# Incorporating Philosophy in Every Psychology Course and Why it Matters

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Psychology undergraduate students often have the notion that philosophy is dead and gone. I say this because many of these same students have overtly voiced this view when I have attempted to introduce philosophical concepts at the beginning of a Theories of Personality Course. They are *Psychology Majors*, after all, the students explain, and they often wonder out loud what we might be doing exploring various philosophical assumptions at the beginning of a Personality course. In this particular course, I often begin with an examination of Aristotle’s four causes, and in many cases, the student response is to ask pointedly, “Aristotle? Who is he, again? Ancient Greece rings a bell, but why do we have to study this?” Even if students have a general or specific sense of, in this case, Aristotle’s contributions, they often fail to understand why we might be applying these philosophical contributions to a discipline like psychology.

I have taught psychology both at a state university and, currently, at a private liberal arts university. In general, the students in the liberal arts are often more versed in Greek philosophy given the curriculum requirements in the liberal arts. Nevertheless, the relationship between philosophy and psychology often remains elusive even for the students in the liberal arts, and they are genuinely perplexed as to how the two disciplines (i.e., philosophy and psychology) might relate.

My response to the students’ protestations is usually two-fold. First, and probably most important to the purposes of this Teaching Tips article, is to demonstrate for the students the pervasive and very alive nature of philosophy and philosophical assumptions. I try to make very clear to my students that philosophy is not stuck in the age-old past where they may have visions of men in togas debating each other amidst ancient Greek architecture. Rather, I argue, philosophy is alive and well, animating and breathing life into our psychological theories, but often doing so in a hidden and tacit way. The challenge is to uncover these hidden philosophical assumptions and frameworks that provide the scaffolding for psychological theories. Indeed, I like to remind my students that all of them have a philosophy (Jaspers, 1954). The question is whether they (a) know that they have a philosophy, and (b) whether they can articulate the relevant aspects of that philosophy. Hence, if there is no escape from philosophical assumptions, it is probably better to be philosophically informed than to be philosophically ignorant.

Second, I explain to the students that if they want to learn to think critically — if they want to subject theories in the behavioral sciences to careful and critical analysis — then they must learn how to identify underlying and embedded philosophical assumptions. However, this kind of critical thinking is tricky. Given the often times tacit and covert nature of philosophical assumptions, they have a tendency to become concretized as taken-for-granted aspects of reality. Albert Einstein (as cited in Slife, 1993) expressed something similar, although as a heeded warning, when he argued that the “road of scientific progress is frequently blocked for long periods” by concepts or assumptions that “assume so great an authority over us that we forget their terrestrial origin and accept them as unalterable facts” (p. vi).

**Inescapable Philosophies in Psychology**

An initial way to help students begin to think both philosophically and critically is to introduce them to a vignette or narrative with hidden assumptions and ask for student reactions to the vignette. The ultimate pedagogical purpose is to help the students identify some of the driving philosophical assumptions embedded in their own philosophies as manifest in their responses. As mentioned above, this can be tricky, because such philosophical assumptions are often covert and tacit. To help students understand the covert nature of assumptions, I tell students that philosophical assumptions have been described as the "ideas behind ideas" (Slife & Woolery, 2006, p. 218). Said differently, philosophical assumptions are the ideas that are "logically necessary" for an "idea to be valid or successful" (Slife & Whoolery, 2006, p. 218). The upshot is that students (and really all of us) make commitments to beliefs that are already logically connected to larger ideational frameworks, although these frameworks are often hidden from view. These frameworks are hidden because they are presupposed as the givens of reality, and like the light in a room, such presupposed givens are often themselves unseen.

**The Friendship Vignette: Helping Students Identify a Hidden and Personal Philosophy**

One particular vignette — the friendship vignette — has been discussed as a teaching tool already (Yanchar & Slife, 2004), and similarly, I find it very helpful in the classroom for personalizing the issue of philosophical assumptions and helping students identify their own hidden philosophies. The friendship vignette describes a situation in which a friend has been rude and insulting to the student. The question put to the students is how each would respond to the relational situation. Students can write down their responses. A discussion follows based upon the varied responses from the students, initiating a dialogue about why students think their own responses to the friendship vignette vary. That is, why are their responses so different?

This is the portion of the exercise that is particularly relevant to helping the students identify their own personal philosophy. As mentioned, there will probably be varied responses from students, but their differences can likely be accounted for by helping the students identify the tacit philosophical assumptions driving their beliefs. For instance, some students might insist on confronting the friend and holding her accountable for her actions; some students may overlook the friend's behavior for various reasons (e.g., hormonal or neurochemical factors, psychosocial stressors); some students may avoid the friend altogether, sending a message that they do not appreciate such behavior from the friend. While the instructor may need to foster the critical discussion, each of the responses to the friendship vignette makes tacit assumptions about the "nature" or character of human nature. And it is these assumptions and the students' tacit endorsement of them that need to be brought to an explicit level of awareness.

