Agnotology in the dialectics of the history and philosophy of psychology

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Abstract
It is suggested that Robinson’s (2013) arguments are based on a less than clear articulation of the relationship between the history and philosophy of psychology. After tackling the relationship between these two subdisciplines and conceptualizing them in a dialectic relationship from a programmatic point of view, consequences for writing and reading works in the history and philosophy of psychology are examined. Lessons learned from the reflections suggest that there are inherent conflicts between the two subdisciplines, that the history of psychology needs to reflect on its implicit assumptions as well as on relevance, and that the substance of philosophical psychology can be improved when an historical perspective is taken. Consequences for a critical history and philosophy of psychology are discussed.

Keywords
history, philosophy, philosophy of science, theory

Agnotology, the study of ignorance-making (Proctor & Schiebingr, 2008), could be a starting point for a response to Robinson’s (2013) concerns about ignorance. However, Robinson’s arguments are reasonable and I actually do not disagree with many of his remarks. Yet, I suggest that an analysis of the relationship between the history and philosophy of psychology clarifies some misunderstandings or misgivings. In approaching my own argument, I could choose an historical approach that reconstructs the trajectory of the history of psychology and the philosophy of psychology as differing thought styles and thought collectives (Fleck, 1935/1979); or I could tackle the problem philosophically/systematically (theoretically) neglecting history.

Applying a philosophical approach, I could be accused of ignoring or misunderstanding academic, historical developments, whereas using an historiographic approach, I
might be accused of describing but not contributing to solving the problem as it faces us in the present. I submit that this “methodological” option resides at the core of the dissatisfaction expressed by Robinson. In order to elaborate on this problem, I discuss (a) the institutional and programmatic dialectics of those two thought styles and collectives (history of psychology vs. philosophy of psychology), (b) the dialectics of writing, (c) the dialectics of reading in both areas, and I make (d) a few recommendations from a critical history and philosophy of psychology point of view. For the sake of argumentation, I will proceed mostly theoretically rather than historically.

**Institutional and programmatic dialectics**

Despite arguments to the contrary (e.g., Brock, 2005; Danziger, 1994; Stam, 2003), the history and philosophy of psychology are not a match made in heaven. They have learned to pursue different goals and approaches but their proximity as outsiders of the discipline of psychology has led them sometimes to a marriage of convenience, and sometimes to a prearranged marriage in an institutional combination. Smaller national associations such as the Canadian Psychological Association have one section for both (History and Philosophy of Psychology; as does the British Psychological Society), whereas a larger organization such as the American Psychological Association can afford two divisions (APA Division 24: Society for Theoretical and Philosophical Psychology and APA Division 26: Society for the History of Psychology). Specialized academic organizations focus on one area rather than on both: The International Society for the History of Behavioral and Social Sciences (Cheiron) focuses on history, whereas the International Society for Theoretical Psychology (ISTP) addresses the theory and philosophy of psychology. York University’s unique graduate program in the History and Theory of Psychology combines both branches because as separate entities they would not be sustainable as graduate programs. The leading journals in the history and philosophy of psychology focus on either subdiscipline, but not both.

Noticing a similar tension, albeit between science studies and the history of science, Daston (2009) argues that that the relationship between the two is strained. While the history of science has become a discipline, science studies have remained “undisciplined.” In this line of argumentation, I submit that the history of psychology is more disciplined than the philosophy of psychology, the latter of which can draw on many different traditions that sometimes do not like each other. From the perspective of a professional historian, Sewell (2005) identified another tension between history and social-scientific theory. Accordingly, historians borrow from social scientists but social scientists do not borrow from historians (although they might borrow from history). Sewell laments that the discipline of history has only produced a handful of theoretically inclined leaders and he asks for more dialogue between historians and social scientists based on the fact that historians provide expertise in (social) temporality. Similarly, philosophically inclined psychologists often do not borrow from professional historians.

Thus, in psychology, we may find the following constellation: A competent philosopher of psychology is not necessarily a competent historian of psychology and, of course, vice versa. But before that insight achieved consciousness (to play with Hegel), a more
urgent problem had been haunting historically and philosophically inclined psychologists: namely, that a competent psychologist is not necessarily a competent historian of psychology. This has led many emerging historians of psychology to look at the discipline of history and to embrace the “new history” of psychology (Furumoto, 1989). But as a consequence not only the division between psychology and the history of psychology increased but so has the one between history and philosophy of psychology, because historians of psychology were now compelled to look at historiography (their approaches, methods, and practices), rather than at philosophy or metatheory.

