

Psychology as Existential Science - A Page from the Unknown History of Psychology, Interwar Berlin, Persian Polymath

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In Dec 1927 came a publication in Berlin titled "Psychology, the Science of the Mind". This was not a pamphlet or a primer to popularize the discipline, but a serious work of scholarship firmly grounded in neuroscience to the extent it was known at the time, focused on individual psychology with an excursion to *völkerpsychologie* replete in references to Wundt, James, Brentano, Freud and many others.

The work however was not in German but Persian, and it was put out by a publishing house (Kaviani Press) in the leafy suburb of Charlottenburg which was a reincarnation of a print-shop that had been set up there during the Great War, financed by the German Foreign Ministry (Intelligence Bureau of the East) to engage in pro-German propaganda in Persia and neighboring countries.

But now the war was over and the print-shop had folded and in its place, had come a literary outfit dedicated to introducing to its home audience the latest in the West's scientific, technological and cultural achievements. However, as it had to survive as a viable business away from home, run by intellectuals of the diaspora, with no host government sponsorship, it engaged also in the opposite activity, introducing the East to the West, works of medieval scholars who had endeavored to preserve the knowledge of the ancients, mostly Greeks, but as well to make certain improvements upon it (mathematics, medicine, chemistry). In short, orientalism as seen by orientals cognizant of the enormous gap with the West.

However, not all that glitters is gold, or in Persian parlance in wooded grounds not all things round happen to be walnuts, and the author of this treatise was of the view that as awesome as the achievements of the West was, it was nevertheless beset by deep societal and civilizational crises, the Great War which had been largely an Anglo-German rivalry had dragged the rest of the world in it and brought about devastation of colossal proportions empowered by high science, debut and proliferation of chemical warfare a case in point.

And of high science he was well positioned to speak intelligently if not authoritatively. He was a student of fundamental science at the Univ. of Berlin, attending lectures and exercise sessions by Nernst, Planck, Einstein, Pringsheim, Freundlich and other luminaries, as he obtained his doctorate in organic chemistry with relevance to pharmacology, a field to which he was predisposed due to his medical training back in Persia.

Psychology, however, was for our protagonist the fundamental science vital to human existence, indeed to man's prospects of survivability, an existential science. And the reasoning he employed to arrive at this conclusion, which propelled him to compose a work on the topic, hence the oeuvre of 1927, ran somewhat as follows -- in the natural sciences the mind probes nature, in psychology the mind probes itself, hence it is vital to calibrating our understanding of nature and as well foundational to understanding human behavior. Given that understanding is vital to intelligent action, gauged by effectiveness, if there is one discipline in which clues may be found illuminating the causation for the outbreak of pathological conduct exhibited by mankind, a case of neurosis climaxing as psychosis manifesting in self-mutilation, it is to psychology that we must turn, not as the science of behavior, if it forgoes an exploration of the gyrations of the mind and its chemical, biological, sociological and historical determinants, but as the science of the mind which underpins behavior and governs it, at individual and collective scales.

This was the preamble to articulate why in his "Series in Exact Sciences" which began with treatises in Physics, Chemistry, and Biology, Psychology was the logical continuation, mirroring the path of complexification along which nature had traversed in evolving intelligent life from inanimate matter (Fischer's protein synthesis the latest in the unveiling of this mystery which he reported), lending to these disciplines a natural connectedness - physics as the bedrock of man's conception of nature, of the very small (atomic, subatomic) and the very large (cosmology), chemistry as the physics of the in-between scale (molecules), biology as the chemistry of organized complexes of large molecules, psychology as the chemistry and biology of the nervous system and dependent organs (endocrine system as we now appreciate), conditioned by physiological and evolutionary traits of the organism, memory playing a vital role in organisms endowed with a developed nervous system, i.e. intelligence.

