

Comment Upon the Teleological Papers

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For anyone who is interested in the theoretical aspects of psychology, this group of papers is of the highest importance. The dominance of behaviorism has ended; cognitive research is seen by many as a corrective for all of behaviorism's deficiencies. Are we now on the highroad to progress, in a position to generate theories that will account for the full complexity of human nature? Into this chorus of complacency the participants in this symposium have introduced some disturbing notes. They are convinced that we need a more drastic change in the direction of our efforts than the shift from mechanistic behaviorism to cognitive science involves. Indeed they contend that cognitive research is as mechanistic in its basic assumptions as behaviorism is. It does not constitute a humanistic alternative.

What all of these authors are attacking is the widely held assumption that what one does or thinks is *determined* by one's past responses to stimulation from the outside world, that the association of ideas rests on data the senses have provided, that our impressions of other people are based on a summation of bits of data derived from previous observations. The reason this assumption has been so compelling is that we have considered it essential for a *scientific* psychology. But the science we have chosen to emulate is an outmoded physics, physics as it was in the days before Einstein or Heisenberg. What is inevitably left out in psychological research of this sort is the *control* human beings seem to be able to exercise over their behavior and their thoughts. Is this illusory or is it real? And if real, how shall we conceptualize it? These authors argue that cognitive psychology has not solved this problem.

Rychlak explains how the British associationists took over only part of the Greek view of the association of ideas, omitting its treatment of direction or intentionality and their emphasis on contrasts or opposites. Williams criticizes research in cognitive psychology for its failure to account for meaningfulness. Slife contends that such research fails to account for metacognition, the control function of mind, and for self-awareness, the conscious function of mind. These three theoretical papers all conclude that a process of *dialectical* reasoning must be postulated to fill in these gaps.

The Lamiell and Durbeck presentation is a report of a research investigation on impression formation designed in such a way as to compare two theoretical perspectives. Do the prototypes generally agreed to underlie our judgments of personal qualities of other people consist of mental averages of our expectations based on previous encounters with people, or do they represent a dialectic consideration of what a person *is not but might otherwise be*? It is an ingenious and careful experiment. From protocols indicating how the individuals to be judged have allocated time and effort, student judges were asked to rate these individuals on three personality scales. Before they made their ratings, instructions were given which made it possible for the experimenter to judge whether they had reasoned normatively or dialectically. His predictions of what the ratings would actually be were significantly more accurate for the dialectical than for the normative assumption.

This ingenious experiment provides evidence that human beings do to some extent reason dialectically even when they do not know that they are doing so. The reason for my qualifying phrase "to some extent" is that the predicted ratings based on the dialectical assumption were significantly closer to the actual ratings than those based on the normative assumption, but were still in far-from-perfect-agreement with them. The question remains as to what *else* was involved in these judgments. What Lamiell has done in this and previous experiments is to demonstrate that scientific research does not require adherence to a positivistic, mechanistic philosophy. Such research does not answer all of our questions, but it gives us hope that answers will eventually be forthcoming.

The authors of these papers make a convincing case for the inadequacy of the prevailing orientation in psychology. What I do not find so convincing is the argument that the *dialectic* is what we need. Partly this is a matter of my lack of clarity about just what dialectic means. The clearest explanations I have been able to find are in Rychlak (1976) and Rychlak (1986). Much of what he says conforms with what I believe.

- (1) Human reasoning is not unidirectional.
- (2) Human thinking and action are purposive. We need the concept of *final cause* as well as *efficient cause* to explain it.
- (3) Research in humanistic psychology requires an *introspective* rather than an *extraspective* orientation.
- (4) In their thinking and their actions human beings are constantly selecting from available possibilities or alternatives.

What I find difficult to accept is what is generally considered to be the core feature of the dialectic, *bipolarity*. I quote from Rychlak (1986, p. 116):

... as we human beings frame a premise for the sake of which we intend to behave, we by this very act *also* frame opposite meanings which *could* be premised

As I "plan to go" I dialectically set the premise of a "plan not to go." This capacity to see what is not in the premise . . . allows us to think about the person . . . as capable in *principle* of generating an alternative course of action.

It seems to me that a person can proceed directly from an initial premise to the consideration of alternatives without the intermediate step of negation. The philosophical system I have found most satisfactory as a foundation for my thinking about multi-potentiality is that of Alfred North Whitehead, as set forth in *Process and Reality* (1929/1969). In an unpublished paper I presented to APA in 1977 I characterized it in this way:

What Whitehead undertook to do was to replace a philosophy of substance with a philosophy of process or organism. The central insight . . . is that reality is constantly being created. We live in an unfinished, never-to-be-finished universe, constantly involved in a "creative advance into novelty." What artists do is a prototype for what human beings all do. In Whitehead's own words, "The future of the Universe, though conditioned by the immanence of its past, awaits for its complete determination the spontaneity of the novel individual occasions, as in their season they come into being" [Whitehead, 1933, p. 255]. (Tyler, 1977, p. 2).

Perhaps my reliance on Whitehead and the adherence of Rychlak and the other participants in this symposium to a dialectic position represent the same sort of thinking. What we agree about is that a humanistic science requires that we deal with possibilities as well as actualities. To me that is the essential thing.

References

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