

Why history matters

Roger Smith

Resumen

Dada la presión sobre los psicólogos para desarrollar investigaciones científicas productivas o abordar problemas prácticos, es necesario aclarar el argumento de por qué la historia importa. Este artículo defiende dos grandes cometidos para el conocimiento histórico: es el marco para entender el significado de las afirmaciones que realizamos, tanto en la ciencia como en la vida cotidiana; y es inevitable en psicología (y otras ciencias sociales o humanas) porque el conocimiento sobre la gente cambia a la gente —el objeto de estudio de la psicología no es «inmutable». Estos cometidos epistemológicos sugieren que el conocimiento histórico es necesario, no sólo virtualmente valioso, para el desarrollo de la ciencia. Los argumentos aquí establecidos sostienen por tanto los cometidos señalados —familiares para los psicólogos— y que asignan a la historia una función pedagógica, crítica o ceremonial útil. La primera sección trata la cuestión de «por qué la historia importa» y establece los dos cometidos principales. La segunda sección desarrolla la idea, a través de una analogía con la «perspectiva», de que todas las formas de conocimiento tienen un propósito. El conocimiento histórico en psicología tiene propósitos —relacionados con las circunstancias en las que se crea el saber— que probablemente son obviados por los propios psicólogos. La tercera sección desarrolla con más detalle los dos principales cometidos epistemológicos y ofrece algún ejemplo de lo que significan en la práctica. La sección final sugiere que los cometidos filosóficos no son sólo un cuestión propia de la filosofía sino que tienen consecuencias para la forma que nos relacionamos con —y no sólo pensamos sobre— gente muy diferente de nosotros mismos. El conocimiento histórico es intrínseco a la capacidad reflexiva, a la actividad de la conciencia en el mundo moderno. Es intrínseca en dos sentidos: los modernos presuponemos una historia que da sentido a lo que decimos, y lo que es el ser humano (o lo que es la naturaleza humana) tiene una historia.

Palabras clave: historia, historiografía, epistemología, perspectiva en el saber, reflexividad.

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Abstract

Given the pressures on psychologists to carry out productive scientific research or to address practical problems, it is necessary to make clear the argument, 'why history matters'. This paper defends two large claims for historical knowledge: it is the framework for understanding the meaning of statements which we make, in science as in ordinary life; and it is inescapable in psychology (and in the social or other human sciences) because knowledge of people changes people –the subject matter of psychology does not 'stand still'. These epistemological claims suggest that historical knowledge is necessary, not just possibly valuable, for the development of science. The arguments made here therefore underpin the claims, more familiar to psychologists, which assign to history a useful pedagogical, critical or celebratory function. The first section introduces the question, 'why history matters' and states the two main claims. The second section develops the view, by way of the analogy of 'perspective', that all forms of knowledge are for a purpose. Historical knowledge in psychology has purposes, relating to the circumstances in which scientific knowledge is created, which psychologists themselves are likely to ignore. The third section develops the two main epistemological claims in more detail and provides some illustration of what they mean in practice. The final section suggests that the philosophical claims are not just a matter for philosophy but have consequences for the way we relate to, not just think about, people who may be quite unlike ourselves. Historical knowledge is intrinsic to the capacity for reflection, to the activity of consciousness in the modern world. It is intrinsic in two senses: we moderns presuppose a history in making sense of what we say; and what being human is (or what human nature is) has a history.

Keywords: History, Historiography, Epistemology, Perspective in knowledge, Reflexivity.

There is something of Don Quixote in a historian who champions knowledge about the past to an audience of natural or social scientists. The historian has virtuous and honourable intentions, but he suffers from hopeless illusions –so it may seem–about having influence in the contemporary world. The knight-historian entertains, and he may even cause trouble, but he neither understands nor controls knowledge, power and social progress. Scientists and people committed to making a practical impact, psychologists included, respond at best with benevolence, and at worst with contempt, to historians of science, as earlier worldly people to the knight of La Mancha. With a mind filled by the past and, for the most part, filled by past errors and untruths, the historian appears to engage with phantoms. What can the historian contribute to the brave new world of modern science, the world of genetically engineered life, cyber identities and understanding consciousness as a brain function? Perhaps the historian may amuse and perform ceremonial functions, but he, and certainly she, has nothing to contribute to the advance of knowledge.

Yet Don Quixote has been a long time on the human stage, first making an entrance in 1605, more or less at the time when Galileo undertook his first telescopic

observations of the moon and planets. If the knight never «really» existed, he has nevertheless remained remarkably alive. A character that engages the imagination can become as much part of thought and feeling about being human, as much as Galileo's contribution to knowledge of the earth's motion has affected belief about nature. What we inherit from the past, like Cervantes' story, has a striking place in the present.

Don Quixote's battles on behalf of the lady Dulcinea are the result of reading too many romances. Don Quixote has recreated who he is, and what he believes true, by (uncritical!) reflection on his reading. The author, Cervantes, in his turn reflects on his character's reflections, and the result is a magnificent play with the reflective human capacity. Then readers, in their turn, reflect, enjoy the possibilities of irony and of distance between the knower and what is known, and between belief and what is true. All this has gone on over many centuries and still goes on.

The story points to the central reason «why history matters»: historical knowledge is intrinsic to the capacity for reflection, to the activity of consciousness in the modern world.¹ It is intrinsic in two senses: we moderns presuppose a history in making sense of what we say; and what being human is (or, if you prefer, what human nature is) has a history.

