Division 24 Program Theme for 2012 APA Convention:

*Psychology and Philosophy: Renewing the Relationship*

In 1913, Wilhelm Wundt (1832-1920) published a small book titled *Psychology’s Struggle for Existence (Die Psychologie im Kampf ums Dasein)*. In the foreword to that work, Wundt wrote:

“Leafing through the first section of this work, one might be inclined to view it as a provocation. But one who decides to read through to the end will be convinced that, on the contrary, the work could well be regarded as a peace offering. In the opinion of some, philosophy and psychology should divorce from each other. Now, it is well known that when a married couple seeks a divorce, both members usually are at fault. In these pages it will be shown that the same is true in this instance, and that if this matter takes the course that both parties want, philosophy will lose more than it will gain, but psychology will be damaged the most. Hence, the argument over the question of whether or not psychology is or is not a philosophical science is for psychology a struggle for its very existence.” (Wundt, 1913)

A scant four years later, Wundt’s much younger countryman, the philosopher-psychologist William Stern (1871-1938) would write:

In its problems, methods, and its current findings, psychology has established itself as a distinct discipline. In doing so, it has to a large extent tried to make itself independent from philosophy. But let us not deceive ourselves: the impact of philosophy throughout psychology is far more significant than it might seem to be at first glance, and the claim here is not merely that philosophy has provided psychology with a point of departure. Basic philosophical convictions determine not only the preconditions and general conceptual basis of psychological work, but are also contained within specific conceptualizations and interpretations of psychological phenomena, extending into the formulation of every particular question and every individual explanatory category. Nor is this dependence of psychology on a philosophical worldview any less when psychological findings are being applied to questions of cultural life. Indeed, in this context the influence is perhaps even stronger, because this domain of application – one need only think about the domain of pedagogy – is itself inseparably bound up with its own philosophical considerations. . . . Hence, it is a matter of some urgency to build a bridge from the side of empirical psychology to the basic questions of a philosophical worldview.” (Stern, 2010, p. 111; original German-language work published in 1917)

The concerns expressed in these writings by Wundt (1913) and Stern (1917) to maintain strong intellectual ties between philosophy and psychology were not widely shared. Early 20th century psychology proceeded to distance itself ever further from philosophy, and by the time Stern had settled at Duke University in Durham, North Carolina after fleeing Nazi Germany, he could mention in a letter to his friend and colleague, the Freiburg philosopher Jonas Cohn (1869-1947) a pleasing but unexpected
and most unusual development. In that letter, which was dated July 16, 1937, Stern wrote:

“It will interest you to learn that next year I will also be a member of the Philosophy Department [at Duke]. This is especially pleasing to me because it is customary there for [the psychology and philosophy] departments to be sharply separated.” (Stern letter to Cohn, July 16, 1937; published in Lück and Löwisch, 1994, p. 180).

In the U.S., the ascendance of behaviorism gave considerable impetus to the divorce of psychology from philosophy that Wundt had found so ill advised. Indeed, in his 1928 book, *The Ways of Behaviorism*, J. B. Watson (1878-1958) averred that behaviorism sounded “a threatening note to the whole of philosophy” (Watson, 1928, p. 14), and he elaborated this point as follows:

“With the behavioristic point of view now becoming dominant, it is hard to find a place for what has been called philosophy. Philosophy is passing – has all but passed, and unless new issues arise which will give a foundation for a new philosophy, the world has seen its last great philosopher.” (Watson, 1928, p. 14)

From the perspective of the early 21st century, it appears rather more likely that the world has seen its last great behaviorist, a development to which B. F. Skinner (1904-1990) seems to have resigned himself in the article completed on the evening before he passed away in August of 1990 (Skinner, 1990). However, strong traces of the positivist-empiricist orientation that was so congenial to behaviorism remain firmly entrenched within psychology (Costa and Shimp, 2011; Harré, 2005), and, at least partly for this reason, psychology remains largely estranged from philosophy.

Now, a century on since Wundt’s dire prediction of the fate of a psychology unconnected to philosophy, a prediction seemingly confirmed by Gazzaniga’s (1998) proclamation of psychology’s death, the time seems propitious for raising the question posed in the title of this document, and it is with this in mind that I propose to make that question the central theme for Division 24’s program at the 2012 APA convention in Orlando, FL.

Questions abound. Traditionally, philosophers have been concerned with matters ontological, epistemological, metaphysical, and ethical. In each of these domains, which is to say throughout philosophy, the quest is for *conceptual clarity*, and it is here where psychologists might find philosophical discourse – and discourse with philosophers – of considerable theoretical and practical importance. For example: the neuroscientist Maxsell Bennett and the philosopher Peter Hacker have argued that much of contemporary cognitive neuroscience suffers from what they have termed the *mereological fallacy*, manifested by attributions to parts of persons, such as brains or brain parts -- psychological processes such as judging, deciding, perceiving, choosing, etc., that can properly be attributed only to whole persons (see, e.g., Bennett and Hacker, 2003; see also Slaney and Maraun, 2005).
As a second example, significant philosophical issues are also quite central to the scientific program for psychology sketched at the APA meetings in San Diego by Division 24’s 2010 recipient of the Distinguished Lifetime Achievement Award, Rom Harré. Harré has called for the development of psychology as a ‘hybrid’ science, in some of its sub-disciplines well-suited to the concepts and methods of natural science seeking causal explanations for the phenomena of interest, but in others of its sub-disciplines really better regarded as a human science seeking normative explanations for meaningful acts embedded in cultural and historical contexts.

Clearly, philosophical issues – especially within the province of ethical considerations – are also important in the various arenas of professional psychology, and probing discussions of these matters could also have a prominent place in the 2012 program.

In addition to the foregoing, some contributors to the program might find occasion to discuss historical and/or contemporary contributions to the literature as especially fitting examples of work that, contrary to the dominant trend of the 20th century (and now into the 21st), did/do remain attentive to philosophical considerations even as a program of rigorous experimental research was/is being prosecuted. The career of former Division 24 President Joseph F. Rychlak is one particularly prominent example of this (e.g., Rychlak, 1988), but there are certainly others worthy of discussion.

Finally, some participants might also wish to direct attention to instances where, contra Wundt and Stern, a program of empirical research in psychology has arguably flourished quite independently of explicit concern for questions of a distinctly philosophical nature. Some might also identify instances where a concern for philosophical questions has arguably impeded progress. In the 1917 monograph by William Stern mentioned above, for example, he acknowledged that such can happen when philosophers are investigating or commenting critically on psychological work without up-to-date familiarity with the latest findings of such work, a view that has been echoed by at least some contributors to a 2007 Special Issue of the journal Theory and Psychology (Osbeck, et al., 2007; Tissaw & Osbeck, 2007).

With all of this in mind, it is my hope and expectation that the theme Psychology and Philosophy: Renewing the Relationship will provide for an exciting and thought-provoking program for the 2012 APA convention in Orlando.

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References


