Social Accountability & Selfhood

John Shotter

A Taos Institute Publication
Social Accountability and Selfhood

JOHN SHOTTER

Basil Blackwell
For my wife Ann,
and my children Mark, Laura, Emily and Jo
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Vladimir: To have lived is not enough for them.

Estragon: They have to talk about it.

(Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot*)
Introduction

The different chapters in this book each, to some extent, approach the same problem — that of what it is to be an autonomous, responsible person. Taken together, I hope they present a progressive story and each constitutes a part of a whole which is implicated within them all: that whole being what I have called 'the ecology of everyday life'.

Although the book may contain many unresolved problems and indicate many as yet unexplored regions, it attempts to chart a 'space' within which to conduct a wholly new kind of psychological research: simply, research into what it is to be a human being, research into our 'whatness'.

Surprising though it may seem to say it, psychology has not yet addressed the question of the nature of our being directly. Indeed, currently, the character of the question it raises is not easily grasped — 'Surely that's a mystical matter. Isn't your concern with what we used to call people's souls?' I'm often asked (or told). To me, however, there is no more practical a question. Aristotle (1928, Z 1028a) attempts to clarify its nature thus:

There are several senses in which a thing may be said to 'be'... in one sense the 'being' meant is 'what a thing is' or a 'this', and in another sense it means a quality or quantity or one of the other things that are predicated as these are. While 'being' has all these senses, obviously that which 'is' primarily is the 'what', which indicates the substance of the thing.

What we believe ourselves to be determines how we treat one another (and ourselves) in our practical everyday affairs. But, by operating as a theoretical science (in Aristotle's sense of the term — see Joachim, 1951, pp. 1–18), psychology forecloses upon the question as to the nature of our being simply by assuming it, by hypothesis, to be of this or that kind, i.e. as if it were only a question of it being a 'this'. But to attempt to answer the
question that way, by assuming that people simply are, say, information-processing devices, and then by showing that on the basis of that assumption one can act to bring about a certain range of predictable results, is to misunderstand the nature of the question entirely. On the basis of other assumptions other results could no doubt be obtained, and so on. And none of all these findings would at all bear upon the question of what in fact we are.

The question cannot be answered in that way, by the use of ‘theories’ (as is argued at greater length below). And in the meantime, we struggle on in our daily affairs without a disciplined way of investigating what actually we are. The answer to the question lies, I shall argue, at least in part, in how we account for ourselves to ourselves in and against the background of our ordinary everyday affairs — not just in and against a few, certain selected activities, such as games or dramas used as models for all the rest, but in and against the background of everything in which we are or can be involved. For it is within that whole hurly-burly that our being is constituted — where being able to construct orderly activities within it is just a part of what it is to be the beings that we are.

How could human behaviour be described? Surely only by showing the actions of a variety of humans, as they are all mixed up together. Not what one man is doing now but the whole hurly-burly, is the background against which we see an action, and it determines our judgement, our concepts, and our reactions. (Wittgenstein, 1980, vol. 1, no. 629)

Our accounts of ourselves must clearly be situated in the world to which we owe our being as we understand it, in the world of our everyday social life. But what is that world?

It is, I shall maintain, a world consisting not only of socially ‘constructed’ institutions, continually reproduced (and transformed) by the accountable activities occurring within them, but also of a larger social process out of which such institutions arise, a process which I have called our social ecology. By that I mean a complex of unaccounted for (and intrinsically unaccountable) interdependencies between people. I have called this kind of activity ‘joint action’; it is unaccountable because it is productive of outcomes unintended by the individuals involved in it. But nonetheless, due to the intrinsic ‘intentionality’ of human action, i.e. its specificatory, structuring or form-producing nature, such outcomes always have a structure or style to them. It is in their joint action that people produce the institutions within which they make sense of their activities to one another.
The circumstances are such that people, without any awareness of having done so, constitute between themselves a common sense, common ways of making sense of whatever occurs to, in or around them. I have attempted to capture the character of this situation in what might be called, the 'social accountability' thesis: that our understanding and our experience of our reality are constituted for us very largely by the ways in which we must talk in our attempts to account for the things and events within it — where a part of that reality is, of course, ourselves. I say 'must', because our ways of accounting for things have a coercive quality to them; only if we make sense of things in certain approved of ways can we be accounted by others in our society as competent, responsible members of it.

Now, whilst human beings who are already constituted as accountable, responsible persons can go out and gather 'information' in a wholly individualistic way about the 'things' and 'events' in their 'external world', they cannot gain their knowledge of how to be such persons in that manner, i.e. persons who are able to see their surroundings as constituting an 'external world', containing 'events', 'objects', etc., as well as other 'persons' like themselves. They owe that knowledge, I shall argue, to their embedding in social activities of a particular kind in their society, to their embedding in certain 'developmental practices'. It is in this sense that the issues of selfhood and social accountability are inseparable: one cannot become the kind of person required in one's society, i.e. one able to reproduce its social order in one's actions, unless one learns its accounting practices, the authoritative ways of making sense which constitute its reality in their operation.

In Part I, I set the scene with a discussion of accounting practices and the difference between accounts and theories. As accounting goes on everywhere in life, and not just in special circumstances, some issues to do with the 'ecology' of everyday life are introduced here also: the different rights and duties of first, second and third persons regarding one another are discussed, as well as whether accounts are given retrospectively, prospectively or simultaneously with the activity to which they are applied. Part I continues with a discussion of psychology as a practical-descriptive science rather than as an empirical-theoretical one (in chapter 2), and goes on (in chapter 3) to describe in certain important respects what it is to be human.

In Part II, the question of how one comes to be the kind of person who can act accountably in one's society is discussed. First, in chapter 4, it is suggested that autonomy consists in possessing 'personal powers', i.e. the ability to act in such a way that one knows how oneself is 'placed' or 'situated' in relation to others involved in one's actions, and that these are acquired by those around one treating one as one term in a personal
Introduction

relationship, i.e. as if one already possessed such powers. In chapter 5, the
nature of ‘developmental practices’ is discussed and their ‘practical her-
meneutical’ nature described, while the ‘opportunities’ for development
made available to one in the social ecology of one’s surroundings are
described in chapter 6. Chapter 7 completes Part II by showing that most
current developmental theories do not face the problem of how we learn to
be individuals, but treat us as ‘developmentally self-sufficient’, i.e. as
already individuals from the start. Thus it is difficult to understand how,
within the frameworks they provide, different modes of social account-
ability could ever be learned. Chapter 7 also discusses the ‘political economy
of developmental opportunities’: the fact the opportunities required for
development are scarce (as they are not freely available, but are provided
only by second persons), and thus differential access to them is socially
controlled.

Part III explores further the character of the social accountability thesis.
In particular, Vico’s remarkable account of the human ‘creation’ of social
institutions is discussed in relation to the notion of ‘joint action’ and its
production of (individually) unintended consequences, due to the intrinsically
intentional nature of social action (in chapter 8). It is within the
institutions that they construct between themselves that people can change
one another: they do it, not by reporting ‘information’ about things in the
‘external world’, but by telling things to one another (in chapter 9).
However, what people say to another, although it has a certain currency in
certain situations, can be deeply misleading; people can be wrong in their
own self-definitions. Chapter 10 explores the over-spatialized nature of our
‘mind- and self-talk’ and the mystification such talk can produce.

In Part IV, an alternative ‘time-space’ language is introduced to describe
the nature of the ecology in which we are embedded, a language of regions
and moments of activity – where regions are not wholly spatial, as all
activities take some time to be recognizable as the activities they are, and
moments are not wholly temporal, as all activities must take up some space
in order to be activities. The aim of chapter 11 is to provide a language for
talking about the world at large such that selfhood is a natural or physical
possibility within it.

The aim of all this talk (this writing) is, as I said earlier, to attempt to
introduce the notion of a practical-descriptive psychology, where (to put the
matter reflexively): a practical-descriptive psychology describes (or in-
structs) people in the ways in which people can tell (or instruct) one another
in how to do things – including the ways in which they describe themselves
and their psychological states to themselves. In other words, not only is its aim practical or instructive, but it is itself an example of the
activities for which it attempts to account.
Part One

Accounting Practices and Their Paradigms
The central shift of perspective exemplified in most of what follows in this book is the attention paid, not at all to the structure of behaviour itself, but to the structure and function of the accounts of behaviour that people give of themselves in their everyday social life. Accounts can be distinguished from theories in this sense: an account of an action or activity is concerned with talking about the action or activity as the activity it is; it works, if it works at all, to render the activity, to those who confront it or are involved in it, as something ‘visibly-rational-and-reportable-for-all-practical-purposes, i.e., ‘accountable’, as organizations of commonplace everyday activities’ (Garfinkel, 1967, p. vii). In other words, an account is an aid to perception, functioning to constitute an otherwise indeterminate flow of activity as a sequence of recognizable events, i.e. events of a kind already known about within a society’s ways of making sense of things.

A theory, on the other hand, is not concerned with activities as they are; it is not simply an aid to those confronted with raw appearances, in making sense of them. It is a cognitive device in terms of which people may reshape and reproduce events which already make one kind of sense to them, and talk about them as being other than what ordinarily they seem to be. Unlike an account, which is addressed to the second persons involved in a situation with first persons, a theory is of use to third-person outsiders, to those unconcerned with the personal situation of first and second persons; rather than context-dependent and personal, a theory may thus (to an extent) be context-free and impersonal. However, a theory must always be accompanied, it would seem, by an account of how it should be understood and used – unless, that is, it can be formulated as a set of specifications for a certain pattern of result-producing activities (Stapp, 1972). Then, the distinction between theories and accounts
collapses, and theories degenerate, so to speak, into accounts. In what follows, the distinction between theories and accounts will be crucial, for my main critique of psychological research will revolve around, not so much its failings as an ‘experimental’ science, but its attempt to be, as McGuire (1973) puts it, a ‘theory relevant’ enterprise.

The Psychologist’s Dilemma: ‘Finders’ or ‘Makers’?

To state a truism: as psychologists, we are also persons as well as being scientists. Thus we cannot forever stand outside of the social life of which we are a part. Although we may find it necessary to maintain a distance from those we study while studying them, we cannot permanently stand apart from them. Besides our professional colleagues, those we study must also appraise our ‘findings’. As a result, the claims we make about human conduct will have an ambiguous status. Thus the dilemma we find ourselves in is this: in addition to being evaluated as claims to scientific knowledge, such claims are also open to evaluation as accounts of human conduct in everyday life terms, working to make the conduct to which they are applied what it is. And not only may these two kinds of evaluations conflict, currently they very often do conflict. If psychology is to progress, this ambiguity must be resolved; it is in our experimental manipulations that it makes itself felt most acutely.

Experimentation: Testing Procedures

When as psychologists we manipulate people’s behaviour in our experiments, we must use the normal procedures and resources available to us as members of our society for so doing, procedures implicit in our society’s way of life. If we do not, then we run the risk of being misunderstood, and of people not treating the experimental situation as we psychologists desire. A central resource available to us as to other people is the ordinary language of everyday life, and the ways of speaking it allows. People can and often do influence one another’s behaviour merely by the use of words – for language is not just a system within which we can all describe things but is a medium within which we can ‘do’ things with others through communication with them (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969). Furthermore, when we do talk about what we have done, are doing, or are about to do, i.e. describe or account for our actions, we must do that also within the ordinary language of our society. We are, in fact, inescapably embedded with it; our reality is constituted for us, whether as ordinary
persons or as psychologists, by the very language we use in our attempts to
describe it (Winch, 1958; Berger and Luckman, 1967; Smedslund, 1978).
In other words, people are restricted in what they can intelligibly and
legitimately express in their language, by the framework of concepts
implicit in it. And these concepts seem to be interconnected in such a way
that (1) there are severe limitations upon what are acceptable ways of
talking, perceiving, acting, thinking and evaluating, and (2) given one set
of utterances, acts, perceptions, thoughts or evaluations, others follow
necessarily, or are necessarily excluded (Smedslund, 1978). In other
words, in using ordinary language one must, apparently, make implicit
reference to a system of norms or standards indicative of its proper use. As
psychologists, if we want to be understood by ordinary people, we are
restricted in the same kind of way; we cannot formulate any generally
intelligible theories about human conduct except ultimately in its
terms – or, if not in accord with its implicit standards, then at least we
must take notice of them in some way. Hence, the ambiguity of any claims
we might make; for we have to satisfy social as well as scientific criteria.

