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I want to become human

“I want to become human”, said Hans Van Themsche when he heard the jury sentencing him to life imprisonment. The 18-year-old Hans Van Themsche bought a hunting rifle, dressed up in the style of The Matrix and walked through the centre of Antwerp intending to kill “some coloured trash”. He shot three people – only one of whom survived – before being shot in the stomach by a policeman. “I want to become human, I need professional help”, he uttered when he heard his verdict. Should we tell him that, after all, we the professionals do not know precisely what is human ourselves? Consider, for example, the fierce battle during his trial between the psychiatric court experts, who diagnosed him as autistic and declared him to be of unsound mind, and the psychotherapists, in the media, who claimed to speak for everyone who was shocked and offended by the alleged relationship between autism and inhuman atrocities. This battle of the experts was already the second one in this trial. The first was the debate over whether racism was a motive for Hans Van Themsche’s deeds – he had sympathies for the Flemish xenophobic party Vlaams Belang – or whether his behaviour was purely psychopathological. Academia disagreed. Was this a case of racism or autism? Sociology or (neuro)psychology? But is it not clear that both stances undermine any concept of responsibility, let alone subjectivity? This case seems to lay bare the fact that we no longer understand what responsibility is and, more generally, what the human is, in spite of all the available sociological or neuropsychological explanations. Or as José Saramago already predicted in an epigraph of one of his novels: “we will know less and less what is a human being” (Saramago, 2008).
Psychologization and the Subject of Late Modernity

Mainstream science, however, usually has no difficulty in bypassing this deadlock in understanding. A renowned Flemish professor, for example, in a book for parents, unhesitatingly links sociology to neurology. Commenting on the Van Themsche trial, he contends that it is normal for adolescents to engage in black-and-white thinking, considering “how the brains of a teenager function”. A music-choice, becoming a vegetarian fanatic, racist talk... all this is connected with the fact that “teenage brains [are] not yet fully developed” (Adriaenssens, 2007). Equally clear and simple is how he assesses contemporary educational difficulties:

There is a lot of knowledge in the world, but with the public this often is limited to the basic ABC. And then those parents coming to the one-hour consultation have to grasp everything we’ve learned in a long academic training.

(Adriaenssens, 2006)

So, what is a human? What is a teenager? What is education? The answer a certain branch of academia provides to deal with the problems these questions pose should not be misunderstood: it is Knowledge. So if Hans Van Themsche wants to become human, he needs to be brought beyond the ABC of his knowledge: he needs to be instructed in psychology and sociology and the like. With his “I want professional help”, Van Themsche showed that the extreme-right discourse failed in providing him with an answer to his quest for Being. The question however is whether he is right to place his ontological hope on professional and academic help. Remember Jacques Lacan’s statement that the discourse of science leaves no place whatsoever for man (Lacan, 1991, p. 171). Or, as science objectifies, it inevitably curtails subjectivity. The paradox is that if we are to provide Hans Van Themsche with the academic knowledge of the humanities and social sciences, maybe the more disconcerting assertions of psychoanalysis should figure in our lessons too.

Psychologization and the gap between being and knowledge

Van Themsche brings us into the heart of psychologization, defined as the fact of the knowledge of psychology having become central in mediating the presence of the human being with himself, the others and the world. There are two ways to approach the phenomenon of
psychologization. On the one hand, there seems to be a massive need for a psychological/psychologizing understanding of ourselves, the others and the world. If something is not working in the education of our children, in our marriage, in our work situation, or, more broadly, in society as such, we turn to the psy-sciences and their knowledge. The verdicts of attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), bonding disorder, burn-out or the psychological dynamics of the financial crisis give us purchase on the situation. On the other hand, the underlying paradigm of a whole array of theoretical and practical approaches in contemporary psychology precisely relies on this feeding of psychology into the field of research or the field of action. One telling example here is the psychologization processes of children and youth: via all sorts of media and institutions, psychology is disseminated to parents, teachers, educators and, last but not least, to the children themselves. The psychologist-psychoanalyst Mary Lamia, for example, pleads for a “general psychological education” to extend “psychological knowledge and awareness” with pre-teen children (Lamia, 2006, p. 114). For Lamia (2006, p. 115), children have to be instructed to recognize and appreciate individual differences, be responsive to shared experiences among peers, become conscious of the complexity of human motivation, develop an awareness of appropriate responses to interpersonal situations, and identify the availability of choice in attitudes and behaviors.

