

B O O K R E V I E W S

ESSAY REVIEW: PSYCHOLOGY AS A HUMANISM

Roger Smith. *The Norton History of the Human Sciences*. New York: W. W. Norton, 1997. 1036 pp. \$50.00 (cloth). ISBN 0-393-0453-9. \$29.95 (paper). ISBN 0-393-31733-1.

Histories of psychology, especially in the English language, lie in plentiful abundance, a legacy of the one-time requirement that college psychology majors, at least in the United States, take a course in history and systems. This unreliable plenitude also measures the discipline's own uncertainty about its scientific status—it required a solid past to support a shaky confidence in its future. These histories usually recognize some obligation to locate psychology in relation to other sciences and to the culture that gave rise to it. As a result, many of these histories do serve their professional purpose, but often enough also convince the reader of history's sterility.

How different is Roger Smith's *History of the Human Sciences*. Smith has written a history that displays an immense learning, a culturally rich judgment, and an engaging style. This is a book capable of seducing a college student and instructing a professor. The occasional asides (e.g., "Pepys was perhaps more troubled by his bladder stones than by his soul," p. 151) will also keep the non-academic turning its pages, as will the enticing explorations of important but usually neglected strands of related cultural history (e.g., a piquant treatment of the Marquis de Sade).

Although the volume bears the title history of the "human sciences," Smith has confined his study to its psychological branches. But he broadens his considerations to include more than efforts at empirical science—it is psychological *thought* in its various dimensions that he tracks from the Renaissance to the present day. Smith often takes unusual, but illuminating perspectives on the periods he examines: so, for instance, the chapters on the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries not only provide a general account of the Aristotelian tradition, but treat of such special topics as the representation of women, the character of moral philosophy, and the disciplines of rhetoric, jurisprudence, and history. Smith's discussion of history itself displays his generous but apt exploration of psychological thought.

Smith indicates how the humanistic discipline of *historia* moved from a linguistic study to concern with the causes of human actions, their motives, and consequences. In this regard, he suggests a close connection with Renaissance legal thought, which had a deep interest in evidence, especially with the ability to assess sources so as to give the most reliable account of past events. He cites Jean Bodin, a lawyer, who thought history to be the proper study of human behavior as exemplified in right action, right economy, and right government. Smith continues this history of history several hundred pages later, in his chapters on the nineteenth century. The principal figures treated there are Leopold von Ranke, who gave rigor and structure to university studies of history, and David Strauss, who applied historical analysis to the Bible and therewith created a new discipline of "form-criticism," which would have tremendous impact on religious thought during the next century and a half. Smith's excursions into the development of Renaissance and nineteenth-century theories of history intend to portray the disciplinary range that encompasses human behavior and mind—a salutary expansion of what might fall under the rubric of psychology.

In Smith's account of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Descartes and the mind-body problems are, of course, given their due. He neither deprecates Descartes' accomplish-

ment (rather he sees it as another response, along with that of Hobbes, to scholastic natural philosophy), nor unduly modernizes it (e.g., he warns against simply identifying the Cartesian conception of the ego with modern notions of self-consciousness), nor neglects aspects of Cartesian theory that have resonance for modern science (e.g., for Chomskian linguistics).

The chapters dealing with the “long eighteenth century”—extending from the 1660s to the post-Napoleonic settlement in 1815—provide in-depth treatment of Locke’s psychological thought (including his resolution of Moleneux’s problem), German rationalism, and French sensationalism. These analyses are leavened with more general discussions of political economy and poetic representation during the period. Of particular interest is Smith’s chapter on human diversity and sociability, which ranges from discussions of the several feral children that appeared in various locales in Europe during the eighteenth century, to examination of efforts to place newly discovered kinds of apes within the Linnaean scheme, to a detailed consideration of Rousseau’s theories of human nature and sociability.

