

Series Editor's Preface

Advancing General Psychology: From Aristotle to New Dialectics

The aim of this new SpringerBriefs Series—Theoretical Advances in Psychology—is to give the international and interdisciplinary readership direct access to specifically theoretical innovations that can be found in the field. This is not an easy task—theoretical innovations in contemporary psychology are usually hidden behind the socially proliferated label of ‘empirical research.’

Nothing can be more confusing than such assertions. Every time I hear that expression I am surprised—such statements seem to be empty calls for something that is already solidly in place. All sciences have their empirical sides—so, why is it important to single out the ‘empirical’ for an extra emphasis? From the vantage point of serious advancement of knowledge all empirical enterprises in science depend on the nonempirical (theoretical and meta-theoretical) intellectual frames all through the research process—from the beginning of asking the research questions to the end of gaining new knowledge. Thus, if the label ‘empirical’ were to denote “research free of theory”—it cannot be scientific, other than by social convention or administrative declaration. All science is theoretical in its generalizing role—gaining new knowledge—while it keeps involving specific theory-defined arenas for empirical inquiry.

Why, then, is the label ‘empirical science’ used? Why emphasize the obvious? The key here may be in the macrosocial context for science—talking of ‘empirical science’ is an ideological commitment. It is a ‘loyalty oath’ to a specific, socially prescribed, mode of operation for scientists. It calls for accepting the primacy of inductive generalization at the expense of its abductive and deductive counterparts. Yet purely inductive generalization has never provided good solutions for any science. Induction works in tandem with deduction and abduction.

A counterargument could be made at this junction—‘empirical science’ is ‘evidence based,’ driven by ‘the data’ and free of ‘speculations’ beyond ‘the data.’ I smile. There is no panacea in ‘the data.’ When I hear my colleagues urging to “let the data speak for themselves” I am ready to ask—“which language do the data

speak, and how did they learn to speak it?" Psychology needs theories that allow us to generalize our understanding through the data—but not confined by the sweet rhetoric of 'the data.' Our SpringerBriefs series is devoted to that task.

Our new series starts well—trying to catch up with the intellectual productivity of Aristotle is a good start for psychology in the twenty-first century. Niels Engelsted reminds us about the dire need to reestablish the theoretical focus upon general psychology in the otherwise theories phobic contemporary enterprise of psychological research. General psychology—a core theoretical frame for the discipline up to mid-twentieth century—has become an appendix for most psychology curriculae around the world. It is even cut out of some study courses as an unnecessary remnant of the past. On the background of such historical change, Engelsted's message needs to be carefully considered—trying to catch up with Aristotle is needed more than ever in our twenty-first century, where we force the theoretical voices from the past to fit into a 'history and systems' classification in a university course taken not very often and not too seriously.

Aristotle had of course much to say in many fields of knowledge at his time. So does Engelsted in ours—bringing together relevant ideas from various fields, and synthesizing these not only into a theoretical whole but into a pleasing one. His cheeky humor is a rare additional treat to contemporary psychologists who are usually confronted with research reports of no elegance, and (often) even less knowledge. This book—differently from many written in psychology—is a masterful exposure of basic ideas that has lingered on for two millennia. The reader can have the pleasure to think together with the author. It is a rare treat of honest intellectual sharing.

Perhaps the first fundamental distinction the reader finds in this book is the two ways of making distinction, one which separates and excludes the other, the other which separates and—by the very act of separating—unites with the other. In Engelsted's own terms, there are two setups, "dash- psychology (S—O), where a dash connects subject to object, and slash- psychology (S/O), where a slash keeps them apart. In the first, the subject and object are connected and separated by an interspace, in the latter by an interface. The interface connection is causal and physical and based on local motion; the interspace connection is intentional and non-physical, and based on locomotion."

The difference between interspace and interface has been the crucial meta-theoretical issue through all of psychology's history as *Wissenschaft*. Most of the empirical efforts of our contemporary psychology are focusing on constructing various versions of interfaces by invented notions that are of technical kind (e.g. "significant difference or relation between A and B"). Such constructed interfaces are inserted into the interspaces—and thus replace the connecting 'dashes' with separating 'slashes.' Asserting a difference between something (A) and something else (B) leads us to conceptual "cutting" of possible ties between A and B. If we conclude that "men are different from women" we guide ourselves toward losing the focus on how men and women are interdependent with one another.