The first claim, or thesis, is that all statements about being human, including scientific statements, have meaning because of their position in ways of life which themselves have a history. The attempt, which logical positivists undertook with exemplary precision, to develop an exclusively empirical theory of meaning, did not work out. What a psychologist or other scientist says about people makes sense in the light of the way of life of which the psychologist or scientist is part. The meaning of knowledge claims is part of an unfolding story or history in which scientists themselves are actors. A psychologist trains in a community of people with a history and as a result knows how to contribute to the science. (It is important to note, and hence to avoid being side-tracked by different questions, that this claim says nothing about the possible truth content of either psychological or historical knowledge. It is a claim about the historical and social nature of the conditions which make it possible to know what we mean.)

The second claim, or thesis, is that when psychologists or other scientists create knowledge about themselves or other people, they change who they and other people are. The subject matter of psychology and the other human sciences does not stand still. There is a circle of influence between knowledge of human nature and what

1. For present purposes, I put to one side the philosophical question: to construe reflection ontologically and thereby incorporate it in the definition of what it is to be human, or to analyse reflection as a historical, and not necessarily universal, process? Philosophical anthropologists took the former direction, and Foucault, among others, drew attention to the latter possibility.

human nature is. It follows that if we seek knowledge about people, individually and collectively, this must include historical knowledge – historical knowledge of the circle of influences linking belief about being human and being human, the circle made possible by reflection.

These are large claims and, like any such large claims, raise more, and more complex, philosophical questions (like those which occur in debates about «realism» versus «relativism») than I, and, it must be admitted, any other author, can hope to answer to the satisfaction of everyone else.² I must get on with the particular purpose in hand, asking why history matters to psychologists, while knowing perfectly well that difficult philosophical questions remain. The pertinent question, then, is: why should students, teachers and researchers in the psychological and social sciences, and indeed anyone interested in human nature, become involved with history? The brief answer is that people are involved with history whether they like it or not and whether they know it or not. Some kind of historical knowledge is a condition of understanding and doing anything. To deny history any place in human self-understanding is preposterous, and I assume not even the most materialist of modern neuroscientists takes such a position. But it is complicated to explain what the position of history is

The first thing to note is that the two claims which I am putting forward are broad as well as philosophical, entirely different in character from the narrow, specialist and precise empirical statements which preoccupy the majority of natural scientists. Many psychologists will think, I suppose, that there is more than enough to do, and more than enough of interest, in contemporary fields of activity like neuro-psychology or evolutionary psychology, than to worry about such broad claims. To such psychologists, often enough, historical knowledge and philosophical reflection look like a waste of time. Indeed, in a sense, they are, if – a very big «if» – science only has the purpose of advancing these fields along the lines of existing specialised activity. Such specialised activity is, of course, the stuff of which average scientific careers are made (and hence T. S. Kuhn called it «normal science»). Science, however, is not restricted to such activity. For example, specialist activity itself provides no answers to questions about «truth» or about the relation of one piece of specialised knowledge to that in another field. Nor does specialised knowledge provide any means for understanding the social, or indeed ethical, context of psychological work in all its enormous variety. This last point clearly

2. An autobiographical note is perhaps in order here. Since writing a general book on *The history of the human sciences* (Smith 1997), I have been asked on a number of occasions to explain the purposes of this field (which subsumes the history of psychology). For a summary: Smith (2001). It became clear that more extended and reflective answers were needed, and this led to a philosophical book: Smith (2007). The present essay is an introduction, with an audience of psychologists in mind, to the arguments of the latter book.

matters: the majority of psychology students, and the majority of people with some interest in psychology, do not aim to live lives devoted to specialist activity; and even those who do have careers in research are still members of a wider society. For many such reasons, broad questions have interest and importance.

A historical comparison may be helpful. Two centuries ago, progressive scientists, like the French physiologist P.-J. Cabanis, the phrenologist F.-J. Gall and the German psychiatrist J. C. Reil, argued that to investigate the mind without reference to the material brain was wrong. Their arguments had great influence. Now, however, we might reverse the point: to investigate the brain, as neuroscientists now do, without reference to the way brains have historical life in people, is wrong.

Students and scholars who stay within the confines of a well-established discipline, like social history, cognitive psychology or linguistics, rarely have to justify what they do. They surround themselves with colleagues who agree it is all worthwhile, and they join institutions which support them. Historians of science, medicine and technology, including historians of psychology, however, are frequently in a less comfortable position. In many cases, they do not belong to large communities of scientists or to well-established organisations which automatically and unquestioningly support what they do. Indeed, it is often psychologists, whose colleagues are much more concerned with contemporary scientific work, who carry out teaching and research in the history of psychology. Given limited time and limited resources –and time and resources are always limited– it is inevitable that scientists should question investment in the study the past, by both students and researchers, when the present, they believe, is building up knowledge which the past did not have. The doubt about history's value is chronic. It becomes acute, in addition, when there is intensified competition, or even a reduction of financial support, in psychology generally. The temptation may then become irresistible for scientists to parody historians as so many Don Quixotes riding out on decrepit horses to fight imaginary battles, while all around «real» scientists are face to face with the brain, the genes, the commercial market, new technologies, or whatever they think is the pressing material reality of the moment.³ The activity of historians of psychology is obviously vulnerable when looked at in this spirit. Among so many competing psychologies, the case for history does not appear strong.

As a result, historians of psychology, addressing psychologists, have put forward a number of arguments to the effect that knowledge of past science helps or supports present science. I will briefly describe some of these.

3. At the time of writing, the large-scale re-organisation of teaching required by the EU Bologna Agreement has created circumstances in which some scientists want to push historical work to the margins; asked to agree priorities, perhaps few psychologists imagine that they might include history.

