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## Putting It All Together: Toward a Hermeneutic Unity of Psychology

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This article provides a broad outline of a hermeneutic unity of psychology, by way of a reply to Martin's comment (2000, this issue). It is argued that the metaphysical and ontological impasses that concern Martin may occur because of two reasons — genuine incomparability or the lack of motivation on the part of potential interlocutors. We argue that neither of these reasons necessarily precludes the dialogue and evaluation called for under this hermeneutic approach. We then show how a proper understanding of dialogue, as well as a group of psychologists to facilitate this dialogue — theoretical psychologists — are keys to a coherent and unified, yet pluralistic and responsive psychology.

The preceding papers in this volume have collectively attempted to address the issue of disciplinary fragmentation from the perspective of philosophical hermeneutics. The authors have suggested that incoherence and insularity need not be stumbling blocks to a discipline that holds the intellectual potential to render many helpful understandings from a variety of perspectives. The argument formed by these papers has taken issue with the paucity of dialogue among discourse communities in psychology, and with the presumed lack of common ground for making comparisons, contrasts, and evaluations across sub-disciplinary lines. Its hermeneutic thrust would view dialogue and evaluation as the keys to sustained success of psychology as a discipline.

In response to the papers that form this argument, commentator Jack Martin (2000, this issue) has suggested that while a hermeneutic strategy may hold some promise in bringing together the discourse communities of psychology into a broad conversation, the discipline may not yet be in a posi-

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tion to actualize the full potential of this approach. He reaches two conclusions (discussed below) as to why this is the case. In what follows, we will clarify our proposal by responding to Martin's concerns and by discussing the scope and nature of the unification that could possibly emerge from the hermeneutic approach suggested in this special issue.

### *Metaphysical and Ontological Impasses*

Martin's first conclusion is that the proposed hermeneutic solution might be unworkable across perspectives that are metaphysically or ontologically distinct, because such positions might *really be* about different things. This conclusion, of course, assumes a fundamental metaphysical or ontological divide in the kinds of positions propounded, wherein no meaningful dialogue is possible. As an example, Martin selects the debate between a materialist position, where mental activity is hypothesized to be nothing more than central nervous system activity (due to an ontological reduction), and a mentalistic position, where mental phenomena are granted a genuine ontological status that resists the reduction to a material substratum. Martin's concern about impasses of this sort is an important one, in the sense that constructive dialogue may indeed be hampered or obviated by the substantial rifts they create. Indeed, the short history of psychology suggests that such rifts have been difficult to overcome. It is our contention, however, that the potential problem to which Martin alerts us is not necessarily the impasse he takes it to be.

By our lights, such a lack of productive discourse may result from one of two factors — either a fundamental metaphysical incomparability or a lack of proper motivation. The first factor suggests that dialogue between metaphysically incompatible positions is impossible *in principle*. This is because the positions in question are so fundamentally different that there is no basis for any kind of meaningful comparison and contrast, and thus no basis for any discussion about them. Any potential dialogue between the positions would be precluded by the putatively idiosyncratic and self-contained nature of each position.

We agree with Martin that many theoretical positions are ontologically incompatible with others (e.g., materialism vs. mentalism), in the sense that one or the other is true, but not both simultaneously. In perhaps a cursory sense, then, these two positions are about different things. The impasse between such ontologically distinct positions is important to note, from our perspective, because it correctly suggests that not all positions within psychology should be considered true at the same time, and that by extension, some sort of careful comparison and evaluation are required if we are to generate coherent accounts of human action and mental life. Perhaps one of the most damaging impediments to a meaningful science of human beings

(though not the only one) is the facile notion that all positions generated are important, true, and thus justifiably integrated into an overarching, all-inclusive account (Yanchar, 1997).

However, it is an extreme move to suggest, on the contrary, that metaphysically distinct positions are about such fundamentally different things that they are unable to be brought into meaningful dialogue, and thus meaningful relation and disciplinary coherence. This claim invokes a strong relativism where there can be no sense-making and evaluation of rival positions *in principle*.

