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Shared Human Epistemic Phenomenology as the Basis for Psychological Inquiry

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Abstract

The idea of "theory as engagement," can provide a fruitful way to conceptualize the human social activity that is academic inquiry. Taking a phenomenological perspective, I will argue that there are assumptions that humans universally must make to survive and function in the world, and that reflecting on those that are epistemic can inform both the social activity of theorizing as well as the nature of the theories that are produced. After suggesting a candidate set of assumptions, their implications for both the content of psychological theories and the practice of theory development will be explored. The advantages for theories produced from doing so, along with complexities entailed, will be identified. Among the proposed benefits are avoiding the "anything goes" problem, "bootstrapping" the hermeneutic circle, managing pluralism, addressing global issues, and furthering a reinterpreted vocabulary for truth-related discourse.

Keywords: metapsychology, pluralism, phenomenology, truth

The theme of this volume, “theory as engagement,” can be recruited to provide a fruitful way to inform the human social activity that is academic inquiry (Osbeck, 2019; Westerman, 2004). Theoretical work, specifically, involves human beings engaging in the activity of developing conceptual models that are in some ways considered to be valuable. The goal of the current proposal is to offer a conceptualization of psychological inquiry as human activity embedded in history, culture, values, and motivations that can (1) benefit how we organize and conduct the practice of psychology and (2) outline a foundational layer for psychological theory.

I will begin by highlighting a set of assumptions, embedded in universal aspects of human experience when persons engage in the tasks necessary for human living, that are necessary for epistemic practices. I will then derive implications from this set of assumptions for socially organized inquiry, psychological theorizing in particular. Finally I will relate what I see as the benefits of taking this metatheoretical approach to psychological research and theory.

Shared human epistemic phenomenology

The ability of human beings to engage in the physical and social tasks of everyday life relies on certain mental activities. Some of these are likely "built-in" to the way the mind works, such as the way we "just see" that other people have thoughts and feelings, as expressed, for example, by Hobson (2002):

> We find ourselves relating to other people in ways that are special to people. This is true of infants as well as young children as well as older children as well as adults. For us, to perceive a living body is more than to perceive a thing - it is to become engaged with a person. A person has a subjective, mental, dimension: we see it and we feel it. Thus we come to know what a mind is - what thoughts are, what feelings are, what intentions are, what beliefs are - on the foundation of our direct experience of other persons as having a subjective dimension behind their behavior. ... The upshot is that our experience and knowledge of *persons* is primary. (p. 248)

A second category of these human capabilities consists of those that become established in every child's mind through the developmental process of learning how to successfully engage with aspects of physical and interpersonal environments that are encountered by every human everywhere on earth, such as gravity, food, abstractions (e.g., quantities) and other persons.

There will, of course, be variations in these capabilities, including extreme variations (e.g., brain deformities or damage, severe autism, or other debilitating conditions) that prevent persons from caring for themselves, performing certain tasks, or, importantly for current purposes, participating in organized psychological inquiry. Such individuals deserve respect and compassion, yet the purpose at hand is to identify those otherwise universal underpinnings that can inform our efforts as theorists, since what is the case for all humans, with certain exceptions, must also be the case for inquirers engaged in developing theories. I consider these underpinnings as epistemological, since they relate to the tasks of understanding, explaining, and theorizing.

Note that there may be other universal underpinnings that are not directly relevant to how theories are constructed and evaluated, such as those that are emotional (e.g., the responses of parents and children to each other), behavioral (e.g., the sucking reflex), or interpersonal (e.g., the motivation toward reciprocity).

To theorize about underpinnings, which start out as pre-verbal and may possibly remain so for some individuals, we must capture them as best as possible in linguistic statements (propositions). I will employ the term "assumptions" to refer to these propositions, so as to be consistent with the often-invoked aim of theoretical psychologists to uncover the assumptions that underlie psychological methods and theories (see, for example, Slife, O'Grady, & Kosits, 2017).

The assumptions that we describe in our theories may be explicitly held by persons or they may operate implicitly. An explicit assumption would be one that a person has consciously used in the process of thinking, or even if not, one that they would endorse when it is presented to them in a conversation or a survey. For example, a person may answer "yes" if asked "do other people really exist?"

What we could call an implicit assumption would be one that may never have consciously been in a person's thoughts but nonetheless functions in that person's mental or physical activity. We would conclude that an assumption is implicitly operating when the action can only be understood as grounded in the assumption. For example, Woodward (1998) presents evidence that by the age of one year, babies behave in ways that only make sense if they assume that other persons have intentions.

