

FIGURING OUT THE HISTORY OF PSYCHOLOGY

DAVID E. LEARY*

Department of Psychology
University of New Hampshire

It is pleasure to contribute some thoughts on the historiography of psychology to this *Festschrift* for Josef BROŽEK, who has spent so much of his career contributing to the historical understanding of psychological theory and practice. Indeed, there is probably no one in the world who has been as passionate, as thorough, and as persistent in the pursuit of varied perspectives on the historiography of psychology as has Professor BROŽEK. His deep concern has known few boundaries: he has travelled through space, to countries around the world, as readily as he has travelled through time, to periods far removed from our own. He knows more people engaged in the historical study of psychology, and more facts about the psychologies of different national traditions, than anyone I expect ever to know. Beyond that, as one of the younger historians of psychology who are following the path that he and a few others have opened up, I owe Professor BROŽEK a debt of thanks. This brief commentary on some of my current historiographical interests will surely not repay the debt, but I am pleased to think that it will at least place the debt in public view.

When the *Festschrift* was first being planned, it was suggested that I might address the topic of the historical relations between philosophy and psychology, since after all a good deal of my historical research in the past has focused on the interaction

*DAVID E. LEARY: Department of Psychology, University of New Hampshire, Durham, New Hampshire, U.S.A. 03824.

between these two disciplines. I thought at first that I would do so, but on further reflection I have chosen to present, in abbreviated form, the historiographical rationale behind a different series of research projects, just now under way. This, I think, is more in the spirit of Professor BROŽEK's own work, which so often portrays new, even controversial perspectives on the history of psychology. In any case, this is what I intend to do for some few pages —to try to explain how I am currently trying to figure out the history of psychology.

I shall begin by stating what is actually a conclusion, namely, that all knowledge is generated by a process of comparing the unknown with the known, aligning the unfamiliar with the familiar, measuring the novel against some customary standard. We understand things, events, and experiences by articulating what they are like, or not like—by defining them in terms of something else. Human understanding, in other words, is metaphorical or analogical at its foundation. (For present purposes, I shall use metaphor and analogy interchangeably, though I assume metaphor to be the broader term, and in fact to be a term which can reasonably be used to encompass all the other figures of speech and thought.)

As a corollary, I assume that psychological knowledge is, at bottom, metaphorical or analogical. As examples, ARISTOTLE's organic theory of mental functions, DESCARTES'S mechanistic theory of the passions, BERKELEY's linguistic theory of perception, FREUD's thermodynamic theory of the mind, SKINNER'S natural-selectionist theory of individual behavior, recent cybernetic models of cognition, and the various technological analogs of brain-functioning provide rich illustrations of the metaphorical thinking in the history of psychology.

Of course, a metaphor or analogy captures at best a similarity or likeness. It does not and cannot provide a definitive, final prescription of the essence of a thing. There is always another way to look at anything, always something that is left out in any description, definition, or explanation. As COLERIDGE put it, "no likeness goes on all fours." Which is to say that every analogy is also a dysanalogy, and hence that all knowledge (being based on analogy or metaphor) is imperfect. Borrowing PLATO'S terminology in the *Timaeus*, I conclude from this that human knowledge is at best "a likely story."

Of course, some stories are more likely than others. At any given time and place, certain stories appear to be—and may in fact be—more consonant with the nature of things. The critical issue in understanding the history of knowledge is to get a sense of how and why new versions of the truth come to displace former versions. Since truly definitive proofs of either the old or new versions are never to be had, the displacement of conceptual schemes—and their attendant methodological practices—necessarily involves an element of persuasion.

This ineluctably points to the rhetoric of science, which should not be viewed as some adjunct of the aesthetics of science, involving a purely formal study of the language of science. Rather, it seems to me that rhetorical considerations deserve a place at the very center of the philosophy of science, and moreover that many contemporary philosophers of science are right now moving from an epistemological position based upon logical and mathematical metaphors to a broader orientation based upon legal

or juridical metaphors. That is, they are shifting allegiance from the premise that logical and mathematical proof provides the ideal instance of truth to the premise that legal reasoning and argumentation provide the appropriate prototype of human knowledge. This shift follows from their loss of faith in the possibility of certain knowledge and their consequent, if somewhat belated and begrudging, acceptance of the historical, fallible nature of human knowledge.

