

Recensioni

Saulo de Freitas Araújo O projeto de uma psicologia científica em Wilhelm Wundt: Uma nova interpretação

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«Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it», says George Santayana's famous aphorism in his 1905 *Reason in Common Sense*. The fact that it has been a kind of intellectual cliché ever since does not mean that there is no truth in it. Neither does it prevent us from taking this statement as a synthetic expression of the thesis of the necessity of history. If we associate it with the archetype of "eternal youth", an especially appropriate justification for the necessity of history in the field of scientific psychology can be obtained. In effect, this discipline appears as a clear case of an epistemological "eternal youth", that is, when the state of conceptual and methodological uncertainty, which is common in the early stages of the development of a new science, becomes chronic. Youth is, after all, a state of possibilities open to the future; but this state must eventually find its closure and its stabilization, lest it turns into sheer immaturity.

The necessity of history is here more urgent than in the case of other sciences that have already overcome this juvenile condition, so that both the repetition of past mistakes and the continued reinvention of the wheel can be avoided.

The difficulties raised by this lack of epistemological definition in the field of psychology has all too often led to its doctrinal fragmentation in a plurality of rival research programs, which is still the case today. For this reason, the problem of *the unity of psychology* – its theoretical possibility and its practical viability – remains a current one. Hence the importance of historical studies focused on the great theoretical systems of the past that sought to found and characterize psychology as a unified science of the mind in the entire scope of the term. Among these systems, Wilhelm Wundt's monumental work certainly stands out. The importance of returning to Wundt's work, from a historiographical standpoint, is even more evident when one takes into account how he is almost unanimously acknowledged as one of the founding fa-

thers of scientific psychology and, at the same time, how his original work remains, for the most part, widely unknown. In other words, Wundt is a perfect instance of "the classic that no one reads" (another archetype or cliché, by the way).

There are many reasons for that, from the accidents of the institutional history of academic psychology after him to the inaccessibility of the sources and the very vastness of the material itself. This is why a work on the history of psychology which contributes to change this situation is, for this reason alone, extremely welcome. Even more if, in addition, it contributes to the rescue from oblivion of an early and systematic attempt to tackle the problem of the unity of psychology.

This is precisely the case of *O projeto de uma psicologia científica em Wilhelm Wundt: uma nova interpretação* [Wilhelm Wundt's Project for a Scientific Psychology: a New Interpretation], a book by the Brazilian scholar Saulo de Freitas Araújo, published in 2010 by the Federal University of Juiz de Fora's university press (Juiz de Fora, Brazil).

The first and most evident virtue of this book is that it addresses the whole array of Wundt's work in its original language and versions, taking into account the significant differences among the various editions of the main works. As well, it heavily relies on the examination of unpublished material, e.g. the documents and letters kept in the two greatest Wundt collections, in the archives of the universities of Heidelberg and Leipzig.

This is a methodological rigorousness that should be ordinary in every historiographical work, but that, in the case of Wundt, is often and conspicuously absent – indeed, this author's image has been mostly disseminated by distorted didactical entries in college textbooks or by interpretations based on specific editions of particular works pertaining to the relatively small portion of the material already translated into English or other languages more accessible than German. This characteristic alone of Araújo's research would be enough to singularize his work in the context of the Wundtian studies. In its turn, it allows the book to reach its objective of providing a new interpretation of Wundt's thought which is focused, among other things, on his specific view of the unity of psychology as a science.

The problem of unity is approached from two

different, albeit interdependent, perspectives. First, it is a matter of demonstrating the internal unity of Wundt's thought itself, since it would be difficult to argue that a consistent and integrated concept of psychology can be found there if the very reflection upholding this concept lacked theoretical coherence. Thus, before anything else, the book argues for this internal coherence, in opposition to negative judgments, such as William James', that saw nothing in Wundt's work but a more or less luxurious proliferation of manifold psychological ideas, lacking a conceptual backbone to provide them with consistency.

Once this task is accomplished, it is possible to formulate the question as to whether there is continuity or rupture in Wundt's thought, as to whether he proposed and developed one single theoretical system during his career or there were one or more decisive changes somewhere along its course. Araújo's conclusion avoids both extreme positions of absolute unity and total diversity. He seeks to show that there is a single fundamental rupture in the development of Wundt's thought, namely, the abandonment of the *logical theory of mind* formulated in the early stages of his work. In consequence, Wundt also renounced the hypothesis of the unconscious inferences, which was a central part of that theory. From then onwards, psychology is essentially conceived of as a science of consciousness, with all the consequences and difficulties which were to be worked through in the later stages of Wundt's work.

However, in addition to the precise identification of this turning point, Araújo's analysis also sets out to explain why it took place. He seeks to show how the intensive philosophical reflection on the foundations of psychology conducted by Wundt led him to criticize the identification between the logical and the ontological planes in the characterization of the nature of mental processes (this identification had been held by him up to this point and was an essential trait of his logical theory of mind).

A crucial moment in the argument which supports this interpretation is the analysis of Wundt's 1866 book, *The Physicalist Axioms and Their Relation to the Principle of Causality* – a work almost universally overlooked in the body of Wundt scholarship. This is one of the many moments in which the research's wide scope and the careful return to the primary sources clearly prove their value and even their necessity.

But even having been later abandoned, this ear-

ly theory was internally configured as a coherent theoretical whole, far from the eclectic fragmentation William James attributed to Wundt's work as a whole. Be that as it may, the task undertaken by Wundt from 1866 onward consisted of seeking to recover the unity lost with the abandonment of the logical theory of mind.

