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Introduction: where did psychology come from?

Psychology is the study of the mind. The word itself comes from the Greek root *psyche*, meaning 'the mind or soul', and the suffix –ology, from the Greek *logos*, meaning 'the study of'. The term 'psychology' was not coined until around the sixteenth century and only came into popular use in the eighteenth century. In fact, psychology was not practised as an explicitly identified discipline until the late nineteenth century. Its roots, however, can be traced back much further than this.

Folk psychology

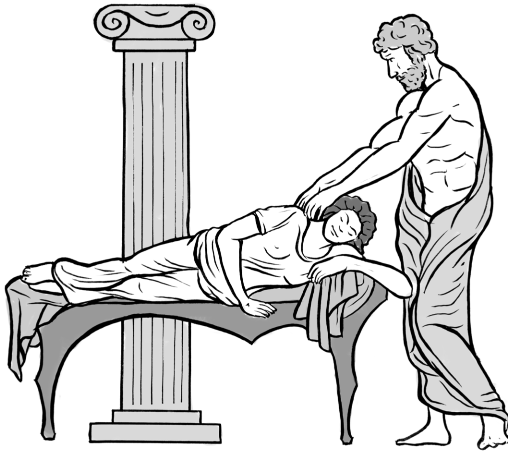
All humans are what might be termed folk or naïve psychologists, in that everyone considers, interprets and predicts their own and other people's thoughts and behaviour. The ability to surmise what might be going

through other people's minds and modify your own thinking and behaviour accordingly is sometimes called social intelligence. There is a school of thought that human intelligence in general arose from the evolution of social intelligence. The term 'theory of mind' has a specific meaning in relation to interpersonal psychology, describing the ability to think about what other people are thinking. This is seen as an essential tool for normal interpersonal relations, and an inability to formulate a theory of mind is linked to autistic spectrum disorders (*see* page 135). So our everyday 'psychologizing' could be said to lie at the root of what makes us – and has made us – human.

Body and brain

As a practice in the academic or professional sense, precursors of psychology can be identified in pre-modern and alternative models of the psyche and its relation to the world. In Ancient Greece, for instance, a form of dream therapy was practised 2,500 years before Jung (*see* page 50), in healing temples where sick people would pray and make offerings before 'incubating' dreams that delivered divine guidance and intercession as they slept (*see* page 16 for more on this).

Ancient Greek medicine reflected aspects of what today is known as a holistic approach, recognizing



the role of the psyche in determining bodily health. Medieval and Early Modern medicine developed from Classical antecedents and reflected this psychological element in theories such as the four 'humours' – blood, phlegm, black bile and yellow bile – that were said to govern mood and character. Mental illness was likewise primarily viewed as an expression of physiological imbalances.

Contrary to popular belief, demonic possession was *not* the most common cause to which insanity was attributed. Evidence from records of medieval 'inquisitions' (that is, inquests to determine sanity, aka 'idiocy') show that there was generally a clear view of madness as having physical, bodily causes, with

almost no appeal to supernatural agency. 'Madness was overwhelmingly perceived as a disorder of the body and brain,' points out medieval historian David Roffe ('Perceptions of insanity in medieval England', 1998). Where possible, specific causes were attributed – for example, in 1309 Bartholemew de Sakeville was said to have become an idiot after developing an acute fever, while in 1349 Robert de Irthlingborough was found to have lost his memory and gone insane after he had been struck on the head by a lance while jousting.

Although this model of the physiological basis of psychology still informed psychiatric thinking and practice into the eighteenth century, humoral theory had begun to fall out of favour from the Renaissance onward. Increased enthusiasm for anatomical dissection, starting with Andreas Vesalius in the sixteenth century, found illness increasingly localized in specific sites of the body, so that 'lesions' or disruptions of specific tissues replaced humoral imbalance as the cause of disease. At the same time there was an increasing emphasis on emotional states as a cause of mental illness in themselves: for example, grief as a cause of melancholy, or terror as a cause of hysteria. Yet even today, terms such as phlegmatic or sanguine are still used to characterize temperament and personality, demonstrating the long reach of the theory of the four humours.

Thus psychology was linked to physiology. In the

sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, works such as Montaigne's *Essays* (1580), Robert Burton's *The Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621) and Shakespeare's plays (1590–1613) saw an increasing emphasis on the inner life of the mind, but there was little separation between psychology and philosophy.

A scientific approach

Our modern conception of psychology arose from movements such as mesmerism and phrenology (*see* pages 20 and 23). Though now recognized as pseudosciences, these approaches did much to advance and legitimize medical and scientific study of the mind. The genesis of psychological science can be traced back to the laboratories of Wilhelm Wundt, who in 1879 opened the Institute for Experimental Psychology at the University of Leipzig in Germany. Wundt's background was in medicine, and he was determined to put psychology on a scientific footing, having learned what is now called psychophysics from his teacher Hermann von Helmholtz. Psychophysics is the study of the response of the nervous system to physical stimuli. Helmholtz investigated topics such as the levels at which luminosity of light or loudness of sound become perceptible, and the speed of transmission of electrical impulses in nerves.

Wundt tried to apply similar techniques of quantification and precise measurement to the inner realms of the mind through a technique known as introspection, which involved the experimenter reporting on his own perceptions and thoughts. Wundt's aim was to analyse perception, sensation and thought into their component parts or structures, giving rise to the school of psychology known as structuralism. Wundt tried to get around the inevitable subjectivity of introspection by training his students to be as precise as possible, but the inherent flaws in this technique eventually led to its devastating critique at the hands of the succeeding behaviourist school of psychology (*see* page 30).

James and functionalism

Around the same time as Wundt was working in Germany, the physician, philosopher and psychologist William James was also developing psychology in the United States. His approach stressed the functions (which is to say, purpose and utility) of behaviour and thoughts, and so his school came to be known as functionalism. Perhaps James's greatest contribution to psychology was his landmark 1890 textbook *The Principles of Psychology*, which set out themes of psychology that are still current today, such as brain

function, consciousness and the self, perception, instinct, memory and emotion. Later, James somewhat disavowed psychology and his famous book, preferring philosophy, but the definition that he set out in the *Principles* remains one of the best known:

> Psychology is the Science of Mental Life, both of its phenomena and of their conditions . . . The Phenomena are such things as we call feelings, desires, cognition, reasoning, decisions and the like.

Joel Levy