Much of the knowledge people have of how to do things with other
people in the course of communicating with them is of course vague and
unformulated, known only unreflectively in a taken-for-granted kind of
way. However, few people would disagree that we do in fact know quite a
number of ways in which we can influence the outcome of another
persons’s behaviour (in fact psychologists are always being accused of
rediscovering the obvious): we can change what another person can do by
making the tasks before them more difficult; by telling or showing them
things; by changing their rewards; by influencing what they expect to be
the outcome of an action; and so on. And people act at a practical level in
anticipation of achieving such aims, not because people are naturally
consistent with themselves and each other, but because they must be
consistent. As members of a moral order, they have a duty to act in ways
which are not only intelligible, but which make sense in other kinds of
ways also. They must make reference to the ‘vocabulary of motives’ (Mills,
1940) current in their society at the time. And it is only in virtue of their
ability to fulfil the duties associated with being a member of such an
order – by becoming responsible adults not reliant like children upon
others to judge and evaluate their behaviour – that they can qualify for the
status of autonomous persons, with the right to act not under the continual
surveillance of others. It is because one is a member of a moral community
that one must act so as to fulfil in the future the commitments implicit in
one’s actions in the present (Winch, 1958; Shotter, 1981a and b).

Thus, if one wants to remain an intelligible, acceptable member of one’s
society (even if on occasions one feels it is one’s society not oneself that is
wrong), then one must make reference in one’s actions to the standards, values, criteria, etc., embodied in its ways of speaking, in its modes of acceptable communication. All our practical conduct should be informed by the ‘guidance’ they give; one cannot as an individual transcend them. They cannot be ‘refuted’ like scientific theories: by expected outcomes, based upon them, failing to occur. For if, as ordinary persons, our interpersonal projects fail, we do not question the validity of our knowledge of the workings of social life at large, in fact we do just the opposite: we put it to use once again in attempting to discover the possible reasons for our failure – perhaps the task we set the person was too difficult, their ability insufficient, or the rewards too small, etc. In other words, what is at stake at a practical level is not the validity of our knowledge but the validity of our actions, whether the procedures proposed in attempting to bring off a desired outcome will work or not. Parents with their children, bosses with their workers, governments with those they rule over, even psychologists with their subjects, all attempt to influence people’s behaviour by manipulating the conditions under which they expect the behaviour they desire to occur.

Hence the ambiguity of the psychologist’s position: they make use of the social-psychological knowledge implicit in their common sense, not only to formulate explicit theories about the conditions conducive to certain kinds of behaviour in certain kinds of people, but also to devise conditions supposedly appropriate for their test, conditions which require social skills to establish. The ambiguity of their position is revealed if their procedures fail to produce the outcome predicted by the theory: was the theory wrong or the procedure inadequate? The results of social-psychological research thus may have not just one use, as is commonly supposed (namely in the empirical testing of theories), but two, for they may also be used as

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<th>TABLE 1</th>
<th>The dual function of data</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>seen as data</strong></td>
<td><strong>as indicators</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>function</td>
<td>to confirm theory</td>
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<tr>
<td>evaluated by</td>
<td>formal match with deduced predictions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>standard referred to in evaluation</td>
<td>explicitly stated, but initially uncertain principles</td>
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<td>(see Schutz’s account of stocks of knowledge – 1964, pp. 72–3)</td>
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indicators of the efficacy of a procedure in provoking a particular outcome. Table 1 illustrates some of the major differences between these two uses, i.e. between ‘data’ actually seen as data, and the results obtained being seen as indicative of a practical skill at managing action outcomes.

Although they ought to be distinct, these two uses of experimental results are completely confounded in social psychological research, at the moment – due to the insistence that social psychology exists in only one guise, as a ‘theoretical-empirical’ science seeking context-free principles (when it must exist primarily, but not exclusively, as a context-dependent ‘practical-descriptive’ science concerned with accounting for, and the criticism of, our accounting practices – see next section). Besides producing a great deal of methodological muddle into the field (e.g. over the proper place and function of experiments: as to whether they serve to test theories, or merely to provide ‘hints’ about the texture of our social life – see Tajfel and Fraser, 1978, p. 12), the most bewildering consequence is that the response to experimental results can be somewhat arbitrary; their empirical force as data may be accepted seemingly almost as a matter of taste or preference. Thus, as Joynson (1974, pp. 11–13) and Gergen (1980, p. 71), as well as many others have pointed out, circumstances can always be found in which many supposedly significant findings in social psychology can be completely reversed.

Take research in the area of interpersonal attraction for instance: the obvious proposition that ‘like attracts like’ (in some circumstances) can be matched with the equally obvious proposition that (in others) ‘opposites attract’. McGuire (1973, p. 449) remarks, in discussing the dilemma raised by just such an example:

Both the original obvious hypothesis and the obvious reversed hypothesis are reasonable and valid in the sense that if all our premises obtained, then our conclusion would pretty much have to follow.

It would have to follow, not because of the causal relations involved, operating irrespective of people’s interests and desires, but because if all our premises obtained, then they would constitute the conditions under which the behaviour in question ought normally to occur (if other circumstances do not intervene); that is how normal people would choose to behave, to retain their membership of their society. If they did not, then we would seek the reasons why.

In other words, the problem here is the familiar one of knowing full well that particular modes of human being and action are real possibilities, but of not knowing the particular conditions required for their actual
instantiation. Depending upon circumstances it is certainly true that both ‘like attracts like’ and ‘opposites attract’; but upon what circumstances? These, of course, can be investigated. But it is an investigation of a practical kind to do with ‘managing’ an interpersonal situation, and not at all like that involved in testing scientific theories. Thus, as McGuire (p. 449) points out, what an experiment may test

is not whether the hypothesis is true but rather whether the experimenter is a sufficiently ingenious stage manager to produce in the laboratory conditions which demonstrate that an obviously true hypothesis is correct.

That is, it can be simply a test of their ‘management’ skills. (Their ‘theories’ remain invulnerable in such tests, for what is actually claimed theoretically is never systematically and explicitly described — Harré and Secord, 1972, pp. 35–36).

Many of the ‘hypothesis testing’ investigations in social psychological research are in fact, McGuire maintains, of this kind, i.e. tests using hypotheses already known to be tautologically true in the context assumed by those testing them; hence, rather than ‘finding’ the results they obtain, psychologists can often be said to have ‘made’ them. This need not in itself disqualify such investigations as scientific investigations, for, as Lakatos (1970) shows, it is a benign feature of all major scientific research programmes that they are anchored in a ‘hard core’ set of principles which are irrefutable in principle — a point we shall be at pains to argue also. In psychology, however, the consequences seem not to be benign, for as McGuire (1973, p. 449) adds:

Experiments on such hypotheses naturally turn out to be more like demonstrations than tests. If the experiment does not come out ‘right’, then the researcher does not say that the hypothesis is wrong but rather that something was wrong with the experiment, and he corrects and revises it . . . .

In other words, while the avowed aim of psychological researchers may be to make their notions of truth conform to things as they are, they in fact often work to bring things into conformity with their notions of truth. This is why the consequences of Lakatosian irrefutability cannot be looked upon as benign in psychology: people can be a source of change in one another.

Indeed, as already mentioned, it is a well-known although little codified fact of social life, probably because it is considered reprehensible, that people can manipulate one another’s behaviour by establishing the
conditions necessary for desired outcomes to occur. Because he did attempt to set out explicitly, as if in a 'workshop manual', the conditions in politics necessary for achieving one's desired ends, Machiavelli was called diabolical (though later the devil was called Machiavellian). In his advice to princes, Machiavelli (1961) suggests, for instance, that the wise prince should, if his authority is uncertain and he requires the faithful support of his people in time of adversity, 'devise ways by which his citizens are always and in all circumstances dependent on him and on his authority; and then they will always be faithful to him' (p. 71). However, it must be added here that establishing the conditions necessary for a particular outcome does not mean that people will necessarily produce the required outcome; whether they actually do so or not is still an empirical matter. Just as with Newton's laws of motion, other factors may intervene to modify the outcomes such principles describe. Recollect, for instance, the first law which states: 'Every body will continue in a state of rest or uniform motion (unless acted upon by an external force).' Nonetheless certain conditions may be necessary to the performance of an action, even if they are not always sufficient.

Researchers have attempted to escape from the 'epistemological worry', as McGuire terms it, about manipulational laboratory experiments not being adequate tests of theories, by attempting to test their theories in natural settings (e.g. Argyle's (1969) 'new look'). But as McGuire points out, the same problem arises again. Researchers failing to confirm their hypotheses may still say that they unwisely chose an inappropriate natural setting in which to test them. Thus, if this deep defect in what he terms 'theory relevant research' is to be overcome, a more fundamentally new outlook is required, he feels, than that provided by research in naturalistic settings. I agree: however I think a quite different solution is required.

I shall suggest that psychologists must turn away in large part from 'theory relevant research', at least in the sense in which such research is currently conducted, towards research of quite a different kind, towards what one might call 'practice relevant' research: an activity in which one conducts oneself primarily as a person, and only secondarily, still within a personal context, as a scientist. But psychologists cannot forget their professional status as members of academic institutions, with all the rights and duties which such a status implies. This inevitably puts constraints upon what legitimately they may undertake to do: their task as agents in a social world is not to 'make' or to 'do' (see the section below for the sense of these terms), but to talk: to describe what is, as well as what might be possible, and the conditions of its possibility, and thus by implication to criticize current forms of life — they do not themselves have a brief to make changes (hence the non-benign character of much psychological research
 Accounting Practices and Their Paradigms

in which people are 'made' to take on this or that character under the guise of 'finding' the truth about them). Only if psychologists are clear as to their role at any one moment, as to whether it is as a person, a professional academic, a professional scientist, a human engineer, etc., can the dilemmas of reflexivity be avoided.

Accounting: Evaluating Action Outcomes

I shall propose in the next chapter that we approach psychology as a 'practical science' in Aristotle's sense of that term. Primarily its stance is non-empirical in the sense of not having anything to do with the testing of theories; this does not mean, however, that it cannot support a body of research, nor that the accounts (of our accounting practices) it offers cannot be warranted or evaluated. The research activity it gives rise to is, as we shall see, very like, but crucially different from, artificial-intelligence (AI) research in cognitive psychology. As such, it is an activity which can be justified in many of the same ways as AI (Newell, 1973; Allport, 1975; Boden, 1977; Cohen, 1977; Johnson-Laird and Wason, 1977). Workers in AI claim: (1) that experimentation cannot lead to the formulation of theories, as experiments are only to test theories once they have been formulated (Johnson-Laird and Wason, 1977); and (2) there are some quite specific a priori criteria arising out of common-sense considerations which any psychological model should satisfy, and these must be formulated as a system of necessary relations before any rigorous empirical work can begin (Cohen, 1977, Ch. 1). However, rather than building models of 'inner' psychological processes, we shall be concerned with investigations into ways in which accounts of our actual accounting practices might be systematically formulated. The failure to recognize the necessity for such research, and the misunderstanding of its nature, arises from the fact that psychologists still conceive of themselves as studying a field of objective phenomena, similar to that studied by other sciences. Whereas the phenomena they study are not only conscious phenomena, they are phenomena which are only manifested within the confines of an everyday form of social life; rather than objects, they are activities, requiring description by verbs, not nouns. Thus the behaviour of interest to psychologists is not only unlike that of billiard balls and planets, it is also unlike that of animals, for ultimately it is accountable behaviour. It is the behaviour of ordinary people in everyday life, in which it is normally necessary for those performing it to know, at least in some sense, what they are doing, and to be able to give an account of it or to justify it to others in some way, if called upon to do so (see Mills, 1940; Garfinkel, 1967; Scott
and Lyman, 1968; Harré and Secord, 1972; McHugh et al., 1974; Harré, 1979, for accounts of accounts, accounting and accountability).

Although accounts serve to render objects and events ‘visibly-rational-and-reportable-for-all-practical-purposes’, to repeat Garfinkel’s formulation, to account for one’s behaviour is not to illustrate, depict or represent it; it is not to repeat in some way the same behaviour again. It is to do something else, something different in addition to what one has already done; it is to communicate something about what one’s behaviour was, is, or might be – for as Harré and Secord (1972, p. 159) point out, an account may be anticipatory, retrospective or contemporaneous with the sequence of things done to which it refers. As such, it stands in quite a different relation to the behaviour for which it accounts than a causal theory of that behaviour: a theory explains the behaviour in terms of events, or things existing prior to it, while an account is merely a more explicit description of what the action actually is. In other words, it serves to describe the action as something explainable within the familiar framework of everyday life. Often it does this by being an indicator of future action, i.e. by describing the goal at which the person was trying to aim in the future by their action at that moment. Or it may serve to justify people’s behaviour by revealing the criteria or standards they applied in their ‘tryings’, the grounds of their action, thus to assure questioners of their action’s acceptability, legitimacy, appropriateness, etc. As Ossorio (1973) shows in his ‘parametric formulation of behaviour’ (see Shotter & Burton, 1983), according to the context in which an account is requested, it indicates what the behaviour is, by mentioning whatever is necessary to distinguish it from other behaviours with which it might be confused; hence, the account may explicitly refer to any one or a number of different parameters or dimensions in terms of which actions may be individuated. This does not mean to say that, as descriptions, our accounts are formulated simply in superficial terms, referring merely to observable behaviour or private experiences. They are formulated in psychological terms; they refer to people’s states of mind, to their beliefs, motives, desires, perceptions, imaginings and suchlike – and the task is not to discover what the objects are to which such terms refer, but to understand what can be done by their use (and what it is which makes such an activity possible) in everyday life.

