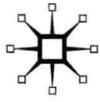
PSYCHOLOGIZATION AND THE SUBJECT OF LATE MODERNITY

Jan De Vos

Psychologization and the Subject of Late Modernity

Jan De Vos
Department of Philosophy and Moral Science, Ghent University, Belgium

palgrave
macmillan



First published 2013 by
PALGRAVE MACMILLAN

Palgrave Macmillan in the UK is an imprint of Macmillan Publishers Limited, registered in England, company number 785998, of Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire RG21 6XS.

Palgrave Macmillan in the US is a division of St Martin's Press LLC, 175 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10010.

Palgrave Macmillan is the global academic imprint of the above companies and has companies and representatives throughout the world.

Palgrave® and Macmillan® are registered trademarks in the United States, the United Kingdom, Europe and other countries.

ISBN 978–0–230–30846–6

This book is printed on paper suitable for recycling and made from fully managed and sustained forest sources. Logging, pulping and manufacturing processes are expected to conform to the environmental regulations of the country of origin.

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

A catalog record for this book is available from the Library of Congress.

Foreword

The object of psychology is a curious thing. We might even say that it is an impossible thing. In conventional sciences, subject and object are neatly separated, allowing the subject (the scientist) to assume an (always impossible) objective and convenient distance from the thing that he or she studies. In psychology no such distance is even remotely plausible. The impossibility of conventional science is redoubled in an *a priori* absurdity. The subject of psychology is of the same nature as its object and, as an epistemological consequence, there is no possible starting point for psychology. But, of course, psychology exists. It carries on anyway, groundless though it may be. This will to persist, however, does nothing to effectively cover the absurdity that stands at the core of the idea of psychology. Similarly, though, the logical fact of the absurd core of the idea of psychology does nothing to diminish the real effects that this idea continues to have. Arguably the principal effect of psychology is the manner in which it shapes how we come to conceive of what it means to be a person.

Our contemporary notion of what it means to be a person – what a self is, what an individual is and who or what counts as a social actor – has become so naturalized that it is quite literally unthinkable to seriously entertain an alternative. For us, in the early 21st century, a person is an essentially discrete entity; primarily rational but increasingly understood as genetically conditioned while, perhaps paradoxically, remaining unique. We are something between a soul (psyche) and a scientifically observable body. There is an old conundrum here which does not appear to have been terribly successfully resolved. Within this conception, which psychology works to promulgate, however confused it might appear, there is a core idea of the indivisible individual as self-governing. But again, paradoxically, we are only capable of self-governance so long as we have the support of psychology to help us understand. Psychology not only teaches us the blueprint of what we are – albeit borrowing rather wholesale from Rene Descartes – it also, *a fortiori*, adopts the role of teaching us what we ought to be and, crucially, how to achieve this.

Here the work of psychology – always, as its scientific aspirations dictate, necessarily presenting itself as neutral – can be seen in fact to be

moral and political and, thus, necessarily partial. On a rather blunt level, discrete entities are much easier to govern compared to collectives or social masses. Moreover, discrete entities who are perpetually concerned with their own "well-being" are less likely to be actively involved in social issues. And, of course, the discrete self-concerned entity who is never quite yet right is the very model of the late capitalist consumer. Psychology not only provides us with a conception of what we are but also offers us an image of what we could be and a toolbox for achieving this image. The problem here is that the conception itself is fatally flawed, the image to which we are encouraged to aspire is impossible, and the toolbox is only ever good for perpetuating the game.

The process I am describing here is what Jan de Vos rather neatly calls *psychologization*. Through this term, de Vos helps us to appreciate the fact of the constructed nature of the object of psychology and, through his deliberations on the functioning of psychology, he helps us to understand the implications of psychology today. But, of course, thinking psychology differently is no easy matter. The process of psychologization runs deep and there is no easy alternative. Philosophy, religion and, more recently, psychoanalysis have offered rich alternative approaches to thinking the self and the relation between the self, the social and the world or cosmos but, arguably, the process of psychologization has operated so forcefully that it is extremely difficult to pursue and maintain any such alternative perspective without slipping back into a psychologized view. Reading history backwards we can already discern something of a psychologized idea of individual identity in Saint Augustine's *Confessions*, arguably the first autobiography. Even Hume, the great sceptic who refuted the notion of a core self, fashions, in his autobiography, an image of a self which is every bit as discrete and autonomous as the psychological self his philosophical work would seek to depose. And despite the radical incommensurability between Freudian ideas and psychology, much of how Freud is understood now is very much a Freud filtered through and by a process of psychologization. Consider the notion of the unconscious which we habitually refer to as *my unconscious* or *your unconscious*. The common understanding of the subject of psychoanalysis is just as much a discrete interiority as the subject of psychology, and the goals of psychoanalysis are often assumed to be much the same too.

