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# Psychology and its history

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## Abstract

During its relatively short history as a distinct discipline, psychology was accompanied by a historiography that projected the *idea* of psychology back to ancient times when such an idea did not in fact exist. As the modern discipline proliferated into a collection of weakly connected sub-disciplines, the textbook image of psychology's ancient essence suggested that, in spite of the current messy reality, the subject had an unchanging core object that had always been there to be recognized. Earlier, that object was the psyche, later it was "human nature," and more recently, the principles of human cognition. However, historiography plays a more useful role within the discipline when it takes the current multiplicity of psychological objects as its point of departure and explores the social context of their emergence. This entails a historical analysis of the language used to define, describe, categorize, and modify psychological objects.

## Keywords

history, language of description, philosophy, philosophy of science, scientific progress

Let me first lay to rest a myth that threatens to obscure the very real issues at stake in this discussion. The notion that I regard authors who trace the history of psychology to ancient Greece as "ignorant" not only lacks any support from my writings, on the contrary, Aristotle happens to be the most cited author in my most recent book on the history of a psychological topic (Danziger, 2008). Invented allegations of ignorance are not among the issues that need bother us here.

## The antiquity of psychology

Profound differences between Robinson's approach to the historiography of psychology and my own do exist, and they emerge quite sharply in connection with questions about the antiquity of psychology. In contrast to Robinson's position, I do not regard psychology as a subject of great antiquity. However, the title of Robinson's (2013) paper refers not to historiography *of* psychology, but to historiography *in* psychology. This points to

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a distinction that is crucial for an understanding of the issues at stake. The historiography of psychology attempts to provide a history of what is now clearly a scientific and academic discipline with a significant professional arm and considerable cultural importance. Few would doubt that this history can be traced back as far as the late 19th and early 20th century. Problems only arise when this disciplinary history is claimed to have far deeper historical roots.

Historiography *in* psychology, by contrast, covers a broader range of topics. Any field of study or intervention embraced by contemporary psychology potentially has its own history. We have histories of mental testing, of psychological statistics, and of various clinical phenomena, for example. These may touch on the history of the discipline but can, and often do, avoid such contact without detracting from their historical value. For this kind of historiography the question of pre-modern roots is usually marginal at best; their subject matter is essentially a product of modern times. Practitioners of modern specialisms do not need to legitimize their professional interests by reference to some remote past—the value of what they are doing is firmly anchored in the present.

Any attempt at writing a history of psychology before its institutionalization as a modern discipline faces an obvious problem: What exactly is the subject whose history is to be presented? The discipline, as we know only too well, is notoriously fragmented and has been in that state for over a century. There are no uncontroversial proposals for unifying the discipline that command any widespread assent. Certainly, we can identify particular topics and areas of investigation, now part of psychology, that existed as subjects of systematic interest well before there were academic departments or professional associations committed to a discipline called psychology: for example, aspects of vision and of memory. Histories of people's engagement with such topics may well be of interest to some contemporary psychologists, but they would not really be histories of psychology. They would address more recent work on certain topics conducted by professional psychologists but they would not be concerned with when and how the category of psychology came into existence.

Some texts on the history of psychology accept the present fragmentation of psychology as an inescapable fact and explore the various histories of the fragments. They are histories of psychology insofar as they limit themselves to the history of topics studied within the institutional framework and the scientific norms of modern psychology (e.g., Richards, 2002), but they do not pretend that beyond these limits there exists an identifiable conceptual unity with its own far more ancient history. More traditional histories of psychology, however, avoid this stance. Although, typically, most of their content is provided by the fragmented histories of modern psychology, they introduce these collected histories by excursions into a more distant past when entities such as "Aristotle's psychology," "Plato's psychology," "medieval psychology," and so on, supposedly existed in an unproblematically identifiable form.