Psychologists sometimes say that past insights have been forgotten or modern researchers are busy rediscovering what ought to be already known. I am inclined to say, for example, that G. H. Mead's papers, now a century old, in which he wrote about the limits of physiological explanation in psychology, make conceptual arguments which psychologists have largely ignored, to the detriment of their science.⁴ Or, I might suggest that there are lessons to be learned about cycles of intellectual innovation. Many lines of inquiry, we know or should know from the past, start out as exciting breakthroughs which attract much interest but then turn into dead-ends; however fashionable a current area of enquiry, we might want to bear this in mind. For example, from the mid-1930s to the early 1960s, a huge amount of resources went into recording brain waves and trying to use these recordings as signs of underlying brain functions. This research was basically unsuccessful as a route to understanding brain functions: the recorded waves did not reveal basic functions; and it was the demands of new technology, new recording devices and techniques of analysis, rather than productive questions about brain function, which commanded the research agenda (for the technological dimension: Borck 2001 and Hayward 2001; on the general story: Stevens 1971). Is there something to be learned relevant to the contemporary fascination with brain imaging techniques –for example, how far does technological innovation rather than conceptual insight drive research in this field? It is not for historians to answer such questions; but it is possible to suggest that historical work provokes questions which specialists themselves would not raise.

In a similar sceptical spirit, scientists sometimes turn to history for resources with which to think about the fundamental, but socially entrenched and therefore almost invisible, assumptions in their area of work or even in psychology as a whole.⁵ The Dutch psychologist Douwe Draaisma has written eloquently on «metaphors of memory», discussing the way western scientists have repeatedly tried to understand what memory is by drawing on contemporary technology, from the wax tablets of ancient worlds to the computers of the present (Draaisma, 2000). This history highlights the limitations of all such physical metaphors and supports the view that very different kinds of thinking are needed in the future for understanding the cluster of processes

4. *Social psychology as counterpart to physiological psychology* (1909) and *What social objects must psychology presuppose?* (1910) in Mead (1964).

5. In the past, psychologists, like other intellectuals, looked to history for illumination of «the eternal questions» facing human self-understanding. If indeed certain questions are «eternal», there obviously may be as much value in earlier ways of addressing them as in later ones, and the study of past science is therefore relevant to the study of present science. I am not, however, making this point. Our age is not one in which it is easy, or persuasive, to make arguments around belief in «eternal questions». In addition, such an argument would, I suppose, carry little weight with the average committee assigning resources in the natural sciences.

called «memory». The mind-body question, which current psychological research approaches as the question of consciousness, is another topic which tempts both psychologists and philosophers of mind to turn to historical resources in order to support their arguments. References to Descartes abound in the literature on consciousness, though these references are more often rhetorical than historical, since they do not aim seriously to represent Descartes' intellectual world (for one study which does attempt both, see Sutton, 1998). One further example: the U.S. psychologist Ben Harris has, in a number of studies, used historical case studies to throw into relief current debates about the ethics of experimentation on human subjects (Harris, 1979, 1988).

The argument about history's importance to revising the psychological sciences has been very influential, especially through the work of two North-American social psychologists, Kurt Danziger and Franz Samelson. Both have been highly critical of research in their field, essentially on the grounds that psychologists, captivated by the requirements of experimental methodology, have not grasped what is involved in conceptualising the social content of psychology's subject matter.⁶ To provide a corrective, both psychologists undertook considerable historical research, research which influenced a generation of younger scholars. Their turn to history was a response to what they perceived as poor science; indeed, they accused contemporary psychologists, ignorant of the historical constitution of their fields, of being unable properly to carry out the scientific activity of critical self-examination of assumptions.

The second major way scientists use history, use for celebration, ornament and inspiration, needs little comment or emphasis. The proportion of conferences or symposia on the history of psychology organised around anniversaries of one kind or another speaks for itself. Historical work for these purposes is didactic and expressive: look what these inspiring women and men did, look at how much progress we have made, look what a great job this institution did, look at the influence our field has had -or should have had but hasn't! The Russian Academy of Sciences has an institute, the Institute for History of Natural Science and Technology, whose primary *raison d'être* has always been the memory of the Academy itself. Such work certainly has its place. Psychologists, just like other groups of people, and in this respect like political nations, create, confirm and enjoy a common identity through such historical activity. In addition, some writers think that history can inspire young people to become scientists or the public to support the spending of taxes on science.

All the same, it is obvious that there are tensions between scientists writing history for celebratory or inspirational purposes and historians writing about the past

6. Especially Danziger (1990); for Danziger's views on the implications for history of psychology, see 1994 and 2004. Samelson's historical papers are scattered, but for his reflections on history of psychology, see the symposium, Burnham (1999).

with critical attention to the complexities, and often enough depressing witness, of the historical record. It is, inevitably, to wield a double-edged sword to use history in order to celebrate the present; historical research may find reasons not to celebrate! Indeed, something of history's critical potential is evident in the work, to which I have already drawn attention, which criticises the fundamental assumptions and research practices of social psychology. Those who wish to celebrate might bear in mind that historical work on the founding of nations has not always confirmed the view which nationalists wish to propagate.