We might ask, how is it possible not to operate, not to think from within a psychologized position? How could one write an autobiography from anything other than an individual position? Indeed, how is it possible to write at all without doing so through a particular voice,

presenting a particular position which, in the end, is a reflection of a particular person? Similarly, is not psychoanalysis concerned in the first instance with the troubles and experience of one lone individual lying on a couch and their lone voice unfolding their own perspective? When we write, when we speak, we do so from a particular and exclusive position? Is not such a position simply what psychology points to? Arguably, no. Arguably, we are, of course, inclined to see things this way precisely because we have been so psychologized. This is very much de Vos's argument. But this is no naïve approach. Throughout this book, there is a perpetual awareness of the risk or even inevitability of slipping back into the trap of psychologization. Turn to the cover. You are told there that the author of this book is Jan de Vos. Turning the pages, you follow his argument, in the process internalizing his voice, trying to understand his point. However well the argument against psychologization is laid out, on the level of form, does psychologization not recuperate it all in the last instance? Here is a discrete, autonomous entity externalizing his interior reasoning. Is this not how we necessarily come to understand a monograph?

Perhaps something of an analogy can be found in a corner of psychoanalysis. In 1967 Jacques Lacan laid out and introduced his conception of what he called *la passe*. The pass principally concerns the end of training analysis and the shift from the position of analysand to analyst. In a common understanding, we might consider the analysand as the one being analysed and the analyst as the one doing the analysing. Things, however, are already more complicated than this. While it is perhaps convenient to think of the psychoanalyst as the active one, the one doing the analysis, analysis can only really function if the analysand is, themselves, actively engaged in analysing. In fact, if we think about it, it is hard to conceive of how the analysand wouldn't be engaged in analysis, even when, or especially when, they are not aware of it. So works the unconscious. The idea, then, of shifting from one position to another is already unstraightforward but, from an institutional perspective, it seems somehow necessary. In order to have analysts who are not simply operating under their own assumption, it would seem crucial that we have some mechanism to facilitate and monitor their occupation of that role. The solution that Lacan offered, the pass, is simple enough. The applicant, known here as the *passand*, relates his or her experience of analysis to a panel known as the *passers*. The *passers*, however, are not charged with making any overt or final judgement. Their function rather is to listen, to understand, to grasp and to pass on what they have inferred. They pass this on to a jury, who then decides.

Simple as it may seem in an operational sense, the thought behind this procedure is rich and complex. Key to the procedure is, obviously, language. The experience of psychoanalysis is already one which takes place in and through language. The *passand* then has to formulate this experience in language to a minimum of two others who need, then, to ingest this language and will then engage in interpretation and translation of the terms. They then need to express their version to a jury, again, obviously, in language.

The common, psychologized 20th or 21st century understanding of this procedure would focus on the experience of the individual supposedly at the heart of the process – the applicant or *passand*. An individual, with their career ambitions, their personal desire to become an analyst, attempts to give the best account they can of their experience of analysis, of what they have been through, of what has happened to them. Considerable pressure is on this individual to be as clear as possible, to convey themselves as accurately as possible, to use language selectively and carefully so as not to misrepresent themselves. Having given as good an account of themselves as they can, they, effectively, step out. It is now up to the *passers* to transmit their understanding of what the *passand* has said. We could understand this process as entailing one individual conveying something to other individuals who, in turn, convey something to further individuals. Such an understanding remains comfortably within a psychologized perspective, or perhaps not so comfortably. We might expect that the individual here is going to get a little bit distorted. With the best will in the world and the greatest clarity in the world, it seems unlikely that nothing is going to get lost in translation. In fact, the more we think about it, the more impossible it is to really maintain any clear idea of the individual in this process. What Lacan's operation consists in is a refusal of the very idea of the individual as a discrete, autonomous entity in the first place. The process of the pass works to disturb a prevalent tendency to fall back into the trap of psychologization.