With the new history of psychology emerging around the 1970s, terms such as “presentism” (Stocking, 1965) not only targeted traditional historians of psychology who were perceived as ignorant of the developments in historiography, but they also disqualified, in my view wrongly, philosophers of psychology who used historical material for their streams of argumentation. Critiques expressed by Danziger (1990, 1997) and repeated by myself (Teo, 2005), and that are the target of Robinson’s objections, challenged foremost traditional histories of psychology but, in my case, not necessarily philosophers of psychology, because my self-understanding is that of a critical historian and philosopher of psychology.

Robinson addresses another important issue within the new historiography: the question of continuity (discontinuity) in the history of psychology, challenged famously by Kuhn (1962) for physics and by Foucault (1966/1970) for the human sciences (or by Piaget for human development). Not addressing such methodological issues and writing and reading continuity into concepts, theories, problems, and events is now considered problematic and ignorant when working on a history of psychology. Even a metahistory of continuity-making could be identified when behaviorists claimed Aristotle or Descartes as originators, or when later cognitive psychologists or neuroscientists did the same. In celebratory narratives of continuity it made sense to claim historically eminent figures as ancestors.

While it appeared ignorant to claim those great men in a presentist and continuous manner as pioneers of various research programs that, aimed at providing legitimacy to dominance at a point in history, recent historiography in psychology has undergone a dialectical shift that suggests that assuming discontinuity for every psychological concept, theory, or problem may be problematic (Danziger, 2003). Indeed, the question of continuity versus discontinuity has become an empirical one. Yet, although some historians suggest that the problem of continuity/discontinuity cannot be answered a priori, a certain skepticism remains when claims (or assumptions) of continuity are made. Besides challenging presentism and assumptions of continuity, the new historiography in psychology was and is concerned with the inclusion of the socio-historical context or ideas rather than focusing on great men, with including the developments in other disciplines and their relations to psychology, with being critical of commonsense assumptions, and with being descriptive or critical rather than celebratory; and, of course, it favored the use of primary sources, including research on archival material.

The historically informed psychologist might point out that the new history is not so new at all. Several of the historiographic issues had been pointed out by the 19th-century German historian Johann G. Droysen (1868/1985), who, despite his focus on great men, was aware of methodological problems and argued that the “greatest danger is that we
involuntarily bring in the views and presuppositions of our own time and the present interferes with our understanding of the past” (p. 129) and that “cautious, methodical interpretation … will enable us to measure the past according to its own standards” (p. 129). Articles in the journals History of Psychology (APA), Journal of the History of the Behavioral Sciences (Wiley), or History of the Human Sciences (Sage) are based on methodological guidelines developed in historiography. For the new history, history is understood as an end that may set the record straight, and identifies, using empirical methods a relevant fact in the past, while doubting the predictability of the future. For the old history, history is a means to show that the present is the best possible outcome.

New historians are concerned when historiographic issues are ignored in traditional histories of psychology. We demand, for instance from our students, that as historians of psychology they are knowledgeable about the extant literature concerning methodological issues in historiography. Yet, although the target of critique was the old history and a form of revisionist history of psychology that developed narratives from the perspective of the dominant “paradigm,” philosophers of psychology could be attacked as well, especially when they dealt with historical material. The philosopher of psychology shares with the old historian an understanding of history as a means, whereby history in itself is not of particular interest. This produces tensions between the two subdisciplines.

The suggestion, based on a play on Kant, that “theory without history is empty, history without theory is blind” (Miller, 1939, p. 36) is, thus, more programmatic than factual. Sometimes one notices historiography wandering around aimlessly, when seemingly endless facts are accumulated without justifying why the selection of those facts is theoretically meaningful. Indeed, to the philosopher of psychology, parts of the historiography of psychology have become “positivist” when, like the rest of psychology, it accumulates large numbers of empirical studies, the meaning of which is doubtful beyond the limits of the topic investigated. Regarding such studies, I hoped for, on the one hand, an infusion with philosophy/theory that tells me why I should care about those particular historical studies, or why those studies are relevant. On the other hand, theory can make empty formal suggestions, neglecting its assumptions, if it does not include historical material (in its widest sense) to elucidate or support them. Indeed, theories themselves have a temporality and they do not fall down from heaven but are embedded in specific cultural-historical contexts. Although there can be theory without history, this may make theory stale. Thus, the Kantian motto is a guiding principle for academics committed to the history and philosophy of psychology.