Perhaps it is here that we depart from Martin's position. When Martin suggests that materialist and mentalist positions really are about different things, he may be overstating the case. As noted above, these two positions constitute rival ways of thinking about many related issues, such as epistemology, ontology, method, and so on, and may be incommensurable (in the sense used by Slife [2000b, this issue]; they are of different "genres" and make different claims). On the other hand, these positions do seem to be about the same thing in the sense that they are both positions staked out on the fundamental nature of human action and mental life, and on how that subject matter should be conceptualized in psychology. Neither materialists nor mentalists could deny that they are developing an approach to human beings that has important consequences for how psychological science is to proceed, and for how we ultimately view human beings. Moreover, it is not difficult to compare the fundamental claims of competing positions on the question of materialism: either the lives of human beings — their actions, beliefs, aspirations, and so forth — are determined by central nervous system activity or they are not. At this level, it seems that these two positions are talking about the same thing, although they are rendering substantially different accounts.

It is because rival positions are parts of a larger whole, or stated another way, because they are members of a larger community of positions (e.g., different perspectives on human action and mental life), that we are able to recognize the distinct meaning and claims endemic to each. To assume that each philosophical position or discourse community is viewed as self-contained and disconnected from other communities, on the other hand, is to deny the fundamental relatedness that allows us to recognize a philosophical position or community as a position or community in the first place. Such a self-contained or *atomistic* approach actually requires a sort of commensurability because we cannot be aware of a single position or discourse community without simultaneously being able to compare and contrast it against other recognizable positions or communities. In this way, the recognition of similarities and differences among positions or communities — that is, some commensurability within a community of communities — assures that dialogue and constructive interaction may be feasible. On this basis, we respectfully suggest that many impasses of the sort suggested by Martin can be overcome.

Indeed, an appeal to the moral standard of evaluation expressed in the preceding papers suggests that much dialogue can take place between theorists on different sides of rather deep contemporary debates. Consider the example of atomism vs. holism in the discourse communities of psychology. This debate, of course, has direct consequences for psychology's disciplinary status. To assume that the discourse communities of psychology are fundamentally atomistic and self-contained is to presuppose several things about our disciplinary structure — among other things, that communication across research programs is not really necessary for a science to prosper, that advancements in one sub-field are not relevant to other sub-fields, that members of one sub-field have nothing to contribute to other sub-fields, and that no cross-community criticism is possible or appropriate.

These presuppositions, which would inform the actual workings of psychology as a scholarly field, and which would most likely impact its success, are at bottom moral claims — they pertain directly to how the disciplinary structure of psychology *ought* to look, and to how it as a scholarly field *should* proceed with the work of answering questions and generating useful theories. Moreover, it is safe to conclude that these moral claims would ultimately undermine the viability of psychology as a scholarly field and a community. Surely we could not use the label “community” to describe a loosely related group of professionals who do not communicate with each other, who have no knowledge of the practical activities of each other, and who do not help each other in some way. Under these circumstances, what might have been a single scholarly discipline would, in fact, be a somewhat artificial conglomeration of small discourse communities that share no meaningful intellectual relationship.

A holistic perspective on disciplinary structure would have different presuppositions — among others, that dialogue provides the essential bedrock of a discipline and that fairness, charity, and respect for other scholars and discourse communities are necessary as a scholarly discipline proceeds with its work. Just as in the case of atomism, these claims are essentially moral in nature; they are values that must be taken seriously and actuated in the practical workings of the discipline in order for it to proceed successfully *as a community*. Of course, some members of a discipline may not be compelled by these values and may thus neglect them in their work; but in so doing, these members also implicitly or explicitly reject the community of communities that is, in essence, a scholarly discipline.

