Ancient Psychology: Uncovering the Origins of the Mind

Authored by

mohammad looti

June 16, 2026

Many cultures throughout history have speculated on the nature of the mind, soul, spirit, etc. For instance, in Ancient Egypt, the Edwin Smith Papyrus contains an early description of the brain, and some speculations on its functions (though in a medical/surgical context). Though other medical documents of ancient times were full of incantations and applications meant to turn away disease-causing demons and other superstition, the Edwin Smith Papyrus gives remedies to almost 50 conditions and only 1 contains incantations to ward off evil. It has been praised as being similar to what is today considered common knowledge, but must be recognized as having originated in a very different context.

Ancient Greek philosophers, from Thales (fl. 550 bc) through even to the Roman period, developed an elaborate theory of what they termed the psuch? (from which the first half of "psychology" is derived), as well as other "psychological" terms - nous, thumos, logistikon, etc. (see e.g., Everson, 1991; Green & Groff, 2003). The most influential of these are the accounts of Plato (especially in the Republic - see, e.g., Robinson, 1995), Pythagoras and of Aristotle (esp. Peri Psyches, better known under its Latin title, De Anima - see, e.g., Durrant, 1993; Nussbaum & Rorty, 1992). Hellenistic philosophers (viz., the Stoics and Epicurians) diverged from the Classical Greek tradition in several important ways, especially in their concern with questions of the physiological basis of the mind (see e.g., Annas, 1992). The Roman physician Galen addressed these issues most elaborately and influentially of all. The Greek tradition influenced some Christian and Islamic thought on the topic. In the Judeo-Christian tradition, the Manual of Discipline (from the Dead Sea Scrolls, ca. 21 BC-61 AD) notes the division of human nature into two temperaments.

In Asia, China had a long history of administering tests of ability as part of its education system. In the 6th century AD, Lin Xie carried out an early experiment, in which he asked people to draw a square with one hand and at the same time draw a circle with the other (ostensibly to test people's vulnerability to distraction). Some have claimed that this is the first psychology experiment, and, therefore, the beginnings of psychology as an experimental science. India, too, had an elaborate theory of "the self" in its Vedanta philosophical writings (see e.g., Paranjpe, 1998).

The first institutions recognizable as insane asylums were built in the medieval Islamic world in the 8th century: in Baghdad in 705, Fes in the early 8th century, Cairo in 800, and Damascus and Aleppo in 1270. Medieval Muslim physicians also developed practices to treat patients suffering from a variety of "diseases of the mind". Ahmed ibn Sahl al-Balkhi (850-934) was among the first, in this tradition, to discuss disorders related to both the body and the mind, arguing that "if the nafs gets sick, the body may also find no joy in life and may eventually develop a physical illness." Al-Balkhi recognized that the body and the soul can be healthy or sick, or "balanced or imbalanced." He wrote that imbalance of the body can result in fever, headaches and other bodily illnesses, while imbalance of the soul can result in anger, anxiety, sadness and other nafs-related symptoms. He recognized two types of what we now call depression: one caused by known reasons such as loss or failure, which can be treated psychologically; and the other caused by unknown reasons

possibly caused by physiological reasons, which can be treated through physical medicine.

In the 1010s, the Iraqi Arab scientist, Ibn al-Haytham (Alhazen) began to carry out experiments in areas related to body and the nafs. In his Book of Optics, for example, he examined visual perception and what we now call sensation, including variations in sensitivity, sensation of touch, perception of colors, perception of darkness, the psychological explanation of the moon illusion, and binocular vision. Al-Biruni also employed such experimental methods in examining reaction time. Avicenna, similarly, did early work in the treatment of nafs-related illnesses, and developed a system for associating changes in the pulse rate with inner feelings. Avicenna also described phenomena we now recognize as neuropsychiatric conditions, including hallucination, insomnia, mania, nightmare, melancholia, dementia, epilepsy, paralysis, stroke, vertigo and tremor.

Other medieval thinkers who discussed issues related to Psychology included:

Ibn Sirin, who wrote a book on dreams and dream interpretation;
Al-Kindi (Alkindus), who developed forms of music therapy
Ali ibn Sahl Rabban al-Tabari, who developed al-'ilaj al-nafs (sometimes translated as "psychotherapy"),
Al-Farabi (Alpharabius), who discussed subjects related to social psychology and consciousness studies;
Ali ibn Abbas al-Majusi (Haly Abbas), described neuroanatomy and neurophysiology;
Abu al-Qasim al-Zahrawi (Abulcasis), described neurosurgery;
Ab? Rayh?n al-B?r?n?, who described reaction time;
Ibn Tufail, who anticipated the tabula rasa argument and nature versus nurture debate.
Ibn Zuhr (Avenzoar) described disorders similar to meningitis, intracranial thrombophlebitis, and mediastinal germ cell tumors; Averroes attributed photoreceptor properties to the retina; and Maimonides described rabies and belladonna intoxication.
Witelo is considered a precursor of perception psychology. His Perspectiva contains much material in psychology, outlining views that are close to modern notions on the association of ideas and on the subconscious.