These uses of history may or may not appeal to contemporary psychologists; it is for psychologists to judge for themselves whether historical work serves either the cognitive or the institutional goals of their science. I want to make the substantial point, however, that these arguments in support of historical work only go so far and, indeed, may at times be counter-productive. These arguments justify historical knowledge only insofar as it serves the purposes of natural or social science; they risk scientists reaching the conclusion that, as a matter of fact, historical work does not contribute to the advance of scientific knowledge or its institutions. I have reservations about these arguments because they make the value of historical work contingent on the state and circumstances of psychology. Lurking in their background, there is still the tacit belief that «real» knowledge is scientific knowledge, exemplified by natural science, while historical knowledge is an optional, if sometimes valuable, extra.

Argument for the value of historical work must, in the last analysis, show why it is not optional but necessary. I therefore move on to a different way of explaining why the history of psychology matters. I do this by examining the statement, often made, that history of science (indeed, history generally) provides perspective. If we can make clear what this trope or figure of speech, «perspective», means, we will, I think, go a long way to saying why history matters.

The notion of perspective is metaphorically very rich. Firstly, perspective is a means or technique for representing three-dimensional objects on a two-dimensional page, canvas or screen. This is so familiar since the time when early Renaissance Italian artists used perspective with such panache that we identify this use of perspective as «realism». Thus, in the dictionary definition, perspective is «the art of delineating solid objects upon a plane surface so that the drawing produces the same impression of apparent relative positions and magnitudes, or of distance, as do the actual objects when viewed from a particular» (Oxford English Dictionary; the «classic» source linking perspective with realism in art is Gombrich, 2002). The art of perspective is a way of representing objects (and the dimensions of objects) in what is still popularly thought of as their proper or objective spatial relation to each other. Secondly, however, reference to perspective draws attention to viewpoint. The artist painting a canvas stands on one spot; the relationship of objects in the picture is the relationship

created by standing at this particular point. Velázquez's masterpiece, «Las Meninas», is a justly famous spectacle of viewpoint (while, of course, also displaying perspective in the first sense).

If we put these two meanings of the word «perspective» side by side, a deep-lying ambiguity becomes visible: there is a way of picturing the world which puts things into their objective relation with each other; and what this objective relation is depends on where one is standing. To say that someone has perspective, therefore, is to say, at one and the same time, that he or she has a good grasp over the objective relations of things and sees from one point of view. This seems to me a very good description of the scientist's relationship to the world: seeing objectively accompanies, and is not opposed to, having a viewpoint. All the same, it must be accepted that many people, and in my experience students especially, draw a contrast between objective seeing and perspectival seeing: they treat «being objective» as taking a viewpoint «beyond» time and space, the viewpoint, perhaps, of God. All the same, as Velázquez taught, the human viewpoint is a point of view.

The relevance of history to perspective can now be stated. Historical knowledge is knowledge of the psychologist's (or anyone else's) perspective. It is knowledge of the means which the psychologist has acquired in order to provide what a community of people agrees to be a realistic picture of the world; it is knowledge of the place and time, knowledge of «context», relevant to where the psychologist stands and has the viewpoint which he or she does. Without historical knowledge it is simply impossible to understand contexts, the viewpoints of the present as well as of the past. When we look at a scientist, we may ask: why did she take the point of view and value the particular kind of objective truth which she did? What is her, and her occupation's, historical story?.

This claim that historical knowledge brings perspective to scientific disciplines, including psychology, has many dimensions, about which there is likely to be considerable disagreement. We must live with disagreement. I am stating that psychologists stand at a particular place, have a viewpoint and that from this viewpoint objects in the world have a particular nature and relation to each other which they would not have from another point of view. On the face of it, I must accept, this appears opposed to the popular belief that scientific knowledge is what all competent observers will agree on whatever their point of view. That popular view, moreover, is confirmed by the fact that when psychologists do not agree, they change viewpoint, do experiments and take measurements. Thus understood, science appears to be the way in which we «get rid of perspective» in order to arrive at knowledge valid from any point of view.

Yet the whole thrust of the history, philosophy and sociology of science in recent decades has been to question the possibility of such disembodied knowledge, existing «beyond» actual social worlds and actual psychological people (see the accessible argu-

ments, related to the natural sciences generally, in Golinksi, 1998; more particularly, see Danziger, 1984; for a philosopher's brief assessment, see Tauber, 1997). This is not the place to recap the arguments. We should note, however, that whatever their persuasiveness in relation to the sciences in general, there are particular reasons for taking them seriously in relation to psychology and the other human sciences. These reasons I stated as two large-scale claims at the beginning of this paper. I can now rephrase them: familiarity with historically constituted languages, and using languages in particular contexts, enables us to know what human phenomena mean; and historically changing accounts of what it is to be human change what it is to be human. The perspective which historical knowledge provides enables us to understand these conditions of knowledge about people. Without historical knowledge, we would lose part of the core of human self-understanding.

The specialist sub-fields which together we call «psychology» can and do carry on their work without explicit attention to history; but they implicitly assume a particular place in history to do this –they have a viewpoint. Historical work makes the implicit explicit. This explicitness may not matter much to researchers in the midst of their specialised activity. But, as I have already noted, only a minority of psychology students will go on to work in research; what they do in the wider world will much more directly involve a need for perspective; and even the most narrowly-focused research psychologist is still a citizen.

Let me now consider in a little more detail the two claims behind the argument for «perspective».

