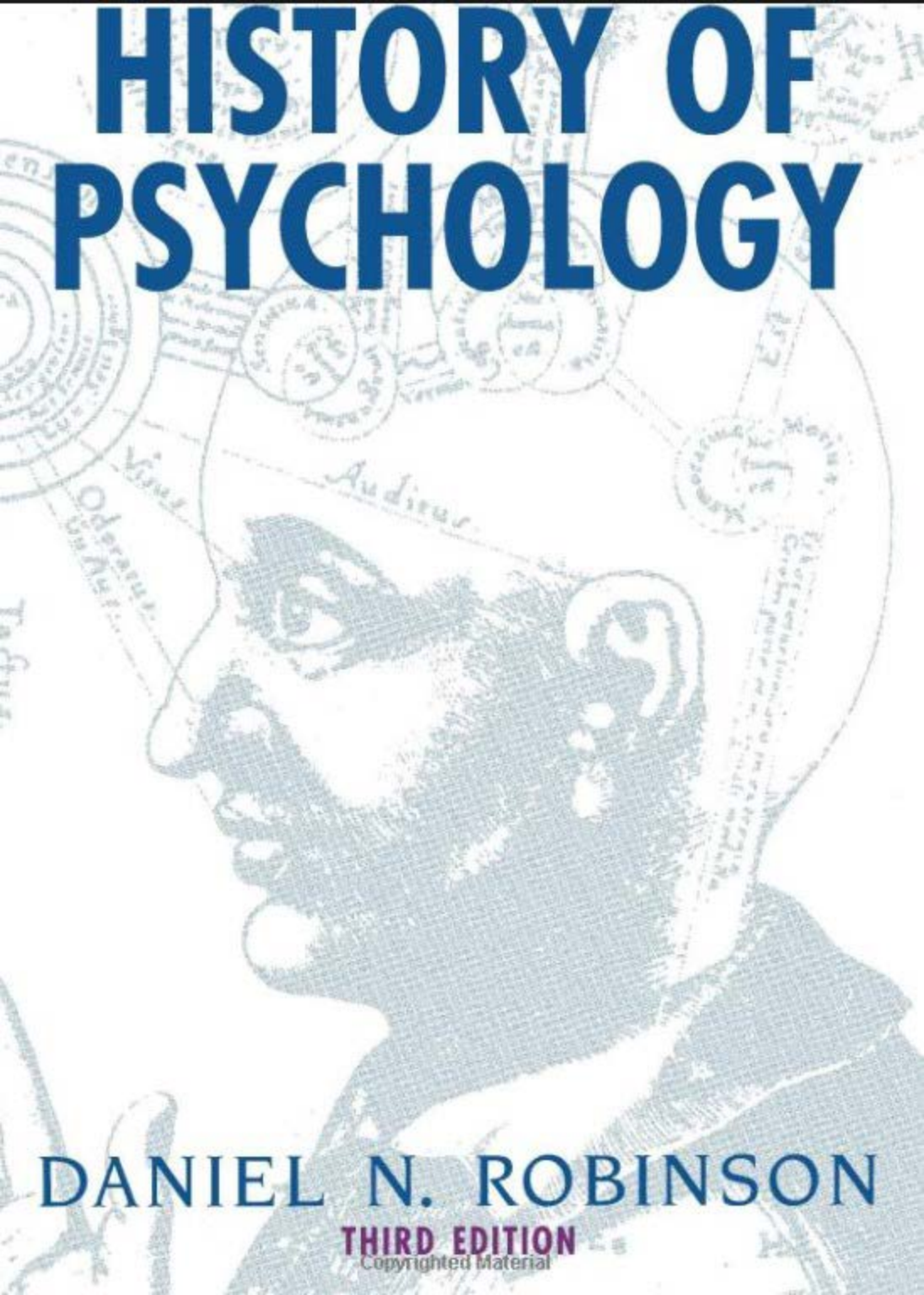


HISTORY OF PSYCHOLOGY



DANIEL N. ROBINSON

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1 Defining the Subject

Not too many years ago it was part of the received wisdom that the history of scientific or philosophical subjects was entirely distinct from the subject itself; that there is the *doing* of psychology, sociology, economics, physics, etc., and then there is the *history* of such fields. We know better now. Although there are still important differences to be noted, we are more prepared to acknowledge that all intellectual pursuits arise within, and to some extent must bear the marks of, their historical and cultural contexts. This is so not only for the obvious reason that major issues are generally bequeathed rather than suddenly born, but also because the entire enterprise of creating knowledge and solving problems of a given kind is itself a continuing tradition, a culture in its own right. This does not prevent the development of new fields and modes of inquiry, nor does it deny the occasional genius a chance to fashion the unexpected. Rather, it is this culture of knowledge, this culture of thought, that comes to establish the very standards of novelty and usefulness and proceeds to confer meaningfulness and significance on just such efforts.

To refer to a "culture of knowledge" is to introduce a set of traditions that transcend ethnic, national, religious, and racial distinctions, traditions that may be said to pertain to something close to our basic humanity. Indeed, free and imaginative inquiry, seemingly idle speculation, argument and spirited discourse, the play of the mind—these are so central to what we take to be part of a flourishing life that we pity or condemn societies and governments unwilling to permit or nurture such activities.

Psychology as a discipline and as a profession is one of the creations of the culture of thought. Just how it was brought about, how the psychological life of individual persons was objectified and externalized and thus made a subject of study, forms an important chapter in the cluttered book of human initiative. But in its current form, psychology is so various, so partitioned into separate provinces, that the nonspecialist might pardonably conclude that there is

no unified subject at all. This state of affairs, too, is the result of historical developments.

Inevitably, it is a subject's history that defines it, and this is perhaps especially the case with psychology, which William James playfully referred to as "that nasty little subject." It has been at the center of speculation and inquiry since ancient times. Contrary to an all too common claim, it is not in any sense a "young subject," even if its extensive experimental programs are relatively recent. On the latter point, too, one must remain mindful that experimental science within the context of university life is fairly recent in all subject areas. It was not until the first half of the nineteenth century that separate university facilities were provided for research in chemistry, the pioneer here being Liebig in Germany. Of course, academic philosophers and scientists had engaged in research long before this, but only in the nineteenth century do we find the beginning of a tradition that includes experimental science as a recognized and official part of the university's functions. Thus, the founding of psychology's first laboratory by Wundt at Leipzig in 1879 takes place only a little later than the establishment of such laboratories in any discipline.

