Obituary

Edwin Bissell Holt

1873-1946

Psychology and the world of knowledge in general lost an original and a universal mind in the death of Edwin Bissell Holt on 25 January 1946. Though the formal recognition accorded to him during his life was scarcely proportionate to his greatness, his name will occupy a prominent place when the historian records the uneven progress of psychology in the first part of the Twentieth Century.

E. B. Holt was one of that brilliant group of students of William James who became influential not as exponents of a James system of psychology but as founders of the science of psychology in this country. From 1901 to 1919 Holt was a member of the psychology faculty at Harvard University; from 1926 to 1936 he was visiting professor at Princeton.

His *Concept of consciousness* (1914) anticipated his motor theory of psychology and was more important philosophically than psychologically. His *Freudian wish* (1915), however, has become a classic in American psychology. Academic psychologists, working in their laboratories, had developed an account of man as an assembly of sense organs and reflexes. Freud, working as a physician dealing with mental disorder, had produced world-shaking theories about the motivation of human behavior. Traditional academic psychology saw no way of relating its world of discourse to the Freudian realm. It was the genius of Holt that translated and modified Freudian doctrines into the terms of behavioral science. The progress of psychology in the past 30 years has been, to a considerable extent, the implementing and elaborating of Holt's contribution in *Freudian wish*. This work is also a milestone because it rejected the artifactual elementarism of the time and emphasized the importance of regarding behavior not as the summation of reflexes but as a function of the field of forces.

Holt is perhaps best known for his motor theory. The early behaviorists repudiated the conventional areas of psychology relating to conscious experience and concentrated upon a study of behavior. The effect of Holt's teachings was to strengthen this movement, but his own motor theory was much in advance of Watsonian doctrine. It attempted to deal with all conscious experiences by identifying them with their motor patterns of response. Many experimental studies in thinking and perception stemmed from the Holtian theory. Unfortunately, little of Holt's work on the problem was in print until *Animal drive and the learning process* appeared in 1931. This work was as late in relation to public interest as his *Freudian wish* had been early. If *Animal drive* had appeared 10 years earlier, it would have given the behavioristic movement a rationale, a perspective, a balance, and a sophistication which it desperately needed. Nevertheless, this work remains the most complete and the most scientific account of human psychology from a mechanistic or materialistic approach. It combines the philosophical recognition of the important problems of the older European writers with the scientific discoveries in modern neurology and psychology. Unfortunately, Holt ignored the entire area of constitutional and glandular factors in the determination of human nature and made no serious attempt to evaluate the evidence in this field. His account of man suffers, in consequence, from a neglect of the internal chemical environment of the organism.

The breadth of Holt's mind is indicated by mentioning two more specific contributions, one to epistemology and the other to social psychology: (1) The Berkeley doctrine of idealism, which asserts that reality inheres not in a world external to ourselves but in our sensations and ideas, never received as systematic and psychologically devastating an answer as Holt's article in the *Psychological Review* of 1934 which exposed the fallacious psychological assumptions on which Berkeley rested his argument. (2) In the social field Holt suggested the fundamental approaches and swept aside the pious hokum and verbalism that sometimes passes as social science. At Harvard, his lectures in Social Psychology comprised one of the first courses to be offered in this field. A cryptic summary of his contribution can be found in his article, "The whimsical condition of social psychology and of mankind," which appeared in *American Philosophy Today and Tomorrow* (1935).

The discrepancy between Holt's real influence on American psychology and its recognition was due to his indifference to the accepted institutional channels of the profession. He did not attend meetings or present papers at conventions; he set no store by quantitative publication in the journals.

Holt was probably the last great American psychologist in the European tradition of philosopher-scientist. His own experimental studies were few, but his systematic formulation of theory and his wise and brilliant evaluation of research findings suggest that there is still a place for the philosopher-scientist—even in modern psychology.

DANIEL KATZ

Brooklyn College