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Overcoming Fragmentation in Psychology: A Hermeneutic Approach

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Considerable fragmentation, and awareness of it, have characterized the field of psychology since its inception. It is suggested that over the years, efforts to reduce uncertainty and overcome fragmentation in psychology have clustered around two broad, opposite strategies which might be termed "scientism" and "constructionism." The first wishes to rely on secure methods and controlled experimentation, the second on a postmodern acceptance of radical heterogeneity and "no truth through method." Some of the shortcomings of these strategies are discussed. A hermeneutic approach centering on dialogue and the idea of social inquiry as a kind of ethical practice is outlined which, it is argued, might have success in incorporating some of the virtues and avoiding the pitfalls of other responses to the problem of fragmentation.

This paper sketches an argument concerning how contemporary hermeneutic thought might speak to the dilemma of fragmentation in psychology. The problem of fragmentation is complicated, subtle, multifaceted, and surely will be with us for a long time. However, a superb review of the literature on fragmentation in psychology published recently by Yanchar and Slife (1997) helps to put the problem in perspective and set the stage for a fresh response to it.

The Yanchar and Slife review makes plain the remarkable fact that both enormous fragmentation and awareness of that fragmentation in psychology have characterized the discipline from its inception. One wonders what in the world could have held the field together — and it is still going strong — for over a century. It may be that the glue in question is a certain focus on the individual which pervades almost all of psychology's diverse subdisciplines

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and approaches to inquiry. The modern outlook on life and living is above all an individualistic one. We tend toward a perspective which Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swindler, and Tipton (1985) call "ontological individualism." This is the view that humans are distinct centers of experience and action and that human reality in general can be understood atomistically as a collection of discrete persons concatenated in various ways into social groups, struggling to reduce inevitable conflicts with others through negotiation and temporary alliances for our mutual benefit. In fact, this view may be riddled with illusion. We may not be distinct individuals striving appropriately for personal autonomy or authenticity so much as co-participants in a shared life world, with many shared values, indebted to the traditions that have shaped us, and obligated to carry them forward as well as to critically sift and reinterpret their aims and ideals. Nevertheless, a common denominator of otherwise diverse modern philosophies, psychologies, and political agendas seems to be a strong emphasis on the idea of a separate, self-defining self set over against a material world or an artificial social order (Taylor, 1989).

Beyond Scientism and Constructionism

Risking oversimplification in order to achieve a measure of focus, let me suggest that our efforts to reduce uncertainty and overcome fragmentation in psychology over the years have tended to cluster around two broad, opposite approaches. They might be termed "scientism" and "constructionism." Elsewhere we have argued that one of our main challenges is to find a new way that incorporates the virtues but escapes the pitfalls of each of these standpoints toward inquiry (Richardson, Fowers, and Guignon, 1999).

Faith in method. The first approach expects or hopes that psychology might become unified "because all psychological knowledge would be derived in the same way and have the same status: empirical facts derived through publicly observable experiments" (Yanchar and Slife, 1997, p. 247). Mainstream social science in this century is based on the idea of a sharp dichotomy between theory and method, with theory or ideas validated or rejected by the best available methods. However, as Slife and Williams (1995, pp. 180 ff.) argue cogently, it is impossible to sharply differentiate between theory and method in this way. Any method of study or the construction of it *presupposes* a great deal of theory. It presupposes a number of things about what the world is really like and what truth about it would resemble. Therefore, it is hardly in a position to serve as a fully independent test of our theories or beliefs.

The tendency of mainstream social science and modern epistemological thinking in general has been to assert that certain methods or standards for evaluating knowledge claims can be established quite apart from inquiry into