We can begin the process of identifying candidates for universal human assumptions by following the prescription of the 18th century philosopher Thomas Reid, who argued that "... when an opinion is so necessary in the conduct of life, that without the belief of it, a man must be led into a thousand absurdities in practice, such an opinion, when we can give no other reason for it, may be safely taken for a first principle" (Reid, 1785/2002, p. 467). Thus, I would propose the following set of assumptions as among the first principles (i.e., universal underpinnings) for how we as persons must proceed in our engagements (for a more detailed discussion of each assumption, along with a comparison of them with similar proposals from Reid, Smedslund, and Ossorio, see Brill, 2021):

1. I have a mental life (I have experiences, I am conscious).
2. I have an identity (I remember past experiences).
3. I have a body that is present in a world of objects and other living organisms.
4. I formulate goals derived from my desires and I act to pursue those goals (I have agency).
5. I engage in thinking to arrive at conclusions upon which I base my actions.
6. I reflect on my actions, thoughts, and feelings.
7. I am sometimes unaware of some of the influences on my perceptions, thoughts, feelings, desires, and actions.
8. There are other beings like me with experiences like mine.
9. I interact with and am affected by other persons.
10. I have a sense of the passage of time.

Once these assumptions are made explicit, they seem to me to be self-evident, as I expect they do to anyone who ponders them. They remain implicit in adults, I presume, only rarely, if at all. I also believe that most research and theory in psychology presupposes these assumptions without explicitly acknowledging them.

Note that additional assumptions might be derived from those listed. Consider for example the assumption that "I can clearly separate my actions from what is happening to me." This assumption derives from #1 (I have experiences) and #5 (I formulate goals and pursue them). We could not pursue goals if we could not separate our actions from what is happening to us.

The process I used to generate this list of assumptions was the combination of my own intuition; my readings of Reid, Smedslund, Ossorio; and empirical work, such as that of the linguist Anna Wierzbicka's studies of many languages (Wierzbicka, 1996) .

The criterion for inclusion in this list above was relevance to the activity of psychological theorizing. Indeed, it would be the case that if a more general list of universal epistemic assumptions were to be generated, other assumptions, such as the reliance on our perceptual systems (e.g., "I can perceive the location of objects in physical space") or Kant's essential categories of human understanding (*Quantity, Quality, Relation,* and *Modality*) might be included.

Other authors, both historical and in recent decades, have come to similar views about the presence of universality in human thought and language. Caldararo (2011) suggests that the notion of a "psychic unity of mankind" is traceable to the ancient Greeks and has been one of the two foundations of American anthropology (the other was cultural relativism), championed by Adolf Bastain (1826-1905) and Franz Boas (1858-1942). Gottfried Liebniz (1646-1716) proposed an "alphabet of human thought," called "*Characteristica Universalis*" (Whipple, 2022), in which a set of primitive concepts would be the basis for any other concepts (Whipple, 2022). Jerry Fodor, (1975) proposed a "language of thought" upon which the verbalized formulation of our thoughts in a particular language is based. Evolutionary psychologists also have posited views of universal innate capacities, such as Atran's (1998) suggestion that "taxonomies plausibly represent 'modular habits' of the mind, naturally selected to capture recurrent habits of the world relevant to hominid survival in ancestral environments" (p. 567).

Also note that while there are strong overlaps between the assumptions listed above and those asserted to be universal by Reid (1785/2002), as well as those put forth in the writings of psychologists Jan Smedslund (2012) and Peter Ossorio (2013), the overall aims of the current proposal are different from those of these other authors. Reid's goal is to refute philosophical skepticism, Smedslund's is to create a comprehensive logic of psychological phenomena, while Ossorio's is to specify a conceptualization of "person" that identifies the subject matter of psychology.

I consider the approach I advocate, which I have named "the view from h umanity" (Brill, 2021), to be phenomenological in nature, since it is concerned with how we humans experience ourselves and what we take to be the physical and interpersonal worlds. Nevertheless, the phenomenological attitude does not "involve disbelief or doubt about, let alone a denial of, the validity of prior scientific knowledge or the existence of what is experienced" (Wertz, 2015, p. 87). Wertz (2015) explains that "eidetic" knowledge (a kind of general knowledge) is, according to Husserl, "based on the ubiquitous way that our ordinary experience includes both the fact that something is experienced and our immediate sense of *what it is*" (p. 87). When these assumptions underlie the ideas that arise in the social practice of inquiry or theoretical work, they function in an epistemological role. Hence the term "human epistemic phenomenology."

Implications for theorists and theories

The implications of these assumptions will be examined as they apply to two domains: to the engaged theorist and to theories in psychology themselves.

Implications for the engaged theorist

Obviously, any theoretical work requires the conscious activity (Assumption #1 - experience) of a person (Assumptions #2 - identity, and #3 - body) who purposefully (Assumption #4 – agency) thinks (Assumption #5 – thinking) on some matter of relevance (Assumption #4 – desires). Also obviously, the process takes time (Assumption # 10 - time).

Organized inquiry is a social activity (Assumptions #8 - other beings like me, and #9 – interaction). Psychological inquiry involves thinking about ourselves (Assumption #6 – reflection on my actions, thoughts, and feelings) and others.