The implications of such “slashing” are profound. Usually such replacement is the final result of an inquiry. It should not be. Where the interface is put into place, the study of the interspaces needs to begin—but it rarely does. The inserted ‘slash’ is like a parasite that consumes the richness of the interspace, explaining it with simplified but plausible causal attributions, thus keeping it from being further studied. The “empirical science of psychology” is filled with many constructed causal entities that are treated as explanations.

It is here the traditions, which were started—but not developed—by the *Naturphilosophie* of the Continental European kind, can be brought back to attention. Among these the main underutilized theoretical system of thought is that of dialectics—introduced by Solomon Maimon (1753–1800), Johann Gottlieb Fichte (1762–1814) and Georg Hegel (1770–1831), dismissed by the avalanche of the *Naturwissenschaften* in late nineteenth century, resuscitated for ideological reasons in Soviet Union in the 1920s, and forgotten again by the end of the twentieth century. Only Klaus Riegel (1925–1977) expressed hopes for developing a dialectical version of psychology in the 1970s American context, while Klaus Holzkamp (1927–1995) systematically advanced dialectical ideas within his version of Critical Psychology. Steinar Kvale (1938–2008) and Svend Brinkmann in Denmark have been linking dialectical ideas with concrete qualitative methodology. Yet these ideas need to be utilized also at the theoretical level.

Dialectical thought introduced a conceptual revolution to *Naturphilosophie* at the turn of the nineteenth century. A core invention of that tradition, the focus on transformation between quantity and quality, remains foreign to our contemporary psychology two centuries after its introduction. The reason is axiomatic, psychological phenomena are assumed to be reducible to variation in their quantity. The quantity, exemplified by the operation of quantification to turn phenomena into data, represents a given or assumed quality. Yet the quality is expected to remain ontologically stable, no transformations are assumed.

This renders the discipline blind to qualitative transformations that are rampant in human lives. In contrast, the dialectical philosophy emphasizes the phenomena of ‘qualitative leaps’ in nature, psyche, and society. These are central in nature, but enormously difficult to handle by the classical logical mindset of the history of Occidental philosophies and psychologies. The focus on “measurement” that prevails in psychology has stopped further inquiries into such leaps since the late nineteenth century. Even that part of psychology that would encounter such leaps most frequently—developmental psychology—has rarely attempted to develop theoretical models of such transitions in quality.

It is here that the centrally relevant new elaboration that Engelsted introduces in his book needs special attention. In Chap. 11, he describes and develops the mechanism used in dialectical thinking to explain such ‘leaps’—that of second negation. To play it out in a very usual theme in psychology:

FIRST NEGATION: “Men and women are not similar.” In empirical terms this is expressed as in “we found statistically significant gender differences.”

SECOND NEGATION: "The statement men and women are not similar is irrelevant—as even if they differ in some ways, they are interdependent as inevitable joint creators of the next generation."

This statement does not bring our decision back to "men and women are similar," but to "men and women are similar while being not similar." This is not a confusion of opposites, but their counterpositioning, and a focus on a higher level systemic unity that renders the local differences irrelevant. Such meta-level contradiction opens the possibility for a new look that goes beyond the previous ones. In other words, something else than difference or non-difference matters, something that unites the separated phenomena ('men' versus 'women') in ways that renders the first negation mute. The relation between the two—"men" relating with "women"—implies something else than mere difference or non-difference. The second negation leads to the study of interspaces, while the first negation results in a 'slash' in Engelsted's terms.

It is at the moment of second negation that novel forms emerge—negation of the first negation constitutes no return to the opposite that was posited first, but to the forward move to search for a different way to understand the difference. What matters is something else than the difference. In the case of gender this could be new forms of coordinating the lives of men and women, (marriage types, emotional relations within the family, etc.), all of which are complex social forms that constitute the interface between human beings embedded in bigger social networks.

Refocusing on the second negation is important. It is de facto utilized already in physical chemistry over the last half century; Ilya Prigogine's discovery of the restructuring of chemical substances under far from equilibrium contexts is a material example of this basic notion. Psychology is of course better positioned to find evidence for the ways in which the second negation works. For human psychology it is basic. Any generalization involving a move beyond the here and now action context involves some version of the second negation. A visitor to the Musée d'Orsay in Paris who is confronted with Gustave Courbet's masterpiece *The Origin of the World* would quickly move beyond the possibility that what is being depicted is a part of a nude body to the generalization of the beauty of the human life-giving powers. Art requires psychological distancing—which involves move to second negation, beyond the first. The processes of dialectical synthesis would allow psychology to consider phenomena of consciousness and self-consciousness in their own terms. This is the pathway that Niels Engelsted's contribution to science makes possible.