**Personal Philosophical Assumptions**

Instructors can use a chart like the one displayed here (Table 1) in the ensuing classroom discussion (for a related chart, see Yanchar & Slife, 2004). Students can be encouraged to consider their responses to the friendship vignette and the role that the following assumptions may or may not have played in their conceptualization. The students and the instructor can then fill in the chart according to the role the philosophical assumptions played in their responses. In the students' responses, was the friend viewed as agentic (i.e., as having a free will)? Was the friend viewed as determined (i.e., as not capable of behaving otherwise)? Was the friend affected or unaffected by the environment (i.e., was the

environment viewed as a force acting upon the friend in terms of environmental stressors or other environmental psychosocial factors? Or was the friend viewed as an independent force acting upon the environment?) Was the friend viewed as selfish or altruistic? What was the role of biology in understanding the friend's behavior, if any?

Once some of these assumptions are identified for the student, some of the *implications* of the driving assumptions can be identified as well. In other words, the ideas that drive other ideas are not simply neutral — they have real-world consequences. For instance, if a student overlooks the friend's behavior because she views the friend's behavior in terms of neural chemicals and other neural events in the brain, what are the implications of that assumption for understanding her friend's personal responsibility? Can one hold certain kinds of deterministic assumptions and integrate personal responsibility? What are the implications for understanding behavioral change in a more professional context in light of these materialistic assumptions? Admittedly, this exercise identifies and conceptualizes philosophical assumptions in concrete terms and fails to recognize subtleties and complexities that are often part and parcel of philosophical positions. However, the exercise usually serves the students well as a beginning reference point for initial awareness and identification of philosophical points of view.

## Incorporate Philosophy as an Aspect of Critical Thinking

A second, practical possibility to encourage philosophical awareness in psychology is to incorporate philosophical assumptions as an aspect of more formal, critical thinking in the classroom. Critical thinking has been highly prized, both within and without the discipline, as an essential intellectual and professional skill (Halpern, 2003; McLean et al., 2007; Sternberg, Roediger, & Halpern, 2007). According to some scholars, critical thinking requires at least two steps (Slife, Yanchar, & Reber, 2005). First, critical thinking necessitates that students be able to identify the underlying assumptions and worldviews of a particular theory or discipline. Second, critical thinking requires conceptualizing alternative assumptions and ideas to those that are identified in the first step of analysis.

As psychological instructors, we would probably all wish for our students to think more critically. Part of what is being suggested here is that students be able to think *philosophically* in order to think *critically*. One way I have attempted to sharpen my students' critical thinking skills is to expose them to Aristotle and the four causes as I mentioned in the introduction. Aristotle's four causes (i.e., the *efficient, material, formal,* and *final* causes) are grounding philosophical assumptions for helping students understand the taken-for-granted meanings of causality that are embedded in psychological theory and method. In other words, the seemingly obvious concept of causality is put to philosophical and critical analysis.

## Applying Philosophical Causal Assumptions to Psychological Theory: A Critical Analysis Tool

One relatively easy pedagogical tool that I have used in the classroom to help students learn, understand, and apply causal assumptions to psychological theory is a group discussion exercise. Students are broken into groups (depending upon the size of the class) and are given a worksheet with short

quotations from various psychological sources. I usually use both contemporary research sources (e.g., quotations from research in *American Psychologist* or other peer reviewed journals) as well as respected historical sources, such as quotations from personality and counseling theorists (e.g., Carl Rogers, B.F. Skinner, Freud, Albert Ellis). Students are instructed to identify the underlying Aristotelian causal philosophical assumption that is tacitly presumed in the quotation.

At the risk of being redundant, I will briefly define each of the four causes here and provide a few examples of the kinds of quotations that I would include on a discussion sheet. The *efficient cause* refers to the linear antecedent-to-consequent motion over time view of causality to which many of us are already tacitly familiar; the *material cause* refers to the material or substance of which something consists; the *formal cause* refers to the form, blueprint, or overarching organization (whole or gestalt) that inheres in something; and the *final cause* refers to the end or purpose that is associated with something. Although each of these "definitions" is correct, they are obviously very formal and abstract. For these definitions to be meaningful to students, each definition will likely require previous discussion that centers on application. For example, what does the material cause really mean as it is applied to the behavioral sciences? The point is that students will need to understand the link between the abstract philosophical definition of causality and the application for the exercise to be meaningful.

