# Some Neglected Aspects of a History of Psychology

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Psychology stands in a peculiar relation to the sciences of life and to the physical sciences, for it is one of the youngest of Philosophy's children and, on that account, has fallen heir, as do the successive members of any growing family, to a number of family treasures, some good, some bad, and some indifferent. Among other things, it has inherited from the physical sciences a well-rounded methodology and a refined laboratory technique; and from the sciences of life, a "genetic" way of regarding mind in its relation to life. Moreover, in the near future, some one will write a history of the development of scientific concepts and it will then be discovered that psychology has fallen heir, also, to scientific ways of regarding the world at large, ways that became established a hundred years or so before mind was brought into the laboratory.

Now when psychology began to use these methodological and other heritages from the physical and the biological sciences in an attempt to understand mind, the opportunities for research became so great and the problems so insistent that the investigators of mind have been urged on to the present. Movement by nothing save the enchantment of their own productivity. Psychology became, over night, a realm of laboratory adventure. And within forty years of the founding of the first laboratory, general science is presented with the spectacle of a discipline whose facts already extend beyond the compass of encyclopedic volumes.

So rapid, in fact, has been the growth of the science, and so absorbing are its demands for the immediate future, that an adequate account of its genesis, a serious historical survey of the path by which it has come, is not a part of its immediate program. The psychologist who is at all historically-minded,·[p. 18] when trying to gain a perspective in his science, finds himself in the peculiar position of the man who wakes in a strange place and endeavors to comprehend his situation by taking a careful inventory of the furnishings of his room. If the science has come, by virtue of its achievements, to maturity, it must begin to realize that even scientific adventure is hedged about with historical restrictions to be understood and accepted before the adventure itself becomes of real significance.[I] Psychology is not merely the accumulation of fact in monthly journals; it is rather a· product of the liberal past and a starting point for a productive future. The historian of psychology must tell us what psychology is, in its largest aspects, by

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telling us whence its methods and concepts have come and what these mean for its further development.

We have, at the present time, no history of psychology. That is to say, there is no written record of the genesis and development of the discipline as it stands.[2] Our historical researches are limited to the introductory pages of doctoral theses and other major pieces of research.[3] There are, of course, histories of [p. 19] philosophy in which the central theme is mind or sense-perception or mental activity. One cannot neglect such accounts and neither can one forget altogether certain other historical surveys of the life and work of men who may, under protest, be designated psychologists; but the discipline has at present no searching and sympathetic survey of the events and ways of thinking that have led up to and that have grown into our present conception of psychology, its problems, and its methods.

Of 254 pages which Dessoir devotes to an[4] outline of the history of psychology, 148 describe events prior to 1800, and the remainder of the book barely takes us beyond Herbart. Brett[5] gets as far as Fechner at the end of 900 pages. Villa[6] devotes some 50 pages to a diary of the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries, while the rest of the book, -- nearly 350 pages, -- draws upon the history of philosophy for a large part of its discussion. The first volume of Baldwin's[7]history goes as far as Hobbes, while the second volume barely enters-into the days of "mental chronometry" and the "James-Lange theory." Klemm[8] has done better than some of the others; but even so close a follower of Wundt as he has hardly entered into modern psychology and then has looked back by way of retrospection. Aside from the Wundtian bias, Klemm has written useful prolegomena to a history of psychology.

Histories grow and the past changes as it is seen in the light of new achievements. The cosmopolitan interest of the present-day psychologist is evidence enough that the science is broader than any existing account of its origin and of its growth. Who, for example, would attempt to describe, in advance of serious historical [p. 20] research, the mental and physical matrix which has stamped in so curious a fashion that current explanatory psychology known as Freudianism? Of the ways of regarding the social mind, of behaviorism and functionalism, of the renewed interest in a "psychology of the soul," and of scores of small problems, we are inclined to speak retrospectively with a superficial knowledge only of the historical facts. In all of these matters, we frequently refer, of course, by way of historical perspective to men and to events; but we have, as yet, no historical research in the field at large comparable in spirit to a recent small but choice example from Titchener.[9]

If, as we have already said, the science is to assume the responsibilities of maturity, it must turn seriously to its history, for such a quest usually tempers the ardor of youth but at the same time saves from stolidity. Now, if there is to be a history of psychology and if we are to speak intelligently of it, we must know upon what principles it is to be established. What significance, for example, will a different interpretation of the two terms "psychology" and "history" have for any statement of the problem and course of historical research in the mental sciences? Obviously, a history adequate to the science need not be three-fourths philosophy and neither must it be a history for purposes of propaganda in favor of any particular school of psychologists.

