In Search of Psychology's Philosophical Center

Frank Pajares

Division of Educational Studies
Emory University

Howard Gardner (1994) observed that "nearly every field begins as philosophy; and psychology continues to foreground its philosophical origins more faithfully than any other discipline" (p. 182). By foreground, no doubt Gardner meant that psychology readily acknowledges and recognizes the prominent role that philosophy played in its creation and development. Philosophy is the parent of psychology. And what a child philosophy begat. Just the other day, my students and I were discussing how amazing it is that an academic discipline of such a tender age should account for the greatest number of academic majors in most universities. Psychology departments are infested with eager suitors, most of whom are unlikely ever to take a philosophy course as part of their program. They are also unlikely to be made aware of philosophy's role in the creation of their discipline. Even in most History of Psychology classes, the philosophical roots are likely dealt with early on and with alacrity so that ample time can be made for the rise of psychodynamic and behaviorist theories, the challenge of the Third Force, and the recent onslaught of the cognitive revolution. I do not find it surprising at all that, after tracing the genesis of educational psychology as outlined in the discipline's texts, Murphy's (2003) students came to the common understanding that the discipline was born out of behaviorism. I would be shocked if they had not come to that conclusion.

This divorce between philosophy and psychology (these days one can divorce one's parent) seems to me to be afflicting not only the preparation of our future scholars but also the professional conversation among the field's practitioners. Philosophically oriented discussions in and about educational psychology research or theory are largely absent from our major and mainstream journals. Even at conferences, philosophical discourse seems very much the exception and rather prominently absent from the vast number of symposia, paper sessions, posters, and roundtables.

Psychology, and in this issue we are concerned with educational psychology, may readily acknowledge and recognize its parentage, but in most universities, the child has long left home and seldom calls her mother. How appropriate that Alexander (2003), who suggested in her Division 15 presidential address that psychology had lost touch with its roots, should entitle her wonderful introduction to this issue, "Coming Home."

When psychological research and theory fail to be undergirded by philosophical understandings, the costs can be high. Philosophical understandings form the paradigmatic world views and foundational tenets that are at the very core of psychological formulating and theorizing. Such understandings form the beliefs and the set of agreements shared by researchers and theorists regarding how the problems within their discipline are to be understood and solved, as well as the methodological practices that will be undertaken to solve them (Kuhn, 1970). Without such foundational understandings, the process of deriving meaning becomes a frustrating enterprise, often serving to distort the very meaning sought. Philosophical understandings form our very vision of reality. Scientific disciplines that distance themselves from their philosophical underpinnings do so at their peril.

Kulikowich and DeFranco (2003) are eloquent in describing the tension between our focus on "fallible experience" versus "absolute truth," and they show how educational psychology can be informed by the types of debates that have led to the development of the science of mathematics. Woods (2003) seeks the "particular go" of truth in educational research and practice and like Murphy (2003) frames this particular go within the promulgation of pragmatic thought and practice of Peirce and Royce. Rosiek (2003) calls for a more methodologically diverse educational psychology grounded in a qualitative experimentalism inspired by Dewey's educational philosophy. What each author has in common is the call for a renewed conversation between philosophy and psychology, a conversation aimed at resolving what Bruner (1996) suggested has minimized the perceived relevance of psychological theorizing, promulgating, and professing. At the heart of the matter is their concern that, without such a dialogue, educational psychologists face the difficult task of convincing their constituencies that their theories, constructs, and research findings are both meaningful and relevant.