In short, children are turned into little psychologists, little apprentices of psychology. As Lamia puts it herself, children should be able to “understand their behavior and emotions through the general perspective of a psychologist” (Lamia, 2006, p. 116). Or to paraphrase an old joke: if you ask a psychologist for advice, his answer will be: what you need is some good psychological theory. Hence the question becomes, are psychology and psychologization not just two sides of the same coin? Is not every theory or praxis of psychology based, in one way or another, on the psychologization of its fields? These questions will guide us through the rest of this book. However, if an affirmative answer is suggesting itself, then immediately some important issues arise, issues which necessitate some prior clarifications.

A first issue is whether my critique of psychologization in the end does not boil down to a meta-psychology, a kind of psychology of psychologization? One problem here is that any meta-psychological answer to why we psychologize will itself inevitably be caught in the
dynamics of psychologization. It would be just another *learning unit* in the course *How to Become Human*. Moreover, especially where my critique departs from psychoanalysis, there seems to be a substantial risk of relapsing into a psychologized psychoanalysis, entailing, again, a meta-psychologization. The history of psychoanalysis is scattered with such slippages. Just consider the attempts to establish a psychoanalytic experimental psychology or, more recently, the endeavour to fully bridge the gap between psychoanalysis and neurology. However, this book will show that to truly grasp what psychologization tells us about psychology and to avoid the deadlock of a meta-psychologization, one needs, a bit paradoxically, a theory of the psyche. For structural and historical reasons, psychoanalysis can prove to be useful here. For while, on the one hand, psychoanalysis is not a psychology – as it is principally a non-generalizable praxis involving only two people – on the other hand, it offers a true theory of the psyche (perhaps more than mainstream psychologies do). On that account, moreover, psychoanalysis can rightfully be called *the mother of all psychologization*, as its vast impact on culture and society instigated the generalization of a psy-outlook on oneself and the world. Precisely because psychoanalysis is on this cutting edge, she is an interesting way-in to answer the question of whether psychologization is only the unhappy, accidental overflow of psychology or whether it is actually inextricably bound up with it.

Here we must make a second clarification: this book is not, as such, a critique of psychology. I will not criticize this or that theory for mistaking human psychology *as it really is*. For the question whether a given psychological approach is wrong or not in the end does not really matter. Whether one looks, for example, at traumas in behaviouristic terms, in terms of narrative theory or in neuropsychological terms, at one point or another this theoretical knowledge is conveyed to the alleged traumatized person: *you have experienced a shocking event and these are your symptoms*. Hence, whether you, as a lay person, are instructed into the basics of learning theory, narrative theory or neuropsychology is secondary to the fact that you are called upon to look upon yourself from an external, scientific point of view. Thus the question becomes, what does it mean to become the psychologist of one’s own life? What are the implications of the fact that the declaration, “I want to become human” immediately mobilizes a knowledge apparatus which assigns discursive positions according to an educational and academic matrix? What I will argue throughout this book is that what is at stake is the essential and irreducible mismatch between the body of knowledge of the psy-sciences and the quest for being. The problem with psychology
is, however, that she, for structural reasons, cannot but deny this gap. Moreover, and this is my central argument, it is precisely here that psychology is inextricably linked to psychologization: psychologization is psychology's very paradigm through which to connect ontology to knowledge. Again, the issue is not to construct a meta-theory – taking the quest for being as a point of departure for a psychology without psychologization – but, rather, to fully value the fundamental disparity between being and knowledge. Or in other words: if you want to know something about mankind, don’t study the human, don’t study psychology, study psychologization, and, above all, study how psychology and psychologization are so inseparable that they have to be understood as each other's doubles.