The results of psychological inquiries may affect us, our community of inquirers, those we study, and the public (when they absorb our theories and apply them to their own thinking and behavior, a phenomenon dubbed the "looping effect" by Hacking, 1995).

Additionally, the choosing of the subject matter of our inquiries and the activities in which we engage to pursue them may be influenced by factors of which we are not aware (Assumption #7 – I am sometimes unaware of some of the influences on my perceptions, thoughts, feelings, desires, and actions).

On the hope that it is clear that these characteristics of psychological inquiry are at least in part grounded in assumptions that are undeniable (and therefore form a secure intellectual foundation for theory), I suggest a set of categories that comprise guidelines for constructing and evaluating psychological theories.

COMMUNITIES/CULTURE/POPULATION: Since organized psychological theorizing is an activity performed by persons working with others in a social context, and since the theories produced are made known to others, perhaps even to the public, the following should be considered: Which communities, cultures, or populations have been studied in the research underlying the theory? Which community, culture, or population represents the theorist's perspective? What consequences, positive or negative, intended or unintended, might the theorist's work have for the population studied (Gillespie, Glăveanu & de Saint Laurent, 2024)?

PHILOSOPHICAL GROUNDING: Along with the universal epistemic assumptions specified above, thought and reflection take place on the basis of non-universal "worldviews," typically absorbed from one's culture, society, or subculture. Slife, O'Grady, and Kosits (2017) describe a worldview as a set of assumptions and values that delineate what can be known, what is good, and what exists and does not exist. Therefore, we can ask "What is the pertinent philosophical basis or worldview from which the theorist operates?" Examples might include philosophical positions such as naturalism, supernatural dualism, parapsychological mysticism, physicalism (a subset of naturalism that restricts explanation to physical causality), theism (a subset of supernaturalism that posits the existence of one or more specific beings beyond the natural world), one of Pepper's (1942) world hypotheses (Formism, Mechanism, Organicism, Contextualism), or a specification of philosophical assumptions at one or more of Hersch's (2003) hierarchy of levels of theoretical inquiry.

PURPOSE: When we consciously act, we pursue goals. Thus it is of utmost importance to understand what a theorist is trying to accomplish. What questions is the theorist trying to answer? Thinkers who approach inquiry as a social practice often emphasize that psychological theories cannot be value-free or value-neutral (e.g., Brinkmann, 2011; Osbeck, 2019). Therefore, disclosing and evaluating the purpose of an inquiry can

illuminate the values that motivated these purposes, and promote an exploration of the ethical implications that follow from those values.

Note that there are also purposes of a personal nature that theorists may have for developing their theories. Authors who work in academia typically have career objectives that are advanced by numerous publications. Likewise, other professionals besides academicians, such as therapists, may be motivated by the potential gain in prestige and credibility for producing theoretical works. While these motivations may not affect the quality of a theory, they may add to the problem of fragmentation in psychology, discussed below, especially since publication acceptance may be more likely for novel theories. Acknowledging these motivations may also help us understand why some theoretical approaches may not achieve the support or attention they may deserve, since authors may shy away from certain topics or viewpoints (for example those that challenge the societal status quo).

SITUATIONAL CONTEXT: We must assume that we exist in a world of other objects and other living beings, and the humans who have preceded us or are our contemporaries have been or are producers of history, culture, political structures, and relationships. Our human lives are conducted within both physical and historical socio-cultural environments, and care must be taken, therefore, to understand and specify the contextual range and limits of our theoretical proposals.

TIMEFRAME: The phenomena that we study occur within intervals of time. Not only might populations and contexts change over time, but there can also be changes and developments in our philosophical groundings and purposes. Nevertheless, a theory need not be eternally valid to be considered useful or important. Theories can address issues and contribute to the solution of problems in a significant way even if those issues and problems will not persist forever. On the other hand, we must be careful not to assume that what we find to be valid, useful, or important during the period of time in which our studies are done will always be so.

It is not intended that these five categories should be taken as set in stone or as completely independent of one another. The ethical commitments a researcher or theorist holds can be integral to the *purpose* of a work, given that purposes are motivated by values that are situated within a moral or normative framework or can be thought of as an aspect of one's *philosophical grounding.* Also, people who share the same culture (or subculture) tend to hold similar *philosophical worldviews* and experience similar social *contexts*. Further, the *purpose* of an investigation or theoretical model may be intended to help a specific *community* or to advance a particular *philosophical grounding* (worldview). Despite the overlaps and the possibility that these categories could be reconfigured or expanded, retaining a larger number of conceptually separable categories rather than condensing them into a smaller number of more complex categories seems more likely to ensure that nothing will be overlooked.

Related ideas in the literature

I previously mentioned commonalities between the approach advanced here and ideas of the philosopher Reid and the psychologists Smedslund and Ossorio. In addition, one can find congruences in the writings of philosophers throughout the Western tradition, such as the ancient Greeks, Kant, the existentialists, Wittgenstein, and the pragmatists (I suspect that similarities also exist in non-Western philosophies, but that remains a future pursuit).