Why should the meanings currently proffered by psychology be considered suspect and subject to such criticism? In *Acts of Meaning,* Jerome Bruner (1990) argued that

> A reaction has set in against the narrowing and "sealing in" that are afflicting psychology. The wider intellectual community comes increasingly to ignore our journals, which seem to outsiders principally to contain intellectually unsituated little studies, each a response to a handful of like little studies. Inside psychology there is a worried restlessness about the state of our discipline and the beginning of a new search for means of reformulating it. (p. xi)

Bruner offered various reasons for the increasing isolation and perceived irrelevance of psychology. In great part, he feared that, by eschewing its philosophical underpinnings, psychology has failed to concern itself centrally with meaning and has, in fact, worked quite hard to become a meaning-free science. Our current fascination with constructivism, contextualism, social and situated cognition, cultural variation, and Lev Vygotsky notwithstanding, Bruner contends that our discipline continues entrenched in "the conventional aims of positivist science with its ideals of reductionism, causal explanation, and prediction" (p. xii; and see House, 1991). Instead, the aim of the authors of the "neat little studies" populating our journals has been to "discover a set of transcendent human universals, even if those universals are hedged by specifications about 'cross-cultural' variations" (p. 20).

Bruner (1990) argued that the hunt for these universals permeates our research, our instruction, and our way of thinking. For all that we deplore decontextualism, the quest for universal truths is not only prevalent but also deeply entrenched in our educational psychology classes and teacher education programs. Although in these constructivist times no one disputes Austin's (1962) premise that it takes a meaning to catch a meaning, more than a fair amount of what is taught in our courses consists of learning how to decontextualize and how to categorize behavior, personality, thinking styles, environmental events, and even self-beliefs in the abstract terms that theoretical formulations employ and that educational research thrives on. In his more recent book, *The Culture of Education,* Bruner (1996) again asserted, with greater conviction this time, that psychology has not successfully resolved the crisis in which it finds itself. As a consequence, "psychology, alas, seems to have lost its center and its great integrating questions" (p. 167).

The content of the articles in this issue notwithstanding, my sense is that most educational psychologists believe that, on balance, we have lost neither our center nor our great integrating questions. My sense is that most would argue that we have achieved the proper balance between universal and particular understandings in our theories, in our research, in our teaching, and in our way of thinking. The import that we give to, say, situated cognition, speaks to the fact that we have already achieved that balance. Bruner (1996) did not agree. He wrote,

> Do not be consoled by the false claim that psychologists already do [keep an eye on both the universal and the particular and do so with proper regard for how these shaping forces interact in the local situation] and [that they] have always done so. It is simply not so: sociotropes and biotropes still think they are involved in a zero-sum game; most mind-modelers would sooner be caught without their computers than be caught [making] interpretations; and all of them seem to delight in establishing separate divisions of the American Psychological Association where they can have the comfort of speaking only to their like-minded constituency. (p. 167)

Our discipline's loss of its philosophical center and relevance, as well as its enthusiasm for discovering and disseminating the universals of human cognition and conduct, has been the subject of discourse by members of our own discipline (e.g., see Cronbach, 1975; Eisner, 1991, 1993; Fenstermacher, 1979; Feyerabend, 1993; Gage, 1989; House, 1991; Thomas, 1997), by members of disciplines other than our own (see Bloom, 1994; Larmore, 1987), and even by the constituency for whom psychological theorizing and professing are intended: classroom teachers, school administrators, educational policymakers, and parents (see Baker, 1998; Kennedy, 1997).

Philosophy teaches that the critical questions in human functioning involve matters that cannot be settled by universal prescriptions. They demand attention to the forces that shape our lives, be those forces biological, historical, social, cultural, economic, or political. As Clifford Geertz (1983) argued, knowledge and action are always local, always situated in a network of particulars. Action and cognition cannot be disjoined from the situation in which they occur, hence both universals and particulars operate locally. However elegant the insight or telling the action, neither can be understood fully beyond the natural boundaries provided by the local and situated conditions in which they are embedded. Or beyond the boundaries provided by the previous understandings that individuals bring to novel information and by the philosophical understandings with which they endeavor to make sense of it. Recall Lee Cronbach's (1975) caution that "when we give proper weight to local conditions, any generalization is a working hypothesis, not a conclusion" (p. 125).

