosophy from the 1880's to the 1920's is therefore extremely timely. Quine's famous paper, "Epistemology Naturalised" was, we learn (11), originally subtitled "The Case for Psychologism". Although Kusch's aim is to provide a contribution to the sociology of knowledge, he has a clear grasp of the main philosophical arguments deployed in this debate and since then and underlines the importance of understanding these debates. His book is an important contribution to understanding not just one episode in twentieth century philosophy but to understanding how philosophy has come to acquire its present form. (And as a good late twentieth century monograph should, it is accompanied by four useful appendices available via WWW, at least two of which deserve inclusion in the book).

His sociology of philosophical knowledge (chapter 2) involves the claim that the distinction between "philosophical reasons and nonphilosophical causes", between the reasons for and against philosophical claims and the causes that lead philosophers to put forward such reasons, is "illfounded" (21). Here and elsewhere Kusch makes clear his own sympathies with both psychologism and relativism. He also notes that his project belongs to the tradition that goes from Kant and German Idealism to Nietzsche, Adorno and Foucault (23), a tradition often and misleadingly called "Continental philosophy", in order to distinguish it from analytic philosophy.

His sociology of philosophical knowledge incorporates many claims associated with the "strong programme" in the sociology of science, most notably that "the acceptance of beliefs, theories or points of view should never be explained in terms of what it is rational, true or progressive to believe" (24).

In his very informative chapter 3, "Psychologism Refuted ?", he presents the main arguments adduced by Frege and Husserl against psychologism and usefully indicates the main correspondences between these. This is no mean feat. Frege and Husserl took psychologism to be bound up with a bewildering variety of philosophical errors, including scepticism, idealism, relativism, nominalism, errors concerning the relation between normative and theoretical sentences, the relation between causal and non-causal connexions, the relation between exact and inexact concepts, and the failure to distinguish between content or sense and object.

Chapter 4 surveys the criticisms of Husserl's arguments against psychologism in German philosophy up until 1920, in particular criticisms by the neo-Kantians who had long been opposed to psychologism without endorsing either the Platonism of Bolzano, Frege or Husserl, or the priority of theoretical versions of logical sentences over normative versions thereof (cf. "Not (p & not p)" vs "One ought not assert that p and not p ") as espoused by Frege and Husserl. The range and frequency of these criticisms show that Husserl's arguments by no means commanded universal support, just as the arguments of Frege-Husserl by no means command universal support today.

Chapter 5 documents with great thoroughness the enormous variety of uses of "Psychologismus" between 1866 and 1931 referring to no less than 11 philosophical "schools" or traditions. All of the best-known critics of psychologism had the label thrown back at them. In particular, a term already overloaded with connotations by Husserl, rapidly acquired even more heterogeneous meanings.

Chapters 3 to 5 describe the history of a family of philosophical debates. Chapters 6 to 8 present a sociological account of two phenomena documented in the earlier chapters: the varied criticisms of Husserl's arguments against psychologism; the accusations of psychologism levelled between 1866 and 1930. In particular, Kusch presents an answer to the question why "Husserl's criticism of psychologism was so much more successful than Frege's (123).

Chapter 6, "Role Hybridisation. The rise of the new psychology" traces the rapid institutional growth of empirical psychology and physiological psychology in the German world. Since the key figures - Wundt, Ebbinghaus, Stumpf, Müller and Külpe - were all in philosophy departments Kusch refers to the phenomenon of "role hybridisation". Although not an experimentalist, Brentano, too, was an enthusiastic proponent of experimental research, happily suggesting experiments to others (just as philosophers-turned-cognitive-scientists do today).

Chapter 7, "Role purification. The reaction of 'pure philosophy' against the new psychology" presents the arguments of four "pure" philosophers - Dilthey, Husserl, Windelband and Rickert - for excluding experimental psychology from philosophy proper. The institutional background to these arguments was a 1913 petition signed by 107 philosophers - members of an informal professorial trade union - demanding that no more philosophy chairs be occupied by experimentalists and the incensed reactions and counter-reactions provoked by the petition. Finally, Kusch presents a number of explanations of the fact that the criticisms of psychologism by Husserl were so much better known than those of Frege (the unpopularity of mathematical logic, the geographical and institutional isolation of Jena as opposed to Göttingen, the fact that Husserl typically praised and damned psychologists, whereas Frege simply damned them).