Of course, latter-day psychologies did not emerge from a historical vacuum. The process of their emergence is part of the history of sub-disciplines, such as developmental psychology, social psychology, and industrial psychology, or it is the history of investigations into specific topics, such as perception, memory and intelligence. These are all particularistic histories, as are histories of the discipline in specific countries or parts of the world. Sometimes the history of a special topic almost becomes part of the history of the discipline in one country, behaviourism being the star example.

All these cases illustrate the use of historiography *in* psychology. Can the history of psychology be anything more than a collection of these particularistic histories? Are there any unifying entities or attributes with an identifiable history over and above this collection? There may indeed be two. One can be found in the process of professionalization, involving the activities of professional organizations and the politics of professional interests; the regulation of training and accreditation; the development of formal and informal standards of competence in research and practice; the structure and control of intra-disciplinary channels of communication; relationships with other disciplines, with the lay public, and with sources of funding; career patterns, and other such matters. That is what I mean by “psychology in the modern sense,” and this sociological aspect of the discipline has a history that is more general than any collection of particular histories based on the content of various sub-fields.

However, explorations of the discipline as a social system are not at all popular among the authors of textbooks on the history of psychology. For the most part, these authors, including Robinson, rely on quite another unifying presupposition which may be identified as *the idea of psychology*. This refers to the belief that the current grouping, under the umbrella of one discipline, of various research interests, plus certain practical interventions in individual lives, is not simply a product of recent social history but a continuation of very ancient and very general human concerns. When textbooks present philosophers, surrounded by an aura of ancient wisdom, as the precursors of something that now serves as the identifying label of a modern discipline, they convey the message that below the surface of the sprawling variety of latter-day psychology there lies an unchanging core, a unifying object, that has always been there to be recognized. Though this approach may be perceived as enhancing the intellectual value of psychological studies, and hence may be welcome in the well-established introductory textbook market, it faces a number of serious problems.

The mobilization of ancient philosophers for a contemporary cause must rely entirely on the interpretation of very old texts written in alien languages. A huge literature devoted to various alternative interpretations must be navigated. Inevitably, the contemporary interests of modern interpreters play a large role in the way texts are chosen and read. For psychology there is also the difficulty of lifting parts of texts from works explicitly about metaphysics, ethics, rhetoric, and so on, and enrolling them in the cause of a history of psychology. This implies a refusal to take these texts on their own terms and to impose on them categories that did not exist for their authors. There is simply too much scope for arbitrary reconstruction.

## **A discipline in time or timeless ideas?**

Nevertheless, one of the texts attributed to Aristotle was traditionally labelled as being “On the Soul,” and its claim for inclusion in the historiography of psychology is certainly stronger than that of other texts of that vintage. To assess this claim we have to return to the distinction between the historiography *of* psychology and historiography *in* psychology. Insofar as Aristotle’s text addresses topics, such as sensation and memory, that are also topics for modern psychology without a radical change of meaning, it may well be a significant source for any history *of those topics*. That would be an example of the use of historiography *in* psychology. However, the “soul” that Aristotle’s text professes to be

about is *not* part of modern psychology. On the contrary, psychology *in the modern sense* is precisely a psychology without a soul *in the Aristotelian sense*. And this difference reflects a profound gap between the Aristotelian world and that of contemporary psychology. As a coherent exposition of a distinct field of knowledge, *De Anima* forms part of the historiography of psychology only by way of contrast.

A critical aspect of this transformation involved a fundamental change in the meaning of “psyche.” To be brief, in the Aristotelian tradition psyche was understood in terms of a metaphysics of matter and form, where psyche was what gave living form to inanimate matter. Psyche was not a specifically human attribute, though the human soul differed in certain respects from the souls of animals and plants. In 17th-century Europe a very different metaphysical framework began to become appealing. The place of psyche is taken by the individual human mind, that of matter by physical bodies understood in corpuscular, mechanistic terms. Mind and body have an influence on each other, though the nature of that influence remained open to debate. Nevertheless, the new metaphysics provided a potential object of knowledge that was quite different from Aristotelian psyche, namely, the embodied individual human mind. Systematized knowledge pertaining to this new object would eventually provide a focus for a new discipline, psychology.