a particular subject matter. But today the idea of epistemology as a foundational enterprise seems implausible, presumptuous, and out of touch with the realities of inquiry. Methods for interpreting phenomena or accruing knowledge, from scientific experimentation to criminal law to biblical hermeneutics, are, in Richard Rorty's apt phrase, "hammered out" in the course of human experience to accomplish particular ends. Also, unless we were already perceiving and thinking about the world on the basis of certain assumptions about it, we could not formulate any methods or even know that we needed them (Slife and Williams, 1995, p. 181). Moreover, such methods and the knowledge or ideas they generate seem intimately related to our practical, social, and moral purposes. That is why Habermas (1971) describes certain fundamental human "interests," including, in his view, shared understanding and justice, as "knowledge-constitutive." Hermeneutic thinkers (e.g., Gadamer, 1981), criticize the modern apotheosis of method for assuming quite arbitrarily that reality is and only is what it needs to be to serve as grist for the mill of particular, given methods. Should these methods turn out not to be appropriate or sufficient at other times or places, they will have been dangerously sealed off from critical scrutiny. We will be saddled with a seriously truncated view of the world. And fragmentation — irresolvable conflict with others who proceed from different epistemologicasl prejudices — will be exacerbated.

Charles Taylor (1995, p. 2 ff.) suggests that simply attacking foundationalist ambitions to secure an Archimedean point beyond all historical contingencies can lead to a reactive, sterile anti-foundationalism that helps very little. Taylor suggests that we take a "wider conception of the epistemological tradition" as incorporating a number of basic beliefs and values. For example, we would never entertain foundationalist ambitions in the first place if we did not conceive of knowledge as the "inner depiction of an outer reality" or the "correct representation of an independent reality" (p. 2). Then everything from truth to technology depends, we think, on anchoring our beliefs in that independent reality. Of course, this representational view leads to insoluble puzzles concerning, among other things, how *through* our mental representations we can gain indubitable access to realities *independent* of them. We tend to oscillate endlessly between realism and skepticism. We don't know whether to believe that science alone delivers truth or that we "create our own reality," and settle for a dissonant and unstable mix of the two. But a credible alternative to the representational view is hard to come by, so it tends to remain our official modern stance toward the world.

Furthermore, Taylor (1995, p. 7 ff.) argues that the representational outlook — according to which knowledge consists essentially in the correspondence of our beliefs to an external reality from which they must be sharply distinguished — fits hand in glove with the widespread modern picture of

the self as disengaged, disembodied, and atomistic or "punctual." This self is "distinguished . . . from [the] natural and social worlds, so that [its] identity is no longer to be defined in terms of what lies outside . . . in these worlds." It is "ideally ready qua free and rational to treat these worlds — and even some of the features of [its] own character — instrumentally, as subject to change and reordering" in order to better secure individual and social well-being. Thus, the representational outlook begins to look like a central strand of our way of life in modern culture, one often thought to purchase valuable freedoms at the price of much alienation. Indeed, Taylor suggests that the modern notion of a "punctual self" confronting a natural and social world to which it has no essential ties is as much a *moral* as a scientific ideal. It "connects with . . . central moral and spiritual ideas of the modern age." Thus, the modern ideal of "freedom as self-autonomy . . . to be self-responsible, to rely on one's [own] judgment, to find one's purpose in oneself" dictates that any overlap between self and world will compromise the individual's integrity and dignity. Obviously, many of our political and therapeutic ideals reflect and reinforce this profound aspiration to individuality and separateness. Also, this connection with modern ideals helps explain why the goal of mainstream social science for the most part has been strictly value-neutral explanations or descriptions of human dynamics, and why it is so comfortable treating cultural and moral values as purely subjective. *Either* such meanings and values must be kept at arms length *or* they will compromise our autonomy and integrity in a domineering manner.

Recently, several thoughtful articles (Fishman, 1990; Hoshmand and Martin, 1994; Hoshmand and Polkinghorne, 1992) accept the demise of an imperial epistemology, or concur in "naturalizing" it, and advocate a pragmatic methodological pluralism as a cure for fractionalism and fragmentation. For example, Hoshmand and Martin (1994) propose an analysis of past and present research programs to ascertain some of their strengths and weaknesses. Eventually, an "indigenous" epistemology for the human sciences might emerge that would help researchers agree about how to "select the conceptual and methodological tools fitting with the task at hand" (p. 176). The main difficulty with this approach is that behaviorists, critical psychologists, postmodernists, and others will have fundamental disagreements about what is an appropriate or worthwhile "task at hand," based on their very different theoretical commitments and implicit social or moral ideals. This sort of methodological pluralism might promote tolerance, but as it stands it seems unlikely to help overcome fragmentation. It retains much of the familiar dichotomy between theory and method, only it leaves method hanging out to dry with no hope of an independent epistemological justification. Thus it does little to retard the slide toward seemingly incommensurable viewpoints and a frank relativism.