When we describe the characteristics of people or identify them (including ourselves), what we say makes sense, has meaning, because of its place in a historical story. This is the case even when we believe certain traits to be universal, part of a universal human nature. If I say, «this guy's aggressive», someone might say, «well, that's his nature». But what does this mean? If it means he is aggressive because he is a human male, that says nothing informative until you fit the description into a biological story (also, in its way, a history) about how human males evolved as animals on the savannah. If, by contrast, you say «this guy's aggressive because he spends all his time worrying about his image with other young men», then we have a different story about habits, emotional needs, social pressures and fashion, and this story requires different, historical, knowledge in order to be understood. Or, someone else might tell a psychological story about the return of the repressed, which involves a story about the young man's intimate relations as a very young child. The point now is not about which story may be right or wrong. The point is that the statement, «this guy's aggressive», however interpreted, makes sense because it is embedded in a context, and the context is a kind of story, whether an evolutionary, social or psychological story, about how people acquire characteristics and identity. These stories are one kind of history. They

also presuppose another kind of story, which would account for the fact that scientists believe it truthful to tell stories about what happened four or perhaps six million years ago, or about the social lives of young men or about unconscious repression.

What academic history and scholarly research in the history of psychology does is discipline the stories which create perspective on these different scientific stories (see discussions of narrative in understanding, including Mink, 1978; White, 1985). This requires seeing each kind of story, the story that scientists tell or the story about why scientists tell the story they do, in context. The discipline consists in using all the available evidence while keeping the stories coherent and giving them significance. It is this discipline which creates the contrast between academic history and the personal stories or tales which people tell about their past because it creates solidarity or makes them feel good. There are different kinds of stories for different purposes; but, if our purpose is objective knowledge, the scholar must discipline story-telling according to the highest standards. Psychologists expect the highest standards in reporting experiments; there is no reason why they should not expect the same in telling stories which makes sense of their own activities –but for this they need the discipline of historical (as well, of course, of sociological), not psychological, research.

Perspective is also essential to critique. This is familiar in the context of political argument: consider, for example, the importance of historical knowledge for debate about the founding of nation states, or the feminist significance of re-writing the history of women. A number of psychologists and social scientists have also made the connections between historical perspective and critique familiar, using history in order to show how research fields have become the way they are and hence how, in other circumstances, they might be different. I referred earlier to the work of Danziger and Samelson. Such critical work is enormously important to the well being of any discipline. In many fields of psychology, because of the attention customarily given to rigorous methodology and the formal requirements of demonstrating objectivity in research papers, cognitive assumptions and social values can be deeply hidden. In these circumstances, history becomes a key tool in making a discipline reflexive about its own practices and social place. The work of Jill Morawski shows this with particular clarity (Morawski, 1992, 2005).

Some psychologists, no doubt, think of history as something to be ignored or resisted, a subversive irritant to what they believe is the serious business of making knowledge objective through methodological rigour. Yet the critical historian of psychology can respond by showing how methodology, too, has a history and that even the most rigorous scientific procedures have meaning in a context. A recent example of such work is that of Trudy Dehue, who examined the limits to the most advanced randomised clinical trial (RCT) procedure, the so-called gold standard for assessing the benefits of a therapeutic intervention (Dehue, 2002). Studying a heroin replace-

ment programme for severe users in the Netherlands, she showed how the behaviour of experimental subjects (subjects who received free heroin) changed by virtue of being experimental subjects, raising questions about whether the testers were investigating social realities or creating them. Subjects found «differences» in the heroine provided because the whole context of free provision affected their experience and judgement. In the light of such results, we can see that the historical nature («historicity») of meaning, the first large-scale claim in this paper, merges with the historical nature (also «historicity») of the subject matter psychologists study, the second large-scale claim.

People's knowledge about human nature alters that nature. Human beings, in linguistic and symbolic activity, are reflective, and hence the beliefs which they express through cultural life, including through science, shape what sort of being they are. The English philosopher Stuart Hampshire put it like this:

As the knowledge that we may have of our own mental powers is reflexive knowledge, the object of knowledge and the knowing subject change and extend their range together (Hampshire, 1960, p. 255).

The philosopher of science Ian Hacking called this phenomenon «looping», and he has studied its effects in connection with multiple personality and autism (Hacking, 2002, p. 48; 2006). By taking a new perspective, standing elsewhere and looking in a new way (at others or at themselves), people do not just look; they become different. This occurs in everyday life, it occurs on a large scale over long periods of time and it occurs when psychologists carry out experiments. It is central to psychotherapy, as Anna O., the patient of Freud's early colleague, Joseph Breuer, made clear in her insightful reference to «the talking cure»: a person's articulated self-knowledge is the vehicle for change (Breuer and Freud 1974, p. 83).

The human sciences are therefore centrally concerned with the reflexive circles in which knowledge changes the object of knowledge. It is a truism to observe that these circles are situated in time. If there are reflexive circles, historical work necessarily becomes part of the human sciences.

This argument is philosophical, and psychologists may think it does not affect the empirical research which they do, for example, on children's expression of the emotions, in relation to which the argument about reflexivity may seem remote. There are perhaps two kinds of response to this. Firstly, psychologists who distance themselves from philosophy do not thereby avoid making philosophical commitments; they just avoid thinking about the commitments which are implicit in the work they do. Any position we care to take makes philosophical assumptions about which, if we change perspective, we can ask questions. This is the lesson drawn from the collapse of positivist philosophies of science. Secondly, if, as I am now arguing (with arguments which also

go back to criticisms of positivist epistemology and to Wittgenstein), we start from the perspective of language use and the social activity language makes possible, then we may conclude that changing language changes both the human world around and human identity. Human beings are not bundles of feelings, thoughts and capacities bound together like atoms in molecules to form stable structures. Through language, people are self-recreating. Ordinary people have often understood this, as in stories in which foretelling a death leads to that death.