But philosophy also teaches that complex human processes must be understood as having both situational and universal properties and within each of these properties evolutionary, biological, historical, social, cultural, economic, political, and interactive components. What has been called the cultivation of judgment is required to contextualize the meaning that can be drawn from these understandings—not simply on the cultivation of judgment, of course, (we all strive for judgment of a sort) but on the cultivation of situated judgment. Kant (1965) viewed

> Judgment [as] the faculty of subsuming under rules; of distinguishing whether something does or does not stand under a

given rule…although admirable in understanding [an individual] may be wanting in natural power of judgment. He may comprehend the universal *in abstracto,* and yet not be able to distinguish whether a case *in concreto* comes under it (p. 177).

Bloom (1994) suggested that "discerning which action best instantiates a given principle requires judgment about the particularities of the situation" (p. 67). Eisner (1993) called this process "the refinement of sensibility" that increases one's ability to construct meaning within a domain. One could easily call it the refinement of taste. As the authors of this issue show, a conversation with philosophy is essential to this process.

The cultivation of judgment is enhanced when research is ecologically grounded. To this end, I applaud Rosiek's (2003) call for a more methodologically diverse educational psychology, and am I inspired by his call for a qualitative experimentalism founded on Dewey's educational philosophy. Educational psychology continues to show impatience with modes of inquiry and analysis not reducible to quantities and not assessable statistically. William James (1956) once spoke quite directly to those of us who traffic nearly exclusively in numbers:

> I for my part cannot but consider the talk of the contemporary sociological school about averages and general laws and predetermined tendencies, with its obligatory undervaluing of the importance of individual differences, as the most pernicious and immoral of fatalisms. (p. 262)

Clearly, the discipline would be well served by placing more emphasis on ecologically grounded investigations and less emphasis on survey-type studies, giving greater value to sound qualitative efforts and less to decontextualized quantitative methods that serve little function other than to confuse lay readers and practitioners and to provide fodder for psychometricians in search of a problem (Robinson, 1993).

Ironically, as Hammond (1966) observed, generalizations are actually incompatible with nomothetic theorizing, and scientific laws are never derived through statistical analysis. Kurt Lewin (1935) long ago warned that psychologists who accept the ideology of accumulated observations and generalizations drawn from statistical results have already deviated from a strictly nomothetic path. Note Brunswick's (1943) contention that, "if all the relevant conditions are known, or rather if all disturbing influences are eliminated, only one observation is needed to ascertain a general law," which is what nomothetic thinking is really all about (pp. 265–266). What characterizes good science is that it tries to elucidate something particular about a phenomenon, something related to other phenomena that also have to do with particulars. Greater conversation with its philosophical roots would help educational psychology shift its emphasis from the accumulation of facts in the pursuit of universals to the cultivation of judgment—a process that I believe could provide the disci-

pline with an opportunity to overcome its derivative and divided character and to place the study of human functioning within an integrated view of the study of all material reality.

Murphy (2003) and Woods (2003) each write with elegance and passion that greater attention to the philosophical method of pragmatism would prove beneficial to helping psychologists find the center of their discipline. I am not altogether certain that pragmatism has exercised the influence on education and educational psychology that Murphy suggests (see Pajares, 2003), but I concur that greater attention to this method of resolving philosophical disputes is warranted.

Pragmatism is of course one of the most criticized, misinterpreted, and ill-used philosophical movements of the last century. Being "pragmatic" has become synonymous with being practical, expedient, and relativistic, each independent of moral and ethical ramifications. But this is neither how Charles Peirce (1997) nor William James (1975) viewed or expounded pragmatism, which was for each more method than philosophy, a method for arriving at the meaning and truth of ideas. As Woods (2003) notes, James (1975) argued that "truth *happens* to an idea," and it happens when "we can assimilate, validate, corroborate, and verify" its agreement with reality (p. 97), "be such realities concrete or abstract" (p. 101). Pragmatism asks its practitioners to consider the value of truth in terms of its utility.

