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Book Review: Richard Wilton and Trevor Harley, Science and psychology

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Review of Science and Psychology by Wilton and Harley
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Science and Psychology by Wilton and Harley is based on a final year option course delivered over many years by Richard Wilton in the Psychology Department at the University of Dundee. I took this course in the final year of my undergraduate degree in 1990. I distinctly remember the enjoyable classes and the robust argument and debate that took place in the “Reading Room” of the Scrymgeour Building. Not only did I find the course thoroughly enjoyable as an undergraduate, but it also stimulated me to engage with issues fundamental to the basic science that underpins modern experimental (cognitive) psychology. I believe I call upon the knowledge established in this course almost every day in my work as an experimental psychologist.

Science and Psychology is essentially a written form of Wilton’s course, providing informed, well thought-through, philosophical perspectives on a significant number of principles and issues related to the scientific nature of experimental psychological research. Each chapter in the book comprises of a series of discursive texts – a hypothetical exchange between the authors and the reader, where questions are raised and answered with explanation. These exchanges act as exercises in the philosophical consideration of topics such as theoretical development, power, scope and simplicity, and of course, testability of theory. The book also engages with issues more specifically associated with psychology, such as causality, intentional states, free will and consciousness leading the reader to consider implications beyond psychology, for example, within the legal system. Throughout the text, examples are used to illustrate the arguments that are developed in the book. These are not cutting edge (important historical examples from physics, astronomy and chemistry are included, as well as references to maze running rats, Skinner boxes, and pigeon pecking), but they are effective in illustrating the important and often complex points under consideration. The language is simple yet functional. There is little jargon and the explanations are thorough without being labored. The Figures are rudimentary. There are questions at the end of every chapter to allow the reader to assess their understanding of the preceding content. The authors recommend that the book be read as a novel, starting at the beginning and finishing at the end. This is how I read the book, and having done this, I can see it makes sense to read it that way.

I thoroughly enjoyed reading this book and I found it to be excellent. I appreciated revisiting the philosophical discussions surrounding issues that I engage with directly in my work. The issues that are raised are important and are directly relevant to those involved in scientific research, especially within the field of experimental psychology. I recommend this book to undergraduate and masters students who may be considering a scientific research career (particularly in experimental psychology), or indeed, those who are already committed to such a career path and wish to take a moment to reflect upon what it is they are trying to achieve in their work as a scientist. Reading this book will almost certainly cause you to reconsider issues you thought you had already sorted out, assess those issues in a different light, and perhaps even result in a change to your current philosophical perspective.