From Soul to Mind: A History of an Idea

IN 1998 YALE UNIVERSITY PRESS published the late Edward Reed's book From Soul to Mind: The Emergence of Psychology, from Erasmus Darwin to William James [1]. Reed, a prolific philosopher of science and advocate of ecological psychology, quite naturally approached the question of the history of psychology from the point of view of environmental affordance. The question that drives From Soul to Mind was stimulated by a curious student who wondered why psychologists today did not attend to the legacy of creative writers. In Reed's hands it is disarmingly simple: "What historical transformations encouraged people to define themselves as psychologists rather than writers or vice versa?" (p. ix). His research into the causes of separation between science and literature in the early part of the 19th century leads him to suggest that the answer is to be found not only in events and institutions but also in the way that we approach the history of science today. The isolation of the history of science from the history of other ways of knowing the world—such as art and literature—will, he claims, always lead us to an unsatisfactory account of the modern that is "inextricably bound up with advances in science and culture" (p. x).

Reed's historiographic intervention rests on a discussion of the internalist and externalist approaches to history. The former (and most common) returns from the present to the past, gathering ancient signposts on the way that provide convincing explanations of how we got to where we are without too many false starts and wrong turnings; the latter is often an uncomfortable, messy and less sure-footed affair. This is because, inevitably, externalist histories are necessarily written as conflicts and collaborations with other histories. What this means for the story of science is that we need to incorporate other histories in order to account for the wrong explanations of experimental observations as fully as those that we currently understand to be correct. This externalist approach allows Reed to offer an evidence-based account of the origins of psychology that not only embraces academic, philosophical and theological disputes that precede the idea of a science of psychology but also reveals the importance of professional societies, censorship and the secret police in the weighting of consensus and resistance to important concepts concerning human experience.

From an externalist position Reed concludes that "it is a myth that the Romanticists rejected science; on the contrary, most of them nurtured hopes for science that those of us living in a world after Hiroshima can scarcely comprehend" (p. 219). During the industrial revolution, and afterwards, science was regarded as a gateway to knowing the innermost workings of the human such that "Wordsworth, Keats, and Shelley all embraced Erasmus Darwin's view that science was a boon to mankind, a means of furthering our spiritual longings." What they were horrified by, and were antagonistic towards, was not science but the economic and social conditions of industrialization. In this they were at one with scientists who, as Reed painstakenly shows, shared the Romanticists' foundational fascination with the idea of soul but were obliged by the institutions of the state to disavow it and replace it with a science of mind. This divided what had been understood as a unity "into three parts: the mind, the unconscious and the body" (p. 219). The problem of connecting these was circumvented by disconnecting the mind from the animal body and unconscious. This leads us to the science of mind as a multiplicity of disciplines deeply divided against itself that draw us away from "the reality of living, breathing, acting and experiencing" (p. 220).

A discussion of soul in the 21st century may seem out of place, at least outside of the seminary, and almost embarrassing in scientific company. But what Reed alerts us to is the importance of experience and the losses incurred in bracketing it for explanatory elegance. It is difficult to imagine an artist who would not agree with him. In the context of Leonardo Reed offers more than an externalist history of science; he proposes how we might begin to rethink the relationships between those disciplines and practices in the arts, sciences and humanities that speak for human experience.

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