> Grant an idea or belief to be true, it says, what concrete difference will its being true make in anyone's actual life? How will the truth be realized? What experiences will be different from those which would obtain if the belief were false? What, in short, is truth's *cash-value* in experiential terms? (James, 1975, p. 97)

Criticisms of pragmatism are typically predicated on the assumed effectiveness of questionable short-term actions, but determining the cash value of an idea requires determining the practical, ethical/moral, and intellectual long-term consequences that will emanate from the actions the idea will generate.

Pragmatism would call educational psychology to exactness. After all, James (1975) begins his essay, "What Pragmatism Means," with the amusing story of the squirrel and the tree and illustrates the first principle of pragmatism with the observation that the rightness of a contention often simply depends on what we practically mean by the words we use. As Murphy (2003) eloquently observes, one of the problems of failing to adhere to the rigors of philosophical discourse is that educational psychologists find themselves in the discomforting position of lacking "clear criterion of meaning" for many of the terms used.

There are two examples I always find amusing. The first deals with terms related to teachers' beliefs. Reviewing research in this area (Pajares, 1992), it soon became evident to me that researchers were using markedly different terms

to describe a quite similar process. I found that "beliefs" were often called attitudes, values, judgments, axioms, opinions, ideology, perceptions, conceptions, conceptual systems, preconceptions, dispositions, implicit theories, explicit theories, personal theories, internal mental processes, action strategies, rules of practice, practical principles perspectives, repertories of understanding, social strategy, and personal knowledge. The second example deals with the proliferation and similarity of conceptualization of terms related to one's self-perception of competence (see Pajares, 1996). In this area, researchers can call these perceptions self-efficacy, task specific self-concept, self-concept of ability, expectancies, expectancy beliefs, expectancy for success, performance expectancies, perceptions of competence, perceptions of task difficulty, self-perceptions of ability, ability perceptions, perceived ability, perceived competence, self-appraisals of ability, perceived control, subjective competence, and, the ever useful, confidence. Achievement goal theorists know in just what a quandary they find themselves when they must explain that mastery goals are often referred to as task goals or learning goals, performance goals as ego goals, and so on and so forth. One of the rewards of striving for greater rigor in thought should be the achievement of greater clarity in "word making." If only for this reason (although she handsomely outlines others), I welcome Murphy's (2003) contention that "it is time for educational psychologists to both embrace and share pragmatism of purpose and method with philosophy."

As part of preparing an invited address on the future of motivation research, my friend Tim Urdan recently asked some colleagues for their thoughts on the matter. These sorts of divination enterprises are always risky. In the 1960s, Decca Records turned down a recording contract with the Beatles with the unprophetic evaluation, "We don't like their sound. Groups of guitars are on their way out."

Throwing caution to the wind, however, I responded that, although I could not presume to know the direction that educational psychology or motivation research would take in the future, I thought we would all be foolish not to realize that many powerful insights about psychological processes likely will not come from within mainstream psychology. Sigmund Freud (1961, 1991) conjectured that the future of psychology would lie with biology. Steven Pinker (2002) made much the same claim in his new book, *The Blank Slate.* If this should prove to be the case, I am not altogether sure what this will mean for educational psychology. It does seem to me almost unavoidable, however, that the architecture of the mind and of the nature of learning is more likely to be crafted in the future by cognitive science, neuroscience, behavioral genetics, and evolutionary psychology than by either psychology or educational psychology. As Pinker also points out, however, it would be a serious error to distance philosophical thinking from scientific research and theory, for it will be precisely such thinking that will guide investigators toward the metaphysical, epistemological, and ethical questions and methods that will be at the heart of scientific advancement.

REFERENCES

Alexander, P. A. (2003). Coming home: Educational psychology's philosophical pilgrimage. *Educational Psychologist, 38,* 129–132.

