

Symposium

# The Psychologizing of the Psychological and the Return of Common Sense

Pietro Perconti<sup>(a)</sup>

Ricevuto: 29 gennaio 2016; accettato: 24 marzo 2016

**Abstract** According to Tim Crane, his version of psychologism is not based on the familiar opposition between conceptual analysis and empirical science. His point is not simply to consider phenomenological and empirical data in the science of the mind. Challenging the idea that investigation of the mind has to be understood “as an autonomous investigation solely into the concepts embodied in our psychological discourse”, Crane tries to argue for a more realistic picture of the mental. His rejection of “autonomous investigation”, however, is based in the end on its impermeability to empirical evidence and on the consequent reduction of philosophy of mind to conceptual analysis of ordinary intentional vocabulary. This seems clear as far as conceptual analysis goes, but perhaps has some undesired consequences in terms of common sense vocabulary. In fact, *with respect to folk psychological discourse about the mind*, all that Crane is saying is that — besides conceptual analysis — we have to take into consideration empirical evidence in order to reconsider common sense discourse on the mind. This is not so different from the familiar contrast between conceptual analysis and empirical science.

**KEYWORDS:** Psychologism; (Anti)-psychologism; Conceptual Analysis; Common Sense Knowledge; Folk-psychology

**Riassunto** *La psicologizzazione dello psicologico e il ritorno al senso comune* – Secondo Tim Crane, la sua idea di psicologismo non poggia sulla nota opposizione tra analisi concettuale e scienza empirica. Non si tratta semplicemente di tenere in considerazione i dati empirici e fenomenici all’interno della scienza della mente. Diversamente da quanti ritengono che l’indagine sulla mente debba essere intesa “come un’indagine autonoma che verte solo sui concetti incorporati nel nostro discorso psicologico”, Crane vorrebbe sostenere un’immagine più realistica del mentale. Il rifiuto del metodo della “indagine autonoma”, poggia in definitiva sull’impermeabilità all’evidenza empirica e sulla conseguente riduzione della filosofia della mente ad analisi concettuale del lessico intenzionale ordinario. Quanto pare chiaro circa l’analisi concettuale, ha forse tuttavia qualche conseguenza indesiderata sul lessico del senso comune. In effetti, se prendiamo in considerazione *il discorso della psicologia del senso comune sulla mente*, quanto Crane afferma è che – oltre l’analisi concettuale – dovremmo tener conto anche dell’evidenza empirica. Questo, tuttavia, non sembra tanto lontano dalla solita contrapposizione tra analisi concettuale e scienza empirica.

**PAROLE CHIAVE:** Psicologismo; (Anti)-psicologismo; Analisi concettuale; Conoscenza di senso comune; Psicologia del senso comune

<sup>(a)</sup>Dipartimento di Scienze Cognitive, Università degli Studi di Messina, via Concezione, 8 – 98133 Messina (I)

E-mail: perconti@unime.it (✉)



## Can doing and undoing the psychologizing of the psychological

*ASPECTS OF PSYCHOLOGISM* BY TIM Crane is a selection from his essays over the last twenty years. Although the book contains contributions devoted to different topics, as a whole the essays represent a unified perspective which he calls “psychologism”. The word “psychologism” doesn’t sit well with analytical philosophers. Crane’s psychologism, however, is different from the classical version, which invited well-known reactions from Husserl and Frege. Husserl and Frege’s (anti)-psychologism was based on their concern that psychologism lacked a solid logical and mathematical basis. They sought a mathematical ontology without the weakness of *psychological* subjectivism. In their view, in fact, mathematical entities were not mental constructions, but objective realities.

The general goal of Crane’s psychologism was different, i.e., to bring together conceptual analysis, phenomenology, and empirical evidence in the investigation of the mind. In his words, a kind of «psychologizing of the psychological».

So in addition to psychologism about logic and mathematics, there are views about meaning and understanding that have also been called “psychologism”. My interest here, however, is in the mental or the psychological. According to Cavell, [...] Wittgenstein’s target in the *Philosophical Investigations* is “psychologism about psychology” – or about the psychological, since we are not interested here in a discipline but in its subject-matter.<sup>1</sup>

Stanley Cavell compares Frege’s and Husserl’s efforts to undo the psychologizing of logic to Kant’s undoing Hume’s psychologizing of knowledge.<sup>2</sup> In fact, in the history of psychologism we can observe a movement similar to that of tidal waves. This coming and going of psychologism and anti-psychologism is in fact a typical feature in the history of the theory of

knowledge in the modern age. Before Kant, standard epistemology was more like a kind of faculty psychology, that is, the doctrine inspired by Aristotle and Aquinas according to which the mind is a collection of cognitive capacities, endowed with their own representational format. What we are accustomed to calling “mind” is simply the way in which all these abilities are realized in an unified cognitive system which shapes the way humans view the world.

In the modern age, faculty psychology is open to the observation of the behavior of human beings and other animals. In this way empirical evidence becomes an essential part of epistemological argumentation. But, as is well-known, the main theoretical concern of critical philosophy is to provide the basis for a *transcendental* philosophy, which can do without empirical evidence. If we are interested in understanding the conditions that make human knowledge possible (*überhaupt*), before (in a logical sense) it actually happens, then in epistemology we have to avoid the use of empirical data. The Kantian concept of “transcendental” is responsible for the transformation from a natural to a transcendental history of the mind.

