

Scientific Psychology: Tracing the Roots of the Human Mind

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Psychology is really a very new science, with most advances happening over the past 150 years or so. However, it can be traced back to ancient Greece, 400 - 500 years BC. The emphasis was a philosophical one, with great thinkers such as Socrates influencing Plato, who in turn influenced Aristotle. Plato argued that there was a clear distinction between body and soul, believed very strongly in the influence of individual difference on behavior, and played a key role in developing the notion of "mental health", believing that the mind needed stimulating by the arts to keep it alive. Aristotle firmly believed in the idea that the body strongly affected the mind - you might say he was an early bio psychologist.

Psychology as a science took a "back seat" until Descartes (1596 - 1650) wrote in the 16th century. He believed strongly in the concept of consciousness, maintaining that it was that that separated us from animals. He did, however, believe that our bodies could influence our consciousness and that the beginnings of these interactions were in the pineal gland - we know now that this is probably NOT the case! From this influential work came other important philosophies about psychology, including work by Spinoza (1632 - 1677) and Leibnitz (1646 - 1716). But there still was no single, scientific, unified psychology as a separate discipline (you could certainly argue that there still isn't!).

When asked the question Who is the parent of psychology?, many people answer "Freud". Whether this is the case or not is open to debate, but if we were to ask who the parent of experimental psychology is, few would be likely to respond in the same way. So where did modern experimental psychology come from and why?

Psychology took so long to emerge as a scientific discipline because it needed time to consolidate (i.e. merge). Understanding behavior, thoughts and feelings is not easy, which may explain why it was largely ignored between ancient Greek times and the 16th century. But tired of years of speculation, theory and argument, and bearing in mind Aristotle's plea for scientific investigation to support theory, psychology as a scientific discipline began to emerge in the late 1800's. Wilhelm Wundt developed the first psychology lab in 1879. Introspection was used, but systematically (i.e. methodologically). It was really a place from which to start thinking about how to employ scientific methods to investigate Behavior.

The classic movement in psychology to adopt these strategies were the behaviorists, who were renowned for their reliance on controlled laboratory experiment and rejection of any unseen or subconscious forces as causes of behavior. And later, the Cognitive psychologists adopted this rigorous (i.e. careful), scientific, lab based approach too.