Beginnings of Western Psychology

Many of the Ancients' writings would have been lost had it not been for the efforts of the Christian, Jewish and Persian translators in the House of Wisdom, the House of Knowledge, and other such institutions, whose glosses and commentaries were later translated into Latin in the 12th century. However, it is not clear how these sources first came to be used during the Renaissance, and their influence on what would later emerge as the discipline of psychology is a topic of scholarly debate.

Etymology and Early Usage of Word 'Psychology'

The first use of the term "psychology" is often attributed to the German scholastic philosopher Rudolf Göckel (1547-1628, often known under the Latin form Rudolph Goclenius), who published the Psychologia hoc est de hominis perfectione, anima, ortu in Marburg in 1590. However, the term seems to have been used more than six decades earlier by the Croatian humanist Marko Maruli? (1450-1524) in the title of his Latin treatise, Psichiologia de ratione animae humanae. Although the treatise itself has not been preserved, its title appears in a list of Marulic's works compiled by his younger contemporary, Franjo Bozicevic-Natalis in his "Vita Marci Maruli Spalatensis" (Krsti?, 1964). This, of course, may well not have been the very first usage, but it is the earliest documented use at present.

The term did not come into popular usage until the German idealist philosopher, Christian Wolff (1679-1754) used it in his Psychologia empirica and Psychologia rationalis (1732-1734). This distinction between empirical and rational psychology was picked up in Denis Diderot's (1713-1780) Encyclopédie (1751-1784) and was popularized in France by Maine de Biran (1766-1824). In England, the term "psychology" overtook "mental philosophy" in the middle of the 19th century, especially in the work of William Hamilton (1788-1856) (see Danziger, 1997, chap. 3).

Enlightenment Psychological Thought

Early psychology was regarded as the study of the soul (in the Christian sense of the term). The modern philosophical form of psychology was heavily influenced by the works of René Descartes (1596-1650), and the debates that he generated, of which the most relevant were the objections to his Meditations on First Philosophy (1641), published with the text. Also important to the later development of psychology were his Passions of the Soul (1649) and Treatise on Man (completed in 1632 but, along with the rest of The World, withheld from publication after Descartes heard of the Catholic Church's condemnation of Galileo; it was eventually published posthumously, in 1664).

Although not educated as a physician, Descartes did extensive anatomical studies of bulls' hearts and was considered important enough that William Harvey responded to him. Descartes was one of the first to endorse Harvey's model of the circulation of the blood, but disagreed with his metaphysical framework to explain it. Descartes dissected animals and human cadavers and as a result was familiar with the research on the flow of blood leading to the conclusion that the body is a complex device that is capable of moving without the soul, thus contradicting the "Doctrine of the Soul". The emergence of psychology as a medical discipline was given a major boost by Thomas Willis, not only in his reference to psychology (the "Doctrine of the Soul") in terms of brain function, but through his detailed 1672 anatomical work, and his treatise "De Anima Brutorum" ("Two

Discourses on the Souls of Brutes"). However, Willis acknowledged the influence of Descartes's rival, Pierre Gassendi, as an inspiration for his work.

The philosophers of the British Empiricist and Associationist schools had a profound impact on the later course of experimental psychology. John Locke's An Essay Concerning Human Understanding (1689), George Berkeley's Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge (1710), and David Hume's A Treatise of Human Nature (1739-1740) were particularly influential, as were David Hartley's Observations on Man (1749) and John Stuart Mill's A System of Logic. (1843). Also notable was the work of some Continental Rationalist philosophers, especially Baruch Spinoza's (1632-1677) On the Improvement of the Understanding (1662) and Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz's (1646-1716) New Essays on Human Understanding (completed 1705, published 1765). Rauch, Frederick A. (1806-1841) Psychology, or a view of the human soul, including anthropology (1840). The Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard also influenced the humanistic, existential, and modern psychological schools with his works The Concept of Anxiety (1844) and The Sickness Unto Death (1849).