The initial chapters devoted to the nineteenth century begin to set out those considerations that will put the rise of “scientific” psychology in proper perspective. Accordingly, Smith focuses on early theories of language, especially on debates concerning its historical origin. This allows him to segue into the larger question of origins as developed in burgeoning explorations in geology and in beliefs about racial differences among human beings. A chapter on Comte and Marx provides a concise and pointed introduction to the foundations of sociology and a preparation for a later chapter on academic sociology (especially as formulated by Durkheim, Weber, and the Chicago School).

The two pivotal chapters—appropriately coming halfway through the book—deal with evolutionary theory and academic psychology respectively. Let me dwell on these for a moment. Smith shrewdly observes that Darwinism incorporated more than the work of one individual; it was a movement that depended on earlier developments and, later in the century, included almost as much Spencer and Haeckel as Darwin. Yet it was indeed the result of Darwin’s accomplishment that the belief in a science of human nature became more than a pious wish or feared specter—it became a virtual reality; and that reality has risen to even more insistent force today. In the *Descent of Man*, Darwin revealed a scientific argument that struck a blow to the more spiritually sensitive, something like a shiv to the kidneys: he advanced a natural-historical account of human morality. Smith sketches this dramatic account in shades too pastel; and he misses, I think, its important feature: namely, that Darwin explained altruistic behavior in humans by claiming that natural selection operated on the entire group of related individuals, not merely on its particular members. Such an observation would have connected Darwin’s theory more closely to the work of those neo-Darwinians who offer kin-selection explanations of human altruism. Smith, by contrast, casts Wallace in bright modern colors that fail to do him justice. Wallace did not suggest, as Smith has him doing, that human evolution escaped the forces of nature to be guided autonomously by human decision. Wallace was a spiritualist and attributed distinctively human traits to selection by higher spiritual powers: Like prize cattle, we achieved humanity through careful breeding by supernatural beings. I would not make too much, however, of what seem momentary lapses—or, perhaps, differences of historical judgment. Smith’s general portrayal of theories of human evolution in the nineteenth century bristles with acute observations.

Other histories of psychology, most perspicuously Boring’s *History of Experimental Psychology*, looked to a single origin, a founder. Boring chose Wilhelm Wundt as progenitor of experimental psychology. Smith’s history operates under a different assumption, namely that psychology, as a twentieth-century discipline, has no single father or mother. He conceives it rather in the botanical mode: psychology has diverse roots and several related but

relatively independent branches. His extensive treatment of academic psychology in the nineteenth century proceeds from this assumption and is realized in his exploration of the collection of disciplines that would travel under the rubric “psychology” in the United States, France, and Germany. Smith does, of course, nod to a singular reality, namely the work and figure of Wilhelm Wundt, whose importance is not merely the historian’s conceit.

The section on Wundt both indicates the strengths and liabilities of this volume. Smith describes Wundt’s connections with philosophy, his apprenticeship to Helmholtz, the physiological and cultural aspects of his psychology, but only has room for some passing remarks about the exact features of Wundt’s investigations into perception, consciousness, and cultural development. Smith situates Wundt’s work in relation to that of his contemporaries in Germany, France, and America; but he offers no indication of the judgments Wundt made about them—or about evolutionary theory, which took deep root in Germany during his lifetime. Some greater analytic development of the theories of such major thinkers as Wundt and James might have been a salutary choice. Indeed, though James’s evolutionary ideas receive proper attention, nothing is said of his theories of self, of consciousness, and of psychology as a science. Nor is the sweet, engaging style of James noticed, a style that may be the secret of an influence that has reverberated over the years.

A good third of Smith’s book takes on the various developments of psychology in the twentieth century. One can imagine his anguish in contemplating the task of giving adequate representation to the range and depth of different areas of psychology in the last hundred years. But in reading this fine section, no fear is felt. His treatment builds to an argument that readers will relish, though some will ultimately find hard to keep down. He begins with a consideration of theories of statistical representation and of heredity at the beginning of the century, which allows him to spend some 30 illuminating pages on the history of mental testing. From there, quick forays into personality theory, occupational psychology, and the child-psychology movement round off the first chapter in this section. The next chapter focuses on efforts to make psychology objectively scientific, efforts undertaken by behaviorists from Pavlov and Watson through Skinner and the drive-reductionists. The reader, though, does not quite get the lived sense of just how behaviorism dominated the profession from the 1930s through the 1960s, with its ghost still lingering over the fragmented remains. Smith believes that the cognitive psychologists who revolted against the reigning orthodoxy exaggerated the influence of the behaviorists to advance their own innovations. Well, maybe—but here I suspect that Smith’s British perspective has simply failed to catch the experience of the American cousins. One can imagine Smith with an ironic smile as he concludes the chapter on the problem of objectivity in psychology with incisive sections on parapsychology, Gestalt psychology, and phenomenology.