Unfortunately, both subdisciplines have become “big” in recent decades and it is more difficult to keep up with both. Even in graduate programs such as the History and Theory of Psychology at York University with four primary faculty, there is a tendency to align oneself with one (i.e., recently, the history of psychology) rather than both when choosing institutional preferences (memberships), conferences, topics, and journals in which one publishes. The reasons are grounded in institutional realities, grant opportunities, personal preferences, social dynamics, and factors that are discussed in science studies and the history of science. They also have to do with the fact that the history of psychology has become a disciplined enterprise that has more institutional recognition in psychology than the philosophy of psychology.
On the dialectics of writing the history and philosophy of psychology

Based on the works and practices of the new history, the historian of psychology cannot fall behind the approaches and principles developed by history and the history of science. Admittedly, historians do not talk much about methodology, but they provide exemplars on how to write good histories. We ask our students to follow the works of historians of psychology such as Danziger (1997) or Richards (2012); trained historians such as Herman (1995) or Pettit (2013); or historians of science such as Daston and Galison (2007) or Vicedo (2013).

As it is “hammered” into the student of psychology that “correlation does not equate causation,” students in the history of psychology learn that they cannot assume continuity or interpret the past from a presentist perspective when writing an historical paper. Only after being made aware of those principles and once they are internalized at an advanced level of academic development can they start to challenge those assumptions: “What actually is causality? At what point is it better to be presentist and to assume continuity? Is it even possible to be non-presentist?” and so on. Such dialectics apply not only to historiographic issues such as presentism and continuity, but also to the problem of disciplinariness/interdisciplinariness (e.g., Smith, 1997) and to what it means to be critical instead of celebratory (e.g., Harris, 2009). Indeed, academic content needs to reflect an awareness of those methodological issues.

By contrast, the philosopher of psychology (active in the discipline of psychology) emerges often from the discipline while following philosophers who have had a psychological relevance or impact (e.g., Foucault, 1966/1970; Habermas, 1967/1988; Hacking, 1995; Taylor, 1989). But it would be a misunderstanding to assume that because somebody writes about the classical Greeks, he or she does history. Historical material alone does not make an historian. Some philosophers are experts on German idealism but they would not consider themselves historians of philosophy. The philosophy of psychology has experts on virtue ethics in the Aristotelian sense (e.g., Fowers, 2005), but such a philosophical interest does not make an historian of psychology.

If I were to write a history of psychology, it would be written according to current historiographic standards and principles. If I were to create a philosophy of psychology, I would pay less attention to historiographic problems. But a history and philosophy of psychology will be selective and problematic for either the historian or the philosopher of psychology. Most textbooks do not combine both, but there exist textbooks that embrace the new history (see Pickren & Rutherford, 2010). In our own textbook (Walsh, Teo, & Baydala, in press), which is intended as a history and philosophy of psychology, we use both streams of ideas. It allows us to include ancient psychological thought, which is problematic from an historiographic (but not from a philosophical) perspective. Some of the arguments expressed in the new history of psychology regarding continuity could be used against our book as well. Writing the book in this way makes it less historical and more philosophical, an assessment that in my view applies similarly to Robinson’s (e.g., 1976) own textbook (which uses the term “intellectual history,” connoting a combination of both).

If I were to write a book on the philosophy of psychology, some of the practices of philosophy would need to be applied that include a “deep” reading of texts. The inclusion
of contexts, precursors, and the social, political, and historical dimensions that made ideas possible reflects already an historical stream of thought. The philosopher could get away without ever talking about context while focusing on reason and consistency of arguments. Good philosophical writing requires extensive knowledge of the subject matter, and Robinson’s (1976) own book is a great example. Although from an historiographic perspective caution is required when making statements of continuity, from a philosophical point of view the “love of wisdom” expressed in classical works and interpreted for our times is without problems.

In addition, a critical historian and philosopher of psychology would introduce the concept of “relevance.” If one follows Nietzsche’s (1874/1988) motto that history needs to invigorate, then one becomes more interested in work that has ethical-political impact or in reconstructions that focus on the history of the present (Foucault, 1975/1977). My own book (Teo, 2005), discussed by Robinson (2013), is actually more philosophical than historical and reflects my personal traditions, moving, maybe not always successfully, between historical and philosophical arguments. Although I write about Kant from an historical point of view, I also believe that Kant is still relevant philosophically (Teo & Febraro, 2003).

Finally, I would like to add another dimension when writing a history and philosophy of psychology in the context of globalization. Sewell (2005) mentioned Chakrabarty (e.g., 2000) as a professional historian with theoretical impact. Indeed, we need to provincialize not only Europe but also the predominant European and American histories of psychology. North American historians of psychology privilege European and American developments, which is understandable because their experiences reflect these traditions. But there is no reason to exclude Indian, Chinese, and African traditions of psychology as well as lesser-known approaches. Postcolonial arguments teach us that a history of psychology needs to contextualize its own material and, for instance, admit to writing a “Western” history of psychology. Ignorant is an historian of psychology who does not realize that “Western” histories of psychology do not represent all of psychology. Thus, “consuming” the classical Greeks is no longer guilt-free—at least not for me.