Although by no means an apologist for psychoanalysis, it is perhaps fitting that between writing the book and publishing it, Jan de Vos sought a mediator, someone through whom to *pass* the text. True to the spirit of the Lacanian *pass*, de Vos does not seek to hold onto an idea of a pre-linguistic individual who would carefully select the right words to carry a preformed idea. The arguments presented in the book are made in language and, as such, transcend any notion of an individual origin. In handing me the manuscript and asking me to work on the expression, de Vos, like the *passand*, necessarily gives himself up, in

both senses of that phrase. On a base level, he hands himself over to be (mis)interpreted and (mis)represented. On another level, he relinquishes the very idea of an authorial self, which is his target in this book.

But we should be wary of recoiling too quickly to any opposite pole. As already noted at the outset and as de Vos makes amply clear throughout the book, there is no quick and easy solution to the problems of *psychologization*. A psychologized identity is not something we can wilfully dissolve. In this sense, it is important to be clear that there is only one author of this book, even if the illusion of a cohesive figure behind the book is a little problematized now. But, as I step away from the work I have done on the book, I have the impression that, just as the book might be a little bit less Jan de Vos, I am perhaps a little bit more Jan de Vos. And perhaps as you read the book, similarly, the idea of maintaining a fixed identity, which was always an illusion, will become a little bit harder.

Calum Neill
Edinburgh, July 2013

Acknowledgements

This book is dedicated to my parents, as their being puzzled by my initial choice to study psychology perhaps eventually prompted me to question the *psy*-turn more in general.

Further special thanks for suggestions, remarks and support go to Erica Burman, Tom Claes, Ronald Commers, Marc De Kesel, Stefan Hertmans, Ian Parker and Gertrudis Van de Vijver. I especially want to express my gratitude to Calum Neill, not only for his scrupulous language editing of the whole book but also for his more than generous foreword.

Some parts of this book are based on previously published journal articles. Chapter 1 is partly based on "From La Mettrie's Voluptuous Man Machine to the Perverse Core of Psychology", *Theory & Psychology, 21*(1), 2011, pp. 67–85, Sage. All rights reserved. © Jan De Vos. Chapter 2 is partly based on "The Deadlock of Husserl's Life-World: From a Critique of Psychologism to Psychologization", *Theory & Psychology, 22*(3), 2012, pp. 324–341, Sage. All rights reserved. © Jan De Vos. Chapter 3 is partly based on "Christopher Lasch's the Culture of Narcissism: The Failure of a Critique of Psychological Politics", *Theory & Psychology, 20*(4), 2010, pp. 528–548, Sage. All rights reserved. © Jan De Vos. Chapter 5 is partly based on "Psychologization or the Discontents of Psychoanalysis", *Psychoanalysis, Culture & Society, 16*(4), 2011, pp. 354–372.

Contents

Introduction: Psychology and Its Doubles

I want to become human

"I want to become human", said Hans Van Themsche when he heard the jury sentencing him to life imprisonment. The 18-year-old Hans Van Themsche bought a hunting rifle, dressed up in the style of The Matrix and walked through the centre of Antwerp intending to kill "some coloured trash". He shot three people – only one of whom survived – before being shot in the stomach by a policeman. "I want to become human, I need professional help", he uttered when he heard his verdict. Should we tell him that, after all, we the professionals do not know precisely what is human ourselves? Consider, for example, the fierce battle during his trial between the psychiatric court experts, who diagnosed him as autistic and declared him to be of unsound mind, and the psy-professionals, in the media, who claimed to speak for everyone who was shocked and offended by the alleged relationship between autism and inhuman atrocities. This battle of the experts was already the second one in this trial. The first was the debate over whether racism was a motive for Hans Van Themsche's deeds – he had sympathies for the Flemish xenophobic party *Vlaams Belang* – or whether his behaviour was purely psychopathological. Academia disagreed. Was this a case of racism or autism? Sociology or (neuro)psychology? But is it not clear that both stances undermine any concept of responsibility, let alone subjectivity? This case seems to lay bare the fact that we no longer understand what responsibility is and, more generally, what the human is, in spite of all the available sociological or neuropsychological explanations. Or as José Saramago already predicted in an epigraph of one of his novels: "we will know less and less what is a human being" (Saramago, 2008).

