Thomas L. Spalding · James M. Stedman
Christina L. Gagné · Matthew Kostelecky

The Human Person

What Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas Offer Modern Psychology

Springer

The Human Person

Thomas L. Spalding • James M. Stedman
Christina L. Gagné • Matthew Kostelecky

The Human Person

What Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas Offer Modern Psychology

Thomas L. Spalding
Department of Psychology
University of Alberta
Edmonton, AB, Canada

James M. Stedman
The University of Texas Health Science
Center at San Antonio
San Antonio, TX, USA

Christina L. Gagné
Department of Psychology
University of Alberta
Edmonton, AB, Canada

Matthew Kostelecky
St. Joseph's College at the University of
Alberta
Edmonton, AB, Canada

Preface

This book is something of an oddity—it is the outcome of a collaboration among two cognitive psychologists, a clinical psychologist, and a philosopher (an unusual grouping by pretty much anyone's standards) trying to come to a common understanding of how psychology as a discipline can be unified such that the discipline provides a full picture of the human. Each of us, on their own and for their own reasons, had become interested in the philosophical tradition associated with Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas (and others), not just as an historical school to be studied, but as a living philosophical approach that could be applied to particular questions and issues in psychology. As we each, and in various combinations, worked on such particular questions, it seemed (to each of us) that the Aristotelian-Thomistic (A-T) tradition offered much that we felt was missing in modern psychology more generally. Writing this book has only reinforced our belief that A-T philosophy does indeed have much to offer, but also that psychology has much to offer in further developing a living, contemporary, A-T philosophy.

Given the nature of our main claim (i.e., that psychology would benefit by taking A-T philosophy seriously), it is inevitable that the book would appear, in some sense, highly critical of modern psychology. But, we are far from the first to note the general lack of unity in psychology and the weaknesses to which this lack of unity gives rise. Indeed, these critiques around the lack of unity in psychology arise every few years, with greater or lesser angst, and have from the very early years of the discipline. The critique has rarely been followed by any action toward more unity. In our view, the problem is that the critiques, important as they are, are often too focused on psychology, whereas we believe that the more fundamental problem is that the disunity in psychology arises out of conflicting philosophical underpinnings in different areas of the discipline. In addition, unlike some historical attempts at unifying psychology, we have been very careful about two issues. The first is that much of the day-to-day work of psychologists is relatively insulated from the philosophical underpinnings of the field. As such, most empirical psychological work is not impugned by our critique. Second, we have been at great pains to try to be clear that, in our view, unifying psychology at a philosophical level (making use of A-T concepts) extends to all areas of psychology: We are not interested in "ruling out"

any area of psychology. We are particularly interested in avoiding many of the "science vs. not science" arguments that have roiled psychology since its earliest days. We see A-T philosophy as offering the best basis for doing so.

We want to be clear that it is the potential that we see in a more unified psychology that is the main motivation of our work: If we did not believe in the importance of psychology as a discipline, we would not have bothered with writing this book. Our critique and proposal for unity is only worthwhile, in our own eyes, because we truly believe that psychology—all of psychology—holds real importance in the modern world. Failure to understand the truly human will be a failure to solve human problems.

We hope that many people will find this book of interest: Psychologists, whether academic or professional, philosophers of mind, philosophers interested in the A-T tradition, cognitive scientists, students of psychology or philosophy or of allied fields. With such a broad audience in mind, we have intentionally eschewed some of the more typical trappings of a philosophy or psychology monograph: We have used no footnotes and have kept our citations to a (relative) minimum. We do not pretend to have presented any area of psychological literature in detail, nor have we presented A-T ideas in anything like the level of detail that one would expect to find in a dedicated philosophy book. In addition, we have been highly selective in presenting aspects of both A-T philosophy and psychology: We do not pretend that we have laid out every area of psychology that could benefit from thinking about A-T philosophy, or every area of A-T philosophy that might have important application to psychology. Instead, we have tried to identify and show some possibilities for the next generation of scholars to develop, while trying to present the A-T tradition in just enough detail for even quite philosophically naïve readers to understand and see the kinds of connections we believe exist. Indeed, every chapter here could probably be developed into a book in its own right. It is our hope that they will.

Edmonton, AB, Canada   Thomas L. Spalding
San Antonio, TX, USA   James M. Stedman
Edmonton, AB, Canada   Christina L. Gagné
Edmonton, AB, Canada   Matthew Kostelecky

Acknowledgments

Contents

About the Authors

Thomas L. Spalding is a Professor in the Department of Psychology at the University of Alberta. His research focuses on the psychology of concepts and the relation between the human conceptual and language systems.