This conclusion should not be unfamiliar to psychologists, since there is a rich cluster of activities, sometimes called historical psychology, which has turned the argument that human nature has a history into research programmes. There are roots in German-language historical sociology and social psychology, notably of Weber and Simmel, focused on the origins and nature of modernity. Norbert Elias, beginning in the 1930s, studied the internalisation of rules of self-control and politeness in the courts of early modern Europe, arguing that this created a new kind of psychological subject (Elias, 1978). A German journal, *Psychologie und Geschichte* (1989-2002), aimed to connect studies in history of psychology and historical psychology, but this proved hard to achieve; one of the journal's co-editors, Gerd Jfcttemann in Berlin, edited related texts (for the background arguments, Staeuble 1991).⁷ In France, Durkeimian social scientists interested in the relation between the individual mind and collective beliefs influenced the *Annales* school of historians, leading to Lucien Febvre's focus on mentalities and, in a later generation, Philippe Ariès studies of childhood. Ignace Meyerson represented these interests among psychologists (Carroy, Ohayon and Plas, 2006, pp. 157-68). In the English-speaking world, Rom Harré, Peter Stearns and others have studied the history of emotion and called for a historical social psychology (Harré and Stearns, 1995; Gergen and Gergen, 1984; for the novel language of «emotions» in English, see Dixon 2003). There is also a group of historians, including Lloyd de Mause, he wish directly to apply modern psychoanalytic categories to the interpretation of past actions («psychohistory») (for an introduction to psychohistory, Gay, 1985). In a direct challenge to experimental social psychologists, Kurt Danziger argued, using considerable empirical historical evidence, that the spread of experimental psychology as an occupation in North America created not just new psychological concepts like «personality» but people who have attributes like «personality» (Danziger, 1990, 1997).

At times, in the background of studies of the historical development of psychological states, there is the outline of the radical thesis that the very category «psychology» itself, along with its subject matter, has a history (I discuss the history of psychological categories, in relation to the historiography of the history of psychology, in Smith,

7. I am grateful to Irmgard Staeuble for information on the German context.

2005). To understand this, it is helpful to consider the point which the English psychologist and historian of psychology Graham Richards has especially stressed: the one word «psychology» denotes both a field of knowledge (including the occupations concerned with it) and the field's subject matter, that is, psychological states (Richards, 2002, pp. 6-10). The radical thesis argues that the field of knowledge (and occupations) and the states came into existence historically in reflexive relation with each other. It implies that there may have been times and places (and, indeed, may still be) when people had no psychology –neither this division of knowledge nor psychological states. This certainly contradicts the common assumption of psychologists. For example, psychologists who searched for early uses of the word «psychology» looked for the use of a word and not for the creation of states of being human (for early usage: Starobinski, 1980; Mengal, 2000).

The possibility that earlier people, or indeed people with cultures other than those now prevalent in the West, have no «psychology», in both the senses Richards distinguished, raises complex questions. To explore these, I will make a controversial historicist case in order to show just how significant historical work might prove to be. Recent research has established extensive biological knowledge about the shared human genetic make-up and the extent to which there is a statistically significant variation of genetic material between different human groups. This knowledge, however, concerns material that has a role in the development of general capacities and not in the development and distribution of specific psychological states. Moreover, whatever the human biological inheritance from a distant past may be, this inheritance has its expression in the development and activity of particular people in a particular social world. In encountering human nature, we in fact face particular phenomena with a particular history. Of course, it may turn out, as a number of psychologists interested in cross-cultural psychology claim, that there are indeed psychological universals (as, for example, in perception of colour). What I am arguing now is that even if such views are confirmed, there is still a case to be made that the attribution of psychological states to people whose world does not include any such category is historically (and anthropologically) problematic. Firstly, it must be agreed that many people have not had the language or means to conceptualise «the psychological». Secondly, when we attribute psychological states to such people, this may hide from ourselves another way in which humans have been humans. Let me argue with an example.

Did Homer's heroes, as they battled to the death on the plain before Troy, describe and experience fear in the same way as modern soldiers? The common-sense answer, and the answer, I assume, of most psychologists, is that of course all soldiers have and experience similar psychological states, including fear. This «of course», however, rests on circular argument: it takes for granted the existence of a universal human nature, causing particular psychological states, and then it collects historical examples to

prove that there is a common human nature. But did the heroes experience and have psychological states?

We can start with the empirical evidence. Knowledge of historical people comes through some kind of record or memory, and historians, seeking the best evidence, pay special attention to what they call the primary source, the record deriving directly from the subject. What we know of ancient Greek warriors is in records like Homer's, or in pictures on vases or from material artefacts. What is now the written record was at the time an art form, constructed according to certain patterns and customs and for particular audiences. Moreover, it is in another language, not even a living language. Before we can know anything about experience in that world, therefore, we have to learn how to interpret the texts which describe it. And when we come to interpretation, we have to decide what it is to judge what a text means. We are back with the hermeneutic circle: we must make a presupposition about the meaning of a statement in order to say what a statement means. No text «speaks for itself».⁸ In the case of reading Homer, a modern reader is very likely to assume that when Homer describes battle, he describes psychological states. The Iliad does indeed have vivid descriptions, sometimes in horrible detail, of soldiers (in English translation) shaking in fear, blinded with pain and even running away. All the same, if we interpret Homer in the context of what we know of the philosophy of the Ancient Greeks, it is possible to reject this psychological interpretation as anachronistic.