I believe that attention to the concerns encapsulated by these categories has recently increased, even if authors haven't systematically attempted to analyze them metatheoretically as I attempt to do. As examples, I will refer to a pair of publications that account for, in their own terms, the five categories recommended for reflection and disclosure (identified in UPPERCASE font).

Power and others (2023) begin with what I have taken to be the self-evident assumption that "Social psychologists are not observers separated from the world, but rather they use interventions and imagination to learn about the world by participating in it" (p. 379). They acknowledge their COMMUNITY of origin in their disclosure that "The constraints of generalizability relate to our intellectual heritage (largely sociocultural psychology, and also informed by the historical tradition of American pragmatism), our geographic location (we are all located in European universities), and we are well-to-do academics, which shapes our shared assumptions about, and aspirations for, a social psychology that not only theorizes humans but also contributes to and enriches humanity" (p. 380) and they recognize COMMUNITIES affected in that "we need to focus on the divergent perspectives of the researcher and the researched, question how they come together to make knowledge, and reflect on what that knowledge is used for and who it benefits" (p. 383). They confront historical CONTEXT when they attempt to "recontextualize social psychology within a critical-historical framework" (p. 380). They identify a PHILOSOPHICAL GROUNDING of process ontology that stresses the TIMEFRAME of processes, and a PURPOSE of "world making" that "foregrounds creative emergence, subjective experience, and ethical responsibility for one's role in cocreating the future" (p. 381) and that enables people "to do the things they want to do and be the people they want to be" (p. 386).

Cornish (2020) focuses centrally on COMMUNITIES in advocating for a methodology called "communicative generalization," which is "concerned with the significance of knowledge to epistemic communities rather than abstract universal truth" (p. 78). She highlights TIMEFRAME when referring to Flyberg's (2001) contention that "there is much to be learned by exploring the concrete unfolding of events in time" and CONTEXT when citing Flyberg's view that "The concrete particulars of the case, in its wholeness and its uniqueness, matter, and the case itself is worthy of investigation, not only as an instrument to test an abstract theory" (p. 83). The notions of PHILOSOPHICAL GROUNDING and COMMUNITY can be detected in a reference to Bauer and Gaskell's (2000) concept of significance: "An observation or a fact is significant in relation to some content – a prior set of assumptions, a body of existing knowledge. And it is significant for some audience" (p. 87). A concern with the centrality of PURPOSE is reflected in sensitivity to the agency of authors, those studied, and readers: " 'Communicative generalisation' thus recognises a distribution of agency among authors, cases and readers, in keeping with a dialogical ethical commitment to respecting the uniqueness and humanity of dialogue partners."

Is this just pragmatism?

It might be noticed that the approach advocated here bears strong similarities to the philosophical school known as pragmatism. Both adhere to the assumption that philosophical and psychological theory should start with human experience and be centered in human activity. Both draw attention to the purposes and contexts of inquiry, and to who benefits or is harmed by the consequences that can be drawn from a theory. In doing so, both can visualize socially organized inquiry, and psychology in particular, as a process in which persons attempt to get to where they want to be.

Therefore, I do not think it unreasonable to consider the approach I am presenting to be a variety of pragmatism, so long as it is understood as a pragmatism with a shared human epistemological foundation that carries the implications elucidated below, along with perhaps others as well.

Implications for psychological theories

I will now put forward what I see as some major benefits of grounding psychological theories in a shared human epistemic phenomenology for the content of our psychological theories.

Avoiding the "anything goes" problem

In a previous publication (Brill, 2021), I identified the "view from humanity" as an alternative to the "view from nowhere" (Nagel, 1986), the latter referring to a privileged access to reality which presumes to transcend the perspectives of any and all human minds to achieve knowledge that is infallible, eternal, and universal, and which has been strongly criticized by many philosophers and psychologists in recent decades (see, e.g., Massimi & McCoy, 2020; Richardson, Fowers, & Guignon, 1999; Westerman & Steen, 2007). Another alternative to the "view from nowhere" approach that has been widely considered in the literature is the postmodern, social constructionist approach. A longstanding central critique of postmodern or constructivist theories is that they allow no criteria for rejecting outlandish viewpoints, and no grounds on which to prefer any theory over others based on differently constructed realities. In contrast, the acknowledgement of necessary human epistemological assumptions provides a criterion for rejecting outlandish viewpoints, while still leaving ample opportunities for historical and socio-cultural diversity in theoretical perspectives. That is, any theories that violate the assumptions that we take to be self-evident are disqualified.

