

THE STATE OF PSYCHOLOGY IN 1936

In 1935 All Souls College in Oxford was considering the establishment of a chair in social anthropology (established in 1936 and first held by A. R. Radcliffe-Brown from 1937 to 1946). This stimulated the following memorandum from two fellows, the historian E. L. Woodward and the lawyer and publisher Geoffrey Faber:

ALL SOULS COLLEGE

We have read with interest the letter signed by Robertson, Coupland and others asking the College to consider the possibility of offering to the University a sum of £600 a year towards the endowment of a chair of social anthropology. We do not underrate the importance of developing the study of anthropology in Oxford; we agree that its development may well receive some support from All Souls. We feel, however, that the question of such support ought not to be considered by itself, but should be discussed in relation to other possibilities, and particularly in connection with the need of new provision in Oxford for psychological studies. In giving, as we ourselves would do, priority of claim to psychological over anthropological studies, we are anxious to make it clear that we do not wish to exclude anthropology, and that we should be well satisfied if the College were able to offer places on its Foundation to a professor in each of these subjects. But if we have to choose between the subjects, we have no doubt that the needs of the University are greater in the field of psychology.

It is known to most members of the College that we have been waiting for some time past to raise the question of endowing or helping to endow, a chair of psychology. We felt last year that the endowment of such a chair really deserved to be considered before the endowment of a readership in statistics. It was with considerable misgivings that we refrained from complicating the issue on that occasion; but we supported the endowment of the readership because we understood that an offer by the College

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would be of great help in securing for the University a large benefaction for social studies.

This benefaction has been received, and we feel now that, at a time when very large provision has been made for social studies, we are justified in asking the College to consider the claims of psychology.

It is unnecessary for us to elaborate upon the urgency of developing the study of psychology at Oxford. This need has been, for several years, officially recognised. The Faculties of Literae Humaniores, Medicine, and the Biological Sciences are in full agreement on the matter, and we believe that they would have the support of other Faculties. It is also unnecessary for us to emphasise the importance of psychological research to the studies of law, history and politics. Modern psychology has perhaps more to offer to these studies than social anthropology, which deals more directly with native races than with civilised society.

We do not ask the College to come to any decision between anthropology and psychology at the next College meeting, but we hope that the question will be referred to the Joint Finance and Research Committee, and that the Warden may be asked to take the opinion of representative members of the Faculties concerned upon the relative urgency of the provision of funds for anthropology and psychology, and to put before the Committee information about the present position of both studies.

E. L. WOODWARD

G. C. FABER

20 November 1935

Isaiah Berlin had been a Fellow of the College since 1932. Among his papers there is a draft letter to the Warden of the College (W. G. S. Adams), and draft material, much of it in virtually final form, for a memorandum on the 'present position' of psychology. The final version has not surfaced. I have extracted the best text I can from the draft material, prefacing it with the letter. The proposed appointment was not made.

This document was first published in History and Philosophy of Psychology 3 no. 1 (2001), 76–83 (without the above letter). The footnotes – apart from one on Denkpsychologie – were kindly provided by Elizabeth Valentine, and appear as endnotes on p. 83 in the aforementioned journal.

Henry Hardy

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TO THE WARDEN, ALL SOULS COLLEGE, OXFORD

5 August 1936

All Souls College

Dear Mr Warden,

As I understand that the letter circulated to the College last year proposing to establish a Professorship of Psychology, signed by Woodward and Faber, is under consideration by the relevant Committee, and as I am in complete agreement with its general purpose (although I should myself suggest that in the present absence of wide facilities for psychology here in Oxford, a Fellowship would do better as a beginning than a full fledged Professorship unsupported by Readers or an organized undergraduate school), I should like to submit a memorandum on the present state of psychological studies in England and elsewhere, which, as you yourself suggested, may be of assistance to the committee and possibly the College in arriving at a decision on this issue.

As I am myself not even an amateur psychologist, and my entire knowledge of the subject is gathered from scattered and unsystematic reading and conversation with experts, I do not suppose that the document which I have prepared is anything like as exact and exhaustive as it ought to be: I believe, however, that there are not positive misstatements in it. I have done my best to verify my classification by reference to the published writings of psychologists, and by relevant questions to the Professor of Psychology in Cambridge¹ and the Reader in Nottingham,² both of whom discussed the present scope and division of the subject with me – without, however, being told the motive for my questions, which I was obviously at present not free to reveal.

