

Fernando Vidal, *The Sciences of the Soul: The Early Modern Origins of Psychology* (Chicago and London: Chicago University Press 2011), xiv & 413 pp.

The history of psychology is well-established as a pedagogical branch of psychology and a large number of textbooks exist to support the courses on this subject. Their portrait of the origins of psychology has generally been ambivalent. On the one hand, they have sought to establish the scientific credentials of the discipline by tracing its origins to the establishment of Wilhelm Wundt's laboratory for experimental psychology at the University of Leipzig in 1879. This date has almost mythical significance for psychologists. The biggest organization of psychologists in the world, the American Psychological Association, declared 1979 to be the year of psychology's centennial and the International Congress of Psychology was held in Leipzig to mark the occasion.

At the same time, there has been a desire to legitimize the discipline by giving it a long and

distinguished ancestry and a particularly distinguished ancestor who has been co-opted is Aristotle on the grounds that he wrote a work that is best known by its Latin title, *De Anima* or *On the Soul*. The period between Aristotle and Wundt is usually made up with discussion of a motley collection of theologians and philosophers from Aquinas to Kant.

What the account leaves out is the origins of the term, 'psychology'. The history of the term is well-known. It first made its appearance in its Latin form, 'psychologia' in the 16th century, though it did not become widely used in Germany and France until the 18th century, and the English language did not adopt the term until well into the 19th century (Lapointe, 1970). However, this aspect of psychology's history has usually been regarded as a minor footnote that is of antiquarian interest but without any major significance for the history of psychology itself. In making this point, I do not want to advocate a simple form of nominalism which equates the history of psychology with the history of the term. Words can and do change their meaning over time. Having said that, they influence our thoughts in significant ways and so the dismissive attitude towards names that is famously associated with Shakespeare ('What's in a name'?) is equally misguided.

Vidal's book goes a long way towards correcting this situation. It is one of two books that originally appeared in French around the same time and which trace the origins of the subject to the earliest appearance of the term in the 16th century. The other book is by Paul Mengal and is titled, *La naissance de psychologie* [The birth of psychology] (Mengal, 2005). Vidal's book is the only one of the two that has been translated into English to date.

Vidal suggests that psychology has its origins in a series of commentaries on Aristotle's work on the soul. The earliest surviving work with the word, 'psychology' in the title is *Psychologia: hoc est de hominis perfectione* [Psychology or on the perfection of man] (1590) by Rudolph Goclenius. It has little in common with psychology as we now understand the term and is a discussion of theological matters concerning the

soul. Unlike Mengal, Vidal traces the birth of psychology not to the 16th century but to the 18th century when this science of the soul was transformed into a science of mind. A precondition of this transformation was 'the disintegration of the Aristotelian framework' (p. 58) and the adoption of the mechanistic framework that was associated with René Descartes. Christian Wolff whose works on rational and empirical psychology appeared from 1730 onwards was an important figure in this transformation.

Throughout the book, Vidal takes issue with the view that psychology is a product of the second half of the 19th century and argues that a discipline that went under that name existed in the 18th century. As Roger Smith pointed out in his review of the original French edition of the book, the argument can be questioned (Smith, 2009). There were none of the social institutions that we usually associate with disciplines – university departments, professional societies, textbooks, journals, conferences etc. These did not appear until the second half of the 19th century. There was unquestionably a literature on psychology in the 18th century but it was scattered across a range of subjects, including anatomy, metaphysics, logic and theology. Clearly the decision on where to place the start of psychology depends to a large extent on the criteria that are being used.

None of this should detract from the importance of Vidal's book, however. It brings to light a lost continent of literature that has yet to make its appearance in the standard textbooks on the history of psychology. It also provides us with the missing link between Aristotle's work on the soul and the modern discipline of psychology that usually considers itself to be a science. Intriguingly, Vidal suggests that the discipline is a continuation of traditional Christian concerns about the soul and would not have arisen without these concerns.

The International Society for History of the Behavioral and Social Sciences, better known as 'Cheiron', has an annual book prize. It was recently announced that Vidal's book was awarded the prize for 2014 and he gave an invited address at the annual meeting of Cheiron in June

of this year. I hope that this development will go some way towards improving the accounts of the history of psychology that are provided in the standard texts. It would be even better if an English translation of Mengal's book on the same subject were to appear.

REFERENCES

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