Might psychology, however, be regarded as young at least in one sense? For was not research undertaken in medicine and in the physical sciences since ancient times, even if not within the context of university studies? This is a more difficult question, for it pertains to activities not readily dated, and to activities not easily defined. Just what, after all, qualifies as scientific research? And what must the subject of the research be to qualify as psychological? There is much in the surviving works of Aristotle to establish that he undertook systematic studies of perception, emotion, and behavior in the animal kingdom. His writings on psychological matters are often detailed and technical, and refer to processes now routinely featured in psychological experiments and courses. Accordingly, it would be entirely proper to date the origins of psychological research and of scientific theories about psychological processes with Aristotle, thus pushing back the birth of this part of the subject to the fourth century B.C. Comparable claims could then be made for most of the succeeding centuries, for in nearly all of them one can find a record of scientific or medical inquiry pertaining to psychological states, processes, or attributes.

The tendency, common in books on the history of psychology, to regard the subject as young or immature arises from uncritically accepted positions on just what the essence of psychology is. If on some distant reckoning the (unlikely) conclusion were reached that the issues of central concern to psychology are utterly unsuited to experimental modes of inquiry, there would surely be no reason to examine early experimental projects in order to date its birth. Only after taking a settled position on just what sort of subject psychology is does it make sense to focus on Wundt and the Leipzig laboratory or, for that matter, on Plato's dialogues.

But the tendency to consider psychology young arises also from an uncritical belief that similar actions taking place in radically different epochs can be understood as arising from similar aims and perspectives. The ancient astrologers constructed star-charts and models of celestial behavior, activities not unlike what is now found in the fields of cosmology and astrophysics. The ancient astrologers, however, based their efforts on a perspective and a set of assumptions now judged to be nothing more than superstitions. Any definition that takes psychology to be just what the psychologists of a given era might be doing is bound to be misleading and ill conceived. First, absent a more fundamental definition, there would be no way of identifying the participants as psychologists in the first place. Secondly, unless the activities and inquiries are merely reflections of personal interests, including quirky ones, what psychologists undertake must be addressed to some set of issues or problems bequeathed to them by earlier students of the subject. Clearly, then, important fields of study cannot be fully understood solely in terms of current practices, or by recording apparently similar inquiries taking place over long stretches of time. To comprehend the nature of psychology and find a definition that establishes both its uniqueness and its relatedness to other subjects, the study of its history becomes essential.