Once the students are presented with the information about philosophical causal assumptions, the group activity follows. The discussion sheet might include the following directions:

Part I. Below are quotes that make assumptions about causality. Identify which "cause" is implied in each quote and explain why you chose that particular "cause" (i.e., efficient, material, formal, final). Defend your position.

Some sample quotations include the following:

If we look at the matter more closely, we shall find the following law holding in the development of all psychic happenings: *we cannot think, feel, will, or act without the perception of some goal. (final cause)*

Adler, A. (1968). *The practice and theory of individual psychology.* Totowa, N. J. Littlefield, Adams, & Co.

During the last two decades of the twentieth century, both psychiatrists and their patients have steadily recognized that mental illnesses are diseases of the brain…We will understand how the cells in our brains go bad when their molecules go bad, and we will understand how this is expressed at the level of systems such as attention and memory so that human beings develop diseases such as schizophrenia and depression. (*material cause*)

Andreasen, N. (2001). *Brave new brain: Conquering mental illness in the era of the genome*. London: Oxford University Press.

Personality is shaped by temperament and cognitive schemas. Cognitive schemas are structures that contain the individual's fundamental beliefs and assumptions. Schemas develop early in life from

personal experience and identification with significant others. These concepts are reinforced by further learning experiences and, in turn, influence the formation of beliefs, values, and attitudes. (*efficient cause*)

Beck, A. & Weishaar, M. (2005). Cognitive therapy. In R.J. Corsini & D. Wedding (Eds). *Current psychotherapies* (7th ed). Belmont, CA: Thompson Brooks/Cole.

**Critical Analysis in Action**

Once the students can identify the predominant causal assumption embedded in the psychological explanation or theory (as exemplified in the quotations above), the instructor can lead fruitful discussions regarding the implications that logically follow from the philosophical assumptions themselves. This is part and parcel of the critical thinking process. For example, material explanations of human behavior (e.g., explanations that focus on neurocognitive, neurobiological, or neurochemical processes) are gaining in prominence in the behavioral sciences (Bennet & Hacker, 2003; Garza & Fisher-Smith, in press). How do we understand the rising prominence of material causal assumptions in psychological explanations? What is the role of alternative forms of causal assumptions in psychological explanations?

In addition, students can apply such critical thinking skills to their own personal philosophies. Such critical analysis offers students the opportunity to examine how their own personal philosophies make similar or dissimilar assumptions as compared to other scholars (e.g., scholars like those quoted on the discussion sheet). This kind of analysis and comparison is helpful, because it can provide students with intelligible insight as to why they may have intuitively liked or disliked some scholars and researchers, but have been unable to articulate why.

For instance, after careful critical analysis, students may discover a tacit confound or collusion between their own personal assumptions and the assumptions of a personality theory or theorist. B. F. Skinner may make perfect sense intuitively to the student, because she already presupposes efficient causation in her personal philosophy (similarly to Skinner and behaviorism – reinforcements occur piecemeal over time). Alternatively, a student may find that she is repelled by Skinner and behaviorism (although the "logic" of the theory seems adequate). After some critical analysis, the student discovers that what she is repelled by is not so much Skinner's theory per se, but differences in underlying philosophical assumption. Whereas Skinner's behaviorism endorses *efficient causation*, perhaps the student (after her own philosophical examination) realizes that she endorses *final causation*, and not surprisingly, is more drawn to the psychoanalytic camp (e.g., pathology takes on a purpose or has intelligence in this model).

The upshot is that all of these questions, and the sophisticated discussion that these questions might engender, require a critical analysis that hinges on philosophical awareness. While the discussion example above emphasizes Aristotelian causal assumptions, the point is not to underscore Aristotle, but rather to highlight the inescapability and applicability of philosophical assumptions to psychology. An instructor could just as easily conduct a critical analysis of psychological theory by orienting the students to epistemological assumptions (i.e. assumptions about knowledge) or to formal, logical assumptions (i.e., assumptions about logic). What is important is that the students come to see how the philosophical assumptions – whatever their stripe – animate the psychological theories. This is why philosophy is not dead and gone – rather, as suggested earlier, it is alive and well. The question is

whether we as instructors can help our students identify the crucial assumptions and their consequences for psychological theory and practice. This philosophical astuteness is what makes students better critical thinkers, and over the long term, what serves as the challenge to the potential roadblocks to scientific progress that Einstein articulated earlier. ?

Table 1: Sample Chart for Students' Personal Philosophical Assumptions

| **Philosophical Assumptions** | **Implications for Personal Responsibility** | **Implications for Psychotherapy & Change** |
|---|---|---|
| Free Will | | |
| Determinism | | |
| Affected by the Environment | | |
| Unaffected by the Environment | | |
| Altruism | | |
| Hedonism | | |
| Role of Biology (Materialism) | | |

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