People cannot of course account for all their conduct, nor need they be able to. In fact, it is usually immediately evident as to what they are doing. It is only normal to request them to account for it if it is not immediately obvious what they are up to. Indeed, the very existence or possibility of being motivated to request an account arises out of the
fact that, rather than puzzlement, the more usual state of affairs is of understanding people's actions perfectly well. A successful account of human activity in everyday life restores that understanding. It serves to construct a relation between unusual, unanticipated, special, puzzling, untoward, suspicious or enigmatic conduct and a more familiar pattern or framework of intelligibility. And it is in this sense that accounts may be said to explain problematic conduct: by making it clear in relation to such a framework, what that conduct is, i.e. what part it plays within the framework. In the process, the intelligibility of such a framework, though not explicitly articulated, is taken for granted as a directly experienced reality (Ryle, 1963; Schutz, 1962, 1964, 1967).

This reliance upon a body of taken-for-granted intuitive or common-sense knowledge, or as Schutz (1964) terms it 'the stock of knowledge at hand', existing prior to any observing or theorizing that we might do, is crucial. It is the conceptual capacities we acquire during our socialization which allow us, as autonomous adults, to make sense of and account ourselves for our actions in socially acceptable terms. One cannot oneself be said to know or to be doing anything unless one already knows in some sense what it is that one is doing, saying or thinking; all such activities presuppose conceptual capacities (Gauld and Shotter, 1977), i.e. an ability to talk about or to represent one's actions in one way or another publicly. Although not always ultimately decisive (as powerful authorities may play a decisive role also in defining what it is one is said to be doing), such a reliance upon a body of taken-for-granted knowledge is usually sufficient for most practical purposes. Accounts (explanations) may be evaluated by reference to it, by 'measuring' them up, so to speak, against the standards provided by the tacit or intuitive knowledge they are meant to specify and describe, to check whether they do in fact succeed in explicitly specifying them appropriately (see Chomsky, 1965, for a more formal account of such evaluation or justification procedures with respect to linguistic descriptions). Thus central to the activity of giving accounts is reference to people's intuitive knowledge of the normative structure of everyday social life, and the fact that anything intelligible we say about human conduct is open to evaluation as right or wrong, accurate or inaccurate, adequate or inadequate, true or false, good or bad, etc. Such judgements are not mere expressions of prejudice, but are grounded on reasons which may themselves be evaluated as 'good' or 'bad' in their turn, and so on. In fact, such evaluations of accounts are commonplace and may be aimed at satisfying many distinct kinds of criteria (see section below).
To repeat a number of points made earlier: as persons, psychologists know how to stage-manage the production of certain experimental outcomes because, after all, they have grown up into, and currently live within, the same system of social constraints and enablements as those they study. Thus it should come as no surprise that they can, to an extent, manipulate their subjects in the laboratory; such an ability is simply an application of the manipulative skills possessed to a degree by everyone—though some clearly have more talent at it than others. However, if they want to have their conduct as psychologists evaluated as intelligible, rational and legitimate by ordinary people, i.e. by those they study, they must also evaluate it in the same terms as they do. For, as already mentioned, everyday activities are intrinsically reflexive in the sense that they contain within themselves devices, methods or procedures for justifying, explaining, interpreting or in some way making those same activities accountable. The psychologist as a person with a particular role and status is susceptible to this kind of accountability.

This is where the psychologist’s dilemma as a scientist lies. For other scientists do not have evaluations placed upon them by their own subject matter. If other scientists claim, as scientists are prone to do, that ‘X is best explained by supposing that it is not really what it appears to be, namely X, but something else altogether, possibly Y,’ they do not run the risk of self-refutation. For they are not a part of their own subject matter and thus do not have implicitly to include themselves in their claims. Psychologists, however, do run such a risk: they cannot deny certain ‘foundation-tenets of common sense’ (Koch, 1975, p. 5)—e.g. that they are acting, thinking, observing, evaluating, accountable persons—without brooking self-contradiction. They cannot, in other words, conclude from a body of evidence that X is really Y, if by ordinarily taking X to be Y the very activity of drawing such conclusions from such data is precluded by that conclusion—unless, that is, they want to claim that for some reason they really do have special access to processes of understanding, reasoning, observing, etc., unavailable to everyone else, i.e. that they are not included in their own theory. But then, were they to make such a claim, if their knowledge were communicable, their ‘advantage’ could soon be wiped out, and their claim nullified (Scheibe, 1978).

Psychologists’ accounts of human conduct must, therefore, be reflexive, i.e. they must account for the psychologist’s own conduct. Thus the whole psychological endeavour fails if, in their accounting, psychologists neglect or decline to account for their own accounting. Lacking reflexivity, their
explicit accounts of human conduct will conflict with what, in everyday life at large, they do when acting as ordinary persons. In the later chapters of this book I shall offer some accounts of accounts and accounting. With this in mind, it will be useful to make some comments here of a grammatical nature, with the purpose of indicating just some of the different functions accounts may serve in ordinary, everyday affairs. For many of the issues discussed so far are recognized and marked in the structure of ordinary discourse, particularly in the person and tense of verbs.

Grammatical Categories and Accounts:
Person and Tense

Accounts, in rendering phenomena explainable as events or objects within the framework of everyday life reality, may be constructed either from a second- or third-person standpoint. Being related as a second-person to a first-person is quite distinct from being related as a third-person to a first, as all texts upon grammatical categories (e.g. Lyons, 1968) will make clear. Linguistically, first and second persons, even if non-personal or in fact inanimate, are always personified, and related to one another as persons, as beings present to one another in a situation. By contrast: third persons need not be personified (they can be 'its'); nor are they 'present' in themselves, so to speak, to other beings or entities; nor are they necessarily 'in a situation'. Indeed, the category is so non-specific that it may be used to refer to absolutely anything so long as it is external to, or outside of, the agency or situation of first as well as second persons.

Arguably, the three roles are necessary to the possibility of accountable action, its existence being dependent upon people’s capacities as first persons to act, as second persons to monitor their actions as to what they are and what they mean, and as third persons to judge it as acceptable or not, etc., against objective, impersonal standards. They would (all three roles) thus be mutually constitutive and reciprocally determining; i.e. none could exist except in relation to the others.

These grammatical categories may be used in accounts to mark an important distinction: that between accounts of those occasions when people are present to or immersed in a situation with things they experience as being other than but nonetheless like themselves (i.e. other agencies), and accounts of those occasions when they experience other entities as being both outside of and quite unlike themselves (i.e. as objects). Objects afford us our experience of them without taking any part in the matter themselves; our experience of them simply arises within us,
while our experience of other agencies arises in the relation between them and us, with them contributing along with ourselves to the outcome. The relation is thus mutual, and its products are the joint products of those actively involved in it. Objects may be experienced in immediate perception as in some sense complete; agencies in being known only in their actions are experienced — unless there is a known prior limit upon what they can do — as boundless, as in some sense free agents. There is thus an intrinsic uncertainty as to their natures, as to whether they can be completely known or not. Thus accounts given in answer to questions of the kind ‘What are you doing?’ referring to second persons, will clearly have quite a different quality to them from those, such as ‘What is he (it) doing?’, which refer to third persons. And people’s expectations regarding them will thus vary accordingly: for instance, as to whether the account supplied is open-ended or not, or refers to someone or something ‘inside’ one’s situation or not, etc.

Another grammatical category of significance concerns the tense of verbs. As Lyons (1968, pp. 304–6) notes, it is usual but misleading to relate a verb’s tense to time-relations, as to whether the action is past, present or future. For one could equally well in a ‘timeless’ fashion use tense to mark whether one was delivering an account as a report, an expectation, a telling or an avowal. Thus without committing ourselves with respect to the temporal location of an action, the aspect of tense of interest to us is to do with the distinction between the perfect and imperfect tenses, between completed and still ongoing action. In response to the question ‘What are you doing?’ (continuous action) one may reply by describing the overall goal at which one is aiming in one’s current action. While in response to ‘What have you done?’ (completed action), on some occasions at least, one may simply point and say ‘That’ (referring to the objective result of one’s action). As scientists, psychologists are concerned very largely with completed actions from a third-person, external-observer point of view; persons, however, are concerned very largely with ongoing, incomplete activity from a second-person standpoint, with the meaningful rather than the objective properties of people’s actions. See chapter 9 for a discussion of the distinction between accounting ‘for’ and accounting ‘in’ action.

Rights and Duties: The Moral Ecology of Everyday Life

The rights and duties associated with these grammatical categories will also influence the style and function of expected accounts. In everyday life, one may be a first-person performer, a second-person ‘understander’ or
recipient, or a third-person observer, judge or critic, or ‘object’ of another’s action. As a second-person recipient one has a status quite different from those in third-person roles: one is involved in and required to maintain the action; one must attend to what is intended and ignore what just happens (what is not intended). As second-persons in everyday life, we do not have the right to step out of our ‘personal involvement’ with other people, and attend to aspects of their person to which they do not intend us to attend — and to ask them to account for matters for which they do not deem themselves responsible. In the ecology of daily social life, there seems to be a moral sanction against such a shifting of roles; unless, that is, one is a physician or psychotherapist, hairdresser or dentist, or suchlike, and then people do intend you to examine the unintended aspects of their behaviour and appearance. The obligation second persons are under, however, does not extend to third persons. Hence our unease when, as first-person performers attempting a tricky interpersonal encounter, we notice ourselves observed by a third-person outsider; we experience ourselves as someone else’s ‘object’, as under surveillance, fearful that we shall be judged and questioned about something over which we have no control. The rights, duties, privileges and obligations of the different ‘persons’ in everyday social life are such as to give rise to two kinds of accounting: (1) that from within the flow of action, when one clarifies one’s action as a first person to a second person in some way by further action (see chapter 9, and Shotter, 1981a); and (2) that in which one breaks off, or is uninvolved in the flow of action, and delivers one’s account as a third-person outsider (Harré and Secord, 1972).

A theory of accounts and accounting must make clear the relations between these two kinds of account from these two different standpoints, for currently they are confounded, and this leaves psychologists unclear as to their own role and status: are they finders or makers? If they are to be just finders, that does not preclude them from finding out, of course, about how making is done. And my point in making these distinctions is this: the conduct of social life is based upon a right we assign to first-persons to tell us about themselves and their experiences, and to have what they say taken seriously as meaning what they intend it to mean (Cavell, 1969) — as long as we feel they can observe a duty both to distinguish in their conduct those activities for which they are responsible from those for which they are not, and to execute the former in an intelligible and legitimate manner. All our valid forms of inquiry are based upon such a right, and it is this right which I aim to reassert. For it seems to me the authority of first-persons has been usurped in recent times by the third-person, external observer position. Thus, if this book is read as a treatise aimed at increasing the authority of that position yet further, it will be misunderstood.
A Science of Psychology: Theoretical or Practical?

As the 'practice relevant' approach I want to discuss can be characterized in terms of distinctions already drawn between different kinds of 'science' by Aristotle in his *Metaphysics*, it will be worthwhile at this point to describe his classification of the 'sciences' (see Joachim, 1951, upon whom I rely heavily for this account; and A. E. Taylor, 1955). This will allow us to see the important differences between 'theory relevant' research and a 'practical-descriptive' alternative to it. As my position has been strongly influenced by Harré's (1970a) account of powers and agency, and as he and particularly Bhaskar (1975, 1979) have extended the 'realist' position to which it gives rise in the natural sciences to apply to the human and social sciences, it will be also worthwhile at this point to examine Bhaskar's views in the light of Aristotle's distinction between theoretical and practical sciences. We shall find that, although there is a case to be made out for the unity of the natural and social sciences, in that both involve a hermeneutical, interpretive component, the fact that they remain 'theoretical' sciences, satisfying a requirement for experience-independent knowledge, precludes them from using the form of understanding required to understand the practical actions of particular individuals. In short, I reject Bhaskar's 'transcendental realism' and substitute for it a 'mundane realism'.

**Aristotle's Classification of the Sciences: Theoretical, Practical and Productive**

Aristotle distinguishes three different kinds of 'science': the theoretical (speculative), practical and productive sciences. Now, we would only
apply the term ‘science’ to an activity if a body of theoretical knowledge is involved in it (such that different sciences would involve different bodies of theory), so such a threefold distinction for us would involve three different kinds of theory or modes of theorizing. Aristotle’s distinction works, however, in quite a different way; our way of distinguishing would for him only distinguish between three ‘theoretical’ sciences. He, however, is concerned in his classification to cover the whole sphere of people’s intelligent activity, their doings and makings, as well as their contemplating and speculating.

