A word more...

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Abstract
Psychology’s place is secure within the history of ideas even if systematically overlooked by those who would professionalize intellectual inquiry. At base the controversy featured here is between a misplaced positivism and the humanistic project of History. Exercises in the sociology of knowledge are not paths to understanding but departures from those paths.

Keywords
Classical works, history of psychology, philosophy

I thank the editor, Prof. Stam, for the courtesy of giving me the last word, though it surely will conclude no more than a rather local exchange of ideas on issues never finally settled. My remarks are confined to several passages in Kurt Danziger’s (2013) comments on my brief essay. Thomas Teo’s (2013) pages find me reacting in the manner of the famous Magus im Norden, Johann Hamman: “I look upon logical proofs the way a well-bred girl looks upon a love letter.” In some respects, nearly all I advanced in my essay was vindicated by Danziger’s unnecessarily defensive admission that, “…Aristotle happens to be the most cited author in my most recent book on the history of a psychological topic” (Danziger, 2013). However, neither Aristotle nor any succeeding generation of savants needs periodic ovations. Nor, contrary to Danziger’s inference, are later or current initiatives either vindicated or rendered suspect by a real or apparent pedigree tracing them to ancient sources. None of this has anything to do with the aims or the content of my essay. The principal aim was to make clear that the discipline of Psychology derives its identity from a set of persistent themes often concealed by methodological nuances and the shifting requirements of guild membership. Perhaps there is something significant after all in Danziger’s distinction—overdrawn, in my view—between

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historiography of and historiography in Psychology. However, I should think the clearer distinction is between history of psychology and historiography as it pertains to a subject various in its methods. Either way, the contrasted entities have one term in common: Psychology. Danziger endorses historiographic methods to trace the emergence of the subject as an independent discipline. My essay takes a passage from Condorcet, who understood Aristotle to be the very source of this notion of distinct disciplines calling for special methods and modes of inquiry and explanation. That is what I mean by a foundational contribution.

Based on his distinctions, Danziger argues that this independent discipline finds its moorings in the Enlightenment. However, that celebrated and systematically misunderstood epoch is marked by quite fundamental differences in perspectives and aspirations. I mentioned Hamman, Kant’s admired friend and critic. (The Hume who awakened Kant from dogmatic slumber most likely was made available to him through Hamman’s translation!) Hamman’s skepticism toward analytical purity, when brought to bear on life as lived beyond the lecture hall, was and is a (philosophically) principled and an (historically) informed appraisal of Enlightenment system-building. The Wundt of the Völkerspsychologie fully endorsed a Psychology no less systematic even as the laboratory was abandoned for the world in which persons actually live (Robinson, 1982). Boring was pleased to think Wundt, now too weak for the rigors of research, retired to the armchair! (I gather this was Boring’s exercise in historiography of psychology).

Danziger repeats the now official notion that the German universities took the lead in overturning medieval Aristotelianism in the matter of the nascent discipline that would become an independent discipline. It is worth noting that in some of the leading universities (e.g., Halle) it was impermissible to defend Leibniz (as Wolff did) on the grounds that his “determinism” was an offense to Pietism (Robinson, 2012). No, the story is vastly more complicated, though a useful starting point would be the Cambridge Platonists and Locke’s “Newtonian” critique of their attachment to the “real essence” of mind (soul). “Consciousness” in Locke—as reached by introspection—is a neologism, making its way to the Continent rather slowly, the path cleared earlier by Descartes (Robinson, 2008).

Those for whom Greek and Latin are not “alien” languages will be permissibly impatient with hurried accounts of Aristotle’s concept of ψυχή as the αρχὴ ζωής. The term is drawn from the basic empirical distinction between living and inanimate objects, whether the latter are naturally occurring (rocks) or made (statues). It refers to the starting point (αρχὴ) of living things. Think of it as taxonomy’s “big bang” and don’t permit commentators to suggest anything wraith-like in Aristotle’s hylomorphism. Begin with “prime matter,” an utterly undifferentiated “X” that does not rise to the level of a something until it acquires a form. It is clear that the realms of inanimate, plant, and animal specimens vary in form, even if at the most elemental level all might be reducible to prime matter. But, as given to direct perception, these entities differ in specific ways, so a taxonomy becomes possible. It is also necessary if types are to be examined to determine the causes of the differences. Some types move, others don’t. The living ones must have powers of nutrition and reproduction. Some others have good memories, still others a degree of intelligence. One type at least is rational, and this creates a quite different set of problems and possibilities, etc. All this can be subsumed under the general heading of the various
powers (δυνάμεις) of ψυχή. “Psychology” can no more do without ψυχή than can Biology, though both can do without the “soul” as Danziger employs the term. Nor can either discipline do without taxa and the phenotypic features permitting non-arbitrary groupings. Thus it makes good sense to study memory in rats and birds and ageing dons, but no sense at all to seek constitutional modes of governance in ant heaps (pace radical Darwinists). Yes, indeed, any discipline informingly dubbed “Psychology” and addressing the historical record of human beings will retrace a number of steps systematically developed in the ancient world and thereafter. This cannot be a serious bone of contention.

Finally, Danziger uses a term that actually does get to the core of our differences; viz, professionalism. Let us recall that when young John Adams sought admission to Harvard College, interviews were conducted in Latin. It should be an embarrassment to many of our highly credentialed academics that their undergraduate preparation for occupancy in the House of Intellect was spotty (a generous term). Their professional preparation thereafter probably made matters worse. The little duchy featuring queries into the history of Psychology is not the cause of any of this, but a vivid symptom. The cure is not to be found by way of formulaics or guild membership. Much can be learned through the study of guilds, the effects of peer pressure, the temporary rewards of uncritical orthodoxy. Very little will thereby be learned about the issues that have long attracted an otherwise distracted world to the conditions favoring either knowledge or ignorance.

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**References**


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