Why did phenomenology and its views on psychologism defeat the competition? Chapter 8, "Winner takes all. Lebensphilosophie and the triumph of phenomenology", provides the following answer. The Great War led to a clear division of labour between pure philosophers, who celebrated war, and experimental psychology, which focused on training the troops. The irrationalist and anti-scientific atmosphere of the Weimar Republic found its truest expression in philosophies of life which originated outside the university (Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Spengler) and the philosophers reacted by attacking or by highjacking these philosophies. The latter strategy (Scheler, Jaspers) was successful and led to the demise of naturalistic philosophy with

experimental psychology as its central pillar. Psychologists eager to remain within philosophy departments sided with the philosophical psychologies of Dilthey and Husserl.

My comments concern Kusch's history of philosophy and psychology and his historico-sociological claims.

First, a historico-sociological point. Geography and intellectual traditions are two important sociological starting points. The debate about psychologism in German language philosophy was by no means a German affair. Bolzano, Brentano and Husserl belong to the tradition of Austro-German philosophy, that is to say to the philosophical world of Austria-Hungary, its predecessor and successor states and southern Germany. This tradition is distinguished by the fact that it puts logic at the centre of philosophy (logic as a developing discipline and the attendant philosophy) by its realism and by its remarkable hostility to Kantian philosophy and the consequences thereof. Brentano's lectures in Vienna inspired a large number of philosophers and psychologists with the vision of a scientific way of doing philosophy which marked the intellectual life of Central Europe at many different points: Gestalt psychology and Polish logic and philosophy, for example. The Austrianness of Austro-German philosophy was noted by two of Kusch's sociological predecessors, the Austrian Marxist Neurath and the southern German, right-wing Catholic Scheler.

The two key German figures in the psychologism debate were Lotze and Frege, both of whom stood outside the two great German traditions of Kantian thought and naturalism-cum-materialism. (The neo-Kantian elements in Frege's thought have, I believe, been much exaggerated). Brentano encouraged his students to study with Lotze, amongst other reasons because Lotze took science seriously. Although none of Frege's early readers in the German speaking world appreciated the full measure of his genius, his earliest philosophical readers were pupils of Brentano (Husserl, Kerry, Marty).

The link between the interest in logic that marks Austro-German philosophy and the debate about psychologism and logic is obviously central to understanding this debate. Kusch deals in an incomplete way with this link. Although logic did not make anything like the same progress within descriptive psychology and phenomenology that it made within its successor, analytic philosophy (the tradition that did take Frege seriously), this should not make us overlook the important contributions to deontic logic and modal logic by Mally and Becker and to the philosophy of logic, geometry and mathematics by Becker, Geiger and Kaufmann; indeed Husserl himself set out many of the principles of what has come to be called categorial grammar. Thus in an important sense Husserl and Brentano's other heirs knew what they were talking about in the debate about logic and psychologism. Something that cannot be said of most of their enemies.

From this point of view, the story Kusch tells of a debate about psychologism which finished when phenomenology turned into irrationalist Lebensphilosophie turns out to be part of a wider story. Early phenomenology and descriptive psychology and the debate they encouraged about the relation between logic and psychology were a foreign body within German academic philosophy which quickly returned to its preoccupation with German idealism, suitably enriched by injections of Lebensphilosophie, and its disinterest in real logic. Two of the four role purifiers studied by Kusch - Windelband and Rickert - were neo-Kantians. Dilthey, the third, made German Idealism, in particular Hegel, respectable again. And Husserl himself, Kusch's fourth example, moved further and further away from his Austrian roots after 1907 in the direction of a

idealistic Transzendentalphilosophie which, as he noted with regret, resembled the philosophy of Fichte.