For psychological theories specifically, the epistemic phenomenological assumptions cannot be violated without venturing into absurdity. It is obvious that there would be little success achieved by any psychological theory that claimed that humans never have consciousness, memories, thoughts, goals, continuity of personhood, recognition of other persons, or the passage of time. Neither would a theory that claimed that humans are always aware of all the sources of their motivations, thoughts, and actions. To do so would be to argue both that humans *never* behave in a way that is contrary to their conscious intentions, and that we are totally uninfluenced by instinct, habit, or rapid unconscious processes. If anything, we find much of the opposite in the history of psychology: psychodynamic theories, cognitive theories of unconscious processes (e.g., "System 1" processing, Kahneman, 2011) and intuition (e.g., Boyer, 2018), evolutionary psychological theories of instincts, and other similar theories that have long been popular and at times dominant.

"Bootstrapping" the hermeneutic circle

Hermeneutics is the study of interpretation, and a hermeneutic approach to human psychology has been offered as an alternative to both objectivism/scientism and relativism/constructionism (e.g., Bernstein, 1983; Richardson, 2000). Humans are seen as interpretive beings, and the hermeneutic study of how humans construct meaning out of life experience (Sandage et al., 2008) features a method known as the "hermeneutic circle," which George (2020) explains as follows:

> "… a new understanding is achieved through renewed interpretive attention to further possible meanings of those *presuppositions which, sometimes tacitly, inform the understanding that we already have*" [italics added].

Thus, if hermeneutic interpretation is a central way that humans understand and, therefore, guide their actions, it must be initiated ("bootstrapped") with presuppositions that we already have. Universal human epistemic assumptions provide such starting presuppositions and thus avoid the problem of infinite regress of meanings.

Managing pluralism

Explicit considerations of *communities*, *philosophical grounding*, *purpose*, *context*, and *timeframe* in our theorizing can help us manage the fragmentation that has been a feature of academic psychology since its beginning (see, for example, Toomela, 2019; Yanchar & Slife, 1997). We can recognize that no single theoretical approach (such as behaviorism, cognitive science, psychodynamic theory, hermeneutics, narrative theory) may be the "right" one that provides satisfying, useful, or valuable answers to every question or problem that may be addressed by psychological theories.

Let us take as an example the effort to alleviate human suffering, which has been a main aspect of the field of psychology since its beginning. To advance this objective, we have to take into account both the specific individuals who are in pain, as well as the social, political, and economic conditions that may be responsible for bringing about the suffering. If we aim to both relieve the suffering of individuals (presumably as quickly as possible) as well as to prevent or reduce the number of suffering individuals or the severity of their suffering in the future, we will need theories that undergird therapeutic techniques (biological, behavioral, cognitive, existential, etc.) for the former goal *and* historical, sociological, political, and economic theories for the latter. It is not enough to provide psychological therapy for suffering persons while ignoring the status quo that perpetuates the conditions that enable or promote psychological maladies. Cushman (2019), among others, argues that a lack of attention to historical and cultural factors by psychological theorists may contribute to the establishment or persistence of social structures, behaviors, or thoughts that worsen suffering.

Psychological theory must therefore operate at multiple levels, each of which may require its own methodology, each employing the principles of a broad conception of science, and each constrained by the requirement to not violate the assumptions that enable us to survive and function in the world. It should also be apparent from this that psychology cannot be isolated from other social sciences (it is already well connected to neuroscience). Therefore, interdisciplinary collaboration will sometimes be necessary to achieve the goals that psychologists strive to achieve or are asked to achieve by those persons or agencies that provide resources to them.

When addressing the issue of fragmentation with the five categories in mind (*communities*, *philosophical grounding*, *purpose*, *context*, *timeframe*), we increase our ability to find that theoretical approaches which have thus far been considered to be in competition (as the one and only correct approach to all of psychology's questions and issues) may instead each be useful or valuable in different ways. Careful attention to the *communities* to which those persons who have been studied belong can prevent the overgeneralization that contributes

to the unnecessary competition among theories. It can also help make us aware of populations who are being neglected by our theories. The findings and theories that psychologists produce can still be worth the effort and investment of resources even when they are valuable or useful only to one community. What may be valuable to individuals in one culture may be irrelevant to those in another.

The same can be said for *philosophical groundings* as what was said for communities immediately above. While, as mentioned above, philosophical groundings tend to be shared by those in the same community, it is possible for a person to change their philosophical beliefs from one time to the next.[1] A theory can be valuable only to those who currently hold certain worldviews. We can conclude this from the existence of journals dedicated to applying psychological theory and research to advancing the mission of religious groups. It is reasonable to expect that psychological theories developed to be consistent with beliefs specific to a certain religion are not of much interest or are thought to be invalid by those who do not follow that religion. However, so long as such a theory employs the techniques or findings of psychology and the application of the theory does no harm, there is no basis (in a society with religious tolerance) for declaring such a theory impermissible.[2]