As for most modern disciplines, this was a gradual process that was very much part of the post-medieval reconstruction of knowledge. The Aristotelian framework of medieval doctrines was not destroyed overnight, and it is only in the 18th century that an altogether different framework for organizing and pursuing knowledge crystallizes. In Germany, universities played a much bigger role in this reconstruction than they did in Western Europe, and it is there that a new, non-Aristotelian, psychology acquired a recognized place in the teaching of philosophy as well as textbooks that addressed common issues within a new framework. Not only was there a new object, the interior of a specifically human mind, there was also a new basis for assessing knowledge claims regarding this new object: the evidence of self-observation. Though the trust placed in introspective evidence soon became subject to the well-known criticism of Immanuel Kant and others, it was not the *empirical status* of introspection that was at issue, only its *reliability* as a basis for an exact science. In fact, identification as an *empirical* discipline was quite central to the distinction between the new study of the soul and the old and was reflected in the titles of several of the new texts, beginning with Christian Wolff’s *Psychologia empirica* of 1732 (Wolff, 1732/1968).

In this context, “psychology” named a body of systematic, empirically based, knowledge that could be distinguished from other fields of knowledge and that could be taught and practised. Though the range of content assigned to this field was somewhat variable, the field itself had a recognized identity, shared presuppositions, and agreement on legitimate sources of evidence. There was academic psychological discourse but no psychological community because there were as yet no psychologists. No one who participated in the teaching and the discourse of psychology made a career of it.

By the early 19th century the new subject had, however, acquired something else, a history (Vidal, 2011). It began with bibliographers who distinguished what they considered psychological texts from other sub-categories of philosophical literature. That was followed by retrospective constructions of a history for a subject that had only recently been identified as such, culminating in F. A. Carus’s monumental *Geschichte der*

*Psychologie* (1808/1990). From its early days, the construction of appropriate histories contributed to the identification of psychology as a distinct academic field. The presentation of a particular history assigned psychology its place in the world of human knowledge and its special objects of inquiry. "The historiography of psychology developed hand in hand with the history of the discipline whose discipline was being written" (Vidal, 2011, p. 164).

These functions of disciplinary history were not unique to psychology, nor were they limited to the early days of disciplines. Retrospective historical construction and reconstruction played a major role in the differentiation and re-identification of all the modern human sciences. "To write the history of a discipline is to state what the discipline is" (Smith, 1997, p. 22). The need to affirm distinct disciplinary identities led to a historiography of "disciplinary Whiggism" in which each specialty presented itself as a coherent entity concerned with human issues that ultimately existed outside of historical time. This can lead to "the rather absurd view that makes Aristotle the first psychologist, the first anthropologist, and one of the first sociologists, economists," and so on (Porter, 2003, p. 13). Here, history becomes a way of "colonizing the past" in order to get over the awkward fact that the distinctions among the human sciences are social constructions of rather recent vintage (Smith, 1997, pp. 27–28).

Robinson's case for Aristotle's role in the history of psychology is very much in this tradition. Although he recognizes that "there are many psychologies 'in the modern sense,'" he identifies a corpus of "Aristotle's psychological works" that tell us "what a systematic psychology might look like if 'modern' psychology were up to the task" (Robinson, 2013, p. 833). A disciplinary coherence which eludes modern psychology is posited as existing far back in time, to be excavated by the right historiography of psychology.

Of course, no-one could identify "Aristotle's psychological works" unless they were in possession of criteria for distinguishing the psychological from the non-psychological. Robinson does not spell out his criteria but they are implied by his reference to "the mission of any science of human nature plausibly regarded as psychology" (p. 820). This mission, it seems, involves the recognition of certain "essential" human "cognitive powers" that are "presupposed" by our social and political life, powers that enable individuals to "frame and comprehend universal propositions" (p. 821). Modern psychology does not understand "the problem of universalized cognitions in a manner radically different from Aristotle's understanding" (p. 821).