Mainstream science, however, usually has no difficulty in bypassing this deadlock in understanding. A renowned Flemish professor, for example, in a book for parents, unhesitatingly links sociology to neurology. Commenting on the Van Themsche trial, he contends that it is normal for adolescents to engage in black-and-white thinking, considering "how the brains of a teenager function". A music-choice, becoming a vegetarian fanatic, racist talk... all this is connected with the fact that "teenage brains [are] not yet fully developed" (Adriaenssens, 2007). Equally clear and simple is how he assesses contemporary educational difficulties:

> There is a lot of knowledge in the world, but with the public this often is limited to the basic ABC. And then those parents coming to the one-hour consultation have to grasp everything we've learned in a long academic training.
>
> (Adriaenssens, 2006)

So, what is a human? What is a teenager? What is education? The answer a certain branch of academia provides to deal with the problems these questions pose should not be misunderstood: it is Knowledge. So if Hans Van Themsche wants to become human, he needs to be brought beyond the ABC of his knowledge: he needs to be instructed in psychology and sociology and the like. With his "I want professional help", Van Themsche showed that the extreme-right discourse failed in providing him with an answer to his quest for Being. The question however is whether he is right to place his ontological hope on professional and academic help. Remember Jacques Lacan's statement that the discourse of science leaves no place whatsoever for man (Lacan, 1991, p. 171). Or, as science objectifies, it inevitably curtails subjectivity. The paradox is that if we are to provide Hans Van Themsche with the academic knowledge of the humanities and social sciences, maybe the more disconcerting assertions of psychoanalysis should figure in our lessons too.

Psychologization and the gap between being and knowledge

Van Themsche brings us into the heart of psychologization, defined as the fact of the knowledge of psychology having become central in mediating the presence of the human being with himself, the others and the world. There are two ways to approach the phenomenon of

psychologization. On the one hand, there seems to be a massive need for a psychological/psychologizing understanding of ourselves, the others and the world. If something is not working in the education of our children, in our marriage, in our work situation, or, more broadly, in society as such, we turn to the psy-sciences and their knowledge. The verdicts of attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), bonding disorder, burn-out or the psychological dynamics of the financial crisis give us purchase on the situation. On the other hand, the underlying paradigm of a whole array of theoretical and practical approaches in contemporary psychology precisely relies on this feeding of psychology into the field of research or the field of action. One telling example here is the psychologization processes of children and youth: via all sorts of media and institutions, psychology is disseminated to parents, teachers, educators and, last but not least, to the children themselves. The psychologist-psychoanalyst Mary Lamia, for example, pleads for a "general psychological education" to extend "psychological knowledge and awareness" with pre-teen children (Lamia, 2006, p. 114). For Lamia (2006, p. 115), children have to be instructed

> to recognize and appreciate individual differences, be responsive to shared experiences among peers, become conscious of the complexity of human motivation, develop an awareness of appropriate responses to interpersonal situations, and identify the availability of choice in attitudes and behaviors.

In short, children are turned into little psychologists, little apprentices of psychology. As Lamia puts it herself, children should be able to "understand their behavior and emotions through the general perspective of a psychologist" (Lamia, 2006, p. 116). Or to paraphrase an old joke: if you ask a psychologist for advice, his answer will be: *what you need is some good psychological theory*. Hence the question becomes, are psychology and psychologization not just two sides of the same coin? Is not every theory or praxis of psychology based, in one way or another, on the psychologization of its fields? These questions will guide us through the rest of this book. However, if an affirmative answer is suggesting itself, then immediately some important issues arise, issues which necessitate some prior clarifications.

