

# Psychology and the Zeitgeist

by Andy Blunden 2010

---

Jerome Kagan, *The Three Cultures. Natural Sciences, Social Sciences, and the Humanities in the 21st Century. Revisiting C. P. Snow*, New York: Cambridge University Press 2009, 300 pp. ISBN 978-0-521-7320-7 (pbk).

---

Jerome Kagan was a pioneer of developmental psychology in the early 1960s. One of the benefits of longevity in science is that in witnessing the ebb and flow of the Zeitgeist, one learns to distance oneself from the latest trends and greet newly discovered certainties with measured scepticism.

Revisiting C.P. Snow's 1959 Lecture on "Two Cultures," Kagan adds a *third* culture. In addition to the Natural Sciences and the Humanities he adds Social Science, and divides the new Social Sciences in two: those dealing with individuals and groups and those dealing with large ensembles like economics and political science, making a total four cultures, in fact.

What Kagan does with this material is to conduct a critical dialogue between the different branches of the academy, particularly with reference to their view of the human condition.

Most telling is his rejoinder to the claims of neuroscience to describe the phenomena of psychology. He demonstrates convincingly that neuroscience has in fact very little to say about the subjective experiences and capacities of its subjects beyond empty generalizations. One of many examples he cites is neuroscientists who were unable to detect any significant differences in the brain development of children from various social groups, completing elementary school, whilst the whole world knows that cognitive development is correlated with social factors. One effect of the spurious claims of neuroscience is to divert much-needed funds and kudos from those who do know how to measure cognitive development and do know factors which affect it. Host institutions favor prestigious disciplines which use expensive equipment.

But then, moving to the claims of extreme constructivism in psychology, Kagan brings forward irrefutable evidence from biology and neuroscience which obliges psychologists to accept that what we and our parents are born with does play a role in personality development alongside experience.

One serious charge Kagan brings against the social sciences is the tendency to move from one problem to another, carried along by the Zeitgeist, without ever producing a resolution. They should listen, he says to what the humanists have to tell them about the complexity and context-dependency of the problems social scientists concern themselves with.

Kagan's critique of theoretical economics is devastating: theoretical models that have little or no connection with reality, abandoned without regret when they fail, to be replaced by a new model. But Kagan's advocacy of approaches like "green" economics exaggerates the extent to which the model creates the reality it models. You can include happiness in the GDP if you like, but that does not change the behavior of economic agents.

Kagan rightly laments the culture of chasing publications and grants rather than addressing real social problems, and the fragmentation of science into silos which not only fail to communicate with one another, but are frequently fail to respect the standpoint of other parts of the academy. The imperative to produce quantitative data with objective procedures, testing approved hypotheses, even when the resultant data may be in fact quite meaningless and the hypotheses tested uncontroversial, produces a regular flow of publications, but little new and useful knowledge.

Kagan raises a host of such criticisms, sometimes half a dozen in a single page, and this is the real value of his book. Everyone who finds themselves trapped in a narrow specialism within a

discipline with its own blind spots and received wisdom, needs the caution of criticisms from the informed generalist. Especially, the young specialist needs to know the limits of their discipline. On the one hand, specialists need to collaborate with others across the full breadth of science if their work is to be meaningful and relevant, but they also need to be aware of the limitations of their own domain and the errors that come from drawing conclusions beyond the domain of validity of their research methods.

But it is quite unrealistic to suppose that anyone is going to be persuaded of a gross error built into the foundations of their discipline by the kind of one-liners, or at least one-paragraphers, that Kagan delivers; even when they come in volleys. Not only that, I suspect that Kagan's knowledge of areas of natural science remote from application in the human sciences is limited, and he should stay away from these areas. If you are going to have an impact on the hubris of natural science, then your criticisms not only need to be more developed and argued at length, but based on a sound understanding of the relevant science.

Also, Kagan is not always consistent. He rightly points to the fatuousness of research claiming to tell us something about psychology which relies on multiple-choices surveys of large cohorts of people self-reporting their own subjective experiences. But then at another point, he will rely upon such data to make a point against humanists or natural scientists.

Kagan gives vent to a lot of criticism of postmodern relativism, of careerism and competitiveness in academia, of the rapidity of social change and loss of interest in history, the distortions research profiles introduced by inappropriate considerations of equity and fairness, the modern tendency of explanations for personal failures to function as justifications of anti-social behavior, and other grumbles which many of his readers may sympathize with, but they somewhat detract from the value of the sharper criticisms of the failures of science which follow from the narrow horizons within which most science is conducted.

There is hardly a cross-disciplinary criticism anywhere in the academy that Kagan does not give voice to. Even if you don't agree with all of Kagan's criticisms (and you won't) it is a beneficial exercise to consider them.

---

Mitchell Ash & Thomas Sturm eds., *Psychology's Territories. Historical and Contemporary Perspectives from Different Disciplines*, Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates 2007, 356 pp. ISBN 0-8058-6136X (hbk).

---

Whereas Kagan's review was restricted to the academy, "Territories" posits everyday knowledge and practice a player in the formation of psychological science, both in setting tasks for academic psychology and appropriating its products. Ulrich Beck's notion of reflexive modernity is taken up in its implications for psychology, and in particular how "self-help" practices engage in a continuous dialogue with science. Kenneth Gergen's Foucauldian diagnosis of the psychologization of everyday life, from the translation everyday mentalist communications into the language of deficit and disease, to the cultural dissemination of psychological ideas, to the social construction of innumerable and ever more refined syndromes, is further proof of the embeddedness of psychology in social life. His description of the colonization of social life by a discourse which supports vested interests is eminently plausible, but like other such deconstructions, we are left wanting some alternative construction.

"Territories" brings together a number of informed and committed expositions of opposing positions on the trajectory and scope of psychology, and in this way offers the reader an opportunity to explore these disputes in depth. One such dispute is the problem of free will and the reality of consciousness. Jochen Brandtstädter argues on a purely logical basis that while a human being can form an intention, they cannot form an intention intentionally. By a line of logical argument with no point of contact with the objective world (towards which human intentions are directed and from which they arise), Brandtstädter proves that free will is logically

impossible, unless, he adds as an afterthought quoting Putnam, “meanings just ain’t in the *head*.” Of course, a bottle of thought forms cannot form intentions on their own; meanings are formed by material interactions, specifically, as shown by Gigerenzer and Sturm, the use of artifacts, in and through material conditions, both those inherited from previous generations and those created by people themselves. Intentions arise as a result of intentional interactions with the objective world.

Continuing the deniers’ case, Wolfgang Prinz likens free will to a unicorn, that is, something that does not exist despite a longstanding myth to the contrary. The impossibility of free will is proved on the usual basis that the human organism is a natural entity obedient to the laws of physics, chemistry and biology. Prinz sees persons executing search procedures and algorithms, constructing models, processing input data, producing preference sets for decision procedures, in other words, as a computer. How else can human behavior be explained? It is amusing that Prinz does not see that just like the hydraulic, mechanical, chemical, telephonic and statistical models of earlier philosophers, his own information processor model is a cultural-historical product not a product of Reason. Nonetheless, his argument that the intuition of free will is a cultural product is well made.

Since belief in free will and an autonomous self serve important social functions, Prinz argues along teleological lines that such beliefs evolved culturally in order to serve social functions. This line of argument was first proposed by Fichte over 200 years ago, but in our time it is not sufficient to argue on simply logical grounds for the plausibility of the cultural origins of self-consciousness and then sketch out homespun teleological schemas for the course of this evolution, as if the social and historical sciences had nothing to say. It seems that Prinz believes it is acceptable to suggest the origins of the illusion of the self with a few speculative gestures because it is after all an illusion. Contrary to his unicorn metaphor: “Like every other social institution,” Prinz says in conclusion, quoting Kusch, “autonomous selves are not fictions, they are real -- *real as artifacts*.” The efficacy of notions of free will and self to explain, predict and control human behavior is undeniable. Prinz is right in that consciousness is not a material entity, but an *appearance*, a phantom, yes, but a phantom which arises from the intersection of two completely objective, material processes: human physiology and human behavior, material processes which are comprehensible only by understanding the illusion which mediates them. When my dog looks behind the mirror to find the other dog, I can scientifically explain his behavior only in terms of an illusion, an illusion arising from known processes; but *I* am not suffering from an illusion in making use of the dog’s illusion to explain his behavior.

The error is to suppose that the derivative nature of free will, its status as a subjective phenomenon derivative of objective processes without itself being an objective process licenses unscientific, even amateurish treatment of these processes which are productive of the human individual. Science demands that both processes and their interaction be treated scientifically, using appropriate methods of investigation in each case.

Michael Heidelberger attempts to refute those who argue that human behavior is a natural process and that therefore free will must be an illusion by arguing that scientific activity is itself predicated on the presumption of freedom, and therefore that his opponents are engaging in a performative contradiction. But his exposition of the notion of free will is one that his protagonists would never be persuaded by. He also conflates freedom in the social and societal senses with physiological free will, whereas the aim of persuasion is better served with a narrower focus. Philosophers of mind who deny freedom of will are actually quite comfortable with the idea that they themselves are subject to the illusion.

Many would agree with everything Heidelberger says in testimony of the existence of free will, the need for it as an element of social life, and his frustration with natural scientists who pronounce on the topic in terms of ‘folk philosophy’ and ‘folk social theory’, but Heidelberger never tackles the question of the preconditions, origins and sources of free will in a natural being.

But there *is* a categorical difference between thought and matter, and this has to be a starting point for science.

Another theme dealt with is the problem of the self. Thomas Sturm responds to Gergen's Foucauldian perspective with an overview of philosophical approaches to the problem of the self, beginning with views equivalent to a homunculus, eliminative views, and those that reduce the self to a set of processes. He advises that a theory of the self must be subject to successive refinement in the light of the variety of phenomena and references to self, an iterative interaction between philosophy and psychology.

A fine series of treatments of the role of tools in the formation of psychology as a science begins with a history of psychological instruments by Horst Grundlach, showing how much the formation and recognition of psychology as a discipline owes to psychological instruments, as objectifications of psychological practices. Giergerenzer and Sturm take this idea further. With an historical investigation, firstly of the use of statistics, and then of computers, as tools in psychology, the authors show how familiarity with a tool in the psychologists' work leads to the adoption of the tool as a metaphor for the human mind. One of the benefits which flows from this observation is to open up lines of critique of current theories by looking at the limitations of the tool and at the differing strengths and weaknesses as compared to real minds.

The part played by brain-imaging tools is then placed in historical context. Roth, Münte and Heinze report on early progress in mapping correlations between activity in different areas of the brain with affective-emotional states. Rainer Bösel reports on early progress with imaging cognitive processes, and despite challenging shortfalls in spatial and temporal localization, hopes that 'in the end, it should be possible to describe human behavior and consciousness based on the functioning of 20 billion cortical neurons'. But with no little irony, Michael Hagner responds with a history of devices claiming to image thoughts from the 19th century to the present. These products of science fiction symbolize visions of the omnipotence of modern science. But a thought is not a brain fibre, and Hagner complains that for some brain researchers "the neuronal chatter is real, and the thoughts are in the realm of fantasy." (p. 301) Thought reflects an outside world, but neurons communicate only with one another, not with the outside world, and no representation of the outside world can be found within them.

The approach of both books to disputes in contemporary psychology has merit, and any psychologist would be well-advised to read both books.

Andy Blunden  
Melbourne, Australia.

## **Links**

[Andy Blunden's Home Page](#)  
[Reviews](#)