Installing Aristotle as the first psychologist, worthy of a pre-eminent place in the history of psychology, clearly involves far more than minor differences of opinion among specialists. It implies specific views about the nature of psychology and its relationship to its history. It embodies claims about what psychology *is*, or, more accurately, what it should be. For the claim that psychology has a *mission* is surely not a factual but a normative statement. In reality the work of psychologists from different parts of the world and from different fields of specialization does not serve one mission but a multitude of priorities ordered in different ways. What the idea of a mission for psychology does is to provide a hypothetical common ground that gives the discipline an imagined coherence which can then be illustrated by a particular history that begins with Aristotle.

However, there is something odd about this history. Where ordinary history is an account of human affairs changing over time, the history of psychology envisaged by Robinson is more concerned with what does not change over time. The notion of psychology's "mission" provides a timeless framework that enables one to establish a direct equivalence between Aristotelian and modern formulations of certain questions and concepts. On this view, historical change does not operate on what Robinson refers to as "the foundational level" (p. 825) where "foundational issues" operate and where certain medieval texts "set the agenda" (p. 821). History may show us discontinuities, but certain foundational concepts will always be there, to be remembered or forgotten from time to time. It is this echo of a venerable idealist notion of history that provides psychology with the coherence that is so much desired, yet so hard to find, in its current incarnation as a collection of minimally connected sub-disciplines.

In the case of Carus's *History*, the timeline of psychological ideas was still linked to human history, albeit in a rather fanciful way. But later in the 19th century this link disappeared, to be replaced by a historiographic tradition that presented psychology as a transhistorical entity grouped around particular concepts and questions that existed outside of historical time, though a genealogy of questions could be constructed by reference to a sequence of canonical texts. Such histories simultaneously provided the new discipline with a deep intellectual history and affirmed its increasingly prominent claim for affiliation with the natural sciences. The sciences of nature were dedicated to the discovery of universal principles that were independent of human historical time. Their history would be one of false starts but also of ultimately successful "anticipations" of facts and principles discovered and accepted in recent times. As a science of nature, psychology acquired just such a history of timeless but veiled verities whose unveiling unfolded in time.

In English-speaking countries such an approach was facilitated by the fact that, unlike in Germany, the 18th-century texts which provided much of the language for 19th- and even 20th-century psychology ignored the term "psychology" but employed the term "science of human nature" to refer to a broader field that included systematic doctrines about the human mind, such as those of the association of ideas and the concept of "attention." When the science of human nature became differentiated into 19th- and 20th-century specialties, such topics and concepts were appropriated and refashioned by the new scientific psychology. Though the understanding of mental philosophy as part of a science of human nature was widespread in the 18th century, it owed much of its subsequent influence to an institutionalized link of mental and moral philosophy in Scottish universities and to Scottish texts that maintained this link (Hatfield, 1995). Under the umbrella of moral philosophy, doctrines of the mind as human nature were transplanted to North America and had an enduring influence on certain characteristics of American psychology (Richards, 1995).

Among the ideas inherited from the "science of human nature," none was more important than the concept of human nature itself. This concept continued to serve as "an a priori category ... an atemporal given" (Smith, 1995) that identified the common object of numerous investigations and speculations. Whatever the fickleness of specific empirical observations or the uncertainties of hypotheses, the natural, ahistorical, existence of the object of all this scientific attention was not open to doubt. However, any characterization of human



nature was always normative in scope. Particular knowledge claims could always be judged in terms of their conformity with prevailing beliefs about “human nature.”

When psychology is taken to be a “science of human nature” inspired by Aristotle, this certainly provides the subject with a unifying core that provides a foundation for a history of the discipline. However, the shape of that history depends on a belief in the existence of certain “foundational issues” that keep on recurring because they refer to “problems for beings of a certain kind” (Robinson, 2013, p. 826), meaning us. This understanding of psychology’s history has always relied on the belief that the concept of “human nature” represents some historically unchanging essence guaranteeing continuity, no matter how great the gulf that appears to separate the present from the remote past.