The Idea of History

It is generally thought to be of importance to a man that he should know himself: where knowing himself means knowing not his merely personal peculiarities, the things that distinguish him from other men, but his nature as a man. . . . Knowing yourself means knowing what you can do; and since nobody knows what he can do until he tries, the only clue to what man can do is what man has done.

R. G. Collingwood's words appear in the introduction to his *The Idea of History*.¹ Following his precepts one might say that the best sense of what psychology is and the most tutored guesses as to what it might become, are developed under the light of its history, the record of what has been *done* in its name (or in all but its name). But as Collingwood goes on to explain, there is more to the study of history than marking down names and dates. History, for Collingwood, is a species of science; it answers questions by identifying the causes and conditions by which historical events came about:

Science in general . . . does not consist in collecting what we already know and arranging it in this or that kind of pattern. It consists in fastening upon something we do not know, and trying to discover it.²

To know, then, that Wundt secured funds to establish a laboratory at Leipzig in 1879, or that Freud wrote lengthily on the interpretation of dreams at the end of that same century, is to be in possession of facts, but not of the explanations that give meaning to the facts. It is to know nothing that points to the rationale, to the impulses behind such undertakings; nothing that discloses the basis upon which either of these important figures in the history of psychology chose his subject or undertook such significant projects. None of this, however, should be taken as a plea for memoirs (as important as these sometimes are). Only if memory were perfect and impartial, and only if commentators were accurate and in full agreement, would the historian's mission be abbreviated or unnecessary, usefully replaced by memoirs. Memories are imperfect and incomplete, sometimes selective, often rhetorical in their deployment. Even the letter-perfect memory of the camera yields a record seen from one direction only. The camera sometimes faces away from the real action and, in any case, never has a view so wide as to capture that full context that gives meaning to the particulars.

To put the matter briefly, there is no dispensing with *interpretation* when seeking to understand complex, unfolding, incomplete events and ideas. Where intellectual history is at issue, the relevant contexts go beyond the compass of any observer's memory. Such a history is comprised of words, and these, unlike swords and tanks and the exchange-rates of currency, are used differently at different times, often intending more than they convey. Intellectual histories are thwarted by all the obstacles facing other forms of historical inquiry, and then some. The thin lines of evidence diverge while the actual witnesses, out of ignorance or fear or sloth or confusion, fail to reflect accurately the ideas of their period. In this way the words themselves obstruct a later reckoning; in addition, modern analysts then enter with their own biases and confusions, further darkening the record.

These biases were insightfully exposed by Giovanni Battista Vico (1668–1744),³ one of the first great historians of the modern era. He warned of the constant temptation to revere antiquity beyond all sense of proportion. This prejudice not only colors our evaluations but may even lead to quantitative errors, errors in estimating wealth or population or longevity. He also recognized the subtle chauvinist who writes about his own people in large case.

Most common of all blunders, Vico noted, is the tendency to identify the character of an age by studying the thoughts of its scholars. Vico recognized that scholars often are not at all representative of the time in which they live. They differ from their contemporaries in interests, in schooling, even in basic values. The importance of understanding Aristotle's theory of the soul or Socrates' conception of virtue cannot be to learn "the Athenian" understanding of such notions. The average Athenian, more likely than not, seldom considered such matters and, had he been privileged to discuss them with Aristotle or

Socrates, might well have found the philosophers' treatments bizarre. If we would unearth the popular views on subjects of this sort, we would have to search the myths and rites of antiquity, the poems and correspondence and plays of the age. Once the commoner understandings are thus located, they are nearly invariably different from the sage's.

