

# P.L.A.C.E

## Preface to Georges Canguilhem's *What is Psychology?*

by R. Groome

The name George Canguilhem is contemporaneous with the introduction of psychoanalysis, phenomenology, and Marxism in France. His *What is Psychology?* first appeared in the *Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale* in 1958 in an era of postwar France in which psychology was largely contested in its project and scientific pretensions. It remains with Georges Politzer's *Critique of the Foundations of Psychology* (1928) and Sartre's *Sketch of a Theory of Emotions* (1938) part of the French tradition seeking to establish a concrete definition of Man on the basis of phenomenological, existentialist, psychoanalytic, and Marxist perspectives. During this time, Daniel Lagache responded with a theoretical counterattack - *The Unity of Psychology* (1948) - aiming to reorganize psychology in the hopes of establishing a unified program in the French university. For according to Lagache, it was necessary to conjoin experimental psychology and clinical psychology, respectively its naturalist and humanist traditions, under One unified psychology.<sup>1</sup>

This short study aims to show how Lagache's project to unify psychology, and thus to constitute the field for a scientific study of Man, was deconstructed in France in two different ways: in a *critical* undermining initiated by Canguilhem's *return to Descartes*, introduced in his 1958 article *What is psychology?* and a *clinical* undermining initiated by Lacan's *return to Freud*, introduced in his 1958 article *Remarks on the Relation of Daniel Lagache*. For just as Canguilhem would deconstruct Lagache's *global* project to unify the field of psychology, Lacan would deconstruct Lagache's *local* project for a unified theory of the personality.

No doubt, if these brief indications were merely of a nationalistic or historical concern, there would be little need today to write this introduction or an English translation of Canguilhem's *What is Psychology?* For if the desire for the unification of the psyche was put to rest in France with Canguilhem's and Lacan's critique, today its cadavre has returned with even more pressing projects and missions.

### Canguilhem's Return to Descartes

Canguilhem deconstructs the desire for a unified psychology in 4 steps.

(I) *Division*: by showing how the response to the question *What is Psychology?* requires the elucidation of an internal *division* of Man by language (that is then dissimulated into differences between animal and human language, experimental and clinical research, etc.).

(II) *Subject*: taking up this division in the 17th century birth of the Cartesian cogito – *I think, therefore I am* – Canguilhem shows how a science proper cannot begin with Descartes' universal doubt, for this properly divisive and metaphysical doubt only becomes scientific the moment it is trivialized to a methodic doubt and the divided subject unified.

(III) *Object*: hence, not only is a theory of the Cartesian *subject* missing, but so is its *object*: that is to say, instead of interrogating its object in the *hallucination* and *fantasy* proper to the division of its subject (and universal doubt), it has become historically trivialized to theories of *illusion* and *error* proper to a unified subject (and methodic doubt) of psychology.

(IV) *Project*: in default of establishing the rigorous grounds of its subject and object in theory, psychology is left with the task of trying to unify its *project* as the mission of the researcher.

## **Textual Indications**

To support argument (I), Canguilhem shows how the *division* of Man is assimilated by the desire for a unified psychology to a disciplinary *double* – natural (experimental) and humanistic (clinical) psychology – thereby trivializing the problem language poses the moment the speaking subject is taken as an object of investigation.

*In spite of appearances, it is by its object rather than its method that psychology is called clinical, psychoanalytical, social, and ethnological. All these adjectives are indicative of a single and same object of study: Man, talkative or silent, sociable or unsociable. This much said, can one speak rigorously here of a general theory of conduct without resolving the question of knowing if there is a continuity or a rupture between human language and animal language, human society and animal society?*

(*Qu'est-ce Que La Psychologie*, G. Canguilhem, 1958, French republished in *Études D'Histoire et De Philosophie Des Sciences*, J.Vrin, 1968; p.367)

To support argument (II), Canguilhem has critiqued throughout his career as a historian not only the pretensions of a science of psychology, but those claiming to found science on psychology, that is, those attempting to found the objectivity of science on a rectification of psychological error and the formation of thematic categories of observation. Writing of Bachelard's enterprise of writing an epistemology of *L'Esprit Scientifique*, Canguilhem states:

*Bachelard continues to utilize the vocabulary of psychology and interpsychology to present an axiology of rationalism. The divided Subject whose structure he presents is only divided because it is the axiological Subject. "Every value divides the subject" if we admit the concepts of normative psychism and of normative psychology, is it any wonder that we find the results in a 'psychologism of the normative'?*

(*Dialectic and Philosophy of the Non with Gaston Bachelard*, G. Canguilhem, 1963, in *Études D'Histoire et De Philosophie Des Sciences*, J.Vrin, 1968; p.205)

By extrapolating on argument (III), Canguilhem shows how the divided Cartesian subject and its hyperbolic doubt, only becomes *a science of subjectivity* by a psychological assimilation to a physics of external sense (become a science of behaviour) and internal sense (become a science of intimate sense). Hence, Canguilhem claims these assimilations of the Cartesian subject are normative psychological misreadings resulting in a field of applications that are neither Cartesian nor anti-Cartesian; thus, out of step with the true foundations of modern science.

To support (IV) Canguilhem shows how the desire for the unification of the *doubles* of psychology cannot be achieved in a psychological *theory*. This does not mean to say, however, that the *project* – or *mission* – of the psychologist cannot be determined:

*In the immanence of scientific psychology the question remains who has, not the competence, but the mission to be a psychologist? Psychology always relies on a de-doubling, but it is no longer that of conscious, under the facts and norms that the idea of Man brings forth, but it is from a mass of "subjects" and a corporative elite of specialists investing themselves in their proper mission.*

(*Qu'est-ce Que La Psychologie?*, G. Canguilhem, in *Études D'Histoire et De Philosophie Des Sciences*, J.Vrin, 1968; p.380)

Although Canguilhem shows the *de-doubling* of psychology necessary to its unification can never be achieved in a scientific theory, it is precisely this impossibility that is determinative of both the history and heterogeneity of its field.

## **Return to Freud: Lacan's Critique of Lagache**

In laying bare the impossibility of Lagache's unification of psychology, Canguilhem's critique served to further show how the divided Cartesian subject had been trivialized and assimilated by the post-cartesians and modern psychologists. This much said, it was not until Lacan's celebrated *return to Freud* that Canguilhem's *return to Descartes* was given its theoretical development.

(to be continued)

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Working Translation of *What is Psychology?* [\(pdf download\)](#)

**NOTES:**

<sup>1</sup>Lagache held the chair of General Psychology at *Normale Supérieure* and was from 1953 one of the founders of the second Society of French Psychoanalysis.

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