In this usage, “human nature” is usually something located within the individual mind, the archetype being the “moral sense” concept of Scottish moral philosophy. That suggests an understanding of psychology’s past as a history of reflections on human nature, a vision broad enough to include Aristotle. The history of psychology now has a unifying object, but it is one whose boundaries are set only by assumptions about “human nature.” Of course, mobilizing history to show that psychology’s mission lies in uncovering the foundations of human nature may reinforce the impression that psychology is the foundational discipline for the human sciences. Perhaps that was one of the reasons why this approach was widely adopted for disciplinary histories launched as introductory texts for the general undergraduate curriculum.

## Historiography and language

Increasingly, historians of psychology have stopped pretending that there is a basic disciplinary coherence and unity whose origins can be traced to ancient times. Instead, they have accepted the fragmented reality of the discipline and explored the diverse history of the fragments. The earlier history of the discipline then becomes a “patchwork” of “discursive pigeonholes” that were eventually linked institutionally as parts of one discipline (Goldstein, 2008). Historians of psychology have excelled at documenting the milestones that mark the paths which led to the establishment of these links, paths that were usually different in different countries. Surely, we then have to ask, what opened up these paths, what set their direction, what helped to maintain them when there were threats to their existence? Some important answers to such questions are certainly to be found in the broader social, political, and economic contexts within which discipline formation occurred, a field best left to professional historians. Does that leave any role for disciplinary historians, other than that of archivists, biographers, and antiquarians?

One line of inquiry that still demands the attention of disciplinary historians concerns the socio-political aspects of the discipline, such as the interplay of various professional interests, the tale of disciplinary rivalries and alliances, the marketing of disciplinary products, and other such matters. But the importance of these sorts of factors only derives from the fact that they represent the social context for the defining activity of members of the discipline, which is their work as psychologists. This work applies particular ways of seeing, categorizing, recording, and manipulating to aspects of the world that are regarded as the work’s appropriate objects, *psychological objects*. The way in which psychologists work with the objects of their professional attention has changed over

time, and as their work has changed, so have the objects at which that work was directed. These developments constitute a history that disciplinary historians are particularly well placed to explore.

As an example of what such a history might involve, let me take the case of disciplinary language, a factor that is absolutely necessary for the discipline to exist at all and to remain in being. Without an intercommunicating community of members, there is no discipline, and without the availability of appropriate language tools, such a community will not form. There can be no common objects of analysis and discussion, let alone joint projects of investigation, unless there is a modicum of agreement on the way the objects of shared interest are represented and identified in the language of the discipline or sub-discipline. As in other situations of language use, there need not be complete agreement for collaborative activity to go ahead, but some common understanding will be necessary even for disagreements about precise meanings to be meaningfully discussed.

A language, however, always functions as more than a closed set of pieces in a game of communication. Occasional appearances to the contrary, intra-disciplinary communication does not resemble a game of cards where the tokens of communication have an agreed meaning within the game but no significant reference to anything outside the game. On the contrary, the most important tokens of intra-disciplinary discourse have a crucial reference to objects in the world beyond that discourse. Typically, the scholarly and scientific texts exchanged among members of a discipline are about what happens in a world that is of interest to the disciplinary community but that lies outside the disciplinary community itself. The language of those texts defines the objects that are the special focus of the discipline's scientific work.

Languages are constitutive of their objects of reference, and disciplinary languages are no exception. The terms of a language identify different parts of a referential complex, distinguishing it from other parts and categorizing it. These terms form a semantic network within which the typically fuzzy meaning boundaries for categories are established. In the languages of the sciences a norm of precision operates, so that attempts at sharpening categorical boundaries are ubiquitous. Competent users of such a language can usually agree on the appropriate identification of phenomena as falling inside or outside a particular category.