James M. Stedman is Clinical Professor at the University of Texas Health Science Center at San Antonio. He has written on an array of topics in psychology, including child clinical pathology and treatment, education in clinical and counseling psychology, and application of Aristotelian-Thomistic philosophy to modern psychology.

Christina L. Gagné is a Professor in the Department of Psychology at the University of Alberta whose work focuses on the human conceptual system and compositionality/productivity within the conceptual system and language system.

Matthew Kostelecky is an Associate Professor, Philosophy, at St. Joseph's College at the University of Alberta, who works on the history of philosophy with a particular focus on medieval metaphysics and cognitive theory.

Chapter 1
Introduction

Check for updates

For many readers, it might be surprising to see a new book arguing that philosophers such as Aristotle or Thomas Aquinas could have anything useful to say about modern psychology. Modern psychology is, if nothing else, an extremely broad and complicated discipline, with a wide range of empirical findings and theoretical hypotheses and explanations, with many more being developed and published every day. In this book, we do not pretend that Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas directly offer a set of empirical results or competing modern psychological theories. Instead, Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas offer something very different: an integrated philosophical vision of the human person.

Modern psychology, for all its strengths, is notoriously difficult to integrate into an overall understanding of the human person due to all the various subfields and differing theoretical frameworks that comprise it. Indeed, as we will see, the visions of the human person offered in modern psychology differ dramatically, and perhaps incoherently rather than complementarily, from area to area of the discipline. The Aristotelian-Thomistic (A-T) vision of the human person, on the other hand, is integrated and coherent: The A-T approach to understanding the human is driven by a few basic metaphysical principles, and the resulting understandings of various aspects of the human (e.g., emotion and cognition) are much more closely and clearly related than in modern psychology, because those aspects are understood in terms of principles in common. In addition, because the human and non-human are to be understood in terms of the same metaphysical principles, the A-T approach situates the human person in a particular way with respect to the rest of nature, emphasizing both similarity and difference. As such, this view has much to offer in terms of providing a useful framework for evaluating and guiding psychological theories across a range of areas within psychology.

We will argue that these characteristics of the A-T vision of the human person provide a way of understanding the human person in an integrated fashion, without attempting to replace, displace, or limit the kinds of empirical work ongoing in modern psychology. At the same time, though it does not challenge the empirical aspects of modern psychology, the A-T vision of the human person presents an

enormous challenge to the underlying, and often rather implicit, philosophical approaches to modern psychology. Rather than replacing existing theories, this approach offers a way of enhancing current approaches. As a result, the A-T vision of the human does lead to different ways of thinking about what the empirical work of modern psychology can tell us about the human person and even about what questions, even empirical questions, should be asked, and how.

In this chapter, we will review the current state of psychology and its philosophical foundations and show why the discipline is so difficult to unify. We will then briefly discuss how the A-T approach to the human person can serve as a framework that allows an underlying unity even among the many different approaches represented in modern psychology. We will then deal with some objections that might arise at the very notion of adopting an "old" "pre-scientific" approach to the human person, like the A-T approach. Finally, we will provide an overview of the rest of the book and the specific topics that are covered.

Current State of Psychology

Any undergraduate student of psychology, at the end of their studies, knows that there is no coherent, understandable picture of psychology as a single discipline. Indeed, reading any modern introductory psychology textbook is enough to see this. It is not just that different areas of psychology emphasize different aspects or approaches, but that they have fundamentally different, and incompatible, philosophical commitments, although those commitments are rarely described. Even though the philosophical commitments are rarely described, and even more rarely seriously discussed or interrogated, the differences are stark. Henriques (2011) provides a good discussion of this issue. In this section, we will briefly recap the deep divisions within psychology, and how these divisions affect the prospects for a unified discipline, as well as discussing what actually drives these divisions. To foreshadow a bit, the divisions are primarily driven not by the science or by the actual empirical work of modern psychology, but by the often-unrealized philosophical commitments in the different areas.

It is something of a cliché that psychologists from different areas of the discipline are like blindfolded people feeling different parts of an elephant's body and coming to radically different notions of the overall nature of the animal that they are feeling. We would argue, though, that the cliché situation is actually far less troubling than the actual situation of psychology. For one thing, the blindfolded people feeling the elephant are primarily responding to the empirical information brought to them by their sense of touch. In psychology, though, it is not really the case that the empirical data itself directly provides such misleading views of the human. Rather, it is the theoretical and indeed philosophical approaches of the psychologists in the different areas that at the least guide, and may in some cases determine, the perception and interpretation of the empirical data.