I append certain conclusions which seem to me to follow from the evidence I have collected. If this is the kind of document which is wanted, I should be grateful if you would circulate this letter and the memorandum to the relevant Committee, or to the College, whichever you think proper.

Yours sincerely,
I. Berlin [77]

¹ F. C. Bartlett.

² Both internal and external evidence suggests this is W. J. H. Sprott.

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MEMORANDUM ON PSYCHOLOGY

Modern psychology may be roughly divided into two main categories, which, for our purpose, it is sufficient to denote as (A) philosophical and (B) experimental. In 'experimental' all those types of psychology are included which, though involving the use both of introspection and inference from it, do at some stage entail the making of experiments under controlled laboratory conditions. I add this to avoid a possible misunderstanding, since the term 'experimental' sometimes denotes, even in the writings of psychologists themselves, a type of enquiry occupied wholly or mainly with the physical or physiological processes connected with mental activity, and not with mental activity itself.

To take the two main divisions in order:

A. Philosophical psychology

This type of psychology is also sometimes called 'analytic' or 'descriptive', and consists in the systematic description, classification and empirical explanation of the phenomena of human consciousness in so far as they are revealed in normal, self-conscious processes such as memory, introspection, perception etc., and the examination of their relevance for the problems of epistemology and philosophy in general. This type of psychology, in so far as it does not presuppose specialised knowledge either of mathematics or of any branch of physical science, can be, and in fact has been, indulged in by many professional philosophers: notably by William James and James Ward. The most notable living exponents of it are Bergson, Stout and Broad; many among the younger professional psychologists expound it, as for example Mr Mace in London, and Mr Sprott in Nottingham. It is today considered an important, if too little studied, branch of the general theory of knowledge, and indeed specific endowment for it exists in Oxford in the Wilde Readership in Mental Philosophy, whose holder is specifically precluded by Statute from indulging, at any rate *qua* Reader, in any kind of experimental activity, it being understood that the founder intended to promote solely such activity as in his opinion had been engaged in by the great John Locke.

The fact that the present Reader, Dr William Brown, is chiefly interested in medical psychology does not invalidate the original

purpose of the endowment, which could serve an extremely useful purpose in a University as rich as Oxford in professional philosophers. The fact, however, that endowment for this subject is already in existence perhaps makes it unnecessary to consider it any further in connection with All Souls.

B. *Experimental Psychology*

1. *Human Psychology*

(a) THE STUDY OF CHARACTER AND HABIT

The most ambitious type of investigation in this subject is conducted by the so-called London School, founded by Professor Spearman, and by analogous schools in the great laboratories of the USA. The main purpose of this kind of research is the discovery and classification of certain permanent factors which enter, in different combinations and fashions, into the various distinguishable types of mental and emotional dispositions. Psychologists of this school claim to have isolated certain such factors, and to have discovered fixed correlations between their occurrence in the complexes into which they combine. The method used is statistical and mathematical, i.e. the basic formulae, the invariant laws which function as the [78] hypotheses and postulates of the system, are stated in mathematical terms, while the empirical evidence which verifies them is obtained by innumerable 'intelligence tests' (which vary from investigator to investigator), the results being stated in statistical terms, which makes them capable of being mathematically treated.

The most famous pre-war adherents of such a method are Simon and Binet; its modern advocates maintain that it has revolutionised their science by putting it on the only scientific – i.e. a mathematical – basis, and preach its virtues with passionate enthusiasm. This claim is, of course, in part or whole, rejected by its numerous opponents. It is impossible for a layman to say, at this stage, whether the new method has justified itself. It is more relevant to point out that the equipment which it requires, both human and mechanical, tends to be very costly, and that it is the work of institutes rather than of single individuals. Quantities of 'subjects', e.g. schoolchildren or factory workers, are needed for the purposes of statistical investigation; counting machines and other apparatus tend at present to be expensive; and unless,

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therefore, it is the purpose of the College to found, or to help in founding, such an institute, the question of the value of this type of psychology is not of immediate importance – it is very doubtful whether the newly endowed Oxford psychological laboratory³ will be able to afford any such research in even a restricted and modest form.