Post-preamble came two domains of elaboration -- the law of mental gyration or cognition and the law of action. The law of action resorted to the principles of adaptation (without which there is only the certainty of extinction), population (guarantor of diversity within the species, driving adaptation and evolution), and contagion (spread of behaviors resonating within the species, amplified when endowed with the faculty of language, the accentuating polarity of vice and virtue in successive epochs of civilization).

The law of action thus positing that posterity is anything but preordained, teleology a figment of imagination, wishful thinking, determinism a fallacy, the future solely dependent and contingent on mentality of man, seesawing with emotive energies, manifested in sentiment, psychology and culture at global scale.

The law of cognition thus being primordial to probing the odds facing mankind, on the verge and edge of the precipice, in its serendipitous journey through history, a law which flows from the principles of survival (man's psychological makeup forged by the quest for survival), parallelism (reality of survival spanning millions of years attesting to the authenticity of man's image of the external world, including social milieu, a consequence of neural complexity wrought by evolutionary pressures), and maturation (the process by which the notion of humanity came into being during the age of conquest, world empires and world religions, unbounded by geography and history, from preceding epochs for which there was only delimited geography, tribal habitat and gathering grounds, and delimited history, tribal cosmogony and ancestor worship). The latter principle now facing a fork - preservation of prevailing notion of humanity, fraught with strife, vestige of age of conquest, leading to collective demise as has befallen untold other species before us, without nature balking an iota at its prospects, or metamorphosis of the notion of humanity as condemned to interdependency of a constructive sort, a global village, inklings of which keep sprouting across the globe.

Intelligent action flowing from a grasp of these two fundamental facets of human existence - cognition and action - requires one to examine the specificity of malaise and pathology at hand, wherever one happens to dwell, at the center or periphery of world civilization, identify effective antidotes, conceiving stratagems to blunt its spread by leveraging population groups which have the most vested interests to steer things towards socially constructive and rehabilitating agendas - the youth, the downtrodden, the enlightened, the Patrician struck with a sense of guilt (fair recompense for the odd Plebeian struck with avaricious greed) -- once they're extricated from the spell of complacency, or vitriolic and vindictive agendas.

For our protagonist, who personally witnessed the collapse of the Weimar Republic and the rise of the Third Reich (precipitated by the Great Depression), and the rapprochement of Pahlavi in Persia with Hitler's regime, intelligent action meant resorting to cultural activism in his home country, a campaign against escapist schools of thought, mystical and gnostic orders (not far from which was the opium den preying on the youth), and political activism pressing for deep social rehabilitation as domestic policy (in opposition to national chauvinism, elitist in character, dispensing with Persia as the country's designation, opting for Iran for it connoted the land of Aryans), and active pacifism as foreign policy while Europe was once again marching towards war and Asia was already engulfed in its bloodbath.

In the autocratic climate of the time, and despite the subtle character of his political activities, this led to his arrest, imprisonment and death in captivity at the age of thirty-seven. However, he did leave behind a rich intellectual legacy, including a fifth element in his "Series in Exact Sciences", beyond Psychology (which he had composed as a contemporary of Piaget and Vygotsky who unlike him did not succumb to obscurity), under the rubric "Logic and General Principles" dedicated to illuminating pathways to social progress and modernization, not by mimicking the West, at the throes of a pathological social algorithm (unrestrained reign of capital manufacturing misery, militarism, fascism and all the scourges of modern civilization), but leapfrogging this paradigm, mastering knowhow in fundamental science and technology while preserving time-honored principles of social equitableness and cohesion in the Sisyphean toil of our species to avert self-inflicted cataclysm, Solon the lawgiver one of its many illustrious sages of the bygone era [1].

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Bibliography

1. Taghi Erani, a Polymath in Interwar Berlin – Fundamental Science, Psychology, Orientalism, and Political Philosophy, by Younes Jalali. Chapter 7 narrates the prewar and interwar ambience in psychology. Chapter 8, dedicated to the protagonist's contribution to psychology (Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).

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