Disclosure and analysis of the *purpose* of an empirical investigation or theoretical effort is extremely important in showing how seemingly conflicting theories do not necessarily require one or the other to be abandoned. While biological or neuroscientific theories may be critical if the purpose is to diagnose and deal with certain psychological disorders; theories underlying "talk therapies" or behavioral techniques may be best for other psychological problems; and hermeneutic, historical, or cultural analysis may be required if the purpose is to gain insight into problematic social structures and practices.[3] For example, Lamiell (2003) levels the criticism that the discovery of statistical differences among population groups on personality measures does not give us any significant insights into any particular person. When our purpose is to care for a specific client (as in psychotherapy) or to describe a specific individual (e.g., Martin, 2016), then studies that uncover findings of differences among groups are not of any value. However, if the purpose is to advise on social or educational policy, where a particular change at the population level is desired whether or not predictions can be made about specific individuals, such findings can be quite beneficial. The recent efforts toward developing "psychological humanities" reflect the purpose of exploring the highly complex and personal issues that people confront when dealing with the mysteries and challenges of life (e.g., Freeman, 2024). As Teo (2019) explains in addressing the topic of subjectivity, "The logic of the psychological humanities is not hypothesis-testing but rather entails providing basic general answers to the comprehensive conceptualization of human subjectivity" (p. 285). Gergen (2014) advocates a purpose of orienting psychological work toward creating social change rather than "mirroring" the world in what he calls the project of "future forming" (similar to the aforementioned purpose of "world making"). He asks:

[1] Of course, those who share the same philosophical groundings can be considered a community of sorts, which coheres with my point above that there can be conceptual overlap in the five categories I have laid out.

[2] The question of how the resources (funding, journal space, etc.) provided by a government, organization, or educational institution should be allocated for psychological theories that only followers of a specific religion find valuable is a separate matter.

[3] Note that the issue of "who decides" what is a psychological disorder or what social structures and practices are relevant will be addressed below.

> What if we replaced the persistent rush to establish "what is the case" and began to ask, "what kind of world could we build"? This would be to place the researcher's values in the forefront of his/her activities. (p. 294)

Recognizing that some theories and their applications can be useful or valuable in a limited range of *contexts* can also help show that different theories do not have to be seen as being in conflict. For illustration we can take the phenomena of classical and operant conditioning. During the middle of the twentieth century, behaviorist theories that centered on conditioning were considered to be the leading general approach to all of psychology. Conditioning techniques work well and continue to be relied upon in research and therapy, but only when issues or conflicts concerning meaning, power, and control are not part of the interpersonal context. Conditioning involves someone in control wielding the power to apply rewards and punishments to a person or animal. In animal training, the animal being conditioned does not participate in the meaningful process of deciding that the behavioral change being conditioned is desirable or appropriate. In the conditioning of a human, a client or patient agrees to relinquish control to a therapist. In some cases the conditioned person is someone whom the society or decision maker has deemed should not participate in the decision about whether the conditioning should take place (young children, severely autistic patients, prisoners, etc.). In the latter set of contexts, if the conditioning is not done for the good of the person subjected to the procedure, the conditioning would be (in societies that recognize certain human rights) inappropriate, abusive, or even criminal. Note that self-conditioning is possible, for example, when a person decides to engage in exposure to feared stimuli, which obviously would not be problematic.

Human beings constantly change within the flow of history, culture, events, experiences, and personal reflection. Therefore, it can be expected that little or nothing in psychological theory that deals with meaning will have the nature of an infallible, eternal law. Whether or not a psychological theory is valuable or useful may depend, along with other factors previously mentioned, upon a *timeframe*. Even if a theory is relevant only to short-lived phenomena, it may still be of great value. Psychologists might be able to provide important contributions to the resolution of an immediate crisis, regardless of whether the crisis persists or recurs. At the other extreme, the stability of human biology and universal life circumstances makes it imaginable that some psychological theories may be valuable for as long as humans exist. We may not want to discount the value of psychological theoretical work simply because there is constant change in our subject matter.

In sum, explicit specification or analysis of *community*, *philosophical grounding*, *purpose*, *context*, and *timeframe* can more clearly pinpoint the particular ways in which theories coexist or conflict with one another, highlighting in the latter case the specific issues that need additional investigation or debate.

Addressing global issues

As mentioned above, it is certainly possible for the practitioners and institutions of professional psychology to find it acceptable to develop theories that are useful or valued only by those who hold particular worldviews or are members of particular cultures in particular geographical or social contexts. However, a theory intended to apply to all humans or to contribute to the resolution of global crises would benefit from having a

vocabulary and philosophical basis that is understandable and acceptable to all. Wierzbicka (2021) puts it this way:

> A shared set of human concepts makes it possible to establish a shared human lingua franca, a "Basic Human" in which messages of global significance can be formulated and exchanged, across all parts of planet earth. In particular, if a charter of global ethics is ever to be agreed on – or even meaningfully discussed – by representatives of different traditions, it needs to be formulated in cross-translatable words. (p. 320)

For psychological theorists who join the discussion about global ethics and global problems, integrating the universal epistemic phenomenological assumptions adds another layer to the foundation upon which global ethics and solutions to global problems can be sought. Conversely, including assumptions that are not universally held would have the opposite effect. Theoretical ideas that violate the universal assumptions or have at their foundations philosophical concepts or assumptions that belong to specific populations or worldviews will not support the sufficient consensus that will be required.[4]

