The Philosophical Dimension of Psychology

A Beginner's Guide

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Cognitive Science and Psychology

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Dedicated to

Ronda Chervin

My First Philosophy Professor

Thank You

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Acknowledgments

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Foreword by James Beauregard

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In psychoanalytic theory, when early adolescents decathect—that is, break away from their childhood relationship with their parents—they don't quite take all of their self along. There's a gap, and that gap is filled in by one's peer group. Something not dissimilar happened to psychology in the late 1800s, when it consciously broke away from its historical relationship with natural philosophy to embrace the empirical methods of the hard sciences. This process has resulted in remarkable advancements in psychology across the twentieth and now the twenty-first century. But psychology also left something behind: the wider, and balancing, world view of philosophy. Unwittingly, it embraced not only a methodology—the scientific method—, but also a world view—empiricism. This choice has not been without consequences for all of the human sciences. One of the most troubling consequences of this separation has been reductionism—the reducing of persons to the physical and the biological, and the consequent attempt to understand persons from these perspectives alone. Furthermore, many have embraced not just the reliable tenets of the empirical method, but a set of beliefs about science collectively referred to as scientism–believing that the empirical method is the only valid way of generating new knowledge, and in more extreme cases, the only valid way of knowing anything at all. This view has effectively created a type of blindness in many modern academic disciplines, specifically a failure to attend to anything about persons that is not amenable to the measurements and observations of science. As a result, some of the most important aspects of being persons fall by the wayside—love, happiness, intuition, human freedom. Harold rightly notes that the content of standard introductory textbooks in psychology presents one way of looking at the field—the empirical one. The reality of these texts is that one of the most important aspects of psychology – psychotherapy –is typically relegated to the end of the book and given only superficial attention. And yet, the vast majority of people who come into contact with a psychologist over the course of their life will do so in the context of psychotherapy. The author's phenomenological approach allows him to

recognize the whole person, not only that which is amenable to objective measurement, and to help us see psychology as a complex whole. One of the chief strengths—and pleasures—of Harold's writing (to highlight one of many) is his striking ability to present philosophical concepts in a comprehensible fashion to the reader. In doing so, he has provided us with an antidote to this problem of reduction. With backgrounds in both psychology and philosophy, he is ideally positioned to recognize what psychology has lost—creating its contemporary blind spots—and to provide concrete ways of moving toward a fuller vision of persons.

This is a book that I look forward to assigning to my own psychology students to give them a vision of the discipline of psychology that is more holistic, and because of that, more adequate and more accurate about human beings. As his writing ranges across the whole field of psychology, he proves himself again and again to be a reliable guide.

Introduction

The purpose of this book is to provide the kind of text I wish would have been available to me many years ago as an undergraduate/graduate psychology student. During those times, I remember feeling a certain inadequacy and incompleteness with respect to the dominant direction of my psychology studies, such as is found in introductory psychology textbooks. I wondered if this was more a problem with me than with the content of these studies. Nobody else, whether professors or students, seemed much concerned. And besides, as a teenager, what did I know? Still, I never could quite convince myself that my feelings and concerns were baseless. I felt in some vague way that mainline psychology, despite its gold-plated scientific pedigree, seemed far too open to merely superficial cultural influences, while deeper truths about human nature were often ignored or explained away. This difficulty was not about questioning the veracity of specific scientific, psychological investigations as much as a nagging sense of incompleteness with respect to their vision concerning human nature. For example, mainline psychology seemed good at identifying irrationality but was practically silent on our rational, personal nature, while oddly presupposing such a nature as a condition for applying their scientific approach. Where were the chapters in introductory textbooks devoted to the rational powers of the intellect and will?

Still, I always thought if I could just find the right mentor, things would be far better. Of course, such mentors in psychology existed, then as well as now. Just because mainline psychology—the psychology one finds in basic textbooks—is one way does not mean all of psychology goes that way. Individual psychology mentors could easily make up for whatever deficiencies existed in mainline psychology. It was just at that particular time and place I did not find one in my psychological studies. So this feeling of the incompleteness of psychology was not corrected, at least by my teachers. It rather grew over the course of my psychology studies. It was ultimately what provoked me to abruptly change course and switch to philosophy.

I am not claiming that philosophy as a field of study is somehow in a better, saner position than psychology. Taken as a whole, it is at least as confused and confusing as psychology. It is just that in philosophy, I actually found not one or two, but rather a whole particular school of mentors. What they taught made perfect sense to me, so I had the possibility of making that vision my own. I grant that in philosophy (similar to mathematics), one needs to see with one's own eyes and not merely through the eyes of others. But practically everyone needs help from teachers, including me. I liked how my philosophy professors

respected what is true and yet were willing to learn from people of every intellectual camp, including their own intellectual opponents. I am deeply indebted to them.