No truth through method. A second, broad approach to making sense of fragmentation in the field and, in a sense, overcoming it, might be loosely termed pragmatist, postmodern, or social constructionist. Sugarman (1992) points in this direction by arguing that no indigenous or "superordinate" epistemology is possible. Any criteria for evaluating knowledge must themselves be selected on some basis, requiring standards for good criteria for knowledge evaluation. These standards themselves will require further criteria, leading to an infinite regress with no possibility of rational justification. Hermeneutics thinkers would contend that this argument rests on the questionable assumption that so far as human knowledge and judgment are concerned, *either* we have metaphysical certitude *or* we should view our beliefs and standards as ultimately arbitrary. Sugarman seems to lean toward the second of these options, suggesting that we strive to reach consensus on purely pragmatic grounds concerning, in William James's words, what is "good for us to believe."

Sugarman's (1992) analysis might be developed in the direction of the sort of hermeneutic viewpoint outlined later in this paper. However, it might also encourage the turn taken by contemporary social constructionist thinkers who offer an alternative, in many ways a compelling one, to foundationalism and the purely representational view of knowing. As Gergen states (1985, pp. 267 ff.), the "terms in which the world is understood are social artifacts, products of historically situated interchanges between people." In both theory and practical life, the "process of understanding is not automatically driven by the forces of nature, but is the result of an active, cooperative enterprise of persons in relationships." Many of the conclusions and theories of empirical social science, from this perspective, are quite distortive. They pretend that the world, the self, and psychological processes are just *one* way, which is not the case, and that they are *our* way, which is dangerously ethnocentric (Cushman, 1990).

According to Gergen (1985, pp. 270 ff.), social constructionism helps us get past the "traditional subject–object dualism." This means that psychological inquiry is deprived of any notion of "experience" as a "touchstone of objectivity." So-called reports or descriptions of one's experience are really just "linguistic constructions guided and shaped by historically contingent conventions of discourse." Therefore, there is "no 'truth through method,'" no correct procedure that bestows a warrant of objectivity on our findings or theories. Moreover, social constructionism bites the bullet and "offers no alternative truth criteria." Instead, Gergen candidly admits that "the success of [our] accounts depends primarily on the analyst's capacity to invite, compel, stimulate, or delight the audience, and not on criteria of veracity."

Constructionist views help restore a sense of the cultural and historical embeddedness of human life, and shed light on how a continuing "renegotiation of meanings" is at the center of social life, allowing us to take greater

responsibility for it. They do not provide us, obviously, with any sort of epistemological guidance or theoretical integration. But they offer a broad view of social inquiry which its advocates suggest might reduce dogmatic factionalism and encourage cooperation among investigators. However, constructionist attempts to get past modern representationalism with its one-sided individualism and narrowly instrumental stance toward the world may be overly hasty and incomplete. Hermeneutic thinkers agree with social constructionists that claims of direct or immediate access to a "real" world or transcendent norms independent of our interpretation of things are really just additional interpretations which, if we crave indubitable foundations, only produce an infinite regress from which there is no exit. In addition, our understanding today of the ways in which knowledge claims are the products of historical development and shaped by social processes makes the view of knowing as mainly forming accurate inner pictures of an outer reality seem absurd. But does constructionist thought give us a genuine alternative?

Charles Guignon (1991, p. 96) suggests that when it becomes clear that we can have no direct access to "Nature as it is in itself" distinct from our interpretations, we may experience a "feeling of loss" which seems to dictate that we are merely "entangled in perspectives," that "there is nothing outside the text," or that our ideas about things are mere "linguistic constructions." Paradoxically, though, this "picture of our predicament as cut off from reality makes sense only because of the way it contrasts with the binary opposition of self vs. world it is supposed to replace." For example, the view that "signs refer only to other signs" is parasitic on the very opposition between "sign" and "signified" it is trying to discard. Thus, this approach may confusedly perpetuate the very axioms of thought it is trying to displace!

