”What is psychology?” Georges Canguilhem

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On another young science of many pretenses and ambitions.

From psychology to computer science

"Sharp as a knife", we wrote, was the language of Baldwin. /

Behind the well-kept facade of a philosophy professor was a first-order intellectual, an uncompromising, and uncompromised, thinker.

In the hands of this proper academic, but only on the surface, words became the equivalent of explosives – of which, he told us, Cavailles was often packed full "without optimism".

Canguilhem, then a 40-year old professor at the Sorbonne, having just succeeded to Gaston Bachelard, published "What is psychology?", in a conventional scholarly journal of his day – we are not sure exactly how.

The ending of this now famous text, so shocking, that its bold words still resound with us today – 'The philosopher may here, exceptionally, give to the psychologist a vocational advice...' But, you read the rest.

Aaron Swartz had remarked that what followed from reading great books was a feeling of disorientation – the world not being as we thought – and loneliness.

But, with intellectuals like that we never feel alone. Canguilhem was one. We smile when we read them.

He used his intellect, and his abilities, that were considerable, to keep the powerful (and sometimes, and sometimes often, nefarious) sciences, and doctors and professors of these same sciences, on a tight leash.

Today, new technical gurus have emerged : they tell us that with artificial intelligence we'll soon all be free, rid of all of Mankind's misery. These new specialists have answers for all of humanity's old questions – they claim –. Love, labour, sex, all of it. That, or they will bring an end to it. Flip a coin, and you'll have as many answers as they do.

In today's "intellectual climate" (as the director of the New School had put to us), someone like Georges Canguilhem is sorely missed. Just as Baldwin is sorely missed.

Psychology : another young science of many pretenses and ambitions... – like a certain other one.

Not "What is computer science?", but "What is psychology?" was the question that preoccupied this philosopher-historian.

From Stanford plaza, or MIT square to the next nearest police station, one only needs to walk the street down. – He would have written today.

Medicine and psychology then, computer science and technology today.

'WHAT IS PSYCHOLOGY?'

Georges Canguilhem

The question "What is psychology?" is a matter of greater complication for the psychologist [*genante*] than "What is philosophy?" is for the philosopher. This is because the issue of its meaning and essence is the foundational, constitutive question of philosophy : more so than any particular answer to this question could define it. The fact that this question comes up again and again, for lack of good answer, should be reason for humility, not pretext for humiliation.

But, let's turn to psychology now :

however, for psychology, the question of its essence, or more modestly of its concept, threatens the very identity of the psychologist, in so far as being unable to provide a satisfying answer, they also cannot answer for their actions without facing great difficulties...

The only resort of the psychologist, thus, is to look for answers in some "efficiency", always debatable, as an attempt to justify their existence as a specialist; in the importance of the specialist some would like to see cause for an inferiority complex in the philosopher.

When we say that the efficiency of the psychologist is debatable we do not mean to say it is illusory; rather, we wished to convey that this efficiency is inadequately founded, and further, so long as no sufficient proof has been given that it is in fact the result of a science; this is to say that the status of psychology has not been established [*fixe*] in such a way that we must hold it at best for a form of composite empiricism, codified as literature for teaching purposes.

In fact, many psychology [studies] works strike us as the combination of a philosophy of little rigor with an ethic of little demands, a medicine out of control...

A philosophy without rigor, we wrote, because here eclecticism serves as a pretext for objectivity; an ethic devoid of requirements, because producer of experiments where confessor, educator, chief, judge, all at the same time, are confused, and more; and, finally, uncontrolled medicine because of the 3 most unintelligible types of diseases – skin diseases, diseases of the nerves, mental diseases – the last two have always provided it with new observations and hypotheses.

We are thus assured that asking "What is psychology", is, indeed, not done in vain, not futile.

For a long time, people thought to answer such questions, regarding the characteristic unity of a science, by taking a look at its object. The object of a given science would provide us with answers... The object would deliver the method to choose when inquiring about its properties.

(...)

Our perspective, this goes without saying, is not that of abilities or "the technical". The fact that there are good psychologists, and bad psychologists,

which is to say technicians who after their trade schools have gathered sufficient skills, or those whose nonsense practices continue to exist because the law is silent, – all this is not our terrain.

(...)

[ending]

In the writings of Kant and de Biran, psychology is part of anthropology – contrary to ambiguities, now fashionable, they meant philosophy. (...) If we are unable to define this psychology in relationship to some idea of Man [*l'homme*], which is to say within philosophy, it should be evident that we are then also powerless to prevent anyone from saying they are a psychologist and to call that what they are doing psychology. (...) Philosophy, with its constitutive naivete [evoked at the beginning], not to be confused with elitism but also not excluding some provisional cynicism, is thus returned to the people, this is to say the 'non-specialists'.

Vulgar, thus, you will permit the philosopher to be when asking psychology the question : tell me where you are going, so I'll know what you are. But, the philosopher is also allowed here, exceptionally, to give the psychologist a vocational advice : exiting the Sorbonne from Saint Jacques street, one may move up to the Pantheon, just as one may move down to the police station.

References

Canguilhem, Georges. 1958. 'Qu'est-ce que la psychologie?' *Revue de Meta-physique et de Morale* 1 : 12-25.