What I ended up doing was switching gears and getting a doctorate in philosophy. However, during those studies—and afterwards too—I was surprised to find out just how my psychological education was not terminated, but rather continued and even flourished. It gave me the novel idea, at least to myself, that philosophy had much to offer psychology. This novelty of approach surprised me because I assumed the only methodology acceptable to psychology was just what I learned in my basic introductory psychology classes (and then presupposed in all my other classes): the empirical, scientific method. But if that were true, how come I kept meeting with interesting psychological insights from philosophers who did not use that method? Then I wondered why these insights were under-represented and even neglected by mainline psychology and what this philosophical/psychological approach is?[1] Also, why not integrate that method—whatever it is—into psychology as a whole, especially if these insights could help correct some of the deficiencies of the scientific, psychological method? Similarly, the empirical psychological method could help with what is lacking with the philosophical/psychological approach. My suspicion was that the criterion (or measure) for what was considered a suitable object for psychological investigation had to first pass an empirical litmus test, which then excluded the philosophical/psychological viewpoint.

What I want to do with this book is investigate what psychology looks like without that litmus test. In my view, there will also be an opening for a philosophical contribution to psychology. This dimension can add a three-dimensional fullness to psychology that is far more satisfying and interesting than merely empirical psychology alone.

Philosophy, however, is like psychology in being extremely varied. Not every philosophy is in a position to be of real service to psychology. There are, after all, just as many crazy philosophical systems as there are psychologies. In fact, many of the wild psychologies stem from philosophy. This is no doubt one reason why many reasonable psychologists are legitimately fearful of philosophy.

Let me state first in broad terms the kind of philosophy I have in mind, which, if true, can be of service to psychology. It is a philosophy of realism, that is, a philosophy which claims that the human person can really know some aspects of reality as it is in itself. This kind of philosophy refers to the classical, philosophical tradition going back to Plato, Aristotle, Augustine and Aquinas. These people especially gave me insight into what an ordered, psychological

life of a person theoretically looks like, which then allowed me to see more easily what is psychologically disordered.

Specifically, however, the philosophical approach I will be using will be the language and approach of a school known as phenomenological realism, growing out of the work of twentieth-century philosophers Edmund Husserl, Max Scheler, and Dietrich von Hildebrand. Although I will be largely using their terminology, it is important to note their connection to the great philosophical tradition of classical philosophy, that is, of philosophical realism. Many of their insights could just as easily have been transmitted using a stricter Aristotelian or Thomistic approach and categories.

I think this phenomenological approach, however, is especially suited to the project of this book. There are two advantages of phenomenology over these other classical philosophies worth mentioning.

First, phenomenological realism attempts to be especially close to a direct, intuitive, and concrete lived experience, with less reliance on learning a wholly abstract, deductive system that typically characterizes Aristotelian and Thomistic philosophizing. Psychologists in general prefer the concrete and the experiential to the abstract. However, just because the richness of the Thomistic system is largely foreign to a modern audience does not mean it is thereby false, but it does pose difficulties in applying it for my purposes.

Secondly, a realist, phenomenological approach will take into account not only objective truth—so thematic to classical philosophy—but also the subjective, conscious experience of the person encountering that truth. Realist phenomenology is interested in exploring this subjectivity, just as it is open to the possibility of the subject reaching objective reality (and responding adequately to it), as well as investigating the reasons why we sometimes fall short of being in a right relation to reality.

In one specific respect I hope to "turn the tables" on psychology, insofar as introductory psychology textbooks tend to be antiseptic (insofar as these texts require nothing from a person challenging the way they existentially live their life), third-person, and *objective*. Of course, persons are objective realities, and also beings who can be sensibly or empirically observed, so there is obviously much to be said for this approach.

There is, however, something else. There is also an existential, *subjective* dimension to our being as well. We are not just objects but also subjects, with our own interior, conscious life. That interiority refers to our own conscious, inner experience of freedom and our ability to know reality as it is in itself. Naturally, whether or not an object of study possesses an inner psychological life does not particularly impact biology, chemistry or physics. And outside of diagnosis and pain management, it hardly impacts medicine. But this inner life

does impact psychology. One argument of this book is that something central to psychology is lost if this realm is ignored, discounted or at times even denied.