We should also note that difficulties stemming from the lack of an underlying philosophical psychology are not a new issue for psychology. Rather, it is one that arises throughout the history of psychology. For example, Mercier (1918) focusses on the ways in which early modern philosophy (particularly in the unbridgeable chasm that Descartes interposed between mind and body) had created, within psychology, completely incommensurable versions of materialism and rationalism as competing visions of the human. Indeed, this division internal to psychology was a major focus even of the first edition of his *Origins of Contemporary Psychology*, written in the mid-1890s. Clearly, these problems were seen prior to much of the specialization that has taken place within psychology. Hence, the philosophical problems of psychology cannot be caused by the differences among the various empirical areas of modern psychology. Rather, the different empirical areas have largely developed out of different philosophical assumptions about the nature of the human and the relation of the human to the rest of the world.

What then are these divisions in psychology? First, of course, there is a major division in that psychology is both a professional practice and a scientific/scholarly discipline. This introduces somewhat differing goals or ends of the study of psychology and, hence, different sets of assumptions about what is important. Interestingly, although the professional practice and the scientific/scholarly parts of the disciplines are often in contrast with each other, that contrast does not, in general, guarantee any internal coherence or consistency within each part. Instead, the confusions and divisions of psychology are prevalent both within the professional practice of psychology and within the scientific/scholarly discipline. Thus, this division adds an additional layer of complexity to the discipline as a whole.

Second, there are many approaches to psychology that play out across both the professional practice and the scientific/scholarly discipline. We will not, of course, attempt to lay out every different approach to psychology, but will briefly discuss a few of the major approaches. It is important to recognize from the start that a large part of the difficulty of psychology as a unified discipline is precisely that the different empirical approaches all have value—it is not that some are obviously right and others wrong. In that case, the difficulty would be to identify and eliminate the ones that are wrong, which is quite a different issue that the one actually faced by psychology. As Henriques (2011, p. 9) says, "… psychology is currently an ill-defined discipline consisting of a group of mid-level theories, perspectives, and schools of thought that each articulate some basic truths about the human condition but are organized in a manner that makes them compete against one another instead of being harmoniously and coherently interrelated."

Importantly, many of these approaches were developed precisely in contradistinction to preceding or concurrent approaches. Some of the approaches are or were more important in the practice, some in the scientific/scholarly part of the discipline. Some approaches have migrated between practice and science over the years. Psychodynamic approaches, though somewhat out of favor currently, were both historically important to psychology's development and still make up, perhaps, the bulk of what non-psychologists think psychology is about. Behaviorist approaches developed in contrast to both the overly mentalistic previous work of structuralists

and functionalists, but also in severe contrast to the psychodynamic approaches. In turn, existentialist and humanistic approaches arose in contrast to the overly mechanistic and deterministic aspects of the behaviorist approaches. Similarly, the cognitive approaches arose (again) largely in reaction to the behaviorists "ruling out" of anything smacking of the mental, the evolutionary (and neuroscientific) approaches arose against the non-physical abstractness of the cognitivists, and cultural approaches arose in contrast to the almost exclusive focus on the individual (particularly within western culture) as the foundational unit of analysis in other approaches. Critically, the philosophical problem(s) of psychology is not so much that empirical work in these different approaches tell us different things about the human. Rather, it is that the philosophical assumptions behind the approaches virtually guarantee different answers to questions about the nature of the human, because those assumptions dictate different methods, different goals, and even different questions entirely.

Henriques (2011, Chap. 2) provides a very good review of the many philosophical problems that arise within psychology and contribute to the lack of unity in the discipline. He divides the problems into six different kinds of philosophical problems: (1) the substitution of method for coherent topic/problems/questions; (2) problems of definition and subject matter; (3) problems specifically in philosophy of mind, brain, and behavior; (4) problems of epistemology, mission, and values; (5) problems of disconnected domains of causality; and (6) problems of proliferation. We will not attempt to cover all of these issues here, of course. However, there are several that are important for our purposes.