The following comments concern the history of the debate about psychologism. There are omissions in Kusch's guide to the arguments involved. Both Frege and Husserl thought that anti-psychologism must involve Platonism, the view that there are ideal entities such as thoughts and concepts. Whether or not such Platonism is justifiable, it may be doubted whether only Platonism allows us to avoid psychologism. Brentano, for example, although guilty of psychologism in the sense that he thought that logic dealt with mental episodes and was a practical discipline, argues at length against that form of psychologism which fails to distinguish between logical and causal connexions. And he did this without ever feeling the need to invoke ideal entities. Indeed the distinction between internal, (e.g. logical) and external (e.g. causal) relations, in particular the account of internal relations as necessary relations by Brentano's heirs, does not get the attention it deserves. Polish logicians and philosophers such as Lesniewski and Kotarbinski were extreme nominalists, like Brentano, but cannot be suspected of any form of psychologism. It is true that Polish philosophy falls outside the scope of Kusch's book. But Wittgenstein's account of logical sentences as tautologies, as expressions that are not about anything at all, was written in German and is unfortunately not dealt with. It would have been good, too, to have had some account of what happens to the arguments about psychologism when talk of logical laws is replaced by accounts of logic in terms of rules (Lesniewski, Jaskowski, Gentzen) and their applications. Finally, it is regrettable that one of the two main precursors of Frege and Husserl, Bolzano, is merely alluded to. Husserl's anti-psychologistic philosophy of logic and of thinking is perhaps best understood as a synthesis of Bolzano's Platonism and Brentano's account of the non-causal structure of mental episodes. Unlike Frege, Husserl ties logical structure to thinkings and inferrings: the latter instantiate ideal logical structures, they are what are now called tokenings of thoughts. Frege never mentions Bolzano but had read summaries (by Kerry and Korselt) of the insights of his great predecessor in logic and philosophy, the "Bohemian Leibniz". Kusch's treatment of the second main predecessor of Frege and Husserl, Lotze, is, however, brief but illuminating.

Kusch says the term "psychologism" was first employed in 1866. Rath (1994, see below) mentions its use by Rosmini-Serbati in the first half of the nineteenth century; Curzio Chiesa tells me that Gioberti used the term in the same period. Thus it seems that four of the figures who launched the psychologism debate were catholic priests with Italian connexions - Gioberti, Rosmini-Serbati, Bolzano and Brentano.

Although familiar with the Brentanian distinction between descriptive psychology (philosophy of mind) and empirical, causal psychology, Kusch fails to bring out the importance and precise role of this distinction (in Chapter 6) when analysing the commitment of the "role hybridisers" to both psychology and philosophy. Brentano and Stumpf and their influential progeny as well as Külpe, who was heavily influenced by the Brentanian tradition (as Kusch notes), all thought that the connexion between philosophy and empirical psychology was to be found in descriptive psychology, which they took to include the philosophy of language. Descriptive psychology was not, they thought, any sort of empirical discipline; but without philosophical analyses of memory, perception, inference etc empirical psychology was condemned to be a combination of experimental methods and conceptual confusion. The descriptive psychologists admired Mach and Helmholtz because they had philosophies of mind that were, albeit misguided, worth taking seriously, and Hering because he was a natural phenomenologist. Wundt, however, they despised because his philosophy of mind was

thoroughly confused. As Titchener pointed out in 1929, there is no middle way between Brentano and Wundt. (This may not be unconnected with the fact that, as Boring puts it, Brentano was primarily a person, Wundt an institution). Similarly, the great experimentalist G. E. Müller had little time for Husserl's descriptive psychology. This in spite of the fact that it was a student of both Müller and Husserl in Göttingen, David Katz, who produced one of the classic works on colour perception, in which experimental results are meshed with an elegant, phenomenological analysis of colours.