The transcendental claim of putting aside empirical conditioning in the study of knowledge, however, was replaced within a few decades by a new deal in psychologism. This, in fact, is the second wave in the history of modern (anti)-psychologism – the first being the controversy between the old faculty psychology by Locke, Hume, and Berkeley, and the transcendental perspective. The reaction against Kant’s transcendentalism was influenced by empirical findings in the field of psychology. Heymann Steinthal<sup>3</sup> and Karl Wilhelm Ludwig Heyse<sup>4</sup> turned Wilhelm von Humboldt’s linguistics into a psychological perspective, providing the background for the future work of the psycholinguist Karl Bühler. This kind of psychologizing is about language, but the same can be said about other cognitive capacities, like perception and consciousness.

Unfortunately, the return of psychologism was too short to produce a mature, i.e., a fully experimental and mathematically expressed, science of the mind. At the end of 19<sup>th</sup> Century, in fact, psychologism again fell out of scientific favor. While Husserl and Frege were the champions of anti-psycho-logism in logic and mathematics, Ferdinand de Saussure and Ludwig Wittgenstein were the champions in the opposite fields of structuralism and analytical philosophy. Due to the cultural influence of the above mentioned philosophical traditions (including continental phenomenology), anti-psycholo-gism in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century was an almost omnipresent feature of the philosophical scene.

The success of cognitive science is the key feature of the third wave in the history of modern psychologism. Cognitive science considers the mind to be amenable to an experimental and computational approach. The old philosophical epistemology, understood as a discipline able to provide genuine explanations of cognitive abilities has, in the last decades, been widely replaced by a new epistemology, devoted to the methodological control of the scientific enterprise and to the appreciation of its social role. One might wonder if we are approaching a fourth wave in the troubled history of psychologism.

In the meantime, analytical philosophy is faced with the difficulties of its own history. On the one hand, it could be considered as the latest *koiné* in the philosophy of cognitive science, that is, the most popular vocabulary to understand cognitive processes. On the other hand, the fatal attraction for conceptual analysis can lead to neglecting empirical data on one hand and considering common sense vocabulary about the mind as a solid basis for investigation on the other hand. But, we can't draw any conclusions about how the mind actually works from the observation of the ways we are accustomed to talk about it. Even if our ordinary speaking includes a hidden difference between *de re* and *de dicto* references, this does not imply that these semantic differences correspond to a

distinction in the mental reality.<sup>5</sup>

Arguing for a new kind of psychologism – an unconventional move in the British philosophical scene – Tim Crane ends by showing how far analytical philosophy still has to go in order for it to serve the aims of the new science of mind.

### **Common sense is chased out the door, yet comes back through the window**

Crane denies that his intent is simply the psychologizing of the psychological, in the sense of reconsidering? the empirical data and introspective phenomenology with a view to a scientific understanding of the mind. In fact he claims: «The contrast I am making here is not the familiar one between “conceptual analysis” and empirical science».<sup>6</sup>

In the following I will argue that, if we take common sense knowledge about the mind into consideration, the contrast he is making instead just leads us back to the above mentioned alternative. According to Crane, the investigation of the mind should not be understood «as an autonomous investigation solely into the concepts embodied in our psychological discourse».<sup>7</sup> In contrast, his psychologism consists in «an investigation which takes phenomenological and empirical data along with the conceptual, to gain a more realistic picture of the whole of the mind».<sup>8</sup> The rejection of “autonomous investigation” is based on its impermeability to empirical evidence and on the consequent reduction of philosophical discourse to a conceptual analysis of ordinary intentional vocabulary.

But, if philosophical investigation has to take into consideration empirical and phenomenological data, common sense vocabulary on the mind will inexorably be a core subject-matter of this investigation. The reason is that empirical findings in the field of cognitive science influence the common sense view of the mental, and the ordinary image of human nature. This leads one to reconsider the common sense perspective on the mind, as it appears in ordinary discourse. One can have a

conservative, an eliminative, or a revisionist attitude to the way folk psychology should be changed according to cognitive science findings, but in any case must admit that we have to deal with this phenomenon.

The problem arises, of course, from the notion of “autonomy”, that is, from the idea of «an *autonomous* investigation *solely* into the concepts embodied in our psychological discourse» (my italics). The interest in common sense vocabulary describing the mind should not be inspired by the attempt to draw conclusions about mental reality or about how the mind actually works. In fact, this interest is widely and naturally caused by the impact of cognitive science findings on society. Society is nowadays under pressure to understand the kind of changes common sense should undergo in order to be compatible with a scientific worldview. However, if we what we said about Crane’s psychologism being *about folk psychological discourse about*

*the mind*, is right, then it should also be safe to argue that – besides conceptual analysis – in epistemology we must take into consideration (phenomenological and) empirical data. That however does not seem to fall too far from the familiar contrast between “conceptual analysis” and empirical science.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> T. CRANE, *Aspects of Psychologism*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge (MA) 2014, p. 2.

<sup>2</sup> S. CAVELL, *Must We Mean What We Say?*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2002, p. 136.

<sup>3</sup> See H. STEINTHAL, *Einleitung in die Psychologie und Sprachwissenschaft*, F. Dümmeler, Berlin 1881.

<sup>4</sup> See K.W.L. HEYSE, *System der Sprachwissenschaft* (1856), hrsg. von H. STEINTHAL, Olms, Hildesheim 1973.

<sup>5</sup> T. CRANE, *Aspects of Psychologism*, cit., p. 17.

<sup>6</sup> *Ivi*, p. x.

<sup>7</sup> *Ivi*, p. xi.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibidem*.