Furthering a reinterpreted vocabulary for epistemic phenomenology

It is important to point out that when we adopt the universal human epistemological phenomenology orientation, we do not have to abandon the everyday use of such terms as "truth," "fact," "evidence," "knowledge," "reality," or "objective," among others. They can remain as useful as ever, in the same ways that they have always been used. The difference is that grounding theory in universal human epistemological phenomenology avoids the "view from nowhere," which ignores the historical, social, interpersonal, and motivational contexts in which theorists are engaged. The approach to these concepts taken here can be considered to build on the viewpoints of other philosophical and psychological approaches, such as those of John Dewey (1929), who insisted that human experience is primary, and that theories are tools that we use to serve our purposes. Here are examples of how the terms can be interpreted from a universally human perspective, while still retaining the same force and functionality in human affairs:

- The "truth" would be what a person honestly believes is the case with the highest level of confidence and which that person believes all humans should take to be the case. Typically a person is willing to incur costs or take risks, even the risk of death, on the basis of the belief. For example, if I believe that it is true that food is necessary for human life, I will be willing to pay for a meal. Also, I would say that the claim that food is not necessary for human life is false, and that any person who makes that claim is wrong. And throughout history, people have been willing to fight and kill for what they have taken to be the truth, even of course in instances when no one today would say that those beliefs are true. The version of the concept of "truth" offered here (beliefs honestly held with ultimate confidence and the expectation that every human would agree) in combination with accepting that there are universal assumptions that should not be violated supports such statements about theorizing as:

[4] Again, the questions of who participates in the global negotiations or who decides what a sufficient consensus is would ultimately be established by political and historical realities.

> Of all claims that might be made by or about any theory, we will contend that none are more important than truth claims—that is, its claims of what actually is "the case" in particular situations in the lived world of real human activity and engagement. We acknowledge at the outset that the matter of "what is the case" is a multifaceted issue. ... We employ the term in the sense of *a phenomenological correspondence* in the lived world between the understanding and meaningful experience of human beings and the phenomena they experience and understand in the meaningful lived world of human beings. We take this approach to "truth" to avoid the too-common practice of inventing and multiplying abstractions (entities, forces, processes, constructs, structures, etc.) and then endowing them with a reality that assigns a causal efficacy in producing human actions and understandings such that these abstractions come to be seen as more real than human actions and experiences themselves (Williams & Gantt, 2025, p. 2). [italics added]

The appeal to shared human epistemic phenomenological assumptions matches the sense in which Williams and Gantt (2025) identify "what is the case" and satisfies their call below that psychology should be able to "shoulder the burden of truth."

> On the one hand, any discipline which is unwilling to shoulder the burden of truth, as contemporary psychology seems increasingly to be, is necessarily and fundamentally a skeptical discipline. Contemporary psychology has fallen prey to skepticism, for many reasons, both traditional and postmodern, about the possibility of knowing or saying anything authoritative about the nature of truth or the truth of theories ... On the other hand, if theories do not, in some sense, make truth available and, thus, make truth claims of some sort, it is not clear that such theories could then have much to contribute to our understanding of human beings and their actions. Put succinctly, if our theories do not reveal or reflect something true of us, or if we can have no confidence that they do, then what good are they and on what basis can psychology seriously maintain its claim to status as a "science?" (p. 3)

In general the approach I am advocating permits us to avoid falling prey to both extreme relativist claims that there can be no basis for comparing truth claims across constructed realities, and to the "representational view" that our beliefs correspond to an independent external reality (independent, that is, of any and all human minds) which "... leads to insoluble puzzles concerning, among other things, how through our mental representations we can gain indubitable access to realities independent of them" (Richardson, 2000).

Other related epistemic terms that are commonly employed both in everyday conversation and theoretical work can similarly be interpreted.

- A "fact" is a proposition that satisfies a person's criteria for truth. Again, the person takes it that the "fact" is "justified" in that it should satisfy any human's criteria for truth. While the criteria for truth may vary among historical periods, cultures, subcultures, religions, or philosophical standpoints, each person typically believes that their criteria are correct, and others are incorrect.
- "Evidence" is what is taken to be supportive of facts. In modern science, evidence is considered to be what all observers agree that they perceive or otherwise experience. In other words, evidence is consensual among all persons who matter in

the process of such evaluations (those that don't matter might be persons who are too young, uninformed in a critical way, cognitively impaired, etc.).

- We attribute "knowledge" to ourselves or others when we or they can think or say propositions that we believe are "true," or if we believe that they demonstrate skills that require certain capabilities. It should be discernable that the classical philosophical definition of knowledge as justified true belief can be recast using the universal human epistemological phenomenology perspective.
- "Reality" would be the total sum of all truths or facts as just defined.
- The "world" could be considered synonymous with "reality," or possibly refer to all of reality outside of oneself or one's consciousness (as in the phrase "the world is against me").
- Likewise, something is "objective" when a person believes all humans should perceive it (if it is an object) or conclude it (if it is a proposition arrived at through reasoning).
- "Ontology" would be the collection of entities which a theory or model claims must be taken into account.