One important reason why empirical psychology from the 1920's on did not involve as many psychologists and philosophers as hitherto in the defence of psychologism was a fundamental change in attitude as to the type of structure proper to mental episodes and their objects. Many of the early psychologists were held to have been guilty of an excess of atomism and of associationism. The rise in influence of the main schools of Gestalt psychology in Graz, Berlin, Vienna and Leipzig quickly led to the perception that mental episodes and their objects displayed much richer types of structure than those hitherto allowed. Husserl certainly played an important role in this change of attitude. But it was above all the work of other heirs of Brentano, such as Ehrenfels, and their students, such as Benussi, Köhler and Koffka, who were responsible for this change. The descriptive results of Gestalt psychology, for example in the area of visual perception, figure in all textbooks on the subject and count as substantive contributions to empirical psychology, if anything does. Much the same is true of the work on the psychology of reasoning by Selz and Duncker.

Kusch is also, I believe, wrong to say that the project of a naturalistic philosophy quickly lost support after the Great War, although it is true that the project did not loom large in mainstream university philosophy. In the 1920's and before the Berlin Gestalt psychologists Köhler and Koffka developed their influential and controversial theory of mental and physical Gestalten and advanced the claim that mental Gestalten were isomorphic if not identical with cerebral Gestalten, a form of physicalism that anticipated that of Schlick. The Vienna Gestalt psychologist-philosopher and colleague of Schlick, Bühler, set out an impressive naturalistic account of mind and language in the 1920's and early 1930's. These three heirs of Brentano were both philosophers, aware of the great distance between their views and popular anti-scientific philosophies, and also distinguished experimentalists. Their naturalist philosophies were indeed based on their experimental work.

Kusch, then, fails to grasp the decisive role of Austro-German Brentanian descriptive psychology in transforming empirical psychology and the fact that among its many avatars were naturalist philosophies. This is perhaps due to a failure, a common one, to appreciate that even the descriptive psychology of Husserl's *Logical Investigations* was taken to be naturalistic, and indeed to be compatible with physicalism, by Husserl himself. Kusch says that empirical psychology ceased to be a threat to philosophy in the Weimar Republic because it had aligned itself with pure philosophy and correctly mentions the earlier example of the Würzburg school and Berlin Gestalt psychology (262-266). But we disagree about what this alignment involved. I believe he overlooks the fact that these two schools led to flourishing traditions of empirical work and complementary naturalist philosophies, which were just as much a threat to the irrationalist philosophers as Wundt had been to Husserl. Kusch would reject this because he is convinced that the Berlin Gestalt psychologists did not want or have a naturalistic account of mind and had become "presentable psychologists" (270-1). But this is as little true of Köhler as it is of Bühler and Brunswik.

Let me now return to my geographical suggestion above about the transition from the debate about psychologism to irrationalist *Lebensphilosophie*. Dilthey was a key figure in this transition. Kusch notes this but does not entirely appreciate the nature of Dilthey's contribution. Dilthey put forward his own distinction between descriptive and genetic psychology in Germany almost at the same time as Brentano presented his account of this difference in Vienna. But the two programmes differ enormously. For Dilthey, but not for Brentano, the object of descriptive psychology was man or life in its entirety and its method that of understanding (the notorious *Verstehen*). These two claims of Dilthey were enthusiastically taken up and embellished by philosophers such as Heidegger and indeed by many of the representatives of "Continental philosophy"; indeed "life in its entirety" had a long and distinguished career ahead of it. Brentano correctly predicted very early on that if Dilthey's programme and his obscurantism were imitated the result would be catastrophe.

A second key figure in the transition was Scheler and Kusch is right to underline his role. But as I have suggested elsewhere Scheler's role went far beyond making *Lebensphilosophie* academically respectable and bringing it under the banner of phenomenology. Scheler's analyses of the will, the emotions, the self and awareness of the body were adopted and transformed almost beyond recognition by Heidegger, who marks the end of phenomenology properly speaking, and many others. As the most influential of the realist phenomenologists, Scheler's style is for the most part that of a philosopher who takes philosophy as a theoretical enterprise seriously: he makes distinctions, draws extensively on the sciences, advances arguments for and against theses. In other words, he does not do philosophy in the way made famous by Heidegger. Scheler's interest in "life" was first and foremost an interest in the relation of awareness of the body to perception and the emotions, stimulated in part by his interest in contemporary biology and philosophy of biology and in pragmatism. This a far cry from *Lebensphilosophie*. But Scheler was a transitional figure. Influenced by Dilthey, he did, as Kusch points out, also respond to the need in Weimar for philosophical melodrama, thus anticipating one of the central roles of Continental philosophy.