Vico also warned against imputing too much credibility to those who have provided eyewitness accounts. The fact that Tacitus wrote about events in his own time does not mean that he was conceptually closer to them. He wore the distorting lenses of his epoch. His travels were limited. He spoke and read in but two languages. His resources were saddled to a primitive technology. Lacking the methods of modern scholarship (methods only recently developed by linguists, archeologists, physicists, etc.), a Tacitus or a Herodotus or a Livy could examine earlier eras only through the eyes and fables of those who came before.

Finally, Vico presents the pervasive error of *scholastica successionis civitatum*, the "scholastic succession (or bequest) of states." This error moves us to believe that when an intellectual development occurs sequentially in two different countries, it occurs in the second through the direct influence of the first. Since, for example, Adelardus spoke in the twelfth century of the earth's motion and since Copernicus was generous in his reading habits, Copernicus must have got the idea from Adelardus (or Cicero or Aristarchus or Nicole Oresme, etc.). According to this view, an idea is the pebble of a uniquely enlightened time dropped by philosophers on the calm lake of slumbering minds. The idea disturbs first one culture, then the next, seriatim. The historian's challenge is to work back from the ripples to the source and, thereby, to discover the first source of all our wisdom. Vico, as with Aristotle earlier, knew that such orderly succession was seldom the case. Ours is a questioning and a theorizing species which does not rest at length. There is hardly a notion prized by any age that was not entertained by many others at many different times and quite independently. Accordingly, a mere chronology of ideas would not only fail to be a history of ideas but would fail to be true. We can say, with measurable confidence, that an event of a certain kind occurred for the first time or, at least, that no earlier record has been found. But we cannot date the first appearance of a thought or a point of view with similar precision.

The Greeks invented philosophy as a discipline, as a form of inquiry regulated by rules and organized around a set of questions. They were, in this narrow sense, the first philosophers. But it would be ridiculous to argue that Thales was the first human being to recognize that "it is hard to be good." We explore the history of ideas to learn how others have dealt with problems facing us, what others have considered important, and the factors that seemed to have caused events of consequence. One inescapable product of our study is a chronology, but this is surely not the goal. We expect the historian to tell us when

things happened much as we expect the modern astronomer to tell us the position of the planets on the day Caesar was killed. But we expect much more. We believe the astronomer because his calculations are based on laws—laws fashioned in the light of criticism, objective measurement, and multiple observations—and we expect as much from the historian. Not that the explanations will unfold inexorably from the fixed “laws” of history, but that they will be framed according to the very best evidence available and will, therefore, yield the truest picture of what happened and why it happened.

In the epilogue to *The Idea of History*, Collingwood ventures, with characteristic decisiveness, to place psychology in perspective. He argues that psychology's chief mistake was to identify with the physical sciences and by that strategy to adopt methods wholly unsuited and even futile to its enterprise. Psychology, Collingwood insists, can answer its questions only by transforming its methods into those of history:

To regard [psychology] as rising above the sphere of history, and establishing the permanent and unchanging laws of human nature, is therefore possible only to a person who mistakes the transient conditions of a certain historical age for the permanent conditions of human life.⁴

It is not necessary to accept these prescriptions for psychology in order to appreciate the subtler point he raises. A science concerned with the determinants of human conduct, with the character of human perception and emotion, will find in the annals of civilization a laboratory more varied and rich than any we could hope to re-create. This part of Collingwood's instruction is unimpeachable, and it is this part that urges us to study history if we are to study psychology.

In attempting what has been described as an intellectual history, therefore, one is committed to something different from chronology. And, in attempting an intellectual history of psychology, one must be concerned with far more than academic psychology. This said, the following pages may seem to belie the premise, for, in fact, a chronological succession does follow. This, however, is a concession to custom and convenience and is not to be viewed as the fallacy of *scholastica successionis civitatum*. One age does not impart momentum to the next as would a pair of colliding billiard balls, though the culture of thought does have its founders and followers. Ideas are kept alive, they do not merely assert themselves. And where important ideas are concerned, those developed within a productive age, it is misleading even to think that the age itself has died.

There is no question but that psychological scholarship, at any time since Socrates, has been influenced by Greek thought. Yet a study of the Socratics is not enough. Succeeding generations did not passively assimilate Plato's dialogues but interpreted them in altered contexts and for diverse purposes. Often