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978-1-107-00729-1 - A History of Psychology in Western Civilization

Bruce K. Alexander and Curtis P. Shelton

Excerpt

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1 *Introduction: Two histories of Western psychology*

This book is meant for people who are thinking seriously about psychology, especially students who are considering psychology as a career. We are convinced that psychology is not being introduced *historically* enough in today's textbooks or mass media, leaving much of its great thinking lying dormant. We hope to point our readers toward some brilliant and enduring ideas in the classic writings of great psychological scholars, in the hope that they will process them anew for the daunting new world of the twenty-first century.

This introductory chapter contrasts two ways of approaching the history of Western psychology. The *scholarly history of psychology* is the story of great ideas about the human psyche that have proved so stimulating and fruitful that they have become permanently embedded in Western culture. The *professional history of psychology* is the story of a sparkling new profession called “psychology” that was born in the nineteenth century to great expectations. This book concentrates on the scholarly history of Western psychology, but not exclusively. Although its main intent is to re-introduce vital scholarly insights to an unscholarly era, it also intends to show how professional psychology¹ can benefit from being critically examined and ultimately re-imagined in a scholarly context.

Asian and African psychologies have long histories too, which are at last receiving attention in the West (Brock, 2006; Pickren and Rutherford, 2010, chap. 10; Heine, 2012). However, the vast expanses of the Western scholarly and professional psychologies proved to be all that could be compressed into this book. We hope that few vital ideas about human nature have been neglected as a consequence. Comprehensive historians have shown that there is more overlap between Western, Eastern, and Southern psychologies than

¹ Many psychologists reserve the term “professional psychology” for clinical practice, as contrasted with “experimental psychology.” However, we use professional psychology more broadly to refer to the psychological work of all sorts carried out by people with advanced degrees in psychology who are members of professional associations, publish in professional journals, are regulated by professional ethics, and so forth.

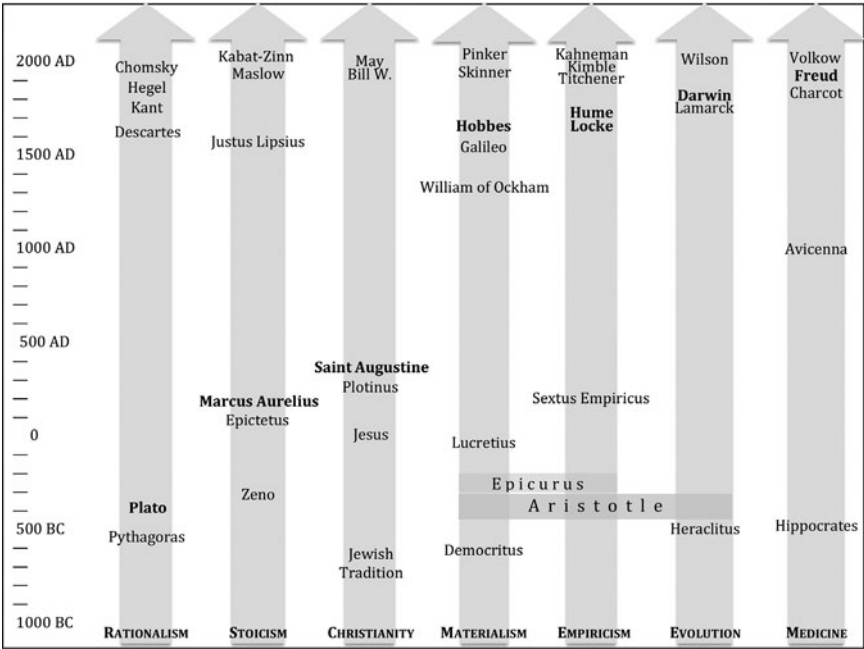


Figure 1.1. A scholarly history of psychology

has been recognized in the recent past, although what is emphasized in one region's psychology often plays a less prominent role in another's (Paranjpe, 2006). This contentious point will be illustrated in Chapter 3.