Social constructionism may also tender a paradoxical and implausible view of human agency. In this approach, the self seems to be at once (1) radically contextualized in society and history and determined or shaped by it and (2) radically free to reinterpret itself and social reality as it wishes for its own self-invented purposes. But, if we are radically contextualized, how do we get the leverage needed to reinterpret and reinvent ourselves? And, if we are radically free to reinterpret and redirect our course in this way, why have we not just reproduced typically modern pretensions to absolute freedom and indefinite control, thereby aggravating the fragmentation and alienation many constructionists hope to lessen by deflating modernist pretensions (e.g., Cushman, 1990). In this approach, we still seem to be something very much resembling self-encapsulated subjects confronting an alien universe. Social constructionism, therefore, may blend some of the worst features of determinism and existentialism rather than escape both their pitfalls.

Critics worry, as well, about the acute moral relativism entailed by this approach. The social constructionist recommendation that we evaluate our

moral beliefs and values in terms of their "pragmatic implications" (Gergen, 1985) severely clashes with what we seem to *mean* by ethical commitment or taking responsibility in everyday life. One wonders if constructionist thinkers have really thought through what it would mean, for example, to collapse the distinction entirely between feeling guilty merely from the fear of disapproval versus remorse from violating one's authentic personal standards. They seem to imply that ultimately there isn't any difference between the two. What this suggests is that these would-be *post*modern theorists really are endorsing a classically *modern*, anti-authoritarian or liberationist ethical outlook, according to which just denying all metaphysical and moral universals will free us from tendencies toward dogmatism and domination.

Evidence for this idea can be found in Richard Rorty's (1985) remarkable contention that a strong sense of the thorough relativity and contingency of all our beliefs and values will tend to give us an enhanced feeling of "solidarity" in the human situation and by itself undermine any motivation to domineer or oppress others on the mistaken basis of some "objective" truth. Although quite sincere, this view seems utopian and naive. The loss of credible conviction and sense of purpose it entails would seem more likely to lead to individual apathy and social atomization (if not despair and violence) than to enhanced solidarity. Such thinkers seem to believe that their own hard-won character and cultivation will spring up automatically in others as a result of embracing relativism. Also, they are embroiled in the contradiction of treating all moral values as purely relative or subjective in order to *promote* certain moral values, such as human solidarity, which they do not appear to view as purely relative or optional (Richardson and Christopher, 1993; Richardson and Woolfolk, 1994).

Beyond Objectivism and Incommensurability

Richard Bernstein (1983, p. 8) defines the "objectivism" which has underpinned so much modern thought and culture as the "basic conviction that there is or must be some permanent, ahistorical matrix or framework to which we can ultimately appeal in determining the nature of rationality, knowledge, truth, reality, goodness, or rightness." Kuhn's (1970) account of theory-choice or "paradigm shifts" in natural science accelerated the demise of this Cartesian faith and the rise in its place of a growing fascination with "otherness," "alterity," and "incommensurability." Bernstein (1983, p. 60) summarizes Kuhn's view in this way: There is no "permanent, neutral observation language . . . [or] determinate set of scientific criteria that can serve as rules or necessary and sufficient conditions for resolving scientific disputes." Thus, there is no algorithm for theory-choice, neither one based on deductive proof nor inductive generalization.

Natural scientific rationality. Kuhn (1970) initially characterized theory-choice in terms like "persuasion," "conversion," "Gestalt switch," and "transition between incommensurables." This suggested to some that he saw the transition between theories as an essentially accidental or arbitrary one. But he has made it clear (e.g. p. 158) that while he wished to deny that we can know in advance exactly what sort of evidence or standards are required to resolve important disagreements, he did not wish to deny that these transitions are in some sense rational. There is always some common ground, and paradigms can be and are *compared* in many respects in spite of the fact that disputants live in partly different worlds and cannot find secure, independent grounds for resolving their differences. Thus, "theory-choice is a judgmental activity requiring imagination, interpretation, the weighing of alternatives, and application of criteria that are essentially open" (Bernstein, 1983, p. 56). In MacIntyre's (1981) words, "objective rationality is . . . to be found not in rule-following, but in rule-transcending, in knowing how and when to put rules and principles to work and when not to" (quoted in Bernstein, 1983, p. 57).