What, then, do we mean by "history" and by "psychology"? Let us first come to terms with "history." We are not here proposing a philosophy of history and we shall, therefore, be brief and somewhat schematic in describing at least two possible conceptions of the nature of history.[10] The first, which is the more venerable of the two, maintains that history is a chronological account of all that has occurred. That is to say, men sit down and, assuming a temporal sequence, proceed to write [p. 21] a diary of the affairs of the world. Such an account proceeds as if one stood at the end of a street and described the succession of houses in adjoining blocks. An example of this static sort of description is taken from a current history of Italy:[11] "Robert the Wise (of Anjou) (1309-1343), the successor of Charles II of Naples, and the champion of the Guelphs, could not extend his power over Sicily where Frederick II (1296-1337) the son of Peter of Aragon, reigned. Robert's granddaughters, Joan I, after a career of crime and misfortune, was strangled in Prison by Charles Durazzo, the last male descendant of

the house of Anjou in lower Italy (I382) who seized the government. Joan II, the last heir of Durazzo (1414-1435), first adopted: Alfonso V, of Aragon, and then Louis III, of Anjou, and his brother René. Alfonso, who inherited the crown of Sicily, united both kingdoms (1435), after a war with René and the Visconti of Milan."

It has been urged that this method is the only scientific method of dealing with historical data. Static historians point out that interpretation and elaboration in history are as open to objections as is interpretation in any of the sciences. As a matter of fact, the static method does escape the great danger besetting the second conception of history, the conception that history consists mainly of an exegesis or an expounding of discrete facts in the light of some ligating principle or principles. In this respect, history as we look back upon it seems to be an unfolding, an efflorescence, an explication, providing we can use such terms without implying *teleology.* It is a curious fact that this second sort of history, genetic history, was largely supported by the biological sciences. Within a decade men began to realize that the whole earth and everything in it had a history, a genesis, a growth, an evolution. They realized that only a part of the story had been told by their static description of events. The main problem *had been* to state history "wie es eigentlich gewesen." The genetic point of view made as its quest history "wie es eigentlich geworden."[12] This second type of history, [p. 22] then, involves a high degree of ligation between facts, and the quest of the geneticist is directed primarily toward the principles of ligation, the bonds that give his bare temporal successions a unity and onward-moving significance.

There are then, at least two ways of regarding history. The historian can be "ultra-scientific"; that is to say, merely descriptive or static, and so put down his facts in orderly temporal succession; or he can enrich and enliven his account by reading into them the culmination of tendencies, the inception of movements, the mental-like stream of pregnant and forward-tending events.

Let us turn now for a moment to psychology. The answer to our query: How are we to write a history of psychology? depends quite as fully upon the meanings of the word psychology as upon those of history. For our present purposes we can distinguish two meanings of the word. In the first sense and at the same time the broadest sense psychology refers, in a general way, to all the events or facts issuing from the existence in the world of minds or of anything mental. That is to say, psychology is a blanket term to cover almost anything from the alleged appearance of dead friends or of the latest achievement of a superior dog to an abstruse discussion of the problem of knowing or of the immortality of the soul. In the second place, psychology may be defined rigidly so as to include only a scientific description of mind, of mental activity, or of mental products. There have arisen, of late, a number of such statements regarding the nature of psychology, statements that definitely exclude a large amount of material popularly known as mental. Moreover, many of these recent descriptions of psychology take the psychologist farther away than ever from certain borderland problems which have in the popular mind formed the central province of psychology. Finally, scientific accounts of mind have eliminated a large number of philosophical problems concerning the nature of mind, of knowing, of the reliability of sense-perception, the origin and significance of the self, and so on.

With these distinctions before us, then, can we state the relevant [p. 23] features of a history of psychology? Our answer must fall under four headings. If history is to be regarded as a *diary* and psychology as the accumulation of common sense and reflective thinking, we shall derive an account considerably at variance with the account issuing from a chronological description of psychology as a science. On the other hand, if history is an interpretation of the diary, a genetic, dynamic account of a growing thing, our psychological history will depend upon out choice of psychology as a general popular discipline or as a specific scientific discipline.