The concept of knowledge he inherited from Socrates and Plato was of knowledge as being inseparable from the power of doing and making. In modern philosophy, by contrast, we have, as Anscombe (1957, p. 57) puts it:

An incorrigibly contemplative concept of knowledge. Knowledge must be something that is judged as such by being in accordance with the facts. The facts, reality, are prior, and dictate what is to be said, if it is to be knowledge. And this is the explanation of the utter darkness in which we find ourselves. For if there are two knowledges— one by observation, the other in intention— then it looks as if there must be two objects of knowledge; but if one says the objects are the same, one looks hopelessly for the different mode of contemplative knowledge in acting, as if there were a very queer and special sort of seeing eye in the middle of the acting.

This Cartesian view of knowledge— as if it were like an inner object requiring an inner eye to read its characteristics off, so to speak— renders practical action incomprehensible; but it was not Aristotle’s view. Neither, for Aristotle, was being thoughtful something one did by withdrawing from action into thought. For thought (i.e. intelligence, reasoning— as the distinguishing characteristic of human beings— permeated all of people’s being and doing; and they could just as easily conduct themselves thoughtfully in social life, as craft an object thoughtfully, or thoughtfully ponder and speculate upon the nature of the universe. Thus for Aristotle, any department of human activity— speculation, conduct, production— could be called a ‘science’ as long as it was alive with true thinking (see also Macmurray, 1957). What Aristotle covers with his classification, then, are the ways in which people can exercise their intelligence, and the different goals that they can achieve in so doing. To slightly adapt Searle’s (1979a) useful ‘intentional’ terminology: people can be said to be aiming at achieving in their activities mind-to-world directions of fit (in speculation); mind-to-mind (in conduct) and world-to-mind (in production).
The accounts he provides of the different attitudes of mind and different procedures involved in the different ‘sciences’ can be specified in more detail: (1) In a theoretical science, one’s attitude of mind is contemplative. The ‘scientific person’, in this restricted sense of the term, is entirely concerned with knowing or understanding, in a way which leaves them untouched in their being by such experiences. Socially and developmentally, they must already be accounted as individuals who know their way around, so to speak, within their society’s accounting practices; they already understand its ways of making sense of things. Thus they can play the part of spectators of what there is in it – and is there independently of their individual wishes or opinions. Persons adopting such a stance neither desire, nor are they able, to alter the truth of things. Their object is not to bring things into harmony with their notions, but as already mentioned, to achieve a mind-to-world direction of fit in their accounts of things. If such persons experiment and manipulate things, their purpose is still to observe a process, not to modify it. It is the expression of a thing’s own nature, independent of any impositions they may make upon it, which they wish to understand.

(2) In the practical (doing) and productive (making) ‘sciences’ – the art of life or conduct, and the crafts and fine arts respectively – people’s object is either to live or to act in certain ways, or to make or to do certain things: it is not to understand them, except as a means of action or production – and then they require the help of ‘practical-theory’, of images, metaphors or paradigm cases (see below). In these ‘sciences’, people are concerned with the sphere of process or change: not with the unalterable nature of things. They are concerned not with how things are, but with how they might be other than what they are, with how they might change them. Thus the source of the change in the people or the objects dealt with or encountered in such ‘sciences’ is not seen as being in them, but as being in the actions of the persons acting upon them. It is their will, their deliberate decision or purpose, which produces the changes in the entities ‘outside’ them which are called ‘their’ acts, for they are acts for which they can be held responsible. Hence Aristotle speaks of the practical and the productive ‘sciences’ as powers or faculties in the sense that their possession works as ‘a source of change in others’ (see Harré on ‘powers’ below and in chapter 4). And this is the point of such ‘sciences’: in relation to them, people should not be seen as already socially or developmentally (completely) knowledgeable about their society’s methods or ways of sense-making. There must still be various phenomena which puzzle them, at which they do not know how to be spectators, phenomena which they have not yet learned how to ‘see’ (i.e. perceive) in a properly accountable manner. It is the function of
practical-theory to change them in their being, to indicate to them such ways or methods of ‘seeing’.

In psychology, we are of course interested in doing and making, as well as in understanding. And the distinctions Aristotle produces will be found relevant in all that follows. However, as I pointed out above, as professional academics our task is not ourselves to do or to make, but to talk: to produce accounts of how persons account to themselves for themselves. And although it is clear that one might argue for three different modes of psychology, exemplifying Aristotle’s three kinds of ‘science’, in what follows I shall be arguing primarily just for one, the practical-descriptive mode – a mode which elsewhere (Shotter, 1975) I have called a ‘moral science of action’. To argue otherwise would seem to me to be suggesting that the arena of public discourse should be bypassed, and changes produced in society without public consent.

Transcendental Realism: Agencies as the Subject-Matter of a Science

Recently, Bhaskar (1975, 1979), following Harré (1970a and b), has set out a whole philosophy of science in which he describes the properties that people and societies must possess if they are to be possible ‘objects’ of scientific knowledge for us. Essentially, he suggests, they must be understood as causal agencies, or generative mechanisms with causal powers, which can only be known as such, in their actions, and which cannot be shown merely by the observation of regularities to exist, i.e. they are to be known by their powers, their capacities to bring about material changes in other things. As Bhaskar’s approach takes the problem of agency seriously, and claims to establish the possibility of studying social ‘objects’ in the same way as natural ones, discussion of his position here will serve to clarify further the issues at stake in still approaching psychology as a ‘theory-relevant’ enterprise, rather being content to conduct it as merely a practical-descriptive activity.

As ‘experimental’ sciences, individual, social and developmental psychology modelled themselves essentially upon a positivist view of the natural sciences. Many (e.g. Koch, 1959; Harré, 1970b; Harré and Secord, 1972; Bhaskar, 1975, 1979) now regard such a move as mistaken: not only because it results in a science inadequate to the facts of human being and action, but because it also is based upon an incorrect view of the natural sciences. In criticizing positivist doctrines – as well as their hermeneutical rivals, which he claims also accepted uncritically the same
mistaken account of the natural sciences – Bhaskar suggests (1) that, rather than discovering constant conjunctions of events, the goal of all sciences, whether natural or social, is to discover intelligible connections between real things at a deeper level. Thus, he claims, the proper subject-matter of all the sciences is not observable regularities, but the things which work, under the appropriate conditions, to produce or generate them. Such things are best thought of as active causal agencies with causal powers which exist and endure as the things they are, whether their powers are exercised or not; and which, when they do act, always act in their normal fashion, whether the appropriate (closed) conditions obtain for their lawful behaviour to be immediately perceptible or not. So, although neither their regular effects nor the things themselves may be directly observable as such, they may still be ‘accounted’ real objects – transcendentally real in the Kantian sense of being the conditions of possibility for the phenomena observed – and treated as existing on the ground of their capacity to bring about material changes in the world. On this criterion, as Bhaskar puts it, ‘to be is not to be perceived, but (in the last instance) just to be able to do’ (1979 p. 16); and it is in their doings that such agencies may be known. Such a position is a ‘realist’ one in the sense that, as we shall see, such agencies must be accounted as actually existing, in some sense at least, independently of our attempts to investigate and describe them – although in what sense that is, is the most difficult aspect of Bhaskar’s position to characterize.

Another of his claims is implicit in his statement that ‘to be is to do’; to state it explicitly: (2) Epistemological questions should be clearly distinguished from ontological ones. To claim that the aim of science is to discover observable regularities is, he suggests, to confuse epistemological questions with ontological ones; such an aim leaves the material of the world undescribed. Furthermore, in the collection of data, it covers up what he calls an ‘ontological gap’ between actual causal laws on the one hand, and the evidence for them in empirical observations on the other: for in fact, (a) as products, surface regularities need not reflect in any simple way the operation of the processes producing them; and (b) a natural order of things may endure, and the laws describing their individual operations continue to hold even though conditions are such (i.e. open rather than closed) that their regular and orderly conduct is unobservable in their combined operation.

Only under certain special conditions – i.e. closed, experimental conditions – can that ‘ontological gap’ be closed, and, with all else held constant, just the operation of the thing in question observed.
scientists produce a pattern of events. There is nothing in itself special about this. For, as causal agents, we are co-responsible for events all the time . . . . What distinguishes the phenomena the scientist actually produces out of the totality of the phenomena he could produce is that, when his experiment is successful, it is an index of what he does not produce. A real distinction between the objects of experimental investigation, such as causal laws, and patterns of events is thus a condition of the intelligibility of experimental activity. And it can be seen that the Humean account depends upon a misidentification of causal laws with their empirical grounds . . . . The objects of experimental activity are not events and their conjunctions, but structures, generative mechanisms and the like (forming the real basis of causal laws), which are normally out of phase with them.

But of course we not only experimentally establish, we practically apply our knowledge – in systems, which may be characterized as open, where no constant conjunctions of events obtain.

It follows from this that causal laws must be analysed as tendencies which only manifest themselves as empirical invariances under the relatively special, closed conditions of an experiment. Can appropriate conditions be set up to investigate social phenomena in the same way as natural ones? Yes and no.

In Bhaskar’s view, as we have seen, there is no difference between the natural and the social sciences regarding the nature of their subject matter. But what does distinguish them is that it is much more difficult to study social things – people and societies – under closed conditions. Such conditions distort their normal mode of being, the only mode of being in which they remain the things they are. For example, adults in a society have a duty to act intelligibly and responsibly, in ways which relate to other people’s concerns and make sense to them. But as long as they observe that duty, they are free to act as they please. To put limitations upon them is to deny them that right; it is to damage their status as persons. Similarly, one can show that a society under closed conditions is a different kind of object than when open. Under closed conditions, both people and societies cease to be what they are normally. Thus as a consequence, Bhaskar asserts, (3) the social sciences are denied, in principle, decisive test situations for their theories. They thus cannot be
experimental sciences. As the criteria for the rational confirmation of
theories cannot be predictive, it must be exclusively explanatory, i.e.
thoretical entities are justified (a) by the way in which they make observed
phenomena intelligible, and (b) by the way in which absurd, incoherent,
counterintuitive, or counterfactual results follow if such entities are
denied. For example, a child otherwise seemingly normal fails to learn to
talk. An explanatory theory as to the cause might be that in order to learn
to talk, the child requires certain social conditions, conditions which
constitute the required ‘developmental opportunities’. A theory of ‘de-
velopmental opportunities’ is confirmed when it is found (a) that, indeed,
all those in his immediate surroundings are dumb, and are unable to
provide such opportunities, and (b) it makes no sense to argue that he or
she could still learn in the absence of such opportunities. The assumption
of his normality is confirmed by his beginning to learn to talk when placed
amongst people who can talk. (Note that the possibility of explanation
rests upon prior knowledge as to what is normal here; this will be a feature
in all the explanatory processes I shall discuss below.) As Bhaskar stresses,
although confirmation by explanation may influence the subjective con-
fidence with which we hold scientific theories, it has no ontological
significance at all: our theories are not produced from the superficial
effects we observe. But what about the relation between such things and
our theories of them?

Distinguishing between ontological and epistemological questions, be-
sides leading Bhaskar to clarify the proper conditions required for exper-
imentation, also leads him to distinguish between what he calls the real
objects of science and the cognitive objects known to us in our theories of
them. Thus (4) scientific knowledge is, he claims, knowledge of real objects
which exist and can act independently of our knowledge of them – these
are what he calls the ‘intransitive’ objects of such knowledge. But if we are
to avoid the absurdity of such knowledge being produced ex nihilo, then it
must depend upon the use of pre-existing cognitive materials – what he
calls the ‘transitive’ objects of knowledge. Although the objects of our
knowledge exist and act independently of our individual wishes, beliefs,
opinions and desires, they can nonetheless only be known to us in historically
specific social forms. In Bhaskar’s view, then, no science can be solely
an individual, third-person enterprise. While it may entail the use of third-
person standpoints (from which to observe forms and patterns), and
reference to third-person ‘intransitive’ objects, as a social process it inevi-
tably contains first- and second-person positions as well, along with, he
claims, their associated ‘transitive’ objects. The knowledge it produces
must be, as he puts it, ‘a produced means of production with transitive
objects existing independently of it’ (1979, p. 19).
It is at this point that the difference between Bhaskar’s position and the one which I have adopted begins to become clear. His concerns, clearly, are with the social sciences as theoretical sciences, in Aristotle’s sense of that term. He is concerned to produce, as a result of his scientific activity, theoretical objects, the ‘transitive’ changing objects, which give access to the unchanging experience-independent ‘intransitive’ objects he thinks of as constituting social reality. But recall here briefly Anscombe’s dilemma quoted earlier. Clearly Bhaskar accepts two knowledges: one known to us transcendentally (in intention), gained by us in our practical but socially accountable encounters with the phenomena in question, and the other in our theoretical accounts, gained by us making scientific observations — the first gained, I would say, as an unintended consequence of the ‘joint action’ (see chapter 8) in which we are involved, the second as an intended consequence of our own individual actions. With Bhaskar’s formulation, we again find ourselves in the darkness of which Anscombe speaks, for (a) the relation between the two is unclear, and (b) as Anscombe points out, a ‘queer and special sort of seeing eye in the middle of the acting’ seems to be required if knowledge of Bhaskar’s ‘intransitive’ experience-independent objects is to inform our actions, and to inform them, of course, in a socially accountable way. For in psychology (as I discuss in the next section) our talk of such things as our emotions, etc., itself works to constitute what our emotions are, and as such, as an accounting practice, works as a real determinant in our actions. In other words, the idea of experience-independent objects is difficult to uphold in psychology.