But, and here we are at the third clarification, even if my critique concerns not psychology directly but rather the fact that psychology itself does not take psychologization seriously, are we not flogging a dead horse? For is not the psychological paradigm of today, the idea of considering the psychic as the cause, not already over and done with? Today the mainstream psychologist would be outraged if you were to, for example, suggest that ADHD could have psychological or psychic determinations. In these times of the genome, brain chemistry and neuro-synapsis, psychology seems to be stone dead. It is just that the psychologists themselves have not noticed. Meanwhile, in the last few decades the psychologists and their psy-discourse have penetrated, in an unprecedented way, education, schooling, work, leisure time, consuming, politics, popular culture. But, paradoxically, everywhere the psychologist repeats the same message: it is not about psychology, it is about neurology. As this double-speak demands an extended analysis, the next section will engage more closely with the neurological turn and ask whether, instead of an obituary for psychology, we should not engage in a search for what it is that allows psychology to survive its own death?

From an obituary of psychology . . .

Given the neurological turn, is a book on psychology and psychologization not destined to be a historical study glancing back at the psychological 20th century? We have now entered, allegedly, a post-psychological era. Psychology as a human science and an independent discipline is over and done with. The argument might be that the brain sciences have finally overcome the inherent paradoxes of the reflexive psychological gaze which was always caught up in its own loops and reflections. Psychology sought an objective account of subjectivity,
leaning on hermeneutics, debatable conceptualizations or a lofty use of statistics and standard deviations. Now it cannot but recognize in the booming neuro-chemical sciences its one and only master. In this serf-role, psychology is narrowed down to a natural scientific discipline based on neurology, bio-chemics and an evolutionary understanding of history. And, when it comes to practice, only evidence-based methods are acceptable, with their fixed protocols and constant process monitoring to assure the natural scientific pedigree. So it is time for a valedictory for psychology as a human science, time for us to look back and wonder why we needed that much psychology in the last century. Or isn’t it?

Does not the very formulation of this question – who are we that we needed so much psychology? – already entail a reintroduction of the same old psychological gaze? As argued earlier, the assertion this is why we psychologize will inevitably be drawn into some kind of psychologizing hermeneutics or conceptualization. But perhaps the true question is whether today’s de-psychologized neuropsychology itself can really rise above the paradoxes of reflexivity. Can it grasp in a natural-scientific way the human subject which, looking at itself, consequently takes yet another step back to look at the one looking at itself? This should remind us of Edmund Husserl’s argument that it is absurd and circular to explain the historical event of natural science in a natural-scientific way. One cannot explain natural science through the medium of its own natural laws (Husserl, 1970, p. 273). But what seemed evident for Husserl is, for many contemporary approaches within the psy-sciences, not an issue at all. One can, for example, easily imagine an evolutionary explanation of evolutionary psychology (a discipline leaving little or no space for the psyche as such), or even an evolutionary explanation of the fact that an evolutionary explanation of evolutionary psychology has been made. However, the fact that this would continue ad infinitum might itself be the real stumbling block with these kinds of explanations, as they prove incapable of assessing or arresting this infinite movement. This is precisely where, I suggest, some kind of psychology will necessarily re-enter the picture and where a natural-scientific neuropsychology will end up again in a psychologizing stance.