(*b*) Closely allied with the above is the type of work carried on in institutes of industrial psychology, such as that founded by C. S. Myers, with its widely ramified studies of industrial fatigue, vocational guidance etc. The practical value of these cannot be doubted, whatever may be thought of the validity of the methods used or the presuppositions on which they rest. The practical objections which applied to 1(*a*) apply equally to this type of investigation. Its importance lies predominantly in its influence on national health and education.

(*c*) A great deal of highly valuable and interesting work has been done in the field of child psychology, notably by Piaget and his colleagues in France, and to some extent by Watson in the USA. While all reputable psychologists would naturally be acquainted with their methods and results, it may be doubtful whether Oxford offers the most fruitful field for a specialist in such a subject. But its value and relevance to all other branches of the subject is immense.

(*d*) Connected with the above, but by now a separate subject, and, it might be added, a recognised profession, is therapeutic psychology with its numerous divisions and subdivisions. The most celebrated of them at present are the group of psychoanalytical schools founded by Freud and his disciples, the French psychopathologists like Janet, Baudouin etc., whose

³ As most readers will know, the University of Oxford dragged its feet more than most in relation to the development of psychology. An Institute of Experimental Psychology was finally financed and founded in 1936 – the context for the present report – but initially its activities were restricted to research and postgraduate teaching. William Stephenson was appointed to assist William Brown. With the introduction of an undergraduate school of psychology, philosophy and physiology ('PPP') and the appointment of George Humphrey as the first Professor of Psychology in 1947, Stephenson (miffed) emigrated to the United States.

greatest contributions to their subject are perhaps their studies in the field of suggestion, of hypnosis, psychoses etc., and of various manifestations of emotional life. And, of course, there are many who continue along the more traditional lines of medical psychology or psychiatry. The contribution which these investigations have made, directly and indirectly, to the science of psychology is very arresting and, some would claim, epoch-making; and it has affected workers in many fields other than their own, notably historians, literary critics, anthropologists, social theorists, and creative artists of every kind. There can be no doubt that the scientific standards and objective outlook of the best representatives of these schools are beyond reproach; no serious psychiatrist would today deny the great practical value of such work. But its attention is still mainly occupied with perfecting the actual technique of the treatment of patients, its whole outlook is pre-eminently practical, and directly therapeutic, and it therefore seems, in spite of its possibly revolutionary importance, not to have reached that stage of theoretical systematisation, of comparative stability, which [79] is required by any subject before it is possible to offer academic instruction in it. This is the sole but, it seems to me, sufficient ground for ruling it out of immediate consideration.

2. *Behaviourism, Reflexology, Animal Psychology*

(a) Very remarkable progress has in the course of the present century been made by those purely experimental zoologists and physiologists who have concentrated their attention on the physical behaviour of human and animal organisms under carefully controlled conditions, in particular in response to artificially produced stimuli. Some have attempted to correlate such behaviour, whether as causes or as invariable concomitants, with various real or apparent states of consciousness. Others maintain that this is an unnecessary refinement, that the whole activity of man can be exhaustively described and accounted for in terms of physical response to purely physical stimuli. The implications of this kind of position for sociology, anthropology, criminology or any other social science are obviously far-reaching. Whatever degree of truth may attach to the theories erected on the basis of this experimental activity, the importance of the empirical results as such both for biology and physiology, and for the therapeutic