To avoid this dilemma, a more appropriate account of intentionality is required than that given by Bhaskar (1979, p. 44), merely in terms of people’s ability, not only to control and monitor their performances, but to monitor their monitoring. For, as we shall see, an ability to report on and to account for one’s performances need play no part in their initial shaping. The intentionality of action is itself such that — in being directed upon an object (or as Searle would say, in being ‘fitted’ to one), whether any such object exists or not — it is intrinsically informed by the context into which it is directed; no reference to any objective things is necessary at all, whether ‘inner’ or ‘outer’ (see chapters 8 and 11).

Mundane Realism and Practical-Theory in a Psychology of Everyday Life

Bhaskar argues for the possibility of naturalism, for an essential unity of method in the natural and social or human sciences. Whether he does so successfully or not, in the social accountability view I am proposing here
he fails to account rationally for its adoption; in C. Taylor’s (1980) terms, which I will elucidate below, he fails to make explicit its ‘desirability characteristics’. Clearly, the ‘scientific’ mode of accountability Bhaskar outlines is not the only mode there is; others exist and have other aims, other implicit intentions; and we choose between them in terms of what we find significant for ourselves at the time of our choosing. While claiming, essentially, that sciences create in their own traditions and practices their own criteria by which they evaluate the theoretical entities which they propose as real, he seems to adduce only historical and pragmatic ones in justification of the overall stance he proposes. However, if our reality is constituted for us by the ways we commit ourselves to talking about it in our attempts to account for it, what kind of reality is it which Bhaskar’s way of talking would lead us to constitute?

As C. Taylor (1980) argues, one of the requirements which has traditionally been seen as central to science being science, is the ‘requirement of absoluteness’, a criterion realism satisfies:

that the task of science is to give an account of the world as it is, independent of the meanings it might have for human subjects, or how it figures in their experience. (1980, p. 31)

An adequate scientific account cannot be about things which exist only in people’s experience. Thus: since Galileo said in a famous passage of The Assayer in 1629, ‘tastes, odours, colours and so on are no more than mere names . . . they reside only in consciousness,’ such things have been denied a place in a proper science of real objects. But are not tastes, odours, colours and so on, real determinants in how we act in the world? At least, is it not the case that it is perfectly legitimate in everyday life to account for some of our actions in these terms? Similarly: in accounting for others, we talk of our emotions, intuitions, understandings, aspirations, values, etc. These words may not ‘stand for’ things, but they are clearly an effective currency in the conduct of social exchanges (Mills, 1940; Wittgenstein, 1953, 1980). They may not denote any entities ‘in’ an individual, but they can nonetheless ‘indicate’ or ‘index’ (Bar-Hillel, 1954) an individual’s real commitments, their powers and tendencies, the real point of their actions for them, in terms accountable to others. Hence, in our attempts to understand someone, these are the real things we want to know about.

The realism being proposed here might, to contrast with Bhaskar’s transcendental realism, be called simply a ‘mundane realism’, for it suggests that the ways of making sense of things indexed by the terms people use in their accounting practices, or which are otherwise indicated
'in' their actions (see chapter 9), really are the terms in which they are trying to conduct their affairs. They 'point to' the things which make an action desirable for them (or what makes it undesirable); to understand it, we need to grasp the appropriate 'desirability characterizations', as Taylor calls them. For a person, we need:

to understand [what we call] his emotions, his aspirations, what he finds admirable and contemptible, what he loathes, what he yearns for, and so on. Understanding doesn't mean sharing these emotions, aspirations, loathings, etc., but it does mean seeing the point of them, seeing what is here which could be aspired to, loathed, etc. Seeing the point means grasping the objects concerned under their desirability characterizations.

To use the language made familiar by phenomenology, understanding another person is understanding his world; it is grasping the significance of things for him. (1980, p. 32)

A science which must meet the requirement of absoluteness, claims Taylor, precludes this kind of understanding.

Thus, to claim that there is no essential difference between the social and human sciences on the one hand, and the natural sciences on the other, on the grounds that both possess an interpretative (i.e. hermeneutical) component and that both have unobservable (if not necessarily imperceptible) real objects as their subject matter, is to forget that as theoretical sciences (in Aristotle's terms) the aim of the natural sciences is to account for things in experience-independent terms. This is achieved (Shotter and Burton, 1983) by the use of idealizations and formal systems of interpretation which determine, prior to any empirical investigations, the basic kinds of things being sought, from which the 'world' being investigated is composed. In other words, the mode of accountability pursued in a theoretical science constitutes reality as a 'unity of homogeneity' (see chapter 11), as a 'world' composed from a small number of different kinds of already existing 'fundamental elements'. The human sciences cannot, however, so limit themselves; they cannot afford, by the use of idealizations and systematic formulations to prejudge their discoveries, determining prior to any investigation the 'whatness' of their subject matter (see Introduction). Their task, if they are to be adequate to people's experience, is to understand what different people's 'worlds' contain, and what their relation to their 'world' is. Thus they must discover a way of talking which allows for such a possibility, which constitutes a 'unity of heterogeneity' (see chapter 11), a 'world' in which the elements composing it are all true individuals, all distinguishable from
one another while all, nonetheless, a part of the same unity, and having an essentially indeterminate nature.

How then can we proceed? Our initial task is simply (to put it ironically) to describe our human ways of living: the activities, procedures, methods, discourses, behaviours, nonbehaviours, doings, makings, thinkings, speakings, and so on, in terms of which we come to be as we are, and to do and to talk as we do. Yet how, exactly, should such goings-on and states of affairs be described? The fact is that with the world of everyday social life we are always dealing with a pre-interpreted, a pre-understood reality, a reality already seen as being a reality of a particular kind by the social actors involved in it. Although unformulated and only vaguely conceived, although indefinite and amenable to a multitude of descriptions (Goodman, 1972, 1978), this pre-understood grasp of reality is nonetheless sufficient at a practical level to render social action intelligible to those involved in it, and to mediate interpersonal relations. Thus, if we are to account for human behaviour in everyday life, as the accountable behaviour it is, we must account for it in at least some of the same terms as those in which it is conducted — for irrespective of their inadequacy, their incompleteness, their indirection, their misleading and perhaps downright mistaken nature, such terms serve to determine its nature.

Thus while we might want to criticize certain ways of talking — claims, for instance, that our ‘outer’ expressions are caused by prior events ‘within’ us; that we possess ‘selves’ conceptually separable from ourselves as persons; or that mental events are contained ‘in our minds’ (see chapter 10) — we can do so by appealing, not to any particular method or special source of knowledge, but simply to other forms of usage, to other ways of talking readily available in our everyday accounting practices. For our accounting practices seem to revolve around ‘images’, ‘pictures’, ‘paradigm cases’ (Wittgenstein, 1953; Rosch, 1973; Ossorio, in Davis, 1981), or ‘metaphors’ (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980, and see chapter 10); and the mistakes we make often arise from extending a way of talking beyond the form of life, beyond the activity within which it originally had its currency.

Sometimes, however, criticism will not be sufficient; alternative images or paradigm cases will be required to replace those currently being used. Occasionally, even, new images will have to be introduced de novo, to indicate a form of order, a way of human being, an activity or relationship previously unrecognized. Such terms will have the form of ‘theoretical’ terms (as if denoting the real things at a deeper level investigated in a theoretical science), but they do not have the same functions at all. As they serve the purposes of practice, I shall call what they provide ‘practical-
theory'; but there is no need to use special terms for individual practical-theories other than those already at hand: for they are images, metaphors, paradigm cases, etc. Their primary function, to repeat Garfinkel's dictum, is to work to render unreported and in fact as yet unreportable human phenomena, 'rationally-visible-and-reportable-for-all-practical-purposes, i.e., 'accountable', as organizations of commonplace everyday activities'. Their purpose is not to help people, who are already clear as to what and who they are, simply to gather further information relevant to decisions as to how to act: but to help change people in their being, in their mode of relationship both to themselves and to others. Thus they are not to be evaluated as theoretical terms in a theoretical science, in terms of their correspondence to reality. Their task is not to provide a ground-plan for a mechanism working independently of human consciousness or experience; nor is it their function to finalize a decision, to achieve a universal consensus within a group of individuals who already know their way around in the world, so to speak. Indeed, just the opposite is the case: their function is to promote a form of understanding which, as Wittgenstein (1953, no. 154) suggests, is best described not as the occasioning of a mental process but as the provision of circumstances in which individuals say 'now I know how to go on.' And those circumstances are provided by 'paradigms', etc., which work as instruments in the 'making' of accounting practices (in, as Wittgenstein would put it, the setting up of 'language-games').

As an example of what he means here, he discusses the use of hermetically sealed colour samples as standards in the definition of colour names. The example itself is not a particularly good one, for we already know how to 'see' (perceive) colours, and thus it is not obvious that that is the problem towards which it is directed. But his account of the function of paradigms in the process is instructive. He describes the status of the activity of naming a particular standard colour sample thus:

[It] is an instrument of the language used in ascriptions of colour. In this language-game it is not something that is represented, but is a means of representation...... It is a paradigm in our language-game; something with which comparison is made...... (1953, no. 50, my emphasis)

As a 'means of representation', paradigm forms of accountability suggest to us ways of 'going on' with certain kinds of phenomena which otherwise, at a practical level, would leave us bewildered; they suggest ways of 'seeing' them as being of this or that kind of thing; they indicate or 'point to' a stance we might adopt regarding them. Their function is thus
rhetorical or instructive; they are aimed at changing us. But as ‘transitive’ objects of knowledge, their function cannot be to ‘stand for’ or indicate ‘intransitive’, experience-independent objects, for their function is not to create new practices de novo, but simply to render ‘rationally visible’ what already we do, to provide us with a way of accounting for it⁴ — thus to account more adequately for our ‘whatness’.

And our aim in our attempts to find a form of talk appropriate to our ‘whatness’? It is simply a practical one, a question of increasing our own powers and competencies by, so to speak, understanding how better to find our way about inside our own human accounting practices: ‘A philosophical problem has the form: “I don’t know my way about”’ (Wittgenstein, 1953, no. 123). But if the aim is simply to make clear to ourselves the character of what we already have ‘on hand’, so to speak, what has prevented us from discovering the appropriate ‘principles of navigation’, so to speak, before? ‘A picture held us captive. And we could not get outside it, for it lay in our language and seemed to repeat it to us inexorably,’ Wittgenstein suggests (1953, no. 115), a picture which came from Descartes (see chapter 3). It led us to believe that the paradigmatic way in which we gained knowledge was by the empirical testing of systematic theories. But such theories were only aimed at helping us, not to find our way about ‘inside’ our own social practices, ‘inside’ ourselves, but to give us mastery over our ‘external world’. And what we want to know now is different: we want to know not what might be made to be the case, but what is the case. Thus:

It is not our aim to refine or complete the system of rules for the use of rules in unheard-of ways.

For the clarity that we are aiming at is complete clarity. But this simply means that the philosophical problems should completely disappear. . . . (1953, no. 133)

Yet one is still tempted to say that there must be a system, a complete pattern to be found, for otherwise one’s powers are incomplete, partial and uncertain; one seems to lack mastery, and a theoretical system seems to promise it. Yet isn’t one’s lack of complete mastery one’s true ecological state? One is not powerless, but neither is one successful in everything one does. One has powers, but is not omnipotent; one survives just as much because of others as in spite of them; one lives in fact in interdependence with them. It is that state of affairs in which no one has total mastery which has to be described. But such mere description is difficult because:
one believes that one needs to fill out the facts in order to understand them. It is as if one saw a screen with scattered colour-patches, and said: the way they are here, they are unintelligible; they only make sense when one completes them into a shape. – Whereas I want to say: Here is the whole. (If you complete it, you falsify it.) (Wittgenstein, 1980, vol. 1, no. 257)

Thus: ‘Not to explain, but to accept the psychological phenomena — that is what is difficult’ (1980, vol. 1, no. 509). Yet it is only by such an acceptance, and an attempt to describe things simply as they are, that we can begin to clarify, at least for ourselves if not in any absolute experience-independent terms, the question of ‘what is it to be human?’
3

What is it to be Human?