The scholarly history of psychology

The scholarly history of psychology is depicted in Figure 1.1 as seven long lines of thought, or perspectives, on the human psyche that began appearing in written form about twenty-five centuries ago and are still being refined and extended today.² Almost all the fundamental ideas used by today's professional psychologists – including theoreticians, researchers, practitioners, and applied psychologists – can be traced back to one or more of these perspectives. However, we believe that today's professional psychologists still have much to learn from this scholarly history.

² This is our way of organizing the scholarly history of psychology. Other authors have organized it in different ways (Peters, 1965; Robinson, 1981; Danziger, 1997, chaps. 2, 3; Hunt, 2007).

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How can the timeless perspectives of scholarly history be differentiated from casual speculation, psychological fads, and the psychobabble of the current media? To earn a place in the scholarly history of psychology, a perspective must meet several criteria. It must comprehensively address the deep psychological issues that people have always wondered and worried about. It must provide an intellectual foundation on which individuals and societies can make the decisions they face. It must feel authentically human so that people can recognize themselves in it. And, it must endure in the living memory of Western civilization over generations. Everyday speculation or psychobabble may make you glad to know what your companion is thinking about and eager to add your own two cents worth, but a good scholarly perspective gives a shock of recognition – you understand at last, you have a better idea about what to do next, and you wish that you had been able to describe the human condition that way yourself. You will probably find yourself telling your children about it one day.

Over the two-and-a-half millennia from about 500 BC to the present, Western civilization has always known the seven distinct perspectives on psychology represented in Figure 1.1, even if most people have not been able to name or differentiate them. These perspectives are as evident in the writings that ancient scholars scratched onto wax tablets and papyrus scrolls as they are in the articles that professional psychologists email to online journals now. Each perspective is best known in the enduring words of a small number of great scholars. This book singles out one great scholar for each perspective (two in the case of empiricism), whose name appears in bold type in Figure 1.1. As well, Figure 1.1 provides at least one example of a contemporary psychologist who bases his or her work on a particular perspective.

Each of the seven perspectives comprises a complete psychology: that is, a comprehensive exposition of why people think, feel, and act as they do; how they interact with other people; what makes them happy; and how they think about the divine (if they do). In other words, we can go to each perspective with any psychological question whatsoever. We may ask, for example, why my (BKA's) Aunt Lena drank so much, and expect to find the basis of a coherent answer. The responses from each perspective will be very different from one another, but any of them could prove to be helpful. (My real Aunt Lena, who died at the age of ninety-nine, appears as a multi-perspective case study in Appendix B.)

Of course, earlier scholars cannot answer specific questions about a person who lived and died in the twentieth century. But they can tell us how to frame the questions, how someone else who develops a similar

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problem might be helped, and how much success can be expected.³ The great psychological scholars did not organize their writings into convenient sections so that we can just turn to their chapters on alcoholism or psychological disorders and find the answers we need. Instead, they anticipated that their readers would reflect on the general principles of their perspectives and apply them to whatever problems seem important. We hope that you will take the time to try this approach too.

One might suppose that as well as being comprehensive, practical, authentic, and enduring, scholarly perspectives must be logically consistent. But this is not completely necessary. The writings of John Locke and David Hume are loaded with inconsistencies, and some parts of other scholars' writings are inconsistent too. Nonetheless, these perspectives have a deeper coherence and belong to the list of great scholarly perspectives because their comprehensiveness, utility, human authenticity, and enduring influence outweigh their intermittent inconsistencies.

It is also sometimes supposed that psychological perspectives must be scientifically proven, but this is definitely not so. Since the philosophical breakthroughs of Immanuel Kant two centuries ago, historians, sociologists, and philosophers of knowledge have increasingly come to agree that the basic assumptions of physical and social science have *not* been empirically or rationally proven. Notwithstanding the confidence that we may rightly place in some of them, they are all constructions of the human mind and of society (Guyer, 1992; James, 1907/1963; Kuhn, 1970; Robinson, 1981; Rose, 1998; Danziger, 1990, 1997, 2008; Khashaba, 2005, pp. 4–15; Watters, 2010; Heine, 2012). Nonetheless, the key scholars reviewed in this book struggled mightily to achieve certainty for themselves and to represent their perspectives as logically unassailable, providing employment for generations of later academics who expended major portions of their lives demonstrating that they are not.