The difference between an atomistic and a holistic perspective on the disciplinary structure of psychology, then, becomes most clear when considered at the deeper, moral level — the level of *ought* and the implications of that *ought*. Here we see that the atomism vs. holism debate has important consequences for the sustained success of a scholarly field of any sort. If disciplinary status is valued, then holism and its attendant presuppositions must

also be valued. To do otherwise — in atomistic fashion — is to undermine the very idea of a scholarly discipline.

This example suggests that viewing debates and antinomies at the moral level helps make apparent the meaningful and moral differences that allow the rival positions to stand in contradistinction in the first place. This level provides a basis for comparing, contrasting, and evaluating the issues and positions in question. Moreover, psychologists have a platform upon which to discuss and debate these moral issues. Surely all psychologists involved in the project of generating knowledge and ultimately “giving away” (Miller, 1969) the goods of psychology have a responsibility to be accountable for the work hitherto accomplished, and to be part of a conversation that helps determine whether the “goods” of psychology should have been produced in the first place (Koch, 1980).

To this point, our response to Martin has concentrated on the possibility that competing positions are at an impasse because no meaningful comparison, contrast and communication are possible in principle. It might turn out, however, that Martin’s central concern is the second factor mentioned earlier: the potential lack of productive discourse among the exponents of widely diverging positions who are simply *not motivated* to engage in cross-community dialogue. Indeed, there may be no reason to assume that researchers deeply ensconced in one theoretical and philosophical tradition will deem it important or worthwhile to take up a sustained and critical dialogue among themselves and with those of different traditions.

Under this regrettable situation, communities of psychologists would be so dogmatic and insulated, by their own motives, that the discipline would defy nearly any model of scholarship and science in which investigators are expected to seek better or even more truthful understandings, wherever that scholarly journey may take them. If the need for dialogue across community lines, and the need to evaluate theories and their philosophical roots, is as important as we are here suggesting, then insularity of the kind that Martin may be detecting can be counted, at a minimum, as irresponsible, anti-scientific, and unscholarly. Under this set of circumstances, metaphysical and ontological debates may remain impasses, as Martin points out, but not because the positions staked out are so ontologically distinct that they are incomparable and impervious to evaluation even at the level of fundamental moral claims and consequences; rather, they remain impasses because those involved refuse to look at their own and other positions in a genuinely and openly critical way, and because those involved may refuse to engage in productive discourse.

No doubt, Martin correctly senses resistance in much of the mainstream to engage in critical self-reflection and to be open to alternative philosophical perspectives on matters of theory construction and method choice. It would seem that institutionalized obedience to a rather narrow method and set of

theories has left the discipline in a position where critical self-reflection and dialogue about the deepest philosophical issues is considered unnecessary. Moreover, the walling off of psychology from other disciplines with much to offer, such as history and philosophy, leaves the discipline with diminished resources and reduces the likelihood that discourse over the most important matters — such as what we should be studying and why — can commence in a productive manner.

The question Martin fails to ask, however, is why psychology has tended to proceed in such an unreflective, non-scholarly, and non-communicative way. Surely there is no logical reason why the discipline must, of necessity, operate in this fashion. It is here, we contend, that the full contributions of theoretical and philosophical psychology may come to bear on the topic of disciplinary fragmentation. It is particularly fitting that this topic be addressed here, we feel, since leading unification theorist Arthur Staats (1998, pp. 76–78) recently asked in regard to the question of fragmentation: “What is the agenda of theoretical and philosophical psychology to be?” We wish to respond to both Martin’s assertion and Staats’s important question by offering our perspective on the role that theoretical and philosophical psychology can play in fostering greater openness, self-reflexivity, dialogue, and scholarship as we attempt to promote increased coherence in psychology.