In chapter 2 I suggested that from a practical point of view, our thinking seems to work in terms of ‘images’, ‘metaphors’ or ‘paradigms’, and that often, when our thinking goes wrong, it is because we have extended the use of an image or metaphor into domains where it ceases to apply. Here I want to examine (1) the image of human being which seems to have informed psychological discourse during its attempts to function as a natural science; and (2) to begin to set out an alternative image, derived from a consideration of what must be the nature of human beings, to live as we know they do from our ways of accounting to ourselves for ourselves in our daily lives: i.e. as individual persons, within a society, with a culture and a history to it, and with the ability to talk about such things.

The Domination of Nature

*The Cartesian Legacy*

Modern philosophy begins with Descartes (1596–1650), and it is largely from his proposals that modern science emerged — but with it came all the problems we face in psychology today. It would be wrong to lay the blame for the confusion in which we currently find ourselves wholly at Descartes’ door, for clearly, in attempting ‘never to accept anything as true that I did not know to be evidently so’ (Descartes, 1968, p. 41), he merely succeeded in giving explicit codification to the implicit ethos of his times (see chapter 10). But nevertheless, it is not to do him an injustice to take his codifications as paradigms for the many others produced at that time. Yet of Descartes’ formulations concerning the nature of mental activities, Ryle (1963, p. 10) in his *Concept of Mind* says:

*it is a part of the thesis of this book that during the three centuries of the epoch of natural science the logical categories in terms of which*
the concepts of mental powers and operations have been co-ordinated
have been wrongly selected. Descartes left as one of his main
philosophical legacies a myth which continues to distort the
continental geography of the subject.

And that is the thesis of this book also.

With equal justice, or injustice, one could have made the same claim
about the legacy of, say, Bacon, Hobbes or Locke, or a host of other writers
and polemicists at the time. For it was between 1500 and 1700 that the
whole western world began to take on the features which, in the dominant
opinion of today, would make it ‘modern’ and ‘progressive’. But, as
Merchant (1980) has shown, those changes were not all caused by
philosophical writings, far from it. Nonetheless, if I had to choose just one
statement by which to characterize the ethos of our modern age, it would be
this one from Descartes’ sixth discourse:

instead of the speculative philosophy taught in the Schools, a practical
philosophy can be found by which, knowing the power and the effects
of fire, water, air, the stars, the heavens . . . we might put them . . . to all
the uses for which they are appropriate, and thereby make ourselves,
as it were, masters and possessors of nature. (1968, p. 78)

I would choose this rather than a passage from Bacon, Hobbes or Locke
because it seems to me to state in a clear, simple and frank manner the
interests and intentions implicit in our current ‘scientific’ ways of knowing
and valuing; mastery and possession.¹ These, I think, are the key concepts in
terms of which we can understand, not only the character of our major
activities in the world these last three hundred years, but also our relation to
and treatment of ourselves. Promising a deep and effective knowledge of the
natural world, Descartes’ practical philosophy held out the great hope that,
instead of victims, we may become masters and possessors, not only of
nature, but of our own natures also. And, implicit now in our psychology, in
our conception of ourselves, our interests, capacities, motives, etc., is that
same intent, but directed towards ourselves; except that now it becomes
both ambiguous — for is it our own nature or that of others we wish to
master and possess? — and problematic — for what is one’s (or another’s)
nature such that one could be said to master or possess it? And indeed these
are some of the confusions we have wrestled with in our attempts to
understand ourselves.

Nonetheless, the fact remains that our modern conception of people,
psychologically, is as ‘possessors’ of their own selves and their capacities; a
possession they gain by virtue of their mastery or control over them, by
virtue of their competence in their exercise. Indeed, in the next chapter, in discussing the growth of children’s abilities, as persons, to act deliberately and autonomously, as they themselves desire, I myself conceive of the matter in just these terms: as a process of appropriation from nature, in which children are helped by adults to bring the ‘natural powers’ available to them, by virtue of their birth as human beings into a human society, under their own control, thus transforming them into ‘personal powers’ (see chapter 4; Shotter, 1974b). One can see the same image (metaphor) at work also informing Freud’s battle cry: ‘Where Id was, there shall Ego be.’ But is the image of nature in these views that of something external to ourselves, existing as an unlimited resource, or is it of something limited, within which we ourselves are embedded?

**The Medieval Cosmos: An Organic, Ecological Conception**

Prior to Descartes, everything in the medieval, Aristotelian cosmos was characterized by greater or lesser degrees of value or perfection according to an interconnected hierarchical scheme, with matter at its foot and God at its summit, and with the world at its centre, with people (men!), also hierarchically arranged, centred in the world. As essentially an organic totality, people were linked to the animals below them, with which they shared sensation, and the angels above, with whom they shared rationality. Human society was also conceived of as an organic whole, stratified according to status, with peasants at the bottom, the king and pope at the apex, and women (Merchant, 1980) below the men of their particular status group.2 Conceived of as a living unity, an injury to a part was seen as an injury to the whole; and it was this apparent interconnectedness of things which inhibited the drive towards the exploitation and domination of nature.

By excluding values and reducing everything tangible to matter in motion according to mathematically expressible laws, Descartes, among others, helped to destroy that older notion of the cosmos. His practical philosophy had the effect of displacing people, from a position of immersion and interplay within it – within which people were depicted as having only very partial and equivocal powers requiring a great deal of care in their exercise – and of transporting them to a place beyond it, thus making what then became their ‘external world’ (Russell, 1914) available to them (or at least to some of them) for their appropriation and use. God was no longer present in the world, nor for that matter were men, in the sense of having any obvious place assigned to them there for themselves. As a mind, quite separate from the world as matter, the role of man himself could only be that of dominating his surroundings and becoming master and possessor of them, putting them to all the uses to which they are
appropriate. And the world itself, containing as it does only matter in lawful and orderly motion, becomes, as we shall see, both a timeless and lifeless place; its organic unity is lost. And it becomes impossible to explain how a world, filled with essentially dead and passive matter, could ever contain within its workings the possibility of personhood.

If we are ever to study ourselves without disempowering ourselves in the process — without destroying our own abilities to be self-determining — it is Descartes’ account of our being in the world (his ontology) and the accounts of how we came to know its nature (his epistemology) that we must replace.

The Cartesian World and its Investigation

To an extent, while deploiring its hierarchical social structure, I intend to return to the medieval image of the cosmos, in which people’s powers were only partial, and in which they lived immersed in their surroundings. Two properties of such a scheme of things are important: (1) people’s surroundings, instead of being considered inorganic, as being full of dead and passive matter, must be considered as consisting of living material — as in fact made up of at least other human beings (although the nature of the world must be such that personhood is a real possibility within essentially its physical nature); thus, in such a scheme of things, not only people but the environments in which they develop and grow must be considered as intelligent also; and this, as we shall see, has important consequences for the understanding of our social ecology and the resources it provides for our personal development. And (2) such a scheme of things is indeterministic in the sense of being open to new possibilities, thus allowing people the power of action, the power to do and to make, not just to be spectators and thinkers. I would like to introduce the idea of an indeterministic growing world of form-producing processes by contrasting it with the classical picture of the world psychology inherited in large part from Descartes.

The publication in 1637 of Descartes’ Discours de la methode (the full title of which in translation is ‘Discourse on the method of properly conducting one’s reason and of seeking the truth in the sciences’) engendered, as I have said, the great belief that it was possible to translate methodically all that is unknown into the realm of indisputable common knowledge. The method consisted in the four rules: (1) never to accept anything as true that was not known to be self-evidently so (that is, to start from ‘clear and distinct ideas’); (2) analyse, divide the difficulties into as many parts as possible; (3) reconstruct the parts into a system, supposing the parts to have an order amongst themselves
which accounts for the events observed; and then (4) to check one's deductions from the system against omissions, etc.:

These long chains of reasonings, quite simple and easy, which geometers are accustomed to using to teach their most difficult demonstrations, had given me cause to imagine that everything which can be encompassed by man's knowledge is linked in the same way . . . . (1968 p. 41)

Thus, via the unity of mathematics — remember Descartes had shown how in co-ordinate geometry, geometry could be translated into algebra — such a method promised a new unification of the cosmos, an artificial, 'man-made' one (literally — see note 2), to replace the old, living unity of the medieval cosmos. And the nature of this 'new world', as Descartes called it, is such that with this method, Descartes said: 'there can be nothing so distant that one does not reach it eventually, or so hidden that one cannot discover it' (p. 41). It is a world in which all that there is of it already exists; a causal place; best characterized by number; a place in which everything of importance can be measured and quantified; a deterministic world in which the nature of one's object of study remains fixed, unchanged by the methods used to study it; with all the data relevant to its understanding being gained from the position of an external observer; a world only of third persons.

Thus, when we speak of 'the method of the natural sciences', we can trace part of it back to the Discours; it was to this emphasis on mathematically expressible laws that Newton added the experimental method. In a letter to the secretary of the Royal Society of 1672 he wrote:

The best and safest method of philosophizing seems to be, first, to inquire diligently into the properties of things and to establish those properties by experiments, and to proceed later to hypotheses for the explanation of things themselves. For hypotheses ought only to be applied in the explanation of the properties of things, and not made use of in determining them.

But actually, it was only possible for him to assert this, given the way in which Descartes had idealized the subject-matter of Natural Philosophy — hypotheses did enter into the determination of 'things', for Descartes had written:

I resolved . . . to speak only of what would happen in a new world, if God were to create, somewhere in imaginary space, enough matter to compose it, and if he were to agitate diversely and confusedly the
different parts of this matter, so that he created a chaos as disordered as the poets could ever imagine, and afterwards did no more than to lend his usual preserving action to nature, and let her act according to his established laws. (1968, p. 62, my emphases)

Thus scientists must study the abstract stuff, matter, which is to be known only in terms of its measurable properties, spatial extent and motion, and whose behaviour is to be investigated to yield God’s established laws. All ‘things’ in the world, except, Descartes thought, people’s rational souls, could be brought into the confines of such an investigation, for they could all be treated as identical in terms of the motion of matter moving according to mathematical laws – its evident living unity was to be ignored; indeed, it was thought an atavistic animism by later generations of scientists to take such a view.

Thus it was primarily from Descartes’ metaphysics, his entirely speculative picture of the fundamental nature of the world, that the modern natural sciences, with their powerful methods for dominating nature, emerged. And as ‘scientific’ thought grew to be the ideal for all thought, it became imperative to bring within its confines what Descartes had left out: people’s rational souls – for there was no other realm in which they could exist, except in the world of matter in motion. People’s actions must be reduced to the motions of their matter.

This then is the Cartesian world: an essentially chaotic, lifeless world, from which people have been excluded. It is a world which must be investigated for the laws regulating the motions of its elementary parts. It is an already existing world in which the only changes are changes of rearrangement. Nothing in it passes into existence and out of it again; it is a world of being, not becoming. If at any moment we are unable to predict its future in it, that is not because it is in principle impossible — quite the contrary: it is because we are still too ignorant; we have not yet amassed enough knowledge; yet more research is needed. In such a world, as Laplace (1886) appreciated:

An intellect which at a given instant knew all the forces acting in nature, and the position of all things of which the world consists — supposing the said intellect were vast enough to subject these data to analysis — would embrace in the same formula the motions of the greatest bodies in the universe and those of the slightest atoms; nothing would be uncertain for it, and the future, like the past, would be present to its eyes.

It is a world in which the future is merely hidden like distant regions of space
(for time is spatialized); and it seems possible, ultimately to know everything!

Such hopes and beliefs as these still motivate, I feel, much of what is called scientific psychology today. It is surely possible, isn’t it, to discover completely people’s ‘inner’ workings?

Being a Person

Our Sense of Our Own Responsibility: Its Fundamental Nature

While such a view as that above may capture all our significant experiences of what we now call, as a result of our Cartesian displacement, our ‘external world’, the world which we can make yield to our manipulations of it, it utterly fails to capture our experience of our own functioning in such a world. Because of this and also its frankly speculative character, I would like to suggest an alternative basis for our investigations in psychology: a basis in the sense of responsibility which we all, as firstpersons, can have for our own actions.