The Greek philosophers, of whom Aristotle is the most important for present purposes, did not have the word «psychology» or the category of phenomena which the modern word denotes. Aristotle certainly wrote about topics which we take to be psychological ones, like perception and memory, but they were not «psychological» for him, let alone for Homer, who composed some centuries earlier. The most relevant text is *De anima*, «On the soul» (though even this is a medieval title), and Aristotle's subject is the various attributes of living things, most especially that higher form of life which is human. Modern writers do, of course, treat Aristotle «as if he were» a psychologist, and this enables them to put what he wrote into dialogue with modern psychological knowledge. A number of philosophers of mind, for example, have argued that Aristotle has something to contribute to modern debates about consciousness, though he had no concept of «consciousness». It is, however, a different claim to say that Aristotle was a psychologist; this, indeed, if it is intended to make a precise historical claim, is straightforwardly wrong. It is wrong because it is not language the

8. I am putting to one side the argument, associated with «deconstruction», that the primary source is itself already the outcome of dialogue and cannot be treated as independent of the interpretive act. My rhetorical point is to engage psychologists who take the empirical reality of psychological states for granted.

Ancient Greeks did or could have used, and there was no occupation of «psychologist». There was no identity of this character. Aristotle's human beings were subjects with a soul not with psychological states. The same point applies to Homer's heroes: they were men with an exemplary place in a story and in a mythology, and this place gave them a set of characteristics as heroes, characteristics which it is problematic to describe as «psychological». A way of life understood as heroic differs from a way of life understood as a sequence of feels caused by brain states. There may be better grounds for saying that Greek heroes were different from modern soldiers than for saying they were like them; they represented the world differently and experienced it differently. When Homer described terror, he described it as the content of being, not a state which a person subjectively has or a state which a body is in. Fear may be something other than a psychological state.

Perhaps the modern psychologist will be tempted to claim that «really» the heroes had psychological states. This, however, presumes not just the universality of human nature but universal privileges for one way of talking about it. It is precisely those universal privileges that are at issue. The whole point about seeking perspective is to understand the contingent, historical circumstances in which particular ways of talking about being human, and hence being human, acquire privileged status. Jumping to the conclusion that Homer «really» described psychological states rejects the possibility of perspective. The hard-nosed, materialist neuro-psychologist may simply shrug and say that Aristotle and Homer were ignorant and lacked scientific knowledge. According to this point of view, it does not, finally, matter for knowledge what Aristotle or Homer said. What is wrong with this conception of knowledge, however, is that it excludes reflection on the validity and history of its own view of knowledge. It also takes for granted that conscious feels are naturally existing things (which philosophers call «natural kinds»), and exist independently of the manner in which they are understood and symbolised in cultural life. But this, to repeat, is what is at issue.

My perspective as the author of this paper is different from the perspectives of readers (who may have many different perspectives), particularly as I am a historian and they may be psychologists. No one of these perspectives is uniquely true. Each perspective derives from living in one way rather than another and from having one rather than another occupation and purpose (or, if you prefer, place in a discourse). It makes no sense to assert, as an abstract generalisation, the superiority, let alone exclusivity, of one form of knowledge, such as psychological knowledge, rather than another, say, historical knowledge, or vice versa. Knowledge of all kinds is always for a purpose, and it is in relation to its purpose that we must judge whether our knowledge is adequate or not. One purpose is, of course, truth-telling. As a cognitive scientist and philosopher writing together concluded: «The criteria that control 'good talk' in

science, poetry, history or any other interpretive system depend on its point and its purpose. (Arbib and Hesse, 1986, p. 181).

Without perspective, there is no possibility of comparison and constructive interaction between different purposes. Historical knowledge is therefore intrinsic to an open-minded conception of learning. Using history is more than assembling facts; it is a matter of standing where other people have stood, of re-creating the structure and meaning the world has had for others. History is not at all the only way to do this -ethnology or poetry, for example, also have this capacity. History does, however, offer a disciplined and accessible way to acquire perspective on the purposes (or discourses) of psychologists.

This is a source of pleasure and excitement. New worlds open up in a sort of tourism of the intellect. It is akin to the pleasure of reading novels and biography, or of talking with good friends, when we see how the world looks to another person or community of people. Not by chance, good historical writing, good fictional writing and good travel writing use the same narrative techniques to present readers with different perspectives and enrich lives.

It is of crucial importance that such shifts of perspective enable readers, students or scientists to see themselves, as well as other people, differently. Historical work is constitutive of self-reflection. Indeed, I think we could go so far as to say that if we had no perspective we would not see ourselves at all. As the French historian Michel de Certeau noted: «We travel abroad to discover in distant lands something whose presence at home has become unrecognizable» (Certeau, 1984, p. 50). These «distant lands» are historical as well as geographical, and among them are the lands in which psychology, in all its variety, has roots. In a straightforward sense, psychologists, like everyone else, if they are to know who they are, have to be able to stand outside themselves in order to see. In fact, people create perspectives informally all the time by telling stories about who they are and why they feel or do what they do. In telling these stories, people compose their own histories. (Which story they tell can make a huge difference, as recent conflicting narratives of child abuse have made vivid.)

The discipline of history, including the history of psychology, compared with ordinary story-telling, is just this: it is a discipline to make stories the best ones possible, where we judge «best» in relation to what accords with all the available evidence, has coherence and embeds what is said in knowledge relevant to a community. The differing biographies of the psychologist C. G. Jung provide an example of discipline and indiscipline in history. Much work, as Sonu Shamdasani has shown, has been all too eager to reach one or another judgement about Jung and has not taken account of the wealth of material in fact available about his life (Shamdasani 1998; 2005). Such biographies tell stories to suit the writers purpose; disciplined biography also tells a history to suit the writer's purpose, but this purpose gives first place to the rigorous

and comprehensive use of evidence. Shamdasani, writing with Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen, has also presented a systematic «dossier» to sort out the difference between disciplined history and story-telling, in the sense of inventing stories (not least, by Freud himself), about Freud and psychoanalysis (Borch-Jacobsen and Shamdasani, 2006).