The crucial question in the philosophy of science now seems to be: Given that absolute knowledge is impossible, how do scientists bring their tentative principles, the precedents in their intellectual tradition, the unique characteristics of individual cases and experiences, and all their resources of argumentation (words, numbers, graphs, and so on) to bear upon the articulation and presentation of the most persuasive stories possible at any given time and place?

This line of thinking has provided the rationale for several of my current research projects, which involve the study of the role of metaphorical thinking in the history of psychology and the consequent study of the role of rhetoric in the history of psychology. Obviously, these two topics are intimately related: the persuasiveness of any given explanation or description is bound up with its metaphorical foundation. In any particular historical situation some metaphors carry greater rhetorical power than others (which is not to say that the cultural popularity of a given metaphor is the only criterion of its persuasiveness). Still, in the first stages of this new research program, it has seemed appropriate to separate the two concerns, to try to establish the metaphoricity of psychological thought (and practice), on the one hand, while also beginning to investigate the rhetorical structure of psychological discourse (and practice), on the other. If both of these projects bear fruit, as they now appear to be doing, they should eventuate in a single unified monograph on the metaphorical and rhetorical foundations of psychology. But I am content to leave the question of progeny to the judgment of time.

For now, having argued that all knowledge is metaphorical and that all expressions of knowledge are supported by a rhetorical posture, I shall bring my argument full circle and conclude with a few comments on the metaphorical and rhetorical structure of historical discourse. This is what I have alluded to, indirectly, in the title of this paper. We do indeed "figure out" history. We historians construct our stories, as psychologists and others construct theirs, by using tropes or figures of thought, all of which I have lumped for convenience (and with scholarly precedent) under the single category of metaphor. In trying to understand the progression of historical events, we necessarily rely upon metaphorical assumptions. I have just done so in using the metaphor of "progression." Surely to think of history as a progression is to assume and impose a structure upon the sort of vision we entertain, the sort of questions we ask, and the sort of data ("givens") we look for. As historians ought to know, one of the best ways to become aware of our own assumptions is to study times and places in which different assumptions were typically held. But we need not go so far afield to find instances of quite disparate metaphors underlying historical thought. Not all historians, even in our own time and culture, assume that history entails progress, even in the weaker sense of the term. Cyclical and organic metaphors, which have structured so much historical thinking in the past, are far from unknown among our own contemporaries. And the

structuralist and related deconstructionist metaphors underlying so much historical analysis these days illustrates that one need not even believe in continuity—a premise that for a brief while was thought to be essential to the study of historical “relations”—in order to tell likely stories about the past.

The fact that historical analyses are informed by metaphorical thinking does not mean that the stories told by historians are mere fictions, though they are indeed “fictions” in the root sense of the term. One story about a given subject may well be more persuasive than another, at least to a given audience in a given time and place. In fact, we encounter this situation all the time. Yet it never rules out the possibility of another, even more persuasive story being told in the future, not simply on the basis of new data, but more significantly on the basis of an extensive reformulation of the explanatory (metaphorical) framework that supports and patterns the data already on hand.

Of metaphor production there may well be no end, but certain basic metaphors recur again and again, as Carl JUNG among many others has noted. All the more noteworthy, then, is the fact that Josef BROŽEK has postulated his own novel and pithy historiographic metaphor—that writing history is like making a mosaic. This is a marvelous image. I like it in particular because it implies, as I believe, that the historian picks and chooses material that will fit an overall design, a design which is at least partially in mind even at the outset, while simultaneously the existence or non-existence of fitting material—upon which the full realization of the design depends—is something outside the historian’s control. As a result of maker/material interaction, adjustments of the design may occur as the work proceeds, but the basic framework of possibilities is constrained both by the original design and by the data at hand.

Like some mosaics, some histories never reach completion; their marriage of form and content proves to be barren. Fortunately, others do evolve, in dialectical fashion, into those wondrous products of human art and science that both represent and contribute to what we call reality. It is a pleasure to conclude these comments with the observation that Josef BROŽEK’s work has come to fruition, and has been of great service to the profession of history-making.

SUMMARY

This paper, written in tribute to Professor Josef BROŽEK, presents the historiographical rationale behind several ongoing research projects dealing with the metaphorical and rhetorical foundation of psychological theory and practice. It also suggests that historical analysis and discourse rely upon metaphorical formulations and rhetorical modes of argumentation.