We all distinguish, and indeed if we are to be accounted reasonable human beings we all must be able to distinguish, between that for which we as individual personalities are responsible and that which merely happens, irrespective of our agency. This distinction is fundamental not only in everyday life but also in science, where it is absolutely fundamental: it is only because we can sense, when acting in accord with theories of what the world might be like, whether the results of our actions accord with or depart from the expectations engendered by those theories, that we can ever put such theories to empirical test. No more fundamental basis for deciding the truth of empirical matters exists, nor will another ever be found — in the organizational complexity of matter, say, as some such as Sutherland (1970) have suggested — for how could it ever be established as a true basis? It would still rest upon the basis of our ability to recognize the consequences of our own actions. Our sense of responsibility as first-persons is, then, at the very basis of science itself; lacking any sense of their own functioning scientists would be unable to do experiments.

Responsible Action

The distinction I have been making above is the distinction between actions and events, doings and happenings which has been explored extensively of late in the philosophy of human action (for example, Winch, 1958; Peters, 1958; Hampshire, 1959; R. Taylor, 1966; R. J. Bernstein, 1972). If, when we are acting alone, we want others to say that we are acting not just intelligently, nor even intelligibly, but also responsibly and
Accounting Practices and Their Paradigms

legitimately, then we must both make our actions intelligible to ourselves as we perform them, in other people's terms, and understand how they relate to other people's needs and interests. In other words, if we are to be accepted by other members of our society as reasonable people we are expected to show not just awareness (i.e. consciousness) of our circumstances, but self-awareness (i.e. self-consciousness); that is, we are expected not just to act in a manner appropriate to our circumstances but also to act in a manner appropriate to our 'place', our status in some larger social scheme of things; we must be aware of the relation of our actions to interests other than our own immediate and idiosyncratic ones. Actions judged as responsible actions within a group are related not to individuals but to interests shared by other members of the group. We thus arrive at what may seem to some a paradox; as an individual personality, I can only be truly responsible for my own actions to the extent that I know how to respond to them as others do – the criterion George Mead proposed for such conduct:

Such is the difference between intelligent conduct on the part of animals and what we call a reflective individual. We say the animal does not think. He does not put himself in a position for which he is responsible; he does not put himself in the place of the other person and say in effect, 'He will act in such a way and I will act in this way'. (1934, p. 73)

The paradox is resolved by realizing the inherently social nature of everyone's self-conscious activity (all the activities in which people themselves know what they are doing, even if the action is as trivial as raising an eyebrow or waving a hand). I can only be self-conscious in my actions – i.e. know who I am, by knowing how I am 'placed' or 'situated' – by acting in the knowledge of my relation to others.

Now in explaining our actions to others, we have, ideally, to give our reasons, tell of our aims or intentions, to say what we expect to result and why. In practice, however, our intentions are often as obscure to ourselves as to others, and this is where further investigations of a psychological kind have their point: to elucidate further reasons for people's actions when required – because the reasons already given are suspect; because they are still insufficient to explain an action; because we are interested in the action's historical origins, and wonder about alternatives to it; etc., etc. Unlike actions, however, events just happen, they are no one's responsibility; and they are not, of course, to be explained by seeking their reasons. To explain them, we must seek collectively their causal principles, what we call 'the laws of nature' which seem to underlie the structure of their
appearances – the traditional task of the natural sciences. So we must be clear when investigating psychological phenomena whether it is reasons (or something having the logical structure of reasons) or causal principles that we seek; the two belong to two quite distinct spheres of thought and investigation (to different paradigms).

To sum up so far then: while classical science demands that we study everything as if, ultimately, it could be considered as disconnected elements of matter in motion according to so-called ‘natural’ (or to Descartes’ absent God’s pre-established) laws, people seem able to act according to beliefs or interests, according to mere conceptions of laws or rules, thus exempting themselves from this demand. But in acting thus, according to what others can recognize as rules or laws, people must make their own actions intelligible to themselves as they perform them in terms of their relations to other people – they can monitor their actions (Harré and Secord, 1972). But even more than this, and this is what makes psychology as the reflexive study of ourselves possible, people are aware that they are aware of what they are doing; they are capable of monitoring their own self-monitoring, and of criticizing the account they give of themselves, and of finding that what accounts for their actions in one sphere of their lives doesn’t in another. Here, and in the rest of this book, I am interested (1) in the sphere of responsible or accountable action, in which we ourselves act; and also (2) in what it is we must do in other spheres of our activity to make such a kind of action possible.

Now in attempting to act responsibly, people may fail; they may act rightly or wrongly, appropriately or inappropriately, legitimately or illegitimately. So besides being essentially a developmental social science in dealing with affairs of this sort – i.e. attempting to understand people acting responsibly in relation to shared rules or criteria – psychology also becomes, as I suggested above, a practical, moral science. And its goal? To the extent that, from a practical point of view, human nature is essentially incomplete, it can only be concerned with discovering our next possible stages of development; it must be, as Bruner (1972) has termed it, a ‘policy’ science. Thus at its heart we shall not find, as in the natural sciences calculation to do with the one true view, but forms of negotiation to do with possible alternatives to the current view – and to the extent that the social conditions do not yet exist in society for the appropriate forms of negotiation to take place, the appropriate forms of ‘undistorted communication’ (Habermas, 1970 a and b), it becomes unavoidably a politically sensitive enterprise, a science critical of current social forms.
The Need for ‘Practical-Theory’

In its guise as a practical, moral science, psychology cannot be, as I said above, solely the study of individual, responsible action. For while there are some things we as individual personalities clearly do do, there are others which just as clearly we do not do. These distinctly different kinds of activity belong to two different but clearly related spheres of study, and later I shall distinguish between individual action, in which individuals act all alone in terms of ‘plans’, ‘scripts’, ‘ideas’, ‘inner representations’, etc., and ‘joint action’, in which people interlace their activities in with one another’s, and in which what one person does is determined just as much by what another does as by their own ‘ideas’. And it is in explaining joint action that new terms must be introduced: ‘joint action’ is itself just such a term, while others such as ‘intentionality’, ‘duality of structure’, and so on will be introduced also; furthermore, it must be noted that terms like ‘social structure’ and ‘social order’ also designate entities only understood initially by use of metaphors and images, for they also do not appear in immediate perception as objects. Most of our important concepts we shall find only appear ‘in’ people’s actions.

I would like to continue here by introducing a number of other distinctions to do with the difference between artificial or constructed things and the so-called natural world. Though we must be careful of the sense in which the word ‘natural’ is taken, for sometimes it means (a) what is done by people spontaneously, without individual deliberation (the sense in which I shall mostly use it); or (b) the world of the ‘natural sciences’; or (c) as meaning a ‘world of nature’ which exists beyond all the accounts we might give of it.

In Chapter 4, I shall explore the distinction between the individually constructed and the socially ‘constructed’, between what individual personalities with their personal powers can do planfully and deliberately (using the term powers there in Harré’s (1970a) sense, to do with the causal powers of an agency), and what people as unconscious agents with their natural powers can do; and with how the transition from this second form of activity to the first can be accomplished. This will bear upon a distinction I would like to make between the cultural and the ‘natural’ (in the first sense above), i.e. between social orders and institutions, and the social ecology within which they are embedded.

The Socially ‘Constructed’ nature of the Social Context

The Intended and the Unintended

A distinction between the natural and the cultural world has recently been drawn by Popper (1972) also, and it will be useful here to examine the terms
he uses as they raise the most important issue of the unintended consequences of (intrinsically intentional – see chapters 8 and 11) social action. He distinguishes between: (1) the natural world, (2) the world of people's psychological states, and (3) those parts of the natural world which are products of the human mind – such as works of art, ethical values, social institutions, libraries, scientific problems and scientific theories – he calls them worlds 1, 2 and 3 respectively, in the order, he thinks, of their emergence into existence. It is the all-but-complete autonomy of world 3 which interests him. It is partially autonomous because, once we have produced it, it becomes an object seemingly 'outside' ourselves, and as such is then open to investigation and intersubjective criticism; and quite often we may discover in it unintended consequences, thus increasing our powers in unexpected ways. It is the introduction of world 3 into his philosophy that Popper thinks of as revolutionary, for in its autonomy and its unintended consequences it can, so to speak, work to act back upon us to determine our conduct and our experience of ourselves. Thus he suggests that:

One day we will have to revolutionize psychology by looking at the human mind as an organ for interacting with the objects of the third world; for understanding them, contributing to them, participating in them; and for bringing them to bear on the first world. (1972, p. 156)

The ‘Natural’ and the ‘man-made’

Within a cultural perspective, we view people as individual personalities, responsible for their actions to others, and as monitoring or interpreting their own and one another’s actions in relation to shared aims and interests, whose forms are in themselves humanly constructed – and it is worth remarking in this context that no other beings construct their own goals in such a way. An action can have its meaning in terms of the part it plays in furthering a society’s aims or in modifying its interests. It is being responsible for their own actions in this way that gives the structure of their behaviour a manufactured or ‘man-made’ aspect – it is also this ‘constructed’ aspect of their behaviour which, spuriously, makes it seem amenable to mechanistic explanation.

Alternatively, within a ‘natural’ (ecological) perspective, in contrast to people as children of culture, we can see them as children of nature, just as much a part of the natural order of things as the trees and the stars. Here we must view them as being aware of their circumstances in the sense of responding appropriately to them, but as not yet being self-consciously
aware of them, in the sense that 'they' themselves could be said to be responsible for their actions; they act as they must, in relation only to their own immediate states of being—as if continually in a 'passion' (see Shotton, 1982, and chapter 11, as well as Jaynes, 1979, for a most interesting description of what he calls the 'bicameral mind'). As people themselves are not responsible for their actions in this sphere, the structure of their behaviour does not have a constructed aspect to it. It has a distinctly different structure, one which does not render it amenable to ready explanation mechanistically at all. And what it is for persons to bring sets of circumstances under their own self-control is, I shall maintain, to impose upon the 'natural' order of their behaviour in these circumstances, one way or another, an artificial structure.

In the 'man-made' and the 'natural' (or ecological), we have two distinct but related spheres of study needing two distinct but related modes of thought and methods of investigation. But this distinction is not in any sense new or original. It was proposed long ago by Giambattista Vico in his Scienza Nuova of 1744; for him it was

a truth beyond all question: that the world of civil society has certainly been made by men, and that its principles are to be found within the modifications of our own human mind. Whoever reflects on this cannot but marvel that philosophers should have bent all their energies to the study of the world of nature, which, since God made it, He alone knows; and that they should have neglected the study of the world of nations, or civil world, which, since men had made it, men could come to know. (Vico, 1975, para 331)

While people make culture, it is 'nature' (or what I want now to call people's social ecology) which, as an agency, makes people; and, as we shall see, as there is an essential contingency always in the action of an agency, it is only in those spheres where people can reduce 'nature' by their manipulations to the form of a machine, thus depriving it of its agency, that they gain any degree of control over it at all.

As this distinction between the 'man-made' and the ecological is so fundamental it is worthwhile at this point going a little more deeply into the structures of the two different kinds of system: even the most complex of 'man-made' systems, machines for instance, are constructed piece-by-piece from objective parts; that is, from parts which retain their character unchanged irrespective of whether they are parts of the system or not. (And just as people may construct mechanisms for use in the affairs of their external world, so it is not inconceivable that they may construct mechanisms 'within' themselves for use in the regulation of their personal
affairs – see chapters 3 and 4 for a discussion of how mothers may help their infants in the execution of this task.)

But whole people as natural systems are certainly not constructed piece by piece; on the contrary, they grow. They develop from simple individuals into richly structured ones in such a way that their ‘parts’ at any one moment in time owe not just their character but their very existence both to one another and to their relations with the ‘parts’ of the system at some earlier point in time – their history is just as important as their logic in their growth, and because of this it is impossible to picture natural systems in spatial diagrams. As Čapek (1965, p. 162) remarks, ‘any spatial symbol contemplated at a given moment is complete, i.e., all its parts are given at once, simultaneously, in contrast with the temporal reality which is by its own nature incomplete and whose ‘parts’ – if we are justified in using such a thoroughly inadequate term – are by definition successive, i.e., nonsimultaneous.’ There is always more to come of natural systems because as well as existing in space they realize themselves through time; true, if they contain reversible processes (see Piaget, 1971, 1972), it may be more of the same, but then again, if they contain irreversible processes (see the account of Prigogine’s views in chapter 11) – which they must if they are to be in any sense growing systems – then they may manifest genuine novelty.