No doubt there is much more to clarify about this "scientific process." But postempiricist philosophy of natural science illuminates how natural scientific inquiry is, indeed, a "judgmental activity" in which we are neither obedient to fixed criteria of rationality nor, as Gergen (1985) says, "victims of the facts." There is probably an analogy here between science and ethics. Neither the notion that we should lead a compassionate or courageous life nor canons of scientific rationality can be formulated as timeless principles from which the appropriate action in a particular situation can be logically deduced or determined in advance. It seems to be part of the reality and risk of both scientific inquiry and the moral life that to act appropriately means different things under different circumstances, and that our insight into what that means grows with experience.

The human sciences. Bernstein (1983) and others (Slife and Williams, 1995; Taylor, 1980) have argued that postpositivist philosophy of natural science points toward a view of scientific rationality and rationality in general that lies beyond both (1) objectivism and (2) the idea of our being trapped in incommensurable paradigms or perspectives. This view reduces the differences and philosophical gulf between natural science and the social disciplines — both are richly interpretive. In the hermeneutic view, however, there still are key differences between them, reflecting different interests and purposes in our multifarious existence.

Perhaps the main point of contrast is the central place occupied in the natural sciences by the exercise of a special capacity for abstraction that we might call "objectification." To adopt an objectifying stance toward things is to ignore or abstract away most of the meanings of and relationships among

things that show up within our ordinary experience, concerned with our shifting desires, values, and aims, and to "regard the world as it is independently of the meanings it might have for human subjects, or of how it figures in their experience" (Taylor, 1980, p. 31). It no longer makes sense to insist that "objective" reality must be only that which is captured by this approach. We have learned to question the detached, somewhat depersonalizing, "spectator" view of knowing and relating to the world this kind of objectifying approach entails. Obviously, objectifying events in this way and rigorously disregarding the other kinds of significance they have for us has enormous utility in natural science and its applications. Something resembling it also may play a constructive role in ethical reflection, too, at times, allowing us to distance ourselves from less worthy attachments and passions in order to better see and do the right thing as we judge it.

However, there is no good reason to deny the validity of other *kinds* of interpretations of our experience and events, reflecting different *ways* of being involved with the world. The objectifying approach seems to have yielded very little in terms of its own goal of empirical theory permitting extensive prediction and control of the everyday human realm (Bernstein, 1976; D'Andrade, 1986), settling often for fragmented islands of inquiry and sometimes mere "wordy elaborations of the obvious" (Taylor, 1985a, p. 1). Moreover, many feel that "the language of science," because "we force ourselves to study human beings at a distance," is a "relatively impoverished language" (Slife and Williams, 1995, p. 195). Indeed, one wonders if our lengthy persistence in the face of such limited success reflects an admirable diligence so much as a stubborn attachment to the one-sided individualism and horror of arbitrary authority which inspire the representational outlook.

A Hermeneutic Approach

Charles Taylor (1985a, p. 160) argues that in many of life's "situations of involvement" there should be no question of "abstracting from the significance for us of what we are examining." We need to do almost the opposite, namely get closer to our feelings, motives, or involvements with others, possibly get past anxiety or defensiveness, and engage the meanings we live by more fully in order to "get a more balanced view of [their] significance." Doing this often changes us in an irreversible way. It is this realm of first-hand engagement with the world that much social science seeks to understand and explain. Hermeneutic thinkers see "dialogic understanding" (Warnke, 1987) as a key to what transpires in this arena. This approach does not offer us a new foundational epistemology or promise of conclusive theoretical integration in psychology. But it might help focus the discussion, reduce needless fragmentation, and curtail novelty for novelty's sake.

