

Article: 2237

Topic: 60 - Philosophy and Psychiatry

CAN PSYCHIATRY EVER BE COMPLETELY SCIENTIFIC?

J.E. Foss

Philosophy, University of Victoria, Victoria, BC, Canada

Introduction: Psychiatry views humans through a spectrum of scientific specialties stretching from the “hard” natural sciences to the “soft” social sciences. But, since language is an inescapable aspect of human thought and behavior, and it is doubtful there could ever be a *science* of meaning, it is doubtful psychiatry can ever be completely scientific.

Objectives: To determine the prospects for a science of meaning, and the prospects for a science of psychiatry if we remain unable to reduce meaning to a science.

Aims: To consider the problem of determining what information people express or absorb via language.

Methods: Examine the evidence types ideally accessible to a science of meaning from a logical point of view to see how much confirmation they could provide to hypotheses concerning the information content of linguistic behaviors.

Results: Hypotheses about information content are not as strongly constrained by evidence as are hypotheses about physical properties. Physical properties are directly measurable, whereas information content cannot be measured, but only postulated in order to explain other behavior. Behavior, in turn, cannot be measured or detected except relative to the same explanatory system in which information content, or meaning, is embedded.

Conclusions: There is no absolute methodological barrier to a fully scientific psychiatry, but there are methodological problems a higher order of difficulty than in the hard sciences such as neurochemistry. Psychiatry will advance scientifically, while encountering methodological challenges with meaning that is expressive of values, desires, fears, goals, right and wrong.