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Jaan Valsiner

Preface

When 50 years ago in Copenhagen I started in university, one of our professors told us new students that it was up to each of us to make his own map of psychology. The book presented here is the map I've made, and an account of the travels that went into making it. A Zeigarnick effect put to rest, so to speak, a mission accomplished.

You are not supposed to make your own maps; the whole point of education is that you should be shown the way by people in the know and not be on your own. Henry David Thoreau jibed that education makes straight-cut ditches of free, meandering brooks. Yes, it is meant to; education is the very channel of civilization, and the passage must be unceasingly maintained. Unspoiled nature may be fine, and it may not always be true that self-taught people have bad teachers and even worse students, but beginners are not experts, and amateurs like brooks tend to flow all over the place when they shouldn't.

Nevertheless, in every other generation or so, students have been left to find their own bearings when the tides of historical change have disrupted the channel, thrown open the institutional locks and settled paradigms, and left the old attendants without ability and will to form and regiment. To make a virtue of necessity, such occasions have been hailed as windows of freedom and opportunity. Imploring man's "inability to make use of his understanding without direction from another," Immanuel Kant went overboard, declaring Enlightenment to be "man's release from his self-incurred tutelage," and its motto to be 'Dare to know!'¹ No one would want to impugn Kant and Enlightenment; and, of course, there is an upside to these outbreaks as well. Which goes to show that both brooks and ditches have a place in science and education, if not necessarily in equal measure.

Ditch or brook is today a temperamental choice, only in our case there was no choice. Finding ourselves in the precarious window of opportunity, even those born to be ditches had to be brooks scouring the landscape for courses to run. For better or worse, it was this that made my generation—the class of 68—special.

¹Kant (1784).

With everybody left to their own devices, what were mine? Like schoolboys of old, I had become a natural history buff, avidly collecting insects and fossils, and with my class mate Lasse first to embrace dinosaurs in primary school.² Years later we joined together with Kurt Malling from primary school in an attempt to reproduce at home James McConnell's memory transfer experiments with planarians; it failed miserably, but I made another try at university, and the many, many hours spent in company with that endearing little invertebrate made its indelible mark. Later I upgraded to rats and mice, and since a chance encounter with Robert Ardrey's *African Genesis* when in high school in California had already made me conversant with our hominid ancestors, I'd come the full evolutionary circle. It was this biological grounding—in combination with invaluable insider knowledge gained from an episode of depressive illness—that led me to the theory of mind presented in the book.

Of equal significance were the two great intellectual achievements that until the window closed again informed my generation: Marxism and Feminism. For introduction to the latter I greatly owe the tutelage of Bette, now long my life partner. Though not so easily aligned, enforced with the proper biological scaffolding, the insights of Marxism and Feminism almost effortlessly led to the understanding of the human being proposed in the book. In keeping with the belief of my generation that science and education should not be sequestered from the great issues of our time, this understanding is also a plea for a better future.

Mentioned should also be patriotism, some might say chauvinism. Having been handed the keys to the shop, some of us did not willingly wish to surrender them again and became true patriots of psychology when the integrity of the field was threatened by foreign forces and fifth columns. This ethos should be evident throughout the book. The account of intentionality, for instance, is basically a declaration of independence, psychology's claim for autonomy as domain and science; similarly, the call for a general psychology is basically a warning for psychology to stand united.

Whether students need teachers or not, teachers need students. No sooner had we been left effectively teacherless, when we ourselves were called to be the teachers for the next batch of students. It is a well-known secret that the best way to learn a subject is to teach it, and for that you need students. This is one reason the numerous students I have taught through the years have a great share in the book; I owe them all a deep debt for educating me. For their never flagging backing, I particularly wish to thank my three early students Annette Aboulafia, Magnus Dahl, and Torben Kjeldsen, who themselves went on to become teachers of psychology at universities in Denmark and abroad.

The route traveled was never a crowded one, but so much more exclusive the company. For their friendship and intellectual companionship I am particularly

²As natural history presenter for Danish Broadcasting Corporation, Lasse—aka Jens Olesen—went on to become a Danish David Attenborough.

indebted to Jens Mammen and Ole Elstrup, through many years my fellow travelers and co-combatants in the struggle for a sensible psychology.

Finally, a warm thanks to Jaan Valsiner, my editor, for offering this brook a passage way out of the wilderness; and if—through no fault of his—it has overflowed, hopefully it has watered some far afield pastures in the process. You decide.

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Catching Up With Aristotle

A Journey in Quest of General Psychology

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