Hermeneutics rethinks ontology by viewing us as "self-interpreting beings." The *meanings* we work out in the business of living make us to a great extent what we *are*. In order to understand people and what they are doing, you have to understand their vision of things, their intentions and perceptions, because in this realm "personal interpretation can enter into the definition of the phenomenon under study" (Taylor, 1985a, p. 121). Human existence, in Heidegger's (1962, p. 426) words, is conceived of as a kind of "becoming" or "movement" that is "stretched along between birth and death." According to Guignon (1993, p. 14), just as "events in a novel gain their meaning from what they seem to pointing to in the long run . . . so our past lives and our present activities gain their meaning from a (perhaps tacit) sense of where our lives are going as a totality." Individual lives are "always 'thrown' into a familiar life-world from which they draw their possibilities of self-interpretation. Our own life-stories only make sense against the backdrop of possible story-lines opened by our historical culture" (1989, p. 109).

What does it mean to participate in this kind of temporal and storied existence? We sometimes follow the path of abstraction and objectification and "hammer out" a knowledge of lawfulness or of repeated patterns in events that occur regardless of the everyday meanings these events have for us or the evaluations we make of them, including technical knowledge of reliable means to desired ends. But there is a more fundamental, ultimately *practical* kind of understanding which humans always and everywhere "hammer out" together, one that does not primarily mean comprehending events, especially human action and social life, mainly as "instances" of a general concept, rule, or law. In everyday life and in a more systematic way in the human sciences, people seek to understand the changeable *meanings* of events, texts, works of art, social reality and the actions of others in order to appreciate them and relate to them appropriately, along the story-lines of their living.

In this view, a basic fact about humans, as Heidegger (1962, p. 228) puts it, is that they *care* about whether their lives make sense and what their lives are amounting to. Therefore, humans have always taken some stand on their lives by seizing on certain roles, traits, and values. Indeed, people "just are the stands they take in living out their lives" (Guignon and Pereboom, 1995, p. 189). This means that humans do *not* simply desire particular outcomes or satisfactions in living. Rather, they always make "strong evaluations" (Taylor, 1985a, p. 3). Even if only tacitly or unconsciously, people evaluate the *quality* of their desires and motivations and the *worth* of the ends they seek in terms of how they fit in with their overall sense of a decent or worthwhile life. Support for this view might be found in Rorty's discussion of solidarity and objectivity mentioned above, in which he encourages us to view all social and moral ideals as purely subjective or relative in order to promote certain ideals that he apparently can't help but take quite seriously. Consider also

Kimble's (1984, 1994) delineation of "scientific" and "humanistic" cultures in psychology. The fundamental issue between them, according to Kimble, is "a concern for a subject matter for its own sake versus 'man as the measure of all things'" (1984, p. 839). This sounds to some of us like a plea for the proud, modern value program of iconoclasm, autonomy, and commitment to the exercise of instrumental reason versus an undisciplined, immature, subjectivism or relativism. It seems to reflect deeply held commitments concerning the good life — but that is not fully acknowledged.

If so, this means we are always "insiders" with respect to some deep, defining commitments and identifications, even though their content varies greatly across cultures. Oddly, it seems to hermeneutic thinkers that *both* positivists and postmodernists encourage us to play the role of "outsiders," to try to step outside or distance ourselves as much as possible from such historical entanglements, whether through a stance toward the world of instrumental control or of ironic, insouciant play. Of course, one or the other of them may be the better path. Or, we may have misconstrued the issue. But, for better or worse, hermeneutic thinkers see this kind of detachment as not only impossible but perhaps somewhat inauthentic, as if we could ever defend or protect ourselves from uncertainty, mistakes, disappointments, and tragedy.