Did phenomenology really triumph, as Kusch's chapter 8 suggests? The phenomenology of the *Logical Investigations*, as it was developed by Reinach, Geiger, and Ingarden did not triumph. Sobere, scientific (*wissenschaftlich*) and realist, it was quickly submerged by the irrationalist and melodramatic philosophical currents of the 1920's. Husserl's own later idealistic and transcendental phenomenology did not triumph. Although it strongly marked Heidegger, neither Heidegger nor - as far as I can tell - anyone else was a card carrying transcendental phenomenologist. Husserl's transcendental turn was rejected by his own most gifted students, who were also worried by the essentially programmatic nature of his later work. Phenomenology as a synonym for descriptive psychology did triumph in the sense that it decisively marked a large number of movements in twentieth century philosophy and science - Gestalt psychology, structuralist linguistics and phonology, medical psychology and psychiatry. But within German philosophy the honours went, as Brentano had feared they would, to obscurantist, irrationalist traditions. That at least is how the surviving heirs of Brentano saw things, a vision they shared with the members of the Vienna Circle. But although phenomenology did not triumph, the word "Phänomenologie" did. Indeed Kusch might usefully have done for this word what he has done for "Psychologismus", that is, document its inflated currency in a period in which it came to mean very little.

Kusch's sociology of knowledge obliges him to refrain from appealing to the truth of philosophical claims, rationality or progress in explaining why philosophers made such claims.

As he is well aware, this is a philosophical assumption that is by no means uncontroversial. One of the founders of the sociology of knowledge and indeed of the sociology of philosophy was Scheler. But unlike nearly all his successors up to and including Foucault, Scheler rejected this assumption in the name of realism and anti-relativism. Sociologism, he thought, was a mistake as profound as psychologism. That a state of affairs obtains is often a very good reason for attributing the belief that this state of affairs obtains. Within psychology and the philosophy of mind, the counterpart of Kusch's view about the way to do the sociology of knowledge is what is often called methodological solipsism - the view that the psychologist or cognitive scientist can and should concentrate on cognitive activities considered in abstraction from their relation to the real world. Stumpf noted the main objection to this already in 1892: to the extent that psychology deals with genetic questions - for example concept formation - it must deal with the relation between the mind and its material objects.

From the point of view of Scheler's philosophy of knowledge, rather than Kusch's Foucauldian position, the story of the debate about psychologism and the rise of *Lebensphilosophie* is the story of a transition from good to bad philosophy. Just why philosophy regularly exhibits phases of theoretical vigour followed by periods of obscurantist decadence in which melodrama and practical questions predominate is an interesting question, to which Brentano had an answer, one accepted by many of his heirs. But since it is not a question Kusch allows himself to pose, we may ignore it. Kusch's self-imposed Continental methodology does not, as far as I can see, detract much from the interest of the story he has to tell.

His lucid, informative and indeed entertaining study - it contains some excellent jokes - was preceded in 1994 by Mathias Rath's *Der Psychologismustreit in der deutschen Philosophie* (Freiburg: Alber Verlag), which covers much of the same ground, often in less detail. It is perhaps no accident, as sociologists of knowledge say, that Rath, like Kusch, is heavily indebted to Foucault for his methodological approach, the *Zeitgeist* being what it is. He, too, describes the "strategies", "tactics" and "discursive lines" and "formations" thrown up by the psychologism debate. And I was delighted to learn from Rath that Foucault's project had been anticipated by Kant in his sketch of a "philosophical archaeology".