Because a good scholarly perspective on psychology has the four essential qualities listed above—comprehensiveness, utility, authenticity, and endurance—it becomes influential in a particular historical era. A *great* scholarly perspective becomes influential for all time. This book surveys seven great scholarly perspectives in the words of the scholars who gave each perspective one of its best-known formulations.

³ Danziger (1997, chaps. 2, 3) stressed that early scholars did not use the same psychological categories as today's professional psychologists, even when the same words are used. Nevertheless, if we take the time to comprehend their ways of thinking, we can readily understand them and gain fresh insights.

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The first complete scholarly perspective on psychology is expressed in the words of Plato, written about four centuries BC. Some of the ideas are even older, going back to the time when Greek scholars first began writing about Psyche, not just as one of their legendary goddesses, but as the spirit of a human being that could be studied like the other aspects of the natural world. Plato (and Aristotle) both acknowledged their intellectual debt to earlier oral traditions and to pre-Socratic writings of which we have only fragments now. As the path is followed back in time from ancient Athens, these written fragments quickly tail off into dust, so we cannot say precisely when and where it all began.

Nor can we say when it will end. Some people believe that scholarly psychology became outmoded when professional psychology first appeared as a science in the late nineteenth century. But it is quite possible that this belief is no more than a passing burst of enthusiasm for a particular approach to science and medicine that has been brilliantly productive in physical science over the last couple of centuries but which has also been oversold in psychology. Scholarly psychology has not ended, but constitutes a continuous contribution to civilization from ancient times to the present. We believe that as time passes, professional psychology will more and more intertwine its science with scholarly psychology.

The complications of scholarly history

Of course, any attempt to condense twenty-five centuries of thinking requires stringent selection and simplification. Seven is not a magic number, but a serviceable one for dividing the huge expanse of scholarly psychological thinking into discussable bundles. The scholars chosen to highlight each of the perspectives were selected because their names are particularly familiar to psychologists. They are not the only scholars that could have been chosen though. For example, Aristotle, Thomas Aquinas, Rene Descartes, Pierre Gassendi, Adam Smith, Immanuel Kant, Karl Marx, Ludwig von Bertalanffy, Jean Piaget, and Erik Erikson might have been given the leading roles and the scholars singled out as exemplars in Figure 1.1 assigned secondary ones.

A more complete Figure 1.1 would be graffitied with the names of tens of thousands of scholars who influenced the course of psychological thinking. But the figure is not meant to completely chart the evolution of the seven perspectives, only to list enough well-known thinkers to show that there has been an evolution in each case. Nor would a more detailed figure have nearly such straight and tidy paths from the ancient scholars to contemporary psychology. The paths would look more like wandering rivers, with

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forks, confluences, flooded plains, and long stretches where the flow was reduced to a trickle or went underground.⁴

Figure 1.1 contains a greater concentration of names in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries than in earlier times, but this is not meant to suggest that there has been more psychological creativity recently. Instead, it is because this book is for today's psychologists who are naturally more aware of key present-day players in their fields. Another complexity is that each of the systems of knowledge listed across the bottom of the figure, from rationalism to medicine, is much more than a perspective on psychology. Part of the task of this book is to show how each psychological perspective is embedded in a more encompassing system of knowledge.

This book does not rely on what is sometimes called the "great man" approach to the history of psychology. The scholars who personify each of the perspectives in these chapters did not invent them. Their genius lay in adapting an enduring perspective about human nature in ways that were useful enough to excite public interest in their historical periods and universal enough to be still valuable in the twenty-first century. Other well-known scholars probably contributed as much, and it is likely that the ingenious ideas of many equally talented men and women were overlooked or lost. Current psychology is not nearly as male-dominated as it was in eras in which men did almost all the scholarly writing. Thus, this book is not about great men, but about enduring psychological perspectives. It highlights a handful of scholars because ideas are human creations that are only fully understood by carefully studying the way they were expressed by real individuals living real lives.

Although we professional psychologists draw from the scholarly history of psychology, we do not own it. The scholarly history of psychology is a cultural legacy that belongs to every person who hopes to understand human events. Psychology, in the scholarly sense of the word, is neither intellectual property that can be owned nor a domain of practice that can be monopolized by a particular profession. It is an ever-changing cultural conceptualization of human life to which any serious thinker can contribute and from which all people can draw in the practice of living.