One way to describe what happens in understanding something is to say that the understanding puts a particular event, detail or argument into relationship with a larger whole which has meaning for us. Historians describe this larger whole as the «context». The context, however, is not simple given, and, in fact, historians are often in dispute about what the relevant context is. There are good reasons for this. Historians are actors in the present who select some aspects of the past, and not others, for attention, and different historians come to their work with different interests and from different communities. All the same, whatever their starting point in the present, historians have to judge the appropriateness of the selection they make in the light of what they uncover about a past context. A relevant case study is the different understandings of the English philosopher, John Locke. He has a standard place in histories of psychology as a pioneer analyst of empirical experience. Here we can see how modern psychological interests have suggested the relevance of a context largely located in time in the years after Locke's death. The community of historians, however, will want to look more carefully at the context in which Locke himself characterised his own work, the debates to which he contributed and the audience which he had (or hoped to have). Such an approach will conclude that Locke thought of his work as a contribution to logic (not psychology), that is, as an argument about how we can arrive at truth –and indeed about the limitations to our ability to arrive at truth (Buickerood, 1985; Yolton, 1956). In turn, this concern with the sources of truth was part of a political, theological and moral response to violent disagreement in the social world around him. There is therefore a real question as to whether the appropriate context for understanding Locke's work is the modern psychological ideas for which he appears to be so influential a source or the debates about the sources of authority in his own time.

Why should the psychologist pay attention to the historian's notion of context? Firstly, obviously, if psychologists are going to make historical claims, as they constantly do, they should be disciplined in what they say. They expect this in their own areas of science. Secondly, psychologists might want to consider historical work as a kind of conversation (in more formal terms, dialogic discourse). On one side, there are the historians' frameworks of questions, and on the other, there is the historical evidence which, so to speak, talks back. In this conversation, views about the past change; but so, in some measure, do the historians' frameworks and judgements about the nature of the evidence. As in a conversation, the relationship with an interlocutor (or text, artefact or whatever) is a moral as well as cognitive matter. Conversation or dialogue

engages us in moral as well as cognitive relationships both with what is other than ourselves and with ourselves. We can describe this (using Heidegger's term) as an «encounter», which «is not just sensing something, or staring at it. It implies concern, and has the character of being affected in some way». (Heidegger, 1967, p. 176). Which «past» we chose to converse with, and the dignity which we afford it, affects the kind of relationship which we have with the world, including ourselves. To presuppose that «the past» is simply another version of ourselves is to refuse the possibility of an «encounter». Concern with context is the historian's version of the respectful attitude of mind which exists in good conversation.

It is relevant in this connection that historians are often interested in particular people, actions, beliefs and events. They are interested in «individuality», the origin of the First World War, for example, not of wars in general. Many historians share concerns with occupations, like that of the clinical physician, the psychotherapist and the biographer, where the whole point of learning is to understand the individual. For this purpose, knowledge claimed about a universal human nature, based for example on evolutionary psychology, is not likely to be of much help. Historians want to know what sort of nature fear had for particular men or women, not all people. So, often enough, do psychologists.

The social circumstances of the history of psychology and the history of medicine have many parallels. There are medical schools where students can take courses in the history of medicine, and sometimes, as in Russia, a history course is obligatory. Why ever should this be so, given the huge work load which medical students face? Indeed, many teachers of medicine and their students, as a matter of fact, think history a waste of time and resources; thus, in Germany, the history of medicine, once taught in every medical school, is under threat as a disciplinary area. In response, historians of medicine have put forward a number of arguments to defend the «humanistic» perspective which they aim to provide. The defenders of history in the curriculum put it forward as a counter-weight to ever-mounting scientific and technological specialisation, to the centrality of financial considerations in medical decisions and hence to the treatment of patients as objects rather than subjects. History, it is argued, gives medical students knowledge of the social, cultural and moral contexts in which they will work as doctors. The teaching of history is an attempt to retain the ties of the physician to a larger, perhaps we may say more humanistic, calling than that of technician of science, government administrator or operative for insurance company.

This paper has commented on why history should be thought relevant to this kind of humanistic ambition among psychologists.⁹ Nevertheless, important as they

9. The question, whether and how far this kind of education actually works or can be made to work, is not easy to decide, and I have not addressed it.

are, arguments about the significance of historical knowledge to the practice of modern psychology assign to history an essentially secondary and utilitarian role in the intellectual, social, moral and political imagination. I have therefore suggested that reference to «perspective», if we go behind clichés, takes us further. I have made the stronger claim, which is not humanistic but structural: history is implicated in all that we do when we make meaningful statements about the world and reflect on, and hence change, human life. The central purpose of «good talk» about history is knowledge of what is not ourselves (as individuals and as members of groups) and hence also knowledge of ourselves. This «good talk» is intrinsic to psychology's multifarious purposes.

Moreover, people, individually and collectively, cannot but share the way their society has come to think about being human, psychological ways obviously included. If people do not think about this consciously, they will take a whole variety of unexamined beliefs for granted. In making our knowledge and situation self-conscious in historical work, we converse with what we ourselves are and how we ourselves live. In this conversation, we change ourselves. Writing disciplined history about what people think it is to be human brings this conversation into the open.

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