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sciences, is very great. Its most fruitful findings are to be met with in the work on animal psychology and physiology done on the one hand by the school of Pavlov and Bechterev in Russia, on the other by Köhler, Wertheimer and Koffka in Germany, Revesz in Holland, and possibly Hogben and Zuckerman in England (the latter is attached to the zoological department in Oxford).⁴ This type of research advances simultaneously on two fronts, the animal and the human, which it attempts to fuse into a single general schema. In spite of the brilliant record of this group of scientists, they seem to me to be occupied too exclusively with the physical properties of cerebral or neural processes – to be, that is to say, too definitely physiologists or zoologists with one eye on psychology (which they regard as a branch of biology) rather than psychologists with a physiological training. Their outlook is farther removed from that of philosophy or any other humane study than that of any other psychological school mentioned in this catalogue. This is the reason, perhaps, for the ill-informed and, occasionally, extremely silly statements on philosophical topics for which one or two amongst them, e.g. Dr J. B. Watson, have become deservedly notorious. This should not, of course, blind anyone to the very impressive quality of their work in their special field. But it does indicate that, preoccupied as they are today with the behaviour of primitive organisms, naturally enough while their science is in its infancy, they pay more attention to their rats and tadpoles than to the functioning of the human mind, and tend to be guided by analogies between them more easily than the majority of their colleagues. On this ground, and partly also because the College may not be prepared to provide the necessary facilities, they too may have to be eliminated.

(b) Physiological psychologists exist, as e.g. Piéron in France, who are more eclectic and less sweeping in their reduction of human thought to a mechanical process than behaviourists, being influenced by the monumental studies in human physiology

⁴ Professor (later Sir Hugh) Cairns arranged for Koffka to carry out work on psychological aspects of disorders associated with intracranial tumours and head injuries in the Nuffield Department of Surgery in 1939–40. See R. C. Oldfield, 'Psychology at Oxford 1898–1949, Part II', *Bulletin of the British Psychological Society* 1 (1950) No 10, 382–7, at 384. See also J. Morrell, *Science at Oxford 1914–1939* (Oxford, 1997: Clarendon Press), 85–92.

published by Head and Sherrington, whose work has shed light far beyond the frontiers of their own subject. But these may be fitly reserved for section B 4.

3. *Social Psychology*

The inclusion of this subject under the general heading of experimental psychology is an act of courtesy towards it which may not be easy to justify, since it is by no means clear that it has any right to be counted among the exact sciences. It is a very new subject, and is only very slowly and uncertainly being systematised. Most of its exponents are still groping in the [80] dark, and if one is asked so to define it as to distinguish it from sociology, political science and psychopathology, I do not know how this is to be done, since the subject does not as yet appear to have found its feet. An inspection of the works of its foremost English exponent, Professor McDougall, will show, I believe, that the subject is still in its pre-scientific stage, a semi-co-ordinated mass of loosely described facts and vague hypotheses, the proper technique for dealing with which has not yet been found. At present it forms a kind of no man's land between a number of older subjects, whose experts occasionally throw out an interesting generalisation or an acute *aperçu* in its direction, which, for want of a reliable experimental method, cannot be explored or verified. This is no doubt largely due to the fact that the physical and sociological basis of the future science, the physiology, and possibly the chemical and biological aspects, of such phenomena as mass suggestion, telepathy, extra-sensory perception, the exact interplay of acquired and transmitted factors, the influence of environment, food etc., have not been adequately established, and without them such books and essays as continue to be published are necessarily unreliable, and belong to the realm of general culture. In so far as the work of such truly distinguished men as Durkheim, Levy-Bruhl, Mannheim, and their schools, is neither an account of primitive customs, i.e. anthropology, nor of the social and political organisation of civilised peoples, i.e. political science and sociology, it is at best felicitous guesswork. From time to time brilliant and imaginative thinkers like Bagehot or Graham Wallas make original suggestions which give them the status of early pioneers of the subject; but in the absence of proper criteria for the discovery of the truth, even their justly famous contributions

cannot claim a more than amateur status. Like the psychology of religion and the psychology of art, this subject is still chaotic, still the playground for rival ethical and political opinions, still 'subjective', and cannot therefore be dignified with the title of a separate science. On this ground, unless a man of genius were found to become its Newton, it would perhaps be premature to subsidise it.