Just think how, as many critics argue, pre-investigatory assumptions inevitably shape the outcomes of neurological research. Here, we might already be back with psychology. For is it not psychology which provides neuroscience with the necessary basis for its thought? Psychology caters for the first term in the co-relational equation: for example, altruism, love, violence and so on, for which the material source is then sought. To standardize triggers for fMRI-research (functional Magnetic
Resonance Imaging) on, for example, aggression, a psychological theory of the phenomenon of aggression seems indispensable. Moreover, and here it gets truly problematic, tracing the references to these psychological theories on which neurological research relies, one finds that these themselves rest their findings and theories in neurological research.\(^1\) This is the always immanent threat of looping and tautology: psychology informs neurology while at the same time seeking to ground itself in the neurological paradigm. The neurological turn, while aspiring to offer an alternative for psychology, invariably conceals a latent psychology. Far from signalling the end of psychology, the neurological turn is always in need of some hermeneutics to ground its research but also to make its findings operative, that is, to assign some meaning to the microscopic neuro-synaptical exchanges. Perhaps this just means that psychology has migrated – as a truly hysterical symptom\(^2\) – from the individual to its genes and the material substrate as such. The new unconscious playing tricks on us comes in terms of the genome; as in the already worn-out joke of a man in a bar whose staring at a beautiful woman evokes his companion’s comment: *Do you think it’s love? Deep down you’re just blinded by a couple of…hormones.*

It is thus not that easy to get rid of psychology. On the one hand it is clear that the neurological turn has in a few decades managed to seize psychology departments in a firm grip, as can be seen by skimming the titles of masters and doctoral theses. On the other hand, psychology departments are blooming and booming as never before. In my home town, for example, the psychology department has become the second biggest department of the university. In broader society too, the neurological turn has not led to a decline in the discipline of psychology. On the contrary, as never before, the psy-discourses are expanding into all kinds of societal spheres, while the action-radius of the psy-profession is reaching further and further. As the psy-expert has traded her *it’s psychology!* to intone, with equal fervour, *it’s neurology, stupid!*, she is still convinced that the word must be spread. Faced with these renewed processes of psychologization – albeit that they come in neurological clothes – we have to conclude that we are far from psychology’s obituary. It is more a case of *psychology is dead, long live psychology!*

... to the double birth of psychology and psychologization

The fact that neurology does not relate to psychology as chemistry to alchemy prompts us to question how psychology has been able to
outlive its own end. Might it not be that from its very beginning psychology was dead: the psyche, so to say, has always been a stillborn child? To immediately introduce the key to understand this: the genealogy of psychology is one long history of redoubling itself in order to overcome its own structural impossibility. Today’s post-psychological neurologized psychology is but one of the many subsequent resurrections and shadow figures of psychology. Psychology’s very birth, one could argue, was already a double birth: psychology from its very beginning was accompanied by psychologization.

Let us begin from the following point: psychology, precisely because it is the discipline of reflexivity, cannot but be caught up in the production of a series of double figures. I look at myself always produces a next level of I see myself looking at myself. In pre-modernity the problem of this endlessly receding reflexivity was solved by the firm ground offered by the figure of God. Even Descartes still relies on God to arrest the infinite movement of I think therefore I am as it engenders the endless shifting enigma of the first I. This potentially endless spiral around the radical gap between thinking and being lies at the very core of the Cartesian dualism between body and soul. Here Descartes resorts to the figure of God to bridge the chasm. In putting forward the pineal gland as the place where the interaction between body and soul (between the material res extensa and the immaterial res cogito) is realized, Descartes had to presume the hand of God as securing this interaction. God was the ultimate security, providing a clear focus in the hall of mirrors in which modern subjectivity risked losing itself. However, with Descartes it was already evident that the Renaissance God had begun to retreat from the world and had begun to lose His mediating function between the human subject and itself, the other and the world. The fact that, in the advent of modernity, Descartes still attempted to place God formally in the position of the keystone of the new episteme above all betrays the fact that this new, modern way of being in the world – grounded in the scientific doubt – lacked a firm ontological anchor. This was precisely the conclusion of what Jonathan Israel calls the Radical Enlightenment. These radical Cartesians understood that the modern, rationalist, mechanistic program of science could no longer posit God as their guarantor. The modern subject was thus thrown back on itself to find its own ontological ground.