Mainline psychology and introductory psychology texts investigate human beings almost exclusively in that objective sense: as *objects* of psychological investigation, similar to the mode of investigation of all the other natural sciences. It is perfectly legitimate and appropriate for these sciences, including psychology, to look at persons from that point of view, especially when one understands that the term *object* is rightly understood in this context to only refer to "a datum given," without any implication of depersonalization. It is not that this approach is illegitimate; it is just not the only point of view for psychological research. It is unnecessary to argue for either a purely objective or subjective approach. There will be positives and negatives with both kinds of approaches, with neither method simply being able to replace the other without loss.

There is, however, something ironic about psychology—of all disciplines—ignoring a direct investigation of inner conscious life, insofar as one would think that one primary object of psychological investigation would be conscious life. And by *psychology*, I am again thinking of it only in its mainline sense, as represented by the *American Psychological Association* website and introductory psychology textbooks. I am sure there are individual psychologists who will share many of my criticisms of mainline psychology and feel perfectly free to focus explicitly on inner, subjective life. Furthermore, there are individual psychologists and programs, such as that at Duquesne University, who will use a phenomenological approach.

Also, I think the psychological academic landscape in general is better today than 30 years ago. Martin Seligman's positive psychology has become a major player influencing all of psychology for the better, insofar as he weakened a deterministic orientation dominating large dimensions (specifically, behavioristic psychology and psychoanalytic thought) of this field. He has re-focused psychology away from an exclusive orientation towards efficient causality and towards an appreciation of the role that final causality[2] plays. To understand that things have purposes and ends presupposes the further idea that they have specific natures oriented to specific things that fulfill them. The idea that things have natures that should be respected leads back to philosophy, which is the discipline that studies the general natures (or essences) of things.

Despite the undeniable impact of positive psychology on contemporary psychology, it still remains but one voice among others. Its leaven has not yet sufficiently transformed the dough of what introductory psychology students learn in their classes. There remains a need for students to look at their field from both an empirical *and* philosophical perspective, which I hope will lead

to a richer, more existential (in the sense of being more relevant to their own life) and commonsensical understanding of psychology.

Although I will be critical of contemporary psychology, I do not intend to produce here any kind of "hit-piece" against psychology. I see the value and significance of psychology, including empirical psychology. In fact, I want to broaden out its reach by bringing in philosophical, literary and even theological perspectives that I think have been neglected by mainline psychology.

Although my main focus is on psychology, I will use a philosophical approach,[3] which not only has its own method for reaching truth, but also its own content as well. And this content will at times overlap with the subject matter of psychology. The method used by philosophy is exactly the same as the one followed by mathematics and classical geometry, which allows the mind to intellectually *see* some universal truths, such as the principles of contradiction, identity, number relations, and many others besides, including insights into the nature of the human person. As this kind of *seeing* is intellectual, it is not sensual or empirical in nature. The object of philosophy extends beyond the perceiving of sensible particulars to understanding the general natures of things, including human nature: not just the nature of the person as factually given, but also the way a person ought to be.

To say that the philosophical method can be of assistance to psychology does not imply that this method can alone solve all psychological issues. Psychology may not be exclusively an empirical or natural science, but it is an empirical science. In this text, I want to be open to those psychological objects amenable to the empirical method—of sense observation and inductive generalization—as well as to those receptive to a more philosophical approach. For example, while the empirical sciences study only neutral facts, or what *is* the case, philosophy also studies (besides neutral facts) what *ought* to be. Thus, while the moral sphere is closed to a purely empirical investigation, it is open to philosophical penetration. Ethics, of course, is not psychology, but that does not mean there is no overlap between these fields. For example, without an ethical worldview one cannot do full justice either to human motivation (insofar as some persons really are motivated by what is authentically good and true) or to clearly understand what it is that constitutes self-fulfillment.

Morality, however, is just one instance of a broader pattern of measuring psychic acts and responses according to rational measures, such as when we note that a person's psychological response is either ordered or disordered, balanced or imbalanced, or one could say, rational or irrational. I want to investigate other rational, psychological measures besides morality—such as truth, health and our particular human nature—which I think can be extremely helpful for evaluating psychic responses. This is the central idea behind

rational psychology, which is what psychology used to be called before its superseded by empirical psychology at the end of the nineteenth century.

If the above is in the main correct, then psychology needs to accept the notion that human persons are not simply higher-order animals, but rational beings ordered to what is true and authentically good, insofar as it is these things that are the ultimate rational measures of the person. This power of rationality, however, does not exclude the real possibility of irrational thinking and behavior, as the former is the condition for the possibility of and the measure for the latter.

This rational philosophical approach to psychology has never been completely extinguished in contemporary psychology. However, it needs to thematically re-assert its proper and far larger place within psychology, which implies as well doing justice to a philosophical approach to reality and giving up the notion that psychology is exclusively empirical in nature. This is what I want to establish in this book.

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