Williams (1990, 1994) and Williams and Faulconer (1996), drawing on Heidegger's ideas, astutely outline a similar picture of the human realm. They argue that traditional metaphysics over-identifies intelligibility with atemporality and necessity and generally confuses "being" or "be-ing" with "beings." This bias carries over into modern natural science where it has done minimal harm to inquiry. But a stress on "atemporal, necessary principles which . . . method instantiates in dealing with particular problems" (1996, p. 20) is grossly insufficient for the study of human action. Such human activity is essentially temporal. In this realm, "truth" is mainly to be found not in structures or causes "behind" events that necessitate them but "in the how of things rather than in their what . . . in being rather than in beings . . . in the tension, movement, play of the appearing of things" (p. 22). According to Williams, the judgments we make in everyday life or more systematically in social science are neither "objective . . . application of general rules in a particular situation" nor merely "subjective" whimsy, but "artful, meaningful participation" (1994, p. 28). It appears that "agency and knowledge . . . are intimately associated" (p. 36). Therefore, truth is best thought of not mainly in terms of correspondence to stable realities or principles apart from the world of human activity but as a matter of "living truthfully" in that reality (p. 36).

In the hermeneutic view, understanding human life does not, in the main, consist of proffering objectifying explanations. It is focused instead on understanding meaning-laden human activities and experiences. However, in this view, understanding neither reaches any sort of final, objective account of

what events mean nor is it a matter of utterly groundless "linguistic constructions." Historical experience changes the meaning events can have for us, not because it alters our view of an independent object, but because historical and cultural existence are a dialectical process in which both the object and our knowledge of it are continually transformed. Thus, for example, there is an ongoing interplay between the meaning of the American revolution and my lived understanding of freedom in the present in which both are continually modified. This lack of fixity does not imply that all moral values are ultimately relative or invalid. Only a god could know that, in any case. It does mean that understanding and moral insight are always partial, incomplete, and tied to shifting contexts — in MacIntyre's (1981) sense, part of a never-finished "quest." So, we can *neither* escape "strong evaluations" or self-defining commitments concerning the good life and the decent society *nor* achieve any final or certain understanding of such matters.

One additional, key facet of dialogic understanding is especially relevant to our topic and is worth elaborating briefly. Following Warnke (1987, pp. 167 ff.), we might characterize dialogic understanding as a certain kind of interplay between "openness" and "application." Gadamer's (1975) term for openness is "anticipation of completeness," meaning the expectation of a coherent and credible view of things. For Gadamer, "application" is not a separable element of understanding or something that follows it, but is an essential, ever-present part of coming to understanding itself. This notion of dialogic understanding speaks directly to our modern sensitivity about dogmatism or an uncritical acceptance of conventional or traditional ideas. Genuine openness to any meaning or claim actually involves granting it provisional authority to challenge our beliefs and prejudices — anything from considering an alternative hypothesis to openness to the impact of a religious experience. Application involves ascertaining whether an insight or point of view reveals new aspects of our current motives and dilemmas and helps make sense out of new circumstances. In the process, some reinterpretation or modification of old truths is inevitable. According to Warnke, the danger with openness is "conservatism," in which we bow to authority or rationalize the status quo out of fear or timidity. The only cure for such inauthentic rationalization is further rigorous application of these claims to our unique historical situation. The danger with application is "subjectivism" or the clever, opportunistic interpretation of events or principles in a self-serving manner. However, the only cure for such arbitrariness is further, sometimes painful openness to challenge from others. In this spirit, Hannah Arendt (quoted in Bernstein, 1983, p. 218) wrote:

> The power of judgment rests on a potential agreement with others, and the thinking process which is active in judging something is not, like the thought process of pure reasoning, a dialogue between me and myself, but finds itself always and primarily, even if I am

> quite alone in making up my mind, in an anticipated communication with others with whom I know I must finally come to some agreement . . . . Such judgment . . . needs the presence of others "in whose place" it must think, whose perspectives it must take into consideration, and without whom it never has the opportunity to operate at all.

To be sure, we can always defensively or dishonestly distort the process of dialogic understanding. No sure-fire method or social arrangement of checks and balances can prevent this from happening. Still, this approach suggests a way to blend qualities that often we admire but seem hard to reconcile, in a way that might help to flesh out Williams' (1994) notion of "living truthfully." For example, dialogic understanding helps reconcile *commitment* and *criticism*. At their best, serious moral and political commitments encourage us to be as open as possible to challenges from the outside. Because of the importance of the subject matter, we have a motivation to get things right. Also, such commitments contribute to the sense of self needed to withstand the uncertainty and trepidation of the questioning process. In turn, openness and the critical testing of our beliefs and values against new circumstances and unforeseen challenges can deepen our understanding and refine our commitments. If this view captures our best sense of what commitment and criticism are all about it, then it deserves serious consideration.