First, there is the issue of substituting method for content. It has long been recognized that the scientific method is the pre-eminent way to learn about the physical world. However, there is a danger in transforming that method into a metaphysics. That is, although the scientific method is an excellent way to discover true things about the physical world, it does not, in and of itself, indicate that it is the only way to truth, or that anything that is not amenable to the method cannot be known, and so on. Scientism, this idea that science is the only way to truth and that anything not amenable to scientific investigation is not real, is a constant (philosophical) danger throughout the sciences (see, e.g., Robinson & Williams, 2014, for a recent discussion of the critical role of Scientism in modern thought). Psychology, early on, faced severe temptations in this regard, because psychology, as a rather late purported entrant into the field of sciences, was very tempted to pursue a simplistic imitation of the physical sciences as a way of guaranteeing its institutional separation from philosophy. Indeed, psychology is still highly tempted by the reflected glory of the other sciences. Thus, for example, psychologists were far more tempted by positivist philosophies than were the other sciences, because positivism was (briefly) a hot topic in physics at a critical time when psychology was attempting to become more "scientific." We will argue that a philosophy that is capable of underpinning all of psychology must avoid these kinds of temptations, while also recognizing the importance of matching the method to the questions critical to the discipline (which will often, but not always, mean the scientific method being applied to psychological questions).

Second, psychology faces intransigent problems of philosophy of mind, brain, and behavior. Psychologists would, of course, deny that they are Cartesians, yet the field is riven by differences between Cartesian alternatives—totally mechanistic physical nature versus a special "thinking stuff" oddly untethered from anything physical. The different areas of psychology often take very different positions on fundamental questions of metaphysics and epistemology. Yet, we will argue later that at least some of these differences need not arise, if one squarely rejects the whole of the Cartesian worldview. Unfortunately, however, although psychologists often deny that they are Cartesian, they often still accept one or the other sides of the Cartesian dualism (e.g., neuroscientists are very often subscribers to a very Cartesian mechanistic view, while phenomenological psychologists are very often subscribers—though they may not realize this—to a development from the Cartesian notion of the completely non-physical human substance) (see for example Dawson, 2013).

Third, there are differences among areas of psychology in terms of domains of causality. For example, are various patterns of behavior caused by evolution or social roles? Is an inference caused by physical changes in the brain or by logical patterns? In brief, the answers to these questions are "yes." Evolution and social roles, physical changes and logical patterns play causal roles. The problem for psychology, however, is that (a) the causal roles seem to be very different from each other and (b) the kinds of causal activities cannot be coherently integrated. One of the causes of this problem is that modern psychology, like most modern disciplines, engages only with a particular, and limited, understanding of causality, per se. To anticipate a bit, the A-T approach maintains Aristotle's four-cause analysis (Final, Formal, Material, and Efficient), while modern psychology, following other modern sciences, attempts to pitch all its explanations in terms of Efficient causality (see Chap. 2).

Critically, Henriques (2011) ends his discussion of the philosophical problems of psychology by pointing out that there is an underlying problem, which is that psychology, however inchoately defined, is concerned with the understanding of the human, and that this understanding requires the physical, biological, and social sciences as well as the humanities. Thus, we see that to underpin a unified psychology, we will require a unified philosophy, capable of being applied across the issues that arise in the physical, biological, and social sciences, as well as the humanities. More specialized philosophical positions, even if they avoid some of the specific philosophical problems that currently bedevil psychology, will only reinforce the divisions that already exist.

Unified Discipline

One of the primary aims of this book is to demonstrate that the A-T approach can help provide a unified understanding of the human. It is important to understand that the degree of fragmentation in psychology is actually not mirrored in all other sciences. Psychologists sometimes claim that increased fragmentation is a necessary

consequence of the advance of science, but as Henriques (2011) points out in some detail, the other sciences, despite longer histories of development, and at least arguably more "advances," have far more unified characters than does psychology. Henriques (2011, p. 3) puts it this way, "It is true that there are many disputes in physics and biology, but what makes these qualitatively different from the foundational issues in psychology is that there is a general agreement about the major organizing theories and concepts. Modern physics, for example, is grounded in quantum mechanics and general relativity, and modern biology is organized by natural selection, genetics, and cellular theory. In contrast, there is no generally accepted framework in psychology, but instead profound disagreement, confusion, and almost limitless opinions about the foundational issues."