### *Theoretical Psychology and Hermeneutic Unity*

As outlined by the recent President of APA Division 24 (Theoretical and Philosophical Psychology; Slife, 2000a), theoretical psychologists have two fundamental tasks:

- 1) to formulate, and help others formulate, the theories that are ultimately tested empirically — whether through quantitative research or qualitative research; and 2) to examine, and help others examine, the nonempirical issues that currently facilitate or stymie the work of psychologists. (p. 4)

The first of these tasks concerns the role typified by traditional personality theorists — creating the theories that receive scientific examination. The only nontraditional twist to this first task is that theoretical psychologists are to help others in properly and productively creating their own theories for empirical test.<sup>1</sup>

As important as the first task is, it is the second task that is most pertinent to our considerations. This second task specifically calls for theoretical psy-

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<sup>1</sup>We wish to note that even this cross-subdisciplinary task could serve the aim of unity and coherence. That is, theoretical psychologists could have some flexible but unified sense of what constitutes good theories and ideas, and teach these to the rest of the discipline.

chologists to be concerned with the nonempirical issues of the discipline. Here Slife (2000a), in his Presidential Address, explicitly singles out disciplinary unity and coherence as an exemplar of such nonempirical issues. That is, he considers theoretical psychology a “specialty” that is particularly concerned with the relations among specialties — with the coherence and unity of the discipline. Indeed, he uses Aristotle’s firm warning that without such relations and some type of disciplinary coherence (the *polis*), the specialties themselves will become ineffective and unproductive.

Still, it is one thing to be *concerned* with the coherence and unity of a discipline, either as theoretical psychologists or as concerned “citizens,” and quite another thing to be *doing* something about such concerns. What could theoretical psychologists, as concerned citizens, actually do to promote coherence and effect the unity necessary for productive specialties and an effective discipline? This question, however, begs another question — indeed, the question of this special issue: What is the nature of a truly coherent and unified, yet pluralistic and productive psychology? Here, we proffer a hermeneutic unity. Although we have been discussing different aspects of this unity all along (in this special issue), we intend to “put these aspects all together,” as our title indicates, in this section. This putting-together will allow us, then, to delineate the role of theoretical psychologists in facilitating the disciplinary motivation as well as pluralistic unity that Martin (2000, this issue) and many others find so lacking.

Perhaps the core of our proposal is dialogue. However, all proposals for disciplinary unity give dialogue and discussion *some* important role. After all, how could coherence and unity occur without some communication among the various communities of a discipline? Still, there is a fundamental difference between our use of dialogue and the others: all the other proposals for resolving fragmentation consider dialogue to be a means to the end of disciplinary unity, whereas our proposal considers dialogue as an end in itself.

Indeed, from our perspective, this has been the basic problem with all the other proposals. As we have noted (Yanchar and Slife, 2000, this issue), the other proposals are ultimately just as fragmenting as the discipline they wish to unify. We believe that this is because they have misunderstood the proper function of dialogue in a scholarly discipline. They view it as some neutral forum or process for arriving at or communicating the core values and standards of the discipline. The difficulty with this view is that as soon as these standards and values are arrived at or communicated, they are correctly identified as a “school of thought” and distinguished from other “schools of thought” in the discipline. The result is another type of disunity, enfranchising those who agree with the standards and disenfranchising those who disagree.

Our own use of dialogue, on the other hand, is fundamentally different. Dialogue is part and parcel of the coherence and unity of a creative, productive, and — perhaps most problematic — pluralistic discipline. That is, we recognize at the outset the essential need for incommensurable differences among discourse communities in any viable field. Although such differences foster tensions and struggles that are perhaps uncomfortable and, at times, difficult to manage effectively, such differences are required for the creativity and openness of any scholarly discipline. In fact, the more that such differences are squelched and the field becomes monolithic — with complete agreement about its core assumptions and procedures — the less likely it is to adapt to the inevitable changes that occur both within and without the discipline.