Since much depends upon our choice of a method of writing our history, we shall briefly illustrate the kinds of history falling under each of these conditions. Suppose, for the moment, that history is a diary and that psychology is a general name for the study or observation of anything mental. Our historical chronicle would begin, then, with the first written records we

have of man's dealings with mind, either by way of examination or of superstition or by way of reflection on the problem of knowledge. Such a history would take us back to the life and supposed work of Thales and then hasten us through the births and deaths and the date of the principal works of Pythagoras, Heraclitus, the Eleatics, Democritus, Plato and Aristotle, and finally, after many chapters, would give us a breathing spell among the church fathers. In these early chapters we should have become acquainted with the numerical relations of the typical Pythagorean, the cosmic and mental elements of Heraclitus or of Empedocles, the sieve-like theory of sense-perception from Democritus, the tripartite world of Plato or the realization of the potential in Aristotle. The chief emphasis in such an account, as is evidenced by most of the text-books on the history of psychology, is the contribution of each individual to a growing body of knowledge regarding mind and the world in which it lives. At least, the emphasis is certainly not on the spirit of the time or the factors in the lives of the men that made their contributions possible.

In writing the chapters on the psychological contributions of [p. 24] the church fathers, some genetic reference must be made, at the least, to Plato and Aristotle. All that the patristic leaders did large measure colored by the writings of Plato and Aristotle. But even so, the other factors that existed in the political and social conditions of the times find no part in a description of the conditions that made patristic psychology what it was. Our daily chronicle would take us through Marcus Aurelius, Tertullian, Origen, Plotinus, St. Augustine, Thomas Aquinas and Duns Scotus. The history of psychology, regarded the point of view here considered would still mention births and deaths and the principal contributions of each to our knowledge of the functions of the soul and of the intellect and respective importance of divinity and of the will in the control of conduct. Two hundred fifty years later we should suddenly find ourselves at the inception of a large empirical movement of which Bacon was the first representative and Hobbes and Locke the worthy followers. These men formulated doctrines of the nature of mind and of the problem of knowledge that dominated English thought for nearly three centuries, but if the psychologist knows the origin and significance of this movement, it is by way of general history and general literature and not by way of historical research in psychology. In the meantime, under an impetus from Descartes in France and Locke in England, Malebranche crystallizes French thought for a short time and then the record becomes discontinuous, with a number of contending movements of different value. The whole of Germany falls under the spell of Kant and while the chapters of the text run on with the details of the diary, we suddenly find ourselves in the midst of a psychological laboratory with a conception of mind that is scientifically possible and with a method that begins to produce results with amazing rapidity, but with small appreciation of why we have arrived and where we may expect to go. The whole account from this point of view is just a chronological sequence, the noting of the appearance of new movements and of the men responsible for them.

This general situation is similar if we take history as a diary [p. 25] and psychology as a science, save that our history of psychology begins, not with Thales or early Arabian thought, but with some such time as the publication of the *Beiträge zür Theorie der Sinneswahrnehmung* in 1862. The spirit of the account, however, is not different from that just given. The *Grundzüge* is followed by the *Tonpsyclzologie,* the *Zeitschrift für Völkerpsychologie und Sprachwissenschaft* by the *Völkerpsychologie*, while Hermann's *Handbuch* provides an appropriate sense physiology. The locus of the history is largely in Germany until the late years of the 19th century, when several of Wundt's pupils returned to this country, established their own laboratories and continued the scientific productivity of the German universities.

Now let us turn for a moment to the conception of history as interpretation and to psychology regarded first as accumulated common sense and secondly as science. In this second type of history a new spirit guides the account. We find that men have not only lived and contributed but that they have reflected; they have absorbed from their forefathers and from their contemporaries, and their work is alive with meaning and reference. Thales becomes the spokesman of his day and reflects the type of thought about him. The record from him to Aristotle is not discrete but continuous, and Aristotle is what he is because of the contributions of those who have lived before him. The task of the interpretative psychologist is to discover what there was in the lives of men and in the political and social organization of the time that made the contribution of Aristotle possible. The patristic psychologists are not isolated

commentators on the functions of reason but they are rather the reflectors of profound religious, social and political tendencies in the lives of the people. In this history of psychology we do not find ourselves suddenly in the midst of an empirical movement but we find instead a number of tendencies leading for years toward the formulation of just the problems with which Bacon struggled. In the nineteenth century psychology does not come suddenly upon a scientific conception of mind and of psychological method. These are things that have come out of the lives and work of men [p. 26] who were sometimes remote in place and in thought from the events to which they unwittingly contributed.