This, I claim, is where psychology emerged. Its cradle was the reflexive ontological abyss which became fully visible with the advent of modernity. However, as we will see throughout this book, psychology from its very beginning chose to or, better, could not but deny the chasm
of subjectivity. Psychology puts forward a subject fully equal to itself, or potentially so, a subject fully chartable by scientific methods, if not now, then in the near future. In the course of this book, we will again and again see that the ontological flaw of subjectivity can have no place in psychology. The abyss is filled or simply obscured. One might even say that this is precisely the function of psychology. It is important not to miss how the psy-disciplines realize this: namely by showing the human subject the image of the *homo psychologicus* it is said to be. Psychology in this way redoubles the human being. By saying, *look, this is the homo psychologicus you are,* psychology splits the subject into the one who gazes *and* the one who is gazed upon. In other words, the subject is hailed into a kind of proto-psychologistic position from where it, together with the experts, weighs up its psychological double. Psychology’s *this is what you are* creates a vantage point from where the human subject is called upon to look at itself. In the process, psychology structurally has to deny that this *psychological golem* only comes to being through the psychological gaze itself.

This is the core of psychologization as a central part of psychology itself. Not only does the professional psychologist get redoubled into the lay proto-psychologist but, moreover, the human being itself redoubles into its psychological other as the object of the psychologizing gaze. In the meantime, these duplications must be obscured. Psychology takes the psychological double for the real thing and denies it has created another subject, the watching one, the psychologized subject, the proto-psychologist.

**Psychology giving itself away**

The radical conclusion is that psychologization – the adoption of the particular signifiers and the particular discursive schemes of psychology to look upon itself and its world – cannot be seen apart from the discipline of psychology itself. Psychologization is psychology’s very paradigm. It is in this way that we can understand the words of George Miller when he pleaded in his presidential address to the American Psychological Association in 1969 to “give psychology away”, claiming this would advance “psychology as a means of promoting human welfare” (G. A. Miller, 1969). More recently another APA president, Ronald Levant, even proposed that psychology should become a “household” word (Levant, 2007). There is no mistake possible here: psychology proceeds via psychologization, by dispersing its discourse into everyday life.
To illustrate this on the level of psychological research, we can recourse to Stanley Milgram’s well-known experiment, which is described by Miller as exemplary and “ideal for public consumption of psychological research” (cited in: Blass, 2000, p. 208). Milgram set up a fake learning experiment which was said to test the effects of punishment on learning. The test subjects were asked to conduct a word-pair test via the intercom and to punish each wrong answer of the second person with an electric shock, increasing the shock by one level after each failure. The second person, of course, was an actor, receiving no shocks at all. Milgram observed that the majority of the test subjects went as far as administering the highest, lethal, shock level and believed he had laid bare the psychological mechanism of obedience, namely the principle of authority. However, many critics have pointed out that Milgram, rather than explaining, only illustrates the issue of obedience. But what these critiques miss is that the curious design of the experiment as such concerns the very dynamics of psychologization. The fact that the test subject is asked to take the role of the psychological researcher is a first redoubling, characteristic of psychologization. The second redoubling we find at the close of the experiment, where Milgram lifts the veils of the deception and provides an explanation of the psychology of obedience. Here he shows the test subject its psychological double. Milgram then invariably asks his test subjects, now that you know, how do you feel? Here the subject is again hailed to join the psychologists and describe its psychological double using the stock signifiers of psychology. Milgram’s experiment shows us how psychology passes through psychologization. He wanted to teach us something about the human and its psychology. Here we find already the basic scheme of psychologization. It prompts us to look upon ourselves, the others and the world through the gaze of the psy-discipline. The psy-discourse is only operative if it is given away and becomes a household term.

But are we not going too fast here? Considering the manifold critiques of the Milgram experiment, it can hardly be considered a sound piece of scientific research. Maybe psychologization is just a secondary effect, related to an outdated, freewheeling psychology which is far removed from today’s sophisticated psychological research, with its rigorous scrutiny by ethical and other committees. Moreover, has Miller and Levant’s stance – the idea that the dissemination of psychology knowledge essentially contributes to human welfare – not already been contested by psychologists themselves? Richard Katzev, for example, argues that the increasing public awareness of Milgram’s research and
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Note: The letter ‘n’ following locators refers to notes

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