**On the dialectics of reading the history and philosophy of psychology**

For the purpose of discussion it is important to distinguish not only between historical and philosophical writing but also between an historical (or historiographic) and philosophical reading. By an “historical reading” I refer to the reading of a person, object, event, or text that has importance in history but is no longer considered relevant. In such an historical reading we find “a text” interesting because it is a piece in a puzzle. When we contextualize this information we might conclude that, for instance, an individual is somehow the precursor of something that we know now. A philosophical reading, by contrast, means that an author’s ideas are still relevant today. Such assessments themselves are subject to historical change. For example, when it comes to the German philosopher-psychologist Friedrich Eduard Beneke (1798–1854), we prefer an historical but not a philosophical reading of his ideas, meaning that we try to understand his writings in the context of his time, but we do not assume that they are still relevant today.
Sometimes in the course of history we move from a philosophical to an historical reading. This has happened to a large degree to Johann F. Herbart (1776–1841), one of the most important thinkers of the 19th century in Germany, and it has already begun with Wilhelm Wundt (1832–1920). Students and colleagues in psychology know Wundt as a pioneer of psychology and the originator of a psychological laboratory but they do not know much beyond that. Attempts to reclaim a philosophical reading of Wundt (e.g., Lamiell, in press) may convince historians and philosophers of psychology, but no longer the mainstream of psychology. An historical reading is also evident for Plato or Aristotle, and the attempt to make their ideas relevant for today by translating them to current interests remains marginal in the discipline.

The case is even more pronounced outside of academia. Let me use Spartacus as an example, because he has experienced a revival in the visual media. Although I am not an expert on Spartacus, I approach attempts of his artistic representation with skepticism when he is claimed as a pioneer for the American Revolution, as a Christian martyr, or as an early Marxist. Despite my historical skepticism and knowledge about historical mistakes (and historical ignorance), I have no problem if someone “reads” him as an ethical-political inspiration. I have no concerns that Luxemburg, Liebknecht, and Zetkin founded the Spartakusbund (Spartacus League), motivated by his actions against the Roman Empire. Yet, I would have concerns if someone claimed historically that Spartacus was the first socialist. Historically, Spartacus emerged in specific historical conditions, structurally different from the German socialists and different from the Occupy Wall Street movement.

In an historiographic reading we need to understand Spartacus in the context of his times and reconstruct the life, culture, civilization, personalities, belief systems, political practices, and so on, of Ancient Rome. However, there is not much wrong philosophically with using Spartacus as an inspiration for an ethical-political movement. We can have a philosophical reading of the moral, political, and epistemological ideas of justice, power, equality, freedom, and so on, in Rome, while others might just find entertainment and enjoyment in a neo-pagan representation of sex and violence. But this also means that ethical-political inspiration is oblique both to historical knowledge and to historical ignorance.

In the history of psychology we read the Western Ancient classics because they are inspiring and thought-provoking and because there is somewhere a connection to our tradition of life, even if we do not articulate that connection. The relationship between history and the present is underdetermined; yet, we add connections in our readings as we do in our writings. Thus, we also need a history of the present where we move from the present towards the past (instead of from the past towards the present). When we consider the classical texts, we can choose an historical and a philosophical reading. But when we interpret the past for our own purposes, we need to emphasize reflexivity and awareness of what we are doing. We demand reflexivity when doing traditional empirical research in psychology, and we expect reflexivity when we work on the history and philosophy of psychology. Baydala and Smythe (2012) provide a good example of a philosophical reading of the classics that does not neglect historical knowledge. It would be ignorant to avoid this reflexivity.

Let me use other examples that excel in philosophical/theoretical but not in historical research. Habermas’s work must be considered philosophical scholarship. Although he
participated in the discussion on historical revisionism of German fascism, he did not develop historical works. Yet, Habermas (1987) is a good example of how non-historians can contribute to historical discussions. Gould (1996) used historical material in order to identify the political usage of science. The book should be read in terms of its critical relevance and less in terms of its historical shortcomings—it remains an important piece in the philosophical deconstruction of biological determinism. Finally, I would like to mention Billig’s (2008) book, in which he gives Locke, Shaftesbury, and Reid a much larger place in the history of critical psychology. Although the book is historically problematic, it is theoretically an important piece of scholarship (Teo, 2010).