4. *Psychology of the Senses*

This is at present by far the best organised and most steadily cultivated field of psychology proper. It deals with the properties and circumstances of occurrence of the data of the various senses, of memory, of imagination, of introspection, of various emotional or instinctive attitudes as they are liable to arise under carefully controlled conditions. It lives at the very centre of the subject, since at one end it takes note of the physiological, physical, neural and biochemical structure of the brain, sense organs etc.; at the other, and this is more distinctive of it than anything else, it strives to describe and analyse minutely the actual conscious subjective experience of the human agent, and in virtue of this becomes closely connected both with the old fashioned Descriptive Psychology (cf. section A above) – and so with philosophy proper, e.g. the theory of perception and the problems connected with memory – and with certain independent investigators who belong to B 1(a) and B 1(c), and who accept the method of the School with regard to the study of the evidence, but are sceptical of its bolder hypotheses. The same applies to the undenominational group referred to in section B 2(b).

The following schools of thought are distinguishable under this head:

(a) The influential and original school of Gestalt-theorists: the best-known names are those of Köhler, Koffka, Wertheimer and Lewin, and that of one heretic, Petermann. Originally a predominantly German school, its members have lately emigrated to the USA, where they appear to have met with a sympathetic, and in places enthusiastic, reception in academic circles. Principally concerned with the nature of those pattern-qualities which occur in even the most primitive sense experience, and are, according to them, irreducible components of [81] all conscious existence, they provide experimental evidence to refute the older atomistic and

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associationist views which dominated English psychology in the nineteenth century, and to some extent still survive in behaviourism and other mechanistic theories. The position of this school is fundamentally sympathetic both to opinions long defended by, e.g., Stout, on largely introspective evidence, and to such evolutionary theories as those of Lloyd Morgan and Henri Bergson, which, in the case of the former at least, are themselves defended by experimental evidence. The Gestalt Theory has had a decided influence on the theory of knowledge both in Great Britain and in the USA, and affects subjects which are central in philosophical discussion in, e.g., Oxford and Cambridge at the present day.

(*b*) Allied to this school but more eclectic and less doctrinaire, and not wedded to one single principle of explanation in all fields, is the work of such men as A. Gelb⁵ or David Katz (cf. also B 2 (*a*)), whose book on colour perception and analyses of hunger, curiosity etc. both in human beings and in animals are of outstanding interest and originality. The interest which psychologists of this type take in such problems as the connection of imagery with thought, desire and so on makes them particularly relevant reading for psychologising philosophers: and no competent philosopher does not psychologise.

(*c*) The same may be said of what is probably the best-organised school of psychology in England, that presided over by Professor Bartlett in Cambridge, whose work on the nature of remembering, of colour and sound perception etc., is distinguished for its rigorous scientific standards and the concrete nature of its results. The fact that the Moral Science Tripos at Cambridge includes psychology as one of the alternative subjects required by the curriculum, by creating an early alliance between philosophy and psychology, produces men who are at once scientifically trained and capable of grasping the wider implications of their discoveries, being protected by their philosophical past from the tendency to vagueness and romantic exaggeration, and from a passion for publicly embracing old and obvious fallacies, from which some

⁵ Adhémar Gelb (1887–1936).

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amongst their most illustrious scientific colleagues are far from immune.⁶

This to the best of my knowledge is a fairly complete account of the chief prevailing schools of psychology. One important fact which could not be stated conveniently above is that my divisions are partly artificial and distinguish methods rather than persons. Reputable psychologists are rarely fanatical adherents of any one view to the total exclusion of others: normally they are reasonably eclectic. Nor are they necessarily specialists in one narrow field, but often, as in the case of Katz and Köhler, in two or three, which are not necessarily adjacent, e.g. colour perception, animal psychology and human reflexology. Frequently they bring their varied knowledge to bear together on a single problem, with interesting results.

On these grounds I should like to recommend that in its examination of possible candidates the College should pay special attention to those whose interest is in psychology of the senses, memory and cognition in general, and in particular to those whose qualifications include training in both physiology and philosophy, and who combine specialisation in one field with a broad and informed attitude towards the surrounding country. I should like to add one further point: as philosophy and psychology have both pursued, in English-speaking countries, a course of development which is in certain respects independent of the Continent and *sui generis*, it is advisable that anyone likely to come into contact with them in Oxford should have had some previous acquaintance with it, and should not have to spend too much time and energy in orientation and adaptation. It is therefore to be generally recommended that the candidate (*a*) be fairly young (*b*) have had some experience of a British or American university. This