Do these interpretations of epistemic terms mean that we can't obtain eternal, certain, and infallible knowledge, as many philosophers have striven to obtain for centuries, and which has been commonly taken to be possible? In short, yes, but this does not mean that what we currently take to be the case (i.e., to be true) is not valuable or useful, even essential for survival.[5] Neither does it mean that what we currently take to be true will in all cases be considered false in the future. Some of what our ancient ancestors (or even certain animal species, if we can assign to them the ability to have beliefs) took to be the case long ago is what we still take to be the case and what may always be taken by humans to be the case. An example is the belief that unsupported objects fall downward toward the earth (or, if one is outside of earth's gravity field, move toward a sufficiently large object). Some of the findings of the sciences may be considered valid for as long as humanity persists. Even so, however, the observations upon which they rest are considered "empirical" only in the sense that all humans who matter (i.e., excluding those judged to be incompetent, insane, etc.) agree that they are experiencing the same thing when they make their observations.[6] Only if the human mind changes radically from what it has always been (and here we can imagine genetic engineering or technological brain enhancements), which may never happen, would we even entertain the possibility of our perceptions or thought processes being so different as to nullify some of the beliefs that we as a species have taken to be true.

[5] Persons who believe that one or more deities have revealed eternal truth to humans would most likely disagree with the conclusion that we can't have eternal infallible knowledge. However, so long as there are many different religions whose eternal truths contradict each other, how can we decide which of these truths are the ones upon which we should base our beliefs and actions?

[6] There are, of course, moral concerns about who sets the standards for deciding who is competent or insane and must therefore be excluded from the conversation. There are cultures and there have been times in history in which such judgments were made that are different from those in today's educated, wealthy, complex, and technologically advanced societies.

Concluding thoughts

Relying on my own phenomenological experience (which I fully expect is shared by all who read this) along with the writings of philosophers across the ages, empirical work by linguists and cognitive scientists, and theories by psychologists and anthropologists, I have advanced the proposal that there are a set of universal human epistemological assumptions that should inform the practice of theorizing and also serve as fundamental principles for the content of psychological theory. Regarding the implications of these assumptions on theorizing, the recommendation made here is to abandon the "view from nowhere" attitude that attempts to describe an absolute, unchanging compendium of facts and laws in favor of theories that we consider better as conceptual models or more practically useful than other alternatives. Even so, assertions employing "truth-related" terminology are still viable, so long as it is understood that the truths about which we speak are what we believe to be what all humans should currently believe, and *potentially* subject to modification as human knowledge, skills, technology, and biology change. When we produce or evaluate a theory, much is to be gained by carefully reflecting upon and making evident several aspects of the theorization process as engagement: the historical and cultural contexts of the theorists, the community that the theory is about, and the community that will make use of or will be affected by the theory; the philosophical assumptions underlying the theory; the theory's purposes and potential unintended consequences; the situational contexts in which the theory is relevant; and the time period to which the theory is applicable. Depending on our assessment of these factors, it may be necessary to access facts, conclusions, theories, or expertise from disciplines outside of psychology.

As I have indicated in footnotes that appear in earlier sections, there remain a number of very tough questions to be asked about our theories and how they are to be developed. It is my hope that the recommendation to engage in thoughtful consideration and disclosure of issues related to *communities*, *philosophical grounding*, *purpose*, *context*, and *timeframe* helps to bring these questions to the fore. Which worldviews, cultures, or individuals define what is an acceptable level of suffering, what is proper behavior, what is psychopathological, what social structures need to be changed, or what is the vision of a good life toward which to strive? Who determines which empirical studies are performed and which theoreticians are supported (e.g., with faculty positions, grants, awards, journal submission acceptances, book publications, organizational appointments)? What will the sources of funding and other resources in our society be willing to pay for? What types of theories may be resisted or condemned by those who hold power? In what contexts might our theories fail to be applicable? When might our psychological theory no longer be valid, due to changes in the public's behavior after learning of the theory (the "looping effect")?

The universal assumptions establish a reliable foundation for our theories, providing a way to avoid extreme "anything goes" relativism while leaving ample opportunities for cultural and other forms of relativism to play a substantial role in psychological theories. They are reliable in the sense that they are tied to features of human beings and the conditions in which we all live today, have lived since the dawn of the species, and seem likely remain steady for the foreseeable future. I assert that it would be possible for these assumptions to no longer be made by all humans only if there is radical change to the biological beings that we are or in the technologies we use to enhance how we perceive or think. Such changes are imaginable in the abstract but their potential effects on our phenomenology are extremely difficult, if not impossible, to predict.

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