A first issue is whether my critique of psychologization in the end does not boil down to a meta-psychology, a kind of *psychology of psychologization*? One problem here is that any meta-psychological answer to why we psychologize will itself inevitably be caught in the

dynamics of psychologization. It would be just another *learning unit* in the course *How to Become Human*. Moreover, especially where my critique departs from psychoanalysis, there seems to be a substantial risk of relapsing into a psychologized psychoanalysis, entailing, again, a meta-psychologization. The history of psychoanalysis is scattered with such slippages. Just consider the attempts to establish a psychoanalytic experimental psychology or, more recently, the endeavour to fully bridge the gap between psychoanalysis and neurology. However, this book will show that to truly grasp what psychologization tells us about psychology and to avoid the deadlock of a meta-psychologization, one needs, a bit paradoxically, a theory of the psyche. For structural and historical reasons, psychoanalysis can prove to be useful here. For while, on the one hand, psychoanalysis is not a psychology – as it is principally a non-generalizable praxis involving only two people – on the other hand, it offers a true theory of the psyche (perhaps more than mainstream psychologies do). On that account, moreover, psychoanalysis can rightfully be called *the mother of all psychologization*, as its vast impact on culture and society instigated the generalization of a psy-outlook on oneself and the world. Precisely because psychoanalysis is on this cutting edge, she is an interesting way-in to answer the question of whether psychologization is only the unhappy, accidental overflow of psychology or whether it is actually inextricably bound up with it.

Here we must make a second clarification: this book is not, as such, a critique of psychology. I will not criticize this or that theory for mistaking human psychology *as it really is*. For the question whether a given psychological approach is wrong or not in the end does not really matter. Whether one looks, for example, at traumas in behaviouristic terms, in terms of narrative theory or in neuropsychological terms, at one point or another this theoretical knowledge is conveyed to the alleged traumatized person: *you have experienced a shocking event and these are your symptoms*. Hence, whether you, as a lay person, are instructed into the basics of learning theory, narrative theory or neuropsychology is secondary to the fact that you are called upon to look upon yourself from an external, scientific point of view. Thus the question becomes, what does it mean to become the psychologist of one's own life? What are the implications of the fact that the declaration, "I want to become human" immediately mobilizes a knowledge apparatus which assigns discursive positions according to an educational and academic matrix? What I will argue throughout this book is that what is at stake is the essential and irreducible mismatch between the body of knowledge of the psy-sciences and the quest for being. The problem with psychology

is, however, that she, for structural reasons, cannot but deny this gap. Moreover, and this is my central argument, it is precisely here that psychology is inextricably linked to psychologization: psychologization is psychology's very paradigm through which to connect ontology to knowledge. Again, the issue is not to construct a meta-theory – taking the quest for being as a point of departure for a psychology without psychologization – but, rather, to fully value the fundamental disparity between *being* and *knowledge*. Or in other words: if you want to know something about mankind, don't study the human, don't study psychology, study psychologization, and, above all, study how psychology and psychologization are so inseparable that they have to be understood as each other's doubles.

But, and here we are at the third clarification, even if my critique concerns not psychology directly but rather the fact that psychology itself does not take psychologization seriously, are we not flogging a dead horse? For is not the psychological paradigm of today, the idea of considering the psychic as the cause, not already over and done with? Today the mainstream psychologist would be outraged if you were to, for example, suggest that ADHD could have psychological or psychic determinations. In these times of the genome, brain chemistry and neuro-synapsis, psychology seems to be stone dead. It is just that the psychologists themselves have not noticed. Meanwhile, in the last few decades the psychologists and their psy-discourse have penetrated, in an unprecedented way, education, schooling, work, leisure time, consuming, politics, popular culture. But, paradoxically, everywhere the psychologist repeats the same message: *it is not about psychology, it is about neurology*. As this double-speak demands an extended analysis, the next section will engage more closely with the neurological turn and ask whether, instead of an obituary for psychology, we should not engage in a search for what it is that allows psychology to survive its own death?

From an obituary of psychology...

Given the neurological turn, is a book on psychology and psychologization not destined to be a historical study glancing back at the psychological 20th century? We have now entered, allegedly, a post-psychological era. Psychology as a human science and an independent discipline is over and done with. The argument might be that the brain sciences have finally overcome the inherent paradoxes of the reflexive psychological gaze which was always caught up in its own loops and reflections. Psychology sought an objective account of subjectivity,

leaning on hermeneutics, debatable conceptualizations or a lofty use of statistics and standard deviations. Now it cannot but recognize in the booming neuro-chemical sciences its one and only master. In this serf-role, psychology is narrowed down to a natural scientific discipline based on neurology, bio-chemics and an evolutionary understanding of history. And, when it comes to practice, only evidence-based methods are acceptable, with their fixed protocols and constant process monitoring to assure the natural scientific pedigree. So it is time for a valedictory for psychology as a human science, time for us to look back and wonder why we needed that much psychology in the last century. Or isn't it?

Does not the very formulation of this question – *who are we that we needed so much psychology?* – already entail a reintroduction of the same old psychological gaze? As argued earlier, the assertion *this is why we psychologize* will inevitably be drawn into some kind of psychologizing hermeneutics or conceptualization. But perhaps the true question is whether today's de-psychologized neuropsychology itself can really rise above the paradoxes of reflexivity. Can it grasp in a natural-scientific way the human subject which, looking at itself, consequently takes yet another step back to look at the one looking at itself? This should remind us of Edmund Husserl's argument that it is absurd and circular to explain the historical event of *natural science* in a natural-scientific way. One cannot explain natural science through the medium of its own natural laws (Husserl, 1970, p. 273). But what seemed evident for Husserl is, for many contemporary approaches within the psy-sciences, not an issue at all. One can, for example, easily imagine an evolutionary explanation of evolutionary psychology (a discipline leaving little or no space for the psyche as such), or even an evolutionary explanation of the fact that an evolutionary explanation of evolutionary psychology has been made. However, the fact that this would continue *ad infinitum* might itself be the real stumbling block with these kinds of explanations, as they prove incapable of assessing or arresting this infinite movement. This is precisely where, I suggest, some kind of psychology will necessarily re-enter the picture and where a natural-scientific neuropsychology will end up again in a psychologizing stance.

Just think how, as many critics argue, pre-investigatory assumptions inevitably shape the outcomes of neurological research. Here, we might already be back with psychology. For is it not psychology which provides neuroscience with the necessary basis for its thought? Psychology caters for the first term in the co-relational equation: for example, altruism, love, violence and so on, for which the material source is then sought. To standardize triggers for fMRI-research (functional Magnetic

Resonance Imaging) on, for example, aggression, a psychological theory of the phenomenon of aggression seems indispensable. Moreover, and here it gets truly problematic, tracing the references to these psychological theories on which neurological research relies, one finds that these themselves rest their findings and theories in neurological research.[1] This is the always immanent threat of looping and tautology: psychology informs neurology while at the same time seeking to ground itself in the neurological paradigm. The neurological turn, while aspiring to offer an alternative for psychology, invariably conceals a latent psychology. Far from signalling the end of psychology, the neurological turn is always in need of some hermeneutics to ground its research but also to make its findings operative, that is, to assign some meaning to the microscopic neuro-synaptical exchanges. Perhaps this just means that psychology has migrated – as a truly hysterical symptom[2] – from the individual to its genes and the material substrate as such. The new unconscious playing tricks on us comes in terms of the genome; as in the already worn-out joke of a man in a bar whose staring at a beautiful woman evokes his companion's comment: *Do you think it's love? Deep down you're just blinded by a couple of... hormones.*

It is thus not that easy to get rid of psychology. On the one hand it is clear that the neurological turn has in a few decades managed to seize psychology departments in a firm grip, as can be seen by skimming the titles of masters and doctoral theses. On the other hand, psychology departments are blooming and booming as never before. In my home town, for example, the psychology department has become the second biggest department of the university. In broader society too, the neurological turn has not led to a decline in the discipline of psychology. On the contrary, as never before, the psy-discourses are expanding into all kinds of societal spheres, while the action-radius of the psy-profession is reaching further and further. As the *psy*-expert has traded her *it's psychology!* to intone, with equal fervour, *it's neurology, stupid!*, she is still convinced that the word must be spread. Faced with these renewed processes of psychologization – albeit that they come in neurological clothes – we have to conclude that we are far from psychology's obituary. It is more a case of *psychology is dead, long live psychology!*

... to the double birth of psychology and psychologization

The fact that neurology does not relate to psychology as chemistry to alchemy prompts us to question how psychology has been able to