Fragmentation and Dialogic Understanding

Yanchar and Slife's (1997) overview of the fragmentation problem underscores something that we all know very well, namely that differences among knowledge communities in the field of psychology run very deep. Such communities adopt unique theoretical and methodological approaches based often on quite incompatible philosophical commitments concerning the nature of human existence, knowledge of it, and appropriate methods for procuring such understanding. Moreover, this paper has argued that these diverse fundamental assumptions also incorporate broadly moral commitments or ideals concerning the good life and/or a decent society. In the face of such stunning disparity, it is tempting to conclude that these perspectives are truly incommensurable. However, this view also is difficult to sustain. As Slife (2000, this issue) points out, if we were basically windowless monads among others, there would seem to be no way we could ever know that was the case! Many postmodern views seem built upon the same sharp, categorial distinction between certifiable truth and an aimless drift among perspectives that is assumed by their modern counterparts — postmodernists or constructionists just choose the second rather than the first of what they take to be the only two available options.

However, this sharp dichotomy may be out of touch with many of the realities of everyday life and human science inquiry. There we begin with self-

defining commitments and identifications as creatures of our various traditions. It is commonplace, especially nowadays, to encounter alien points of view or "others" whose meanings and values are not fully commensurable with our own, with no agreed-upon yardstick for adjudicating differences in sight. Such "others" may include not only those of a different culture, ethnicity, or gender, but different facets of our own tradition of understanding, which is often complex and internally diverse, or even another of our "multiple selves." But we may have something in common with all other occupants of the human situation, as embodied and historical beings who care about whether their lives make sense and what they amount to in the end (Gadamer, 1975. p. xxiv). The rest has to be worked out through processes of mutual influence and conversation which perhaps should be a primary target of social science inquiry. And it should be stressed that we often come away from such encounters believing that we have really learned something important or gained in wisdom.

Of course, the agreements or "fusions of horizons" we work out can be seen as essentially impositions of power. But it seems quite unlikely that even this kind of regrettable domination cannot continue for a long time unless it is backed by the force of ideals which are vulnerable to questioning and the inadequacies of which can be exposed (Fowers and Richardson, 1996). Certainly, there is more to clarify concerning how we might properly speak about the truth or rightness of the meanings and standards we "hammer out" in the business of living, or how we can view them plausibly as something different than merely conventional or ultimately arbitrary compacts for one purpose or another (Kane, 1994). But hermeneutic thought tries to get the ball rolling with the observation that humans seem *inescapably* to be committed to some notion of the good life (Taylor, 1989) coupled with the idea that secure possession of truly ahistorical criteria against which to measure our beliefs and values — including the grand conviction that all such beliefs and values are finally relative and groundless — would actually *undermine* the integrity of the quest for understanding and moral insight as we know it.

A hermeneutic framework of this sort might help diverse knowledge communities in psychology come into more fruitful contact and conversation with one another. It could help us abandon dreams of certainty which often require us to distort and diminish our subject matter so that it will accommodate the methods we hope will deliver that certainty. It could illumine the social and moral ideals that inescapably drive our points of view, in part, making us less blind or dogmatic about what we are doing. It could motivate us to pursue such contact and conversation. Deprived of both objectivism and the incommensurability thesis, we have no excuse not to listen to the often disturbing and annoying "voice of the other" (Risser, 1997), frequently the only way to learn anything new.

It is probably best, however, not to characterize the alternative to fragmentation as "unity" or even "harmony" in the field. More fruitful contact and conversation will have to do. Surely one of twentieth century social science's greatest errors is to aspire to a grander knowledge in theory than it would ever be possible to attain in life. In the hermeneutic view, we should recast social theory as a "form of practice," as part of life (Richardson and Christopher, 1993; Taylor, 1985b; Williams, 1994), where the conversation will never end and no final conclusions will ever be reached.

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