The categorical, object-constituting, language of disciplinary communities is, like all language, historical in character. The terms of intra-disciplinary communication acquire specialized, technical meanings and some of them are neologisms. However, for the most general categories these terms have historical roots in earlier usage, in a time before the disciplinary community existed. In the physical sciences the boundaries between intra-scientific and lay usage of key terms are very strong. Newtonian "force" is not applicable to the force of an argument. In the human sciences these boundaries are much weaker, partly because their specialized language continues to seep into the language of everyday life, terms such as trauma, repression, self-esteem, introversion, level of aspiration, and cognitive dissonance providing some examples. Every one of these terms has a history within the discipline and a history outside the discipline, and often the latter begins before the discipline existed. Here there is a rich field for historiography *in* psychology that has only been patchily explored.



There is no reason for this kind of historiography to limit itself to relatively specialized terms. The terms identifying the most general categories of psychology, such as “intelligence,” “emotion,” “motivation,” “cognition,” “consciousness,” “memory,” to name only a few, also have a history that is open to exploration and questioning (Danziger, 1997). Sometimes we do not have to go too far back in time before any clear link to modern psychological usage disappears, but in a few cases the links extend very far back, yes, even to Aristotle, as in the case of “memory” (Danziger, 2008). The nature of these links will vary. Sometimes they involve straightforward textual borrowing or opposition, but some of the most persistent links involve the recurrence of similar metaphors, especially dead metaphors that do not cease to convey particular meanings when they operate without being noticed.

Such historical continuities are often eclipsed by profound discontinuities in the use and understanding of particular categories. The “memory” that medieval monks evoked to describe their meditative immersion in sacred texts was not the “memory” for which Roman manuals on rhetoric offered training, and neither of them had much in common with what Ebbinghaus aimed to investigate (Danziger, 2008). Categories that eventually became of psychological interest always operated within a context of particular social practices and social requirements. Historical changes in these requirements entailed changes in particular practices and in the understanding of the objects at which they were directed. It turns out, for example, that mnemonic practices and mnemotechnology, directed at internal and external memory, respectively, accompanied the category of “memory” throughout its long history. The social practices directed at memory go far beyond mnemonics in the narrow sense and include keeping diaries, writing autobiographies, making confessions, using textual and iconic inscriptions, among others. These practices all have a history in which the conceptual history of “memory” is deeply embedded. Psychological memory experiments constitute a relatively recent and novel social practice directed at this object, and, as is to be expected, they are associated with further changes in conceptions of “memory.”

Among the categories now used to identify proper subjects for psychological investigation very few have the antiquity of memory. Many more are no older than the modern discipline itself and new categories are constantly being proposed. In the course of their recent history psychology and its allied disciplines have not only given new meaning to old concepts, they have also brought into existence new phenomena by constructing new definitions and distinctions, inventing novel descriptions, and creating previously impossible assemblies of data. When this happens, a new area of intelligibility exists as an object for our attention, judgment, intervention, speculation, and even measurement (Sugarman, 2009).

The categories of disciplinary or sub-disciplinary language define the objects of psychologists’ research and intervention. These objects are multiple, and their historiography has to respect this multiplicity. Certainly, there are historical relations among these objects: to a significant degree they are defined by shifting distinctions among them. It is possible to confirm the existence of local and temporary semantic networks but not the history of *one* object that would supply the ground for *the* history of psychology. To accomplish such a task one would first have to define psychology’s essential subject matter in order to decide what is part of its history and what is not.

One has to have a sense of what psychology is in order to explore its history (Stam, 2004). What psychology is can be established either on the basis of preconceived notions or by what the philosopher Ian Hacking calls “taking a look.” When he looks at his own discipline he finds not the timeless objects of “grand unified accounts,” but individual conceptual structures with specific histories that require “a local historicism, attending to particular and disparate fields of reflection and action” (Hacking, 2002, p. 53). If this constitutes a viable approach for the truly venerable field of philosophy, it is surely the only appropriate approach for the sprawling newcomer, psychology. And what do we find if we take a look at the discipline we know? We find a conglomeration of diverse interest groups clustered around various objects of study and professional practice, governed by a range of scientific norms and speaking specialist languages of very limited mutual intelligibility. It is this variety that provides the starting point for historiography in psychology.

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