

Psychology in the Middle Ages (Part I)

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Beyond Aristotle

From the perspective of modern psychology and psychiatry, it is too easy to look back into the past and assume that it is a modern science, albeit with roots in the Renaissance and the Enlightenment. Before this period of European history lay the Middle Ages, often called the Dark Ages, a period where common perception assumes that demonic possession, witchcraft, and superstition defined mental illness, and religion dominated study of the mind. However, the reality is much more subtle.



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The Roots of Psychology and Psychiatry



Modern psychology has developed rapidly, transforming from a discipline regarded as pseudo-scientific to a true science in just over a century. Any psychology student can quote Freud and Skinner, recognizing that psychology has gradually become quantitative rather than speculative.

Delving back further, many point to the Scientific Revolution and the 18th Century Enlightenment, as periods where the study of the mind truly began. Philosopher-psychologists such as Descartes (1596-1650) and Kant (1724-1804) studied the mind, the soul, and the nature of thought, as psychology began to diverge from theology, albeit still possessing a strong root in philosophy and metaphysics.

Travelling back even further through the ages, we can look to the Islamic scholars of the Islamic Golden Age ^[1] (c. 750-1250CE). Polymaths such as Avicenna (c. 980-1037CE) and Al-Hazen (965-1040CE) were amongst the first academics to study the mind and recognize psychiatry, proposing that mental illnesses were diseases rather than spirits or of divine/satanic provenance. We can also step away from the Euro-centric perspective and look at the influence of India, China, Persia, and other cultures where the study of the mind, and its relationship to the self, the universe, and perception were important.

Western Europe, the Dark Ages, and Byzantium



In Europe, there is a huge gap in the development of psychology and psychiatry between the Classical period, where scholars such as Aristotle [2] and Plato first began to study the nature of thought and mind, and the Renaissance. Commonly known as the Dark Ages, from the 6th to the 13th Centuries, this period began when the Roman Empire fell into a terminal decline, a period that we automatically associate with superstition and fear. It ended with the work of the great Renaissance men, whose studies into anatomy and willingness to challenge the church laid the groundwork for the Scientific Revolution and the Enlightenment itself, where the great empiricists would finally start to probe the mind.

However, was the human mind really neglected during the Middle Ages? Was this really an age of superstition, witch-hunts, and demonic possession? In reality, the name 'Dark Ages' is slightly misleading, even for the Early Middle Ages spanning the 5th to the 10th Centuries. Although war, famine, and disease restricted scientific endeavor in Europe, many philosophers and theologians contributed to the body of human knowledge.

Scholars such as St. Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, and Roger Bacon [3] made some astute observations about the inner workings of the human mind, providing a foundation for the Renaissance [4]. In the East, the Byzantine Empire preserved the knowledge of the Greeks, and philosophers such as the Jewish Symeon Seth (11th Century) and Niketas Stethatos (c. 1000-1090CE) studied the nature of dreams and emotions, as well as studying mental disorders and the brain.

Understanding the work of these scholars requires looking at the history of Europe after the Fall of Rome, in the 5th Century. At this time, Europe was shattered by political, socio-economic, and cultural instability, which brought hardship, famine, disease, and war. It also ushered in the domination of Christianity, so it is little surprise that the first scholars studying the mind were also theologians holding to Biblical values.

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[1] <https://explorable.com/islamic-psychology>

[2] <https://explorable.com/aristotles-psychology>

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[4] <https://explorable.com/renaissance-medicine>