Scholars as human beings

The great psychological scholars reviewed in this book did not live in ivory towers. They were vigorously involved in government, the military, the Church, business, social movements, medical practice, and so forth. Each

⁴ Hacking (2002, pp. 28–32) explains this idea with a different metaphor.

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one's perspective helped the men and women of the day think through the pressing issues of their time. Indeed, we believe that the social and political contexts described in the upcoming chapters are *essential* to understanding each scholar's perspective.

Bold commentary on political issues in psychological terms can be dangerous, and some of the scholars' ideas presented in this book were literally "to die for." Socrates was put to death by an Athenian court of law for disseminating beliefs that will be discussed in the next chapter. A number of St. Augustine's Christian predecessors were executed in cruel public spectacles. Hobbes and Locke had dangerous political enemies. They managed to avoid capital punishment by, in part, soft peddling their beliefs when it was necessary. Freud had to flee his homeland because his words – and religion – offended the political masters of the Third Reich. However, these great scholars were death-defying celebrities only some of the time. The rest of the time they were just as ordinary and human as the rest of us.

Just as they were affected by their cultures and politics, the great psychological scholars of this book were affected by personal issues. They used their scholarly perspectives on psychology to help them cope, and their ideas excited the public partly because of this utility. They did not always play fair: Sometimes they ignored competing perspectives, committed logical errors, contradicted themselves, and used rhetorical tricks to influence their readers (Passmore, 1968; Soyland, 1994). But none of these complications detracts much from the validity of their psychological insights. The best psychological thinkers in every generation, including our own, have learned from them.

The future of scholarly psychology

At certain periods, the scholarly history of psychology seemed unimportant. For several centuries in pre-Renaissance Europe, most of the scholarly record was devalued or ignored because it violated Church teachings in an era of dogmatic faith. In the twentieth century, it seemed too "philosophical" for an age that was in love with science and technology. Twentieth-century critics pointed out that scholarly psychology produces no technology, cures no schizophrenics, generates no quantitative data, and is not well suited for graphs, PowerPoint presentations, or multiple-choice tests.

But scholarly psychology is not merely past history. The classic works of scholarly psychology continue to be republished and read in the twenty-first century and new scholarly works continue to be written alongside the publications of today's professional psychologists. New scholarly works on

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psychology are being written not only by psychologists, but also by scholars from other disciplines or by talented thinkers without any particular professional credentials. Clearly, it is a serious error to dismiss scholarly psychology as “just philosophy.” More and more psychologists are coming to understand that examining scholarly history enables us to think more acutely about ourselves, our families, our clients, human nature, and the big psychological problems that face contemporary society (James, 1907/1963; Robinson, 1981; Paranjpe, 1984; Mujeeb-ur-Rahman, 1990; Neville, 1992; Danziger, 2006).⁵ What could be more practical than that? We could hope that the twenty-first century will leave behind the technocratic obsessions of the twentieth.

Scholarly psychology remains an unfinished saga. The profusion of ideas that have accumulated over twenty-five centuries is intellectually rich and imaginatively stimulating – but deeply conflicted, with no grand resolution in sight. However, the conflictful saga can be reconceptualized for every new age, and this book is an attempt at a reconceptualization for a new period of human history in which big ideas are needed more than ever. The twenty-first century is racing toward a global civilization of unprecedented size and danger. There have been triumphal proclamations (e.g., Fukuyama, 1992; Friedman, 2000) that the intellectual foundation of this new civilization is determined forever by the economic, scientific, and psychological assumptions of today’s globalizing, corporate-dominated world. But there are also many signs that the new civilization being constructed on these ideas creates

⁵ There are philosophers who argue that the great works that form the substance of scholarly psychology, which they identify as “speculative metaphysics” or “philosophical systems,” have outlived their usefulness. The arguments that have been presented for dismissing the great philosophers seem lightweight in comparison to the gravity, depth, coherence, and continuing influence of these philosophers. The work of the dismissive philosophers suggests a council of mice convincing themselves, with a great din of squeaking, that all the cats are dead. We do not mean to dismiss the modernist and post-modernist philosophers, but to suggest that they are more notable for their brilliant imaginations than for their dismissive ambitions. Our intention is only to reassert the value of the scholarly achievements upon which contemporary psychology is built. Our outlook is partly drawn from the philosopher R.C. Neville (1992), who built on the work of C.S. Peirce and A.N. Whitehead. For example, Whitehead (1925/1967) argues that:

... the progress of biology and psychology has probably been checked by the uncritical assumption of half-truths. If science is not to degenerate into a medley of *ad hoc* hypotheses, it must become philosophical and must enter into a thorough criticism of its own foundations. (pp. 16–17)

On a broader level, a society without fundamental philosophical analysis is vulnerable to the ephemeral and destructive passions of power politics (Videlier, 1995).

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psychological and social stresses that are every bit as catastrophic as its ecological, military, and economic stresses. The psychological stresses manifest themselves in seemingly epidemic levels of depression, addiction, violence, and apathy.⁶ Fresh psychological thinking may be as necessary to the emerging world civilization as new perspectives on international law, domestic politics, and economics.

Perhaps in the search for fresh psychological ideas for the twenty-first century, thoughtful people will contemplate how long it has been since they found an exciting idea in a psychology journal, on a social media site, or in a big-box bookstore. Perhaps they will then visit such traditional libraries as remain, hunting for valuable ideas in the dusty old books they come across there. This book means to point in that direction.

The professional history of psychology

The professional history of psychology is only about two centuries long, rather than twenty-five. It is the history of psychology as a profession named “psychology” that first acquired recognition and status in the universities and hospitals of the nineteenth century, rose to prominence in the twentieth century, flourished during two World Wars, and powered into the twenty-first century as a growth industry. Although professional history often honors major figures in scholarly history, it usually selects bits and pieces from their writings rather than exploring their perspectives as a whole. Professional psychologists can freely search through the scholarly literature for vintage phrases that support and ornament current ideas without spending much time on their broader implications.

Hundreds of thousands of men and women have made their livings as professional psychologists, achieved legal recognition and status through their professional associations, and identified themselves as professors, scientific researchers, statisticians, therapists, counselors, consultants, writers, etc. They earned graduate degrees in psychology and expected their colleagues to have them too. The principal figures in professional psychology were mostly men until the middle of the twentieth century, after which many more female psychologists achieved prominence. Table 1.1 is an overview of the history of professional psychology.

⁶ National Institute of Mental Health (2012), Sussman, Lisha, & Griffiths (2011), Brauner and Stephens (2006). Particular statistics from these sources and more general indications of widespread psychological malaise in the twenty-first century are discussed in Chapter 9.

Table 1.1. Overview of the professional history of psychology

Year	Person/Organization	Event
2013	American Psychiatric Association	Fifth edition of <i>Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders</i> (DSM-5) published
2008	Social and Affective Neuroscience Society	Founded
2005	American Psychological Association Task Force Report	Endorses psychologists' participation in national security detainee interrogations
2002	Daniel Kahneman	Shares Nobel Prize in Economics for research on "human judgment and decision-making under uncertainty"
1998	Martin Seligman	Presidential Address to the American Psychological Association promotes Positive Psychology
1995	US Military	Psychologists able to prescribe medications
1990	US President George H.W. Bush	Proclaims Decade of the Brain with National Institute of Mental Health and approval of American Psychological Association
1988	American Psychological Society	Founded
1981	Roger Sperry, David Hubel, and Torsten Wiesel	Nobel prize (in physiology and medicine) for brain research
1978	Cognitive Science Society	Founded
1978	Herbert Simon	Nobel prize (in economics) for research on cognition
1973	Vail Conference	Scholar-practitioner training model approved
1971	Philip Zimbardo	Stanford prison experiment
1963	Stanley Milgram	Milgram's study on obedience to authority
1962	Thomas Kuhn	<i>The Structure of Scientific Revolutions</i>
1959	Noam Chomsky	"A Review of B.F. Skinner's 'Verbal Behavior'" in <i>Language</i>
1958	Harry Harlow	"The Nature of Love", rejecting behavioristic and psychoanalytic notions of attachment