We do not deny that viable disciplines sometimes have ascendant (or popular) “paradigms,” as Kuhn (1970) once phrased it. However, we *do* deny the viability of disciplines that are *limited* to such paradigms. Other incommensurable modes of thought have to be boiling under the surface of a discipline for it to be responsive to new discoveries and new ideas. Less popular modes of thought provide important information and conceptualizations to complement and frame new data and ideas. Moreover, members of a discipline need some knowledge of the developments “outside the mainstream” to have options available for understanding revolutionary discoveries. In this sense, nonparadigmatic ideas foster creative tensions and productive counterpoints that are necessary to the long-term viability of any discipline.

If this is true, then the unity and continuing viability of a discipline does not occur exclusively through shared beliefs — i.e., agreement on the rules or procedures that everyone in the discipline must follow. Such an agreement would inevitably exclude those in the discipline who do not agree with or share these rules and procedures; nonparadigmatic ideas and conceptions would not be allowed to develop. Perhaps ironically, the mainstream would cease to be the mainstream under these circumstances, because there would be nothing “outside” it. The mainstream would lack an effective identity, because identity involves not only *similarity to* but also *distinction from*. Ideas that are peripheral or nonparadigmatic would be prevented from enriching and being enriched by the core and ascendant paradigm of the discipline.

What, then, is the nature of a discipline that is unified *in* these similarities and differences? We believe that hermeneutic dialogue is central to this nature. Facilitating such dialogue begins much as we began our answer to the first question of this special issue (Slife, 2000b, this issue) — by acknowledging that fundamental differences are not necessarily incomparable differences. Though disciplinary differences may run deep, as Martin correctly notes, such differences can only be viewed as differences by virtue of some shared moral claims regarding the range and function of the discipline, as Kristensen, Slife, and Yanchar (2000, this issue) show.



Hermeneutic dialogue also recognizes that the fundamental differences of any discipline (not to mention the differences across disciplines) *complement* one another. At the very least, discourse communities, however incommensurable they may be, require their differences from one another to attain and retain their identities. As we have said, discourse communities and disciplinary specialties are not self-contained. Many of the best qualities of even ascendant discourse communities, at the core of a discipline, stem from relations to nonascendant discourse communities, at the discipline's periphery. Indeed, many of the most significant knowledge advancements of a discipline, as well as its responsiveness to these advancements, come from comparisons and contrasts with these peripheral communities.

We should acknowledge that there is a tendency within discourse communities to band together in their uniqueness and spurn communications with other communities, despite the fact that their uniqueness originates, in some sense, from the spurned communities. Sometimes the stresses and tensions among communities are too difficult to bear, so some isolation is relieving. Moreover, isolation can sometimes aid productivity. That is, the tensions involved in relating to incommensurable communities may prevent the respite and concentration needed to fulfill the community's purpose. Consequently, we have no objection to a careful tacking back and forth between a limited isolation (and respite from the tensions) and inter-community dialogue. The problem is that these tensions spur some communities to resist the move back to dialogue.

In fact, this is where we see many of the discourse communities of psychology. The members of these communities have forgotten (or have repressed) their essential relation to one another — sometimes for good reasons (disciplinary productivity) and sometimes for bad reasons (anti-disciplinary insulation). Martin provides an excellent example of this when he contends that materialists and mentalists are about "different things," as though they have no inherent relation. As we have shown, however, even these two incommensurable intellectual factions have all sorts of common interests and common values (e.g., both address the fundamental nature of human action and mental life). Nevertheless, Martin has a valid point, because the tendency to obtain one's identity through uniqueness is strong and results in the discounting of these commonalities.

This is where, we believe, dialogical connectedness is so vital to a community, and where theoretical psychology can be so important in preserving such connectedness. Theoretical psychologists could be charged with promoting the valuing of and involvement in dialogue, so that all psychologists would be forced to see and study their differences and their commonalities. This promotion and conducting of dialogue would allow us to see connections not only across the subdisciplines of a particular field but also in rela-

tion to other fields, enabling us to view ourselves and our own community in the proper perspective and context — as a community among communities.