⁶ At this point an additional category, *C. Denkpsychologie*, appears in an earlier draft of the memorandum. It seems that Berlin decided to omit this from the final text, but for completeness I reproduce his remarks here: 'This psychological movement produced some half dozen experts in Germany whose writings I confess I have never attempted to read, owing to their appalling obscurity. Nothing has been heard of them – nor of any other [German] psychologists except the émigrés – since 1933. This total liquidation fortunately makes it unnecessary to consider their merits.' H.H.

qualification ought not, perhaps, to be too much insisted upon – it is by no [82] means a *sine qua non* – but anyone who satisfies it would, on the whole, be more likely to find the intellectual climate of Oxford sympathetic and stimulating to his work: which, in the case of the first occupant of a newly created post, is very important indeed. And, so far as I know, there is no conspicuous lack of men so qualified both here and in the USA, and possibly in the Scandinavian countries, whose scientists are usually in close touch with England and America. It ought not therefore to be excessively difficult to discover someone who would be suitable for election to a research fellowship, if the College decided to offer one.

For this there are several reasons:

(i) Since there is no school of psychology in existence in Oxford, and all we can provide is a modestly endowed laboratory (due to recent benefaction, and not yet in existence), whose facilities, it is hoped, will be placed at his disposal by the courtesy of its authorities, but cannot give him human allies in any shape or form, it is important that he should not be allowed to languish in isolation, in the complete absence of fellow workers. On the other hand there is at present a very strongly felt empirical bent noticeable among the younger teachers of philosophy in the University, and one can with absolute confidence predict that they would most warmly welcome the appointment of a psychologist whose subject had a common frontier with their own: even as it is, some amongst them are attempting to establish co-operation with one of the readers in zoology whose sphere embraces animal psychology; but the gap between the two subjects is at present still too wide to make this more than a gesture of mutual sympathy and respect. For this reason I should recommend that special attention be paid to my section B 4, in particular B 4(b) and B 4(c), as containing those psychologists who come into the most immediate contact with philosophy.

(ii) It would accord better with the general policy of All Souls, which is, for the present at any rate, the encouragement of the humane rather than the natural sciences, if a man were chosen who, while possessing adequate knowledge of physiology and general biology, which is undoubtedly indispensable, would naturally belong to the Lit. Hum. and PPE faculties rather than those of Medicine or Biology. This he would normally do if he

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belonged to the class referred to above; moreover this would make it possible for him to interest in his work undergraduates and postgraduate research students drawn from the two philosophical schools; interest in psychology exists already in these two schools, as evidenced by the rapid growth of the university psychological society, but it is at present undernourished.

(iii) Psychologists with some previous training in philosophy are, as a rule, better capable both of considering critically the foundations and methods of their own science, and of correctly judging about its relations, or absence of relations, with circumambient sciences. In a subject on whose fringes so many curious fanatics, eager but confused dilettanti, and occasionally out-and-out charlatans are still to be found, this is a rare and valuable virtue.

(iv) Since B 4 is the most adequately explored and scientifically sound region of non-therapeutic psychology, and rigorous standards obtain in it, it is easier to judge a candidate's merit if his reputation has been made in this rather than in any other field. This is not, of course, in itself a conclusive argument in favour of class B 4, but must be read in conjunction with my other points: it seems to me that its acceptance would facilitate the task of election without sacrificing the interests of the subject.

I very much hope that the College will give its most serious consideration to the proposal in question, as its acceptance would constitute the long-awaited beginning of serious study of [83] psychology in Oxford. We have recently helped to repair one of the most conspicuous shortcomings of the University, by creating a chair of anthropology: scientific psychology, which no one would today deny to be a subject of at least equal importance, and one which is older and has reached a much further stage of development, has in Oxford been totally neglected in a way in which even anthropology never was. If the College is financially in a position to afford a contribution of £600 per annum – or whatever sum is thought appropriate – towards the increase of knowledge, there is no branch of it which requires support more urgently or would repay it better. By endowing it the College would assist in promoting a new and growing subject, materially aid the studies of at least two great Oxford Schools, from which its own members are still so largely drawn, and so fulfil its proper function.

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I. Berlin
14 August 1936

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