Smith devotes some 35 pages to a discussion of Freud and the development of psychoanalysis, the largest number of pages given to any individual in the volume. This allotment of space reveals a good deal about Smith’s attitude concerning psychology as a science. He does not pretend that Freud’s importance lies in scientific discoveries. Rather he argues that Freud developed a language and a humane mode of interpretation by which “the individual person comes to terms with both the social and the existential conditions of life” (p. 704). I must confess, I don’t know exactly what this assessment means. Had Smith agreed with Auden that Freud “has become a whole climate of opinion,” that would have been justification enough for considering his work at length. Freud, as great a writer as he was, nonetheless formulated theories about the operations of the human psyche for which he found evidence and for whose truth he ingeniously argued. It would be carrion comfort to suppose Freud’s value resided in a kind of holy scripture, whose meaning must be interpreted through opaque

French semiotics. That Freud was a genius, there is no doubt. That he developed ideas of power and influence, one need only look to the lineaments of modern culture. We are no longer Newtonians in the way Newton was, nor Darwinians in the fashion of Darwin. But we can hope for the realization of Freud's ideals, if not by the means he chose.

Smith's last chapter is meant, I believe, to reinforce his notion of psychology as essentially an interpretive enterprise—and he means to include those branches of psychology that seem firmly entrenched in evolutionary theory and neurobiology. The chapter quickly surveys the residual features of psychology in the twentieth century: behavioral approaches to society, ethology, sociobiology, neuropsychology, cognitive psychology, theories of self—and a range of philosophical approaches to the mind–body problem. In tracing the development of the philosophy of psychology, Smith provides capsule summaries of the ideas of such thinkers as the Churchlands, Dennet, Davidson, Sartre, Nietzsche, Lacan, and Foucault, with his prose warming to the views of these latter thinkers. This rather cacophonous medley is meant to suggest that the psychological disciplines lack the unity to be found in the natural scientific disciplines. Thus, Smith suggests, psychology must have a different methodological character. The final section of the volume returns to the historical interpretation of psychology. Smith reflects back on the views of Dilthey and Richert, both of whom understood the human sciences to be concerned with hermeneutics rather than natural-science kinds of explanation. This means, according to Smith, that even disciplines such as sociobiology should be regarded as “a system of cultural representations not, or not only, a body of empirical statements” (p. 869). This represents Smith's own view of the matter. To make this assumption actually intelligible, this reader would have liked some analysis of the supposed logical differences separating hermeneutics from explanation.

Any history that pretends to the scope of this one will naturally fall short in the gaze of the severe critic. The book is very long—though one really should not complain, since generosity of pages allows for its richness. The volume will, however, require selective use in the classroom and in the easy chair. When as many pages are accorded to Pufendorf as to Kant, then a question of balance could be raised. Inserted in the middle of the volume are a few illustrations and photographs—very few—which also makes the reader sensible of a disproportion (though undoubtedly the fault lies here with the publisher; not that more illustrations of similar quality would have added any significant cost). The many shrewd historical observations of this volume raise it far above the nearest competitor, but some greater detailed anchoring in the particulars of the ideas would have made the significance of the observations tangible. I suppose, however, that if the history of psychology is regarded not as an effort to *explain* psychological phenomena, but as one to provide *meaning*, then the details of particular theories become less relevant. These cavils aside, only the most tendentious critic would chose adjectives other than those of superlative praise to characterize this exceedingly fine example of scholarship in the history of science.

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