A pivotal property of hermeneutic dialogue is that it does this relating of communities without destroying the communities themselves. In other words, hermeneuticists recognize the importance of the respite and bonding that occurs within communities, as well as the qualitative differences and creative tensions among communities. Other proposals for resolving fragmentation would dash these differences and these bonds; they would attempt to instill a set of rules or processes from which all would take their “marching orders.” The beauty of hermeneutic dialogue is that it establishes lifelines of communication and interaction, recognizing each community’s essential relatedness to every other community, but also allowing and even fostering the individuality and commonality of the community that is its life blood.

This is not to say that all communities would be preserved and respected. We cannot rule out the possibility that a particular discourse community would be threatening to the whole enterprise of scholarship and the discipline. For example, a community could be opposed to the fundamental values of respect and openness that allow for dialogue (and the community of communities). In these rare instances, this community should be opposed and perhaps even ostracized by the other communities. Such an opposition should only be mounted after careful and humble attempts at dialogue and understanding. However, unless we are arguing for an “anything goes” relativism, we have to reserve the community’s (or discipline’s) right to ostracize a community or a member, even if this is a rare event.

Does this mean that a hermeneutic dialogue boils down to another fragmentary proposal for unity, with certain core rules and formula for community membership? We think not. First, we must all face up to the necessity of a core set of values for any community (or any community of communities). Communities do not exist without a core set of values. Even the notion of community itself implies a loose set of values (e.g., caring for and about the other). However, the necessity of some broad set of values does not have to mean “marching orders” or a set of rigid procedures or even a paradigm. It can mean, instead, an embracing of the values necessary for dialogue, for the recognition and exploration of the differences and similarities that allow us to be discourse communities within a wider discipline — that is, parts of a whole.

Indeed, a community cannot remain viable unless it allows its discourse communities to differ and dialogue about its values. Because a community will need to move and adapt to changing information and changing times, it is important that it have some means of arriving at and re-arriving at its values. Again, this points to the importance of the “subcultures” within any community. These subcultures have already experimented with new values

and new ideas, often (with the help of dialogue) in relation to the predominant values and paradigm of the wider community, thus making the transition from old values to new values easier and less problematic.

This type of transition is where we see the significant role of theoretical psychologists (in psychology). Theoretical psychologists would carry the mantle of "protectors of the dialogue." Their concern would be, at least in part, to facilitate this dialogue by including minority communities wherever possible, promoting the values that aid true dialogue, setting up the forums that allow exchange and discussion, and clarifying the issues at stake. Most other psychologists would be so involved in the conventional affairs of the discipline that they would be unable to perform this role adequately, and this is as it should be. Theoretical psychologists, by contrast, would be searching for discounted but worthy communities (and ideas) that had been omitted from the dialogue. Theoretical psychologists would attempt to effect connections and interactions among discourse communities wherever possible. And finally, theoretical psychologists would attempt to separate the significant wheat of these interactions from the insignificant chaff to expedite such connections.

What sort of unity is this dialogical interplay among potentially incommensurable communities? It is the sort of unity that many scholarly disciplines, if they are disciplinary at all, have always had — a relatively loose set of "family relations," as Wittgenstein (1953) put it. But if this is already happening in some disciplines — possibly to some degree in psychology — why discuss it? We discuss it so that we can do it more effectively. Members of a discipline might all agree, for instance, that minority points of view are needed for a viable discipline. However, this does not mean that these minority views are included in such a way that they are allowed to reach and affect the mainstream of the discipline.

Having a subset of psychologists — theoretical psychologists — trained and ready to ensure effective inclusion would, in this sense, be vital. Just as important, however, is asking this subset to promote the wider role of hermeneutic dialogue as the arteries and veins of the various organs (discourse communities) of psychology. This promotion will not only permit these organs to perform their vital functions undeterred, but also help them to realize that their existence — indeed their very function — depends on the rest of the body.

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