The Individually Constructed and the Socially ‘Constructed’

Now it is clearly tempting, lacking any clear ‘picture’ of natural systems, to assimilate them to ones which we can picture, to assume in fact that they manifest the same ‘constructional’ properties as familiar man-made systems – we then know what we are all talking about. But the two systems, the natural and the ‘man-made’, can only be equated if the natural systems do not contain ‘structure-dependent’ parts (Chomsky, 1968, 1972), i.e. interdependent ‘parts’, and are in fact made up of objective parts: a feature which natural systems in their entirety clearly do not possess – as pointed out above, they are growing systems with successive as well as simultaneous parts. While such systems must contain some objective parts, and even something like mechanisms as they grow older, their ‘parts’ in general at some moment in time must only be perceptually distinguishable but not in any genuine sense physically separable – that is, if the system is to remain alive. For separation would destroy just that precise set of mutual influences by which a living system’s ‘parts’ determine one another’s functioning (and those in touch with its environment have their response determined) in relation to the whole. The analytic method, while appropriate to understanding ‘man-made’ systems, destroys natural ones irretrievably.
In discussing the ‘man-made’ world I have chosen to concentrate attention on the machine rather than upon rules and maxims, upon institutions and the socially constructed world in general, as one of my purposes is to attack mechanistic psychology and to show that there can be a warrantable alternative to it. But I would not want it to be thought that in discussing mechanistic forms of order I meant only physically constructed systems; I mean socially constructed ones too. But as Mumford (1967) argues, there is often not much of a distinction, for machines can be constructed from people, the megamachines constituting much of modern society being a case in point; people can easily experience their lives as if ‘ruled’ by ‘mechanisms’ invisible to them. Berger and Luckman (1967, p. 77–8) state the character of our experience of an institutional world very well:

[It] is experienced as an objective reality. It has a history that antedates the individual’s birth and is not accessible to his biographical recollection. It was there before he was born, and it will be there after his death . . . . Since institutions exist as external reality, the individual cannot understand them by introspection. He must ‘go out’ and learn about them, just as he must learn about nature . . . . The paradox that man is capable of producing a world that he then experiences as something other than a human product will concern us later on. At the moment, it is important to emphasize that the relationship between man, the producer, and the social world, his product, is and remains a dialectical one . . . . The product acts back on the producer.

And, they continue, it is ‘only with the transmission of the social world to a new generation [that] the fundamental social dialectic appears in its totality’; each new generation is a social product.

Indeterminacy and Time

The Reality of Time and the Contingency of Action

The intention in modern thought has always been to seek the timeless and the fixed. Little thought has been given to the idea of form-producing processes, to the idea of a growing world, or growing systems, or of irreversible changes and the occurrence of genuine novelty (see chapter 11). Indeed, within Descartes’ world running on pre-established principles, genuine novelty would be unthinkable: it would seem to come out of nowhere, to be unprincipled and thus uncaused. In such a world, only
regularities, only reversible changes qualify for a rational (i.e. logical) explanation. But as a growing system, I myself both live in space and through time. At this moment, I myself am manifesting a particular spatial configuration here; then, I was manifesting another state of being there; next, I may or may not be here, I may or may be not be there, it all depends. Through time I can, if I try, realize different possible states of my being in space – and recognizing and recollecting them all together as mine is what gives me my own special sense of personal unity (a unity which can, of course, be lost by some deeply disturbed people). Possessing many possible modes of being, I can project myself in living from one to another – although sometimes I find myself being projected by agencies other than my own. Thus my life can have a directed quality to it, directed by myself or by others. My actions, in being directed from a past towards a future, can express an intention. I cannot, however, intend a novel action. Although I can find myself expressing an intention in a truly novel way, novelty is something which I simply find happening to me; it is not something I can do. But having it once happen to me, I may, under certain conditions (see Dreyfus, 1965, and chapter 11, for discussions on the determination of intentions), make it, as something which now is not of course novel, happen again.

Within the classical deterministic scheme of things a present state of affairs necessitates one and only one future state; thus the future has the same sort of unknown character to it as distant regions of space: it is simply hidden from human knowledge. If we were all not so ignorant, we could know all our future as Laplace once promised. Thus in this scheme of things, time loses its unique reality and becomes like a fourth dimension of space, and in a sense past and future coexist with the present. But the reality of time implies the reality of irreversible processes and the emergence of novelty, which is incompatible with the pre-existence of the future. In a world existing through real time, the only status the future can have is that of ambiguity, of real possibility. It is contingent not necessary; not because of our ignorance but because of a genuine ambiguity in events not yet realized.

Such a world, to contrast it with the deterministic world of classical thought, may be called indeterministic. And for genuine human action to exist, this must be the character of the world in which we live: for in acting we do something; we make something take on a form other than that which it would have had if we had not acted; thus we determine the world. For this to be possible the world must be capable of being given a form which it did not already possess, that is, the world must be essentially indeterminate. Except that his ‘sea of possibilities’ metaphor again spatializes time, William James (1956, pp. 150–1) has produced one of the
best characterizations of indeterminism of which I know. ‘Indeterminism’, he said:

admits that possibilities may be in excess of actualities, and that things not yet revealed to our knowledge may in themselves really be ambiguous. Of two alternative futures which we conceive, both may now be really possible; and the one becomes impossible only at the very moment when the other excludes it by becoming real itself. Indeterminism thus denies the world to be one unbending unit of fact. It says there is a certain ultimate pluralism in it; and, so saying, it corroborates our unsophisticated view of things. To that view, actualities seem to float in a sea of possibilities from out of which they are chosen; and, somewhere, indeterminism says, such possibilities exist, and form a part of truth.

Usually we do seem able to intervene in ongoing processes and to make something happen in one way rather than another, as if both possibilities had been intrinsically available in the process. In a growing world, although each present event is not necessitated by its own past, it is undoubtedly caused; it is made to happen by an act of selection or choice. What had been an uncertain future is specifically realized now, by the exclusion of other possibilities. Thus to do anything in such a world is to do this and not that. This does not mean that action in such a world is preceded by choice, that some mysterious mental act of choosing precedes all our actual choosing. While reflection may precede action, it is only a theoretical, a possible choosing, as is clear from the fact that the ‘action’ so chosen need not be performed. Actual choosing is intrinsic to the performance of human actions whether preceded by reflection or not (Macmurray, 1957).

The Unnecessary Nature of Plans and Rules for Intelligent Action

Now by insisting upon the reality of time, upon a growing world full of form-producing processes and real possibilities, we have implied a distinctly different image of human being in the world than in the classical image of people as isolated contemplatives. Instead of thinking before they act, people must in general act before they think, in order later to think before they act — if this is not to be dangerous, there must be ‘safe’ areas in which they can play (Shotter, 1973a). This is, of course, the image of people, of children, embodied in Piaget’s slogan, ‘thought is internalized action’, but what Piaget needs to add to this is that in order to be intelligible the structure of such thought and action must be socially negotiated (Harré and Secord, 1972; Berger and Luckman, 1967).
Although this view — that action is primary and thought derived from it — is now becoming common, it is not usually realized what such a view implies. In speaking, for instance, we can and usually do speak grammatically without it first being necessary for us to think about how to do it; it does not imply that our actions are all necessarily produced by an inner reference to a ‘plan’, ‘script’ or ‘representation’. Reflecting upon possible grammatical continuations while speaking requires a high level of skill and usually leads to hesitancy (cf. B. Bernstein’s (1972) ‘elaborated code’); it is the exception rather than the rule. Rather than speaking as if one were a computer operating according to a pre-formed programme, one can structure one’s speech by monitoring it for its meaning in relation to one’s intention in the course of its production — and there are many ways of doing this (see chapters 4 and 11, and Shotter, 1982). In general we speak with feeling not with thought, and it is only as our intentions issue in performance that we are able to tell whether we are successfully executing them or not. While I usually (but not always) know what I intend, I am in no better position than anyone else for observing my own performances. They must be judged as they occur, both in space and time — it being the temporal sequencing of spatial possibilities that reveals a person’s choice and thus manifests his intention. Lashley (1951) has been one of the few behaviourist psychologists to see in the temporal sequencing of behaviour any major problem.

Time, then, is the essential psychological medium; it is through time that we express ourselves. In the classical scheme, in which time has been spatialized, this possibility has been lost. There, if contingency was allowed to exist at all it would seem to destroy the possibility of necessity (but this is not necessarily so: see Piaget’s (1971, 1972) discussions of this point). Treating time realistically suggests that our thought and feelings need not remain private, but that it is possible for us to show our thoughts, feelings, moods, beliefs, intentions, etc., in our actions, in our temporal trajectory through sets of contingencies. However, in our attempts to make sense of such expressions, in deciding into which public or trans-subjective category they should be assigned in order to specify them, we must refer not only to objective, to spatial criteria, but also to temporal ones. Such temporal criteria, however, would be essentially contingent; that is, they would be essentially incomplete, and determining them (i.e. making them complete) one way or another is itself a matter of choice. Thus, if they are to be made ‘logically adequate’, then negotiation with others is necessarily involved.

Further discussion of this issue can be found in Berger and Luckman (1967), Harré and Secord (1972) and in chapter 4 below. Suffice it to say this here: to structure our perceptions of a person we must specify a set of
both spatial and temporal categories, and place him or her in relation to them. In categorizing persons spatially we can determine their objective structure and locate it, outside ourselves, in space; in categorizing them temporally we can determine their subjective structures (their mental states) . . . but where in space should we locate them? This is what has always puzzled us about mental states: because there is nowhere precisely in space to locate them, neither in the observer nor the observed, they seem to float ethereally somewhere in between, and lacking any substantiality seem to have no real existence. In the classical world of matter in motion, they have no matter. But in an indeterministic world moving through real time, they can have a location: in a person’s history, and it is that which is amenable to specification. It is by the structuring of our history that we can determine our future; but if we are concerned to act always responsibly, in a way intelligible to other people, how we do in fact structure it is not a matter entirely up to us—it must be negotiated with them.

We have now begun to move into deep waters, and it will be convenient to continue discussion of these issues in later chapters. The discussion above will suffice if it conveys some of the unique properties of time, and shows that it may be quite incorrect to think of it as simply a fourth dimension of space. While the past is what has been determined (and determined by people in some degree), the future has not yet been so, and thus must be considered not as a single, fourth dimension, but multidimensional. It is the future, not this or that hidden region of space, which holds promise of rich possibilities.

By discussing time in this way, I have attempted to indicate that the fact that people are ‘growing systems’, and can by their actions give something a form that it did not previously possess, is all of a piece with the fact that they can learn, express their intentions, pay attention, communicate, pursue goals, create novelty, and so on. In other words, I hope that by realizing in broad outline how it is that we live through time, it will be possible to see that the mental categories which we have called ‘fictions’ in the past are truly real. And that psychology can be seen as the science which, by operating in an indeterministic world in which both logic and our history can function to determine our future, helps us make clear in detail the possibilities from which we may choose our next step.

Conclusions

What is it then, in the new psychology, to be human? It is to be a growing system which can, in interaction with other growing systems, increasingly localize within itself the power of responsible action. And this would be
the goal of a new psychology: to increase people’s personal powers of responsible action; not to increase people’s mastery over other people but their mastery over their own possible ways of life. It would have nothing to do with how we as ‘mechanisms’ work, for as growing systems we are not in fact mechanisms even though we may produce them within ourselves, and be interested in so doing. As time, and thus contingency and choice are central to the new psychology, its tasks will be essentially prospective ones, for our powers will always remain incomplete. As a result of this, the scientific process will itself involve a negotiated form of interaction with the subjects of its study. Vygotsky (1962) has discussed one such form of negotiated interaction as instruction: it is by instruction that spontaneous actions can be raised into the realm of the deliberate, and it is this process which will be discussed in the next few chapters. But as Vygotsky (1962, p. 90) says, ‘in order to subject a function to intellectual and volitional control, we must first possess it.’ This point is of the utmost importance, for it suggests people can only gain their personal powers from ‘nature’, from the social ecology within which they are embedded, if their circumstances are appropriate to such spontaneous activity. Then, suggests Vygotsky, what at first they only do spontaneously in response to such circumstances, they can through another person’s agency, come to do later, as they themselves please, irrespective of their circumstances. But: (1) the provision of the appropriate initial ecological conditions is vital, and (2) so is the participation of another person in the process. Only by attending closely to another’s spontaneous actions, and selecting socially relevant aspects of them, can they construct a socially accountable ideal self, an image of genuine personal being, which can be held out to the other as a challenge to be attained; one person can help another to become more of a person. By instruction individuals can become responsible themselves for actions which initially arose in the context of their interaction with others.

In the past, people have invented for themselves many forms of expression, forms of language, writing, mathematics, forms of art, forms of war, forms of family and community organization; in short, they have invented for themselves ‘forms of life’. And there is no reason to suppose that the process by which we transformed ourselves from cave-dwellers in the past to what we are today is now at an end. Cultural progress is surely still possible, and a science called psychology can surely assist in making our future transformations of ourselves more responsible ones, so that we can all in the future (not just a few select groups) enhance each other’s growth. In the task ahead, the
dignity, the self-respect, the confidence to believe that by acting freely people can, out of themselves, fashion new and higher forms are essential features. Beyond our freedom and our dignity in our personhood (Skinner, 1972) is the human termite colony — if, indeed, people’s nature could really cease to be a growing one as some behaviourist and mechanistic visions seem to suppose.