**Recommendations from a critical history and philosophy of psychology**

As a critical historian and philosopher of psychology, I have recommendations for historians. Historians of psychology should not ignore thinking about the larger meaning of history. The demands from the discipline, and the need to emulate history as a discipline, might lead to a process where the focus on the relevance of historiography is lost. This requires reflexivity on why one is actually doing history. In addition, I suggest that the ideal of historical objectivism, implicitly endorsed by new historians, remains just that. As Johann Martin Chladenius (1742/1985) had already pointed out, in the first half of the 18th century, individuals, including historians, perceive events and objects from different perspectives, and this cannot be avoided. A genuine historical objectivism is not achievable because it is impossible to completely eradicate current horizons from research and because questions and interests emerge from the present. Gadamer (1960/1997) phrased it well when he suggested that the demand for overcoming all prejudices may be a prejudice itself and that rather than pretending that we are outside of a context we must acknowledge that we are part of a tradition that makes our historical knowledge possible. This does not mean endorsing a naïve presentism but allowing for a critical perspective where historical material is used in order to understand current problems. Such a critical stance needs to be accompanied by an awareness and acknowledgement of the limitations of such an approach.

The second recommendation is for philosophers of psychology, who need to understand the importance of temporality. Instead of top-down abstract analyses, historical research allows one to understand the contexts of research and practices. Temporality tells us that each horizon of understanding is historically constrained, and that horizons—to a certain degree—can be transcended through exposure to other horizons, which convey ideas that place one’s own horizon in context. Philosophical reflexivity involves understanding that one’s knowledge and experience are limits of understanding and that one is embedded in a particular tradition (or traditions) that frames one’s horizon (for Gadamer, tradition makes knowledge possible). There is no objectivity without “prejudice” in historiography or in philosophical psychology.

Instead of a false unity between the history and philosophy of psychology, I recommend a dialogue that will often be based on a division of labor. However, there are certain areas where both come closer together, such as in intellectual history (e.g., Robinson, 1976) or in critical history (e.g., Danziger, 1997). My own vision for a critical history and philosophy of psychology concurs with Nietzsche. It entails a move away from the
powerful makers of psychology, from the great men of psychology, and from conserving
and celebrating the past, to a perspective that breaks with history, interrogates the disci-
pline’s roots, and exposes issues that have been repressed or neglected. An anti-
antiquarian critical history of psychology would suggest not collecting impressive
insights, arguments, or studies, but rather discussing the problematic texts (and practices)
of pioneers of psychology. A history of knowledge needs to be accompanied by a history
of ignorance because we can learn from ignorance as much as we can learn from expert-
tise. Indeed, historians of science have developed a program that focuses on studying
ignorance (Proctor & Schiebinger, 2008).

The basic distinction between history as an end and history as a means shows us that
one can add a simple schema in order to understand the dialectics between history and
philosophy of psychology. For many philosophers, history has become a means for
reflection. The social philosophers Horkheimer and Adorno (1947/1982) famously
stated, looking at history from a dialectical point of view, that myth was a form of
Enlightenment and that Enlightenment fell back into myth (e.g., pointing to the domi-
nance of positivism in the social sciences). Similarly, one could argue that knowledge
that is not aware of its ignorance is ignorant, and that ignorance itself can be a source of
knowledge, if one understands that one is ignorant.

Foucault’s program bridges critically both history and philosophy, but I would con-
sider him more a philosopher than an historian and his legacy appears more philosop-
ical. I would say the same for Rose’s (1996) studies, which have had more of a theoretical
than an historical impact. Gergen (1973) famously called for including temporality in
social psychology, but his own works are theoretical and to a lesser degree historical.
Feminist philosophers of science have also used history to explore the association
between objectivity and masculinity (Keller, 1985).

For some psychologists, history and philosophy are means that should contribute to an
understanding of human subjectivity. Holzkamp’s (e.g., Schraube & Osterkamp, 2013) criti-
cal works and the works within historical psychology (e.g., Jüttemann, 2011) fall under this
umbrella. Works in this context draw on history rather than represent doing history. They are
critical of the mainstream, which is presumed to be based on a limited understanding of
human subjectivity that is inherently historical and cultural (not understanding that fact may
lead to ignorance). From the perspective of a critical psychologist, both horizons need to be
embraced and one needs to be aware of problems and possibilities in both subdisciplines. I
should end in admitting that I know that I don’t know and that I try to know what I do not
know and, more importantly, I try to know what I don’t know that I don’t know. From a
dialectical point of view, ignorance may be the beginning of knowledge.

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