

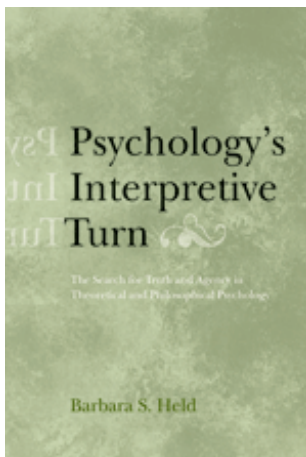
Book Review
Psychology's Interpretive Turn: The Search for Truth and Agency in Theoretical and Philosophical Psychology

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Much of the history of philosophical psychology over the past three quarters of a century has been occupied with the postmodern critique of conventional scientific psychology, which the critics have decried as mechanistic, reductionist, and unable to account for the essential human experience of agency. But the fundamental epistemic relativism of postmodernism, or social constructionism, has itself been criticized, even by those sympathetic to its central insights, and in the past few decades a variety of theorists and empirical researchers have tried to preserve essential elements of both traditions (for a broad sampling of such approaches, see Erneling & Johnson 2005). Barbara Held's most recent book, *Psychology's Interpretive Turn: the Search for Truth and Agency in Theoretical and Philosophical*

Psychology is a study and critique of one segment of the literature that has arisen from this search for a *via media*.

Though united by this search for a more moderate critique of conventional psychology, the group of thinkers, to whom Held refers collectively as *middle ground-theorists*, do not constitute a unified school. Her subjects represent a number of traditions including hermeneutics, neo-positivism, and discursive constructionism. What they do have in common, however, is a commitment to modifying the profound relativism of the radical postmodernists and social constructionists in ways that preserve the postmodern idea that, «[o]ur psychological existence is constituted by, constrained by, and thus dependent on the historical/cultural/linguistic context of our location» (p. 88).

The plurality of traditions to which Held's subjects owe allegiance makes her task a difficult one. In order to do justice to this diversity, it is necessary for her to make multiple theory-specific analyses, which tend to break the flow of her own discussion and give the book a mosaic quality. A reader who has paid close attention to her introductory chapter should not have trouble following the thread of her argument, but the need for specificity complicates what is already a relatively complex analysis of the interplay of ontological and epistemological issues discussed by all her subjects.

Held's most fundamental critique of the middle-ground theorists is that they fail to differentiate themselves from the basic postmodern belief that human nature is self-constructed to such an extent that there can be no objective psychological universals. Such an ontology, she argues, implies that reason itself is socially constructed, which, if true, would necessitate a fundamentally relativist epistemology. This ontological-epistemological question demands a sophisticated philosophical discussion of both of its elements, which is reflected in

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the book's organization into a series of sections in which Held first considers the ontological and epistemological issues separately, and then combines them in a final section where she analyzes the interdependent ontological-epistemological unity.

In the sphere of ontology, Held sees the middle-ground theorists as seeking to carve out positions that avoid both relativism and mechanism, combining the realism of conventional psychology with the agency that postmodernists say is missing from 'mainstream' approaches. Held emphatically approves of the general intent of this project but argues that these theorists fail to achieve their goal, in part, because they accept the postmodernists' mistaken definition of agency with self-fashioning (cf. Greenblatt 1980). Middle-ground theorists argue that, in their models, the constraints on self-construction imposed by a given society, culture and language ground the psychological individual in ways that allow for ontological status, without having to see human action as the result of a string of external causes. Pointing to passages in the writings of middle-ground theorists in which they assert that human beings are «simply» or «just» what they interpret themselves as being (p. 99), Held argues that interpretation cannot confer such ontological status, even when that interpretation is constrained by social and cultural context. What is needed, she proposes, is a conception of human agency as rooted, not in freedom of interpretation, but in the human ability to rationally evaluate one's circumstances and act accordingly.

The agency-as-self-fashioning position of the middle-ground theorists also stems, Held suggests, from their acceptance of the postmodern characterization of conventional scientific realism. According to her subjects, the conventional research program's focus on the study of mind-independent objects carries with it the notion that psychological properties and behaviors are reducible to those of fundamental physical particles. So defined, an objective approach could only lead to a reductionism that is unsuitable for human sciences; but Held rejects this identification of realism with reductionism, citing the work of the realist philosopher, Amie Thomasson (2008), who argues that human-scale objects are as real as the fundamental particles of which they are composed. Such an ontology, Held suggests, makes it possible to consider human behavior and psychological states without reducing them either to brain processes or to the local cultural and linguistic forces that shape the psychological subject's phenomenological experience. The middle-ground theorists' inability to envision such non-reductive, objectivist realism, Held argues, results in an ontology that, whatever its claims about social and cultural constraints, is hardly less relativist than that of the explicitly radical postmodernists.

Such an ontology, in turn, restricts the range of epistemological positions open to the middle-ground theorists. Specifically, it provides no basis from which to criticize the postmodernist dichotomy that limits epistemological options to a choice between pretensions to a "view from nowhere" and "situated knowing" in which both knower and known are so relativized that the subjective and the objective become indistinguishable. As an alternative to such a dichotomy, