

Psychologization and the Subject of Late Modernity

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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

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