Austin, J. (1962). *How to do things with words.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Baker, K. (1998). Magic bullets, slate, and Stradivarius: Analogies, research, and policy making. *Phi Delta Kappan, 79,* 402–405.

Bloom, L. (1994). *Moral perception and particularity.* Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press.

Brunswik, E. (1943). Organismic achievement and environmental probability. *Psychological Review, 50,* 255–272.

Bruner, J. (1990). *Acts of meaning.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Bruner, J. (1996). *The culture of education.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Cronbach, L. (1975). Beyond the two disciplines of psychology. *American Psychologist, 30,* 116–127.

Eisner, E. (1991). *The enlightened eye: Qualitative inquiry and the enhancement of educational practice.* New York: Macmillan.

Eisner, E. (1993). Forms of understanding and the future of educational research. *Educational Researcher, 22*(2), 5–11.

Fenstermacher, G. (1979). A philosophical consideration of recent research on teacher effectiveness. In L. S. Shulman (Ed.), *Review of research in education* (Vol. 6, pp. 157–185). Itsaca, IL: F. E. Peacock.

Feyerabend, P. (1993). *Against method.* London: Verso/New Left Books.

Freud, S. (1961). *Beyond the pleasure principle.* New York: Norton.

Freud, S. (1991). *On narcissism: An introduction.* New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Gage, N. L. (1989). The paradigm wars and their aftermath. *Educational Researcher, 18*(7), 4–10.

Gardner, H. (1994). Scientific psychology: Should we bury it or praise it? *New Ideas in Psychology, 10,* 179–190.

Geertz, C. (1983). *Local knowledge.* New York: Basic Books.

Hammond, K. R. (Ed.). (1966). *The psychology of Egon Brunswik.* New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.

House, E. (1991). Realism in research. *Educational Researcher, 20*(2), 2–9, 25.

James, W. (1956). *The will to believe.* New York: Dover.

James, W. (1975). *Pragmatism.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Kant, I. (1965). *Critique of pure reason* (L. W. Beck, Trans.). New York: St. Martin's Press.

Kennedy, M. (1997). The connection between research and practice. *Educational Researcher, 26,* 4–12.

Kuhn, T. S., (1970). *The structure of scientific revolution* (2nd ed.). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Kulikowich, J. M., & DeFranco, T. C. (2003). Philosophy's role in characterizing the nature of educational psychology and mathematics. *Educational Psychologist, 38,* 147–156.

Larmore, C. E. (1987). *Patterns of moral complexity.* Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press.

Lewin, K. (1935). *Dynamic theory of personality.* New York: McGraw Hill.

Murphy, P. K. (2003). The philosophy in thee: Tracing philosophical influences in educational psychology. *Educational Psychologist, 38,* 137–145.

Pajares, F. (1992). Teachers' beliefs and educational research: Cleaning up a messy construct. *Review of Educational Research, 62,* 307–332.

Pajares, F. (1996). Self-efficacy beliefs in academic settings. *Review of Educational Research, 66,* 543–578.

Pajares, F. (2003). William James: Our father who begat us. In B. J. Zimmerman & D. H. Schunk, (Eds.), *Educational psychology: One-hundred years of contributions* (pp. 41–64). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc.

Peirce, C. S. (1997). *Pragmatism as a principle and method of right thinking: The 1903 Harvard lectures on pragmatism.* New York: State University of New York Press.

Pinker, S. (2002). *The blank slate: The modern denial of human nature.* New York: Viking.

Robinson, D. N. (1993). Is there a Jamesian tradition in psychology. *American Psychologist, 48,* 638–643.

Rosiek, J. (2003). A qualitative research methodology psychology can call its own: Dewey's call for qualitative experimentalism. *Educational Psychologist, 38,* 165–175.

Thomas, G. (1997). What's the use of theory? *Harvard Educational Review, 67,* 75–104.

Woods, B. S. (2003). Happenings, truth, and the "particular go" of philosophy's potential contribution to educational psychology. *Educational Psychologist, 38,* 157–164.