The second part of Araújo's work is dedicated to the analysis of this search. In this analysis, the problem of the internal unity of Wundt's system converges with the more general question of *the unity of psychology as such*. This question can be formulated as follows: how must psychology define itself as a science so that it can become a science of the conscious subject in all its multiple aspects? The key to a satisfactory answer lies, according to Araújo, in the specific meaning of Wundt's concept of *experience*. With regard to this notion, he established the crucial difference, from the epistemological point of view, between the sciences of the *mediate experience* on one hand – a class including physics and all the other sciences of nature – and, on the other hand, the science of the *immediate experience*, namely, psychology.

The unity this definition conferred to the psychological field, however, can only be sustained on the conceptual theoretical plane and, in a wider context, no longer exclusively concerning psychology, on a metaphysical plane. From a methodological point of view, psychology is unavoidably divided in many research programs according to the peculiarities of the various forms of manifestation of its object, in the same way as other sciences are methodologically different from each other, in order to account for the many forms of manifestation of a single fundamental reality.

Some of Wundt's seemingly disparate statements, which earned him so much criticism, could then be more appropriately understood and evaluated if situated in their specific context, be it the epistemology of psychology as an empirical science, the theory of knowledge or a metaphysical approach to the mind.

This does not mean, evidently, that the final state of Wundt's system is completely trouble-free. However, the impasses he confronted and did not seem able to satisfactorily overcome are fairly typical of psychology's later development and, by extension, of human sciences as a whole. Araújo emphasizes and gives a careful account of two of these impasses: (1) the difficulties raised by the very definition of psychology as a science of the immediate

experience; (2) the difficulties brought about by this definition for the conception of a psychology of social phenomena.

The first one concerns, in its own way, a recurring problem involved in any formulation of a science of subjectivity. The scientific discourse presupposes, by definition, some sort of objectification (categorization, conceptual generalization or even a stable descriptive delimitation of the object). How could there be, then, a science of the subject – that is, a science of that which is essentially intuitive, immediate, exclusively given from the first person perspective, and so on – without this objectification causing the very subject matter of this science to vanish?

The second impasse has a narrower scope, but even so concerns any attempt to formulate a social science focused on the concept of subject. In other words, if psychology is a science of the conscious subject and if a social psychology – a “psychology of the people” (*Völkerpsychologie*) in Wundt’s words – must somehow be possible, where is the subject of a collective experience or psychical process to be found? It seems that this subject can only be situated on a metaphysical plane (let us think of the Hegelian “Spirit”, for example), which would violate the principle established by Wundt of keeping the metaphysical and the empirical planes apart in the investigation of mental processes. This is the same philosophical problem that haunted the attempts of a whole generation of French sociologists (Durkheim, Mauss, Lévy-Bruhl, among others) at constituting a positive science of man, that is, a social anthropology defining its object in terms of “collective representations”.

The impossibility of empirically specifying and theoretically justifying the subject of these representations eventually led to the rejection of both the notion of representation and the category of subject by the structural anthropology which followed those earlier attempts. Not coincidentally, this anthropology also reintroduced the unconscious as a central concept for the epistemology of social sciences.

As mentioned above, the forgetting of history leads to repetition, either by insisting on the same mistakes or by redundantly rediscovering past successes. It is, at the same time, reassuring and disappointing to find the same issues approached over and over again in the history of a science, even if they appear widely repackaged or formulated with a different rationale. However, works as *Wundt’s*

Project for a Scientific Psychology are bound to convince us that the history of science is far from being just an exercise in empty dilettante scholarship, as some people tend to judge it. In its best moments, its relevance to the present becomes evident, especially in the case of sciences such as psychology which admittedly still fall short of their long-awaited adulthood.

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Philip G. Zimbardo

L'effetto Lucifero. Cattivi si diventa?

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Solitamente siamo portati a credere che una persona sia *buona* oppure *malvagia*. Essere buoni o malvagi dipende dalla volontà di ognuno, perché siamo noi a scegliere da che parte stare. Inoltre, è comune l’idea che un individuo mantenga lo *stato* prescelto per tutto il corso della sua vita: se nasce malvagio, lo sarà per sempre, a meno di un radicale intervento dall’esterno, che comunque richiede un lento processo di trasformazione interiore. Infine, quando qualcuno compie delle azioni moralmente riprovevoli, siamo certi che sia lui a essere responsabile di tali azioni e che siamo inclini ad accettare soltanto poche tipologie di giustificazione?

Le ricerche condotte da Philip G. Zimbardo sconvolgono – e per certi aspetti addirittura capovolgono – questa visione *statica* della natura umana, della quale il senso comune risulta portatore, proponendo per converso una concezione dinamica del comportamento umano e della morale. In *L'effetto Lucifero* Zimbardo si chiede se sia proprio vero che tutti i comportamenti moralmente riprovevoli sono dovuti alla natura malvagia di chi li compie, oppure se «*cattivi si diventa?*» Questo è il motivo conduttore dell’intera opera, probabilmente sintetizzato al meglio dal sottotitolo dell’edizione originale: *How Good People Turn Evil* [in che modo individui buoni diventano malvagi].

La posizione espressa da Zimbardo si basa sull’idea che l’interazione di *forze situazionali* (esterne) e di *forze disposizionali* (interne) possa spingere gli individui a compiere azioni malvage e impensabili. In altre parole: non si sceglie di *essere cattivi*, ma si *diventa* cattivi in certe situazioni, salvo poi tornare a essere quelli di prima una volta