What is the value of a unified discipline of psychology? Put differently, what is the cost of fragmentation? There are two general approaches to these questions. First, there are many pragmatic advantages to having a unified discipline. A unified field, a field that can convincingly and accurately describe itself in relatively simple and coherent terms, is a field that will have more impact. In the case of psychology, for example, the other social sciences would seemingly have much to gain from psychology. Yet, if a person from another discipline wanted to know how to apply psychology to their own discipline what would they do? They would first have to identify the correct area of psychology to apply. But to do this, they would also have to rule out the approaches of the other areas of psychology. In general, severe fragmentation makes it much more difficult for others to take advantage of the riches of psychology. This, in turn, makes psychology, as a discipline, less influential in the broader society.

Second, although the pragmatic argument above is important, we believe that the more important effect of fragmentation is the inability of psychologists to readily learn from each other, to work together, to understand psychology more broadly, to integrate the huge number of empirical facts that have been collected over the last hundred years or so. Imagine yourself to be a psychologist in a particular area of the discipline. How often can you make use of any empirical work from a different area of the discipline? How often can you even be sure that you have an appropriate interpretation of a given piece of empirical work from a different area of the discipline? Now, of course, we do not expect that a common philosophical framework will automatically make a person in one area an expert in all areas of the discipline, but it would at least provide some guidance in terms of how to understand work from other areas.

Presuming then that a unified discipline of psychology is to be desired, what is required for a unified discipline of psychology? Does psychology need a "grand theory" that spans the entire discipline? A Freud or a Skinner who can extrapolate from their own particular area to cover all the other areas? Someone to "explain away" all that seems different across the different areas of psychology, and to tell all other psychologists what to investigate and how, what theoretical constructs are allowable, who and what "counts" as "real psychology"? NO. It is critically important that psychology not attempt to move to a "unified discipline" by getting rid of the parts of the discipline that do not fit one particular approach. The push to move

all of psychology into a behaviorist framework during the middle of the twentieth century was a clear example of this kind of attempt. Such an attempt is not at all what we have in mind. Henriques (2011, p. 5) had this to say on this issue: "And yet, despite the fact that there are compelling pragmatic and political reasons for moving toward a more unified approach, it is also the case that advocating unity for unity's sake raises some significant concerns. Without addressing the foundational issues, the pragmatic appeal of a unified psychology can be reinterpreted as asking psychologists to gloss over authentic differences in paradigms and perspectives just so that we all get along with the illusion of unity."

Instead, what we want to suggest is that psychology needs to think about an underlying philosophical approach that is sufficiently flexible that it can undergird all of modern psychology, but that is also sufficiently content rich that it can provide some actual guidance as to how psychology should think of what it is to be human, while leaving the empirical details and investigations to the proper spheres within modern psychology. As Henriques (2011, p. 8) writes, "… what is needed is a meta-theoretical framework that crisply defines the subject matter of psychology, demonstrates how psychology exists in relationship to the other sciences, and allows one to systematically integrate the key insights from the major perspectives in a manner that results in cumulative knowledge." Thus, we believe that psychology needs a philosophical approach that speaks to all of modern psychology, not just a subfield or two, but at the same time does not attempt to displace the theoretical approaches that properly apply within the empirical fields of modern psychology. In this book, we present the Aristotelian-Thomistic vision of the human and suggest that this view meets these two criteria.

We attempt to develop this suggestion in two ways. First, we describe the A-T view of the human person. This is more difficult that it might seem. The problem is not so much with the A-T view itself, as the view as a whole is strikingly coherent and will resonate in various ways and in various aspects with most psychologists. The problem is, rather, that we will have to try to "think our way back" to the A-T view itself, on its own terms. This is rather difficult for psychologists, in particular, as psychology has, in many ways, adopted ideas from the early modern philosophers that would be entirely foreign to Aristotle or Thomas Aquinas themselves. So, we have to try very hard to take Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas on their own terms, rather than in terms of the various early modern interpretations of their work. As Feser (2009, p. 8) puts it, "While most contemporary philosophers would probably not identify themselves as Cartesians, Lockeans, Humeans, Kantians, or the like, their thinking…nevertheless tends, however unconsciously, to be confined within the narrow boundaries set by these early modern thinkers. Hence when they come across a philosopher like Thomas Aquinas, they unthinkingly read into his arguments modern philosophical presuppositions he would have rejected." Importantly, even contemporary philosophers who have been influential in some areas of psychology, might reject the A-T approach on the basis of claims made about that approach by early modern philosophers, even though those claimed positions would be quite unacceptable to Aristotle or Thomas Aquinas, and even though in other ways there are deep connections to the A-T tradition (see, e.g., Kugelmann, 2005,