As is the case in the first type of history, the account is considerably shortened if psychology is considered a science. As a matter of fact, we have now come upon what seems to be a real basis for writing a history of psychology. From this point of view, we no longer need to take up half or three-fourths of our text with an account, either chronological or interpretative, of the problems that are essentially philosophical and not psychological. They become of significance and of interest only in so far as they furnish the basis for the interpretative account that must, for the sake of convenience, begin at some arbitrary date, as for example, the founding of the Leipzig laboratory. In this account of the history of psychology, Meumann and Külpe and Helmholtz and Stumpf and Ach and Messer and others do not stand apart from one another but they are creatures with unique historical backgrounds. The work that they did falls into order and assumes significance only in so far as it represents or reflects tendencies which have their roots in the past, some temporally near and some temporally far away.

In answer to our question, then, we can say that a significant history of psychology can be written with the most of it falling within the last fifty years and but little of it in the preceding twenty centuries. Ebbinghaus's remark that psychology has had a long past and a short history emphasizes the fact that the long past is only a mould in which were cast the essential features of the science. The past, that is, the past prior to some such arbitrary date as we have named, becomes significant only in so far as we need it to interpret the facts and tendencies with which we are now dealing.

If this conception of the history of psychology is acceptable, certain other aspects of the problem become immediately insistent. The histories we have at the present time are but prologomena to a real history. They are concerned, for the most part, with the pre-psychological facts. It is true that they can be supplemented by the introductory chapters of a good many [p. 27] doctoral theses, but even so we come upon the fact that the science stands in need of much serious historical research the results of which will form the body of theses instead of brief introductions. We have buried ourselves so deeply in our laboratories and dissipated our energies so prematurely in the fields of psycho-technics that we are, to judge from the tenor of a large part of current periodical literature, losing contact with the real problem of psychology. It is true that psychology has become a complicated discipline. We have said before that it includes a large number of tendencies. The histories that have usually led up to sensationalism have missed altogether the tendencies issuing in functionalism and behaviorism to say nothing of borderland groups of facts that, out of scientific fairness, must be taken into, account. The historian of the science must, then, as soon as time reduces and properly valuates our facts, put them together in an organic whole and see what they mean as history. The science needs the impetus to healthy growth that comes from a knowledge of the contributing factors to its existence. One of the chief ways of properly estimating the overnight development of mushroom "psychologies" is to examine critically the kind of soil out of which they have appeared. All the world loves a good problem and a sound method, but neither of these comes; from sterile ground. They are generally the results of long incubation or simmering, and their real value to the development of the discipine [*sic*] as a whole falls under the scrutiny of the historian who can place them in proper perspective.

The historian of the science of psychology stands in a peculiar relation to his fellow historians. He is dealing with material that is more like mind in its fluent character than any other process. The nature of mind is such that it must be viewed in the light of its own organization and function. The psychologist, by virtue of his knowledge of the subject-matter with which he deals, is peculiarly fitted to exhibit the conditions under which points of view develop *and* the ways in

which our present achievements are related to the past. Mind in its own development is cumulative in a peculiar sense, and as the historian of mind views the facts of his science he finds that they too are, as [p. 28] mental monuments or products of mind, also cumulative. By virtue of his training and his knowledge, the psychologist is committed to the type of historical research we are urging. He has stripped his science of its meaning if he contents himself with a chronology. He is bound to regard the past as a promise of the future and the present as the natural outgrowth of the past.

It appears, then, from our discussion thus far that a history of psychology should consist of an interpretative account of psychology taken as a science. This makes the historical account short in the time covered but long in the developments included. We have found also that the proper valuation of the field as it is rests first of all upon sound historical research, and that the psychologist was peculiarly fitted to be a historian.

We have now to ask what should be the central factors in a history of psychology? About what central theme should the account be written? Too often histories are colored by the desire to show that events are leading naturally to some favored system of interpretation of fact or are useful for purposes of propaganda. But, viewing the science in the large, is there a central theme about which the history can be written, a theme which will not at the same time be an excuse for propaganda. There are a number of possibilities appearing at once. Psychology has depended largely upon the formulation of its methods. But it has also developed a scientific statement of its problem and it has discovered certain vital relations with other scientific disciplines. Let us propose, however, in order to bring the matter to a focus, that the history of psychology should have as its central theme the tracing of the stages in the development of a scientific conception of mind. Method and problem have waited upon a conception of what the subject-matter of psychology really is. If the history of psychology means anything, it means that all that men have done or are now doing in the field rests essentially on this one problem, *viz.*, what is mind? This kind of difficulty did not materially hinder the development of the physical and the biological sciences; although they had to outgrow the belief that life was a manifestation of some immaterial force or power and that events in the [p. 29] physical world were controlled, not by natural laws, but by resident spirits of one kind and another. The development of a scientific conception of mind, however, has been a serious problem. Indeed, it appears to be one of the most serious problems with which the history of psychology has to deal. If mind is a form of energy, then our method and the statement of our problem are to a certain extent already established. If mind is the manifestation of the soul in the body, other methods and other problems are presupposed.

Now, as a matter of fact, two generations of psychologists have been working on an empirical level with just such a concept. As a result of centuries of reflection, and by virtue of inheritances from the related sciences, psychology turns out to be neither the study of the activities of a soul nor the study of a subtle kind of energy. On the other hand, the science consists of an accumulating series of observations directed toward mental experiences. The laboratory has gone to work on the assumption that if it takes a small bit of human experience and repeats it over and over again under conditions that are carefully controlled and undertakes to reduce the experience to its smallest constituents, it has made a scientific description of the event. When all such experiences are thus scrutinized from the point of view of composition, of organization, and of function, and the facts are then moulded into a system, the task of the psychologist is done. His labors have been fruitful beyond his early anticipation.

It is obvious, then, that a history of the science of psychology must be written on the empirical level which the discipline has attained. A history of the functions of the soul or of the problem of knowledge or of the nature of the ego is no longer adequate to the mature dignity of the science. A substantial and adequate history will, according to our analysis, consist, in part, of a genetic account of the development of the scientific concept of mind, and, in part, of a survey of the products of the laboratory and the growth of empirically organized systems of psychology.

**Footnotes**

[1] An expanding interest in the history of science, in this country as well as in Europe, is a token of growth and maturity. It may be traced in the following papers: *Science*, 1915, *41*, 358-360; 1915, *42*, 746-760; 1919, *49*, 330-331; 1919, *49*, 447-448; 1919, *49*, 497; 1919, *49*, 66-68; 1920, 52, 496; 1920, *52*, 559, 562; 1921, *53*, 122; 1921, *53*, 163-164; 1921, *53*, 157-258. That the movement is being taken seriously is further shown by several papers appearing in *The Scientific Monthly*. See, *e.g.*, Gregory, H. E., History of geology, *The Sci. Mo.*, 1921, *12*, 97-26; Woodruff, L. L., History of biology, *ibid*, 289-309; Bumstead H. R., The history of physics, *ibid.*, 289-309; Brown, E.W, The history of mathematics, *ibid.*, 385-413.·

[2] We are, of course, using the term "history" in the sense of a written account and not by way of reference to the *events* of which an account can be written.

[3] A very few illustrations from a single source will show the temper of such historical surveys; Sharp, S. E., Individual psychology: a study in psychological method, *Amer. J. of Psychol.*, 1899, *10*, 1-20; Whipple, G. M, An analytic study of the memory image, etc., *ibid.*, 1901, *12*, 409ff.; Murray, E., A qualitative analysis of tickling, *ibid.*, 1908, *19*, 320ff.; Geissler, L. R, Thc measurement of attention, *ibid.*, 1909, *20*, 473-502; Ruckmick, C. A, The rôle of kinaesthesis in the perception of rhythm, *ibid*, 1913, *24*, 305-314; Boring, E. G., The sensations of the alimentary canal, *ibid.*, 1915, *26*, 2-5; Dallenbach, K. M., The history and derivation of the word "Function" as systematic term in psychology, *ibid.*, 1915, *26*, 473-484; Woods, E. L, An experimental analysis of the process of recognizing, *ibid.*, 1915, *26*, 314-317; Rogers, A. S., An analytic study of visual perception, ibid, 1917, *28*, 519-538.·

[4] Dessoir, M., *Outlines of the history of psychology*, (tr., D. Fisher), 1912.

[5] Brett, G. S., *A history of psychology, ancient and patristic*, 3 vols., London, 1912-1921.

[6] Villa, G., *Contemporary psychology*, (tr., H. Manacorda), London, 1903.·

[7] Baldwin, J. M., *History of psychology*, 2 vols., London, 1913.

[8] Klemm, O., *A history of psychology*, (tr., C. Wilm and R. Pintner), New York, 1914.

[9] Titchener, E. B., Bretano and Wundt: Empirical and experimental psychology, *Amer. J. of Psychol.*, 1921, 32, 108-I20.

[10] We do not care to have it appear that we are dealing lightly or too naively with a question that has for years vexed the historian. He is, apparently, as sensitive to a statement of the problem of history as the psychologist is to a statement of the problem of psychology. This part of the science of history can be traced in the various historical journals.

[11] Quoted by Robinson, S. N., *The new History*, 1912, p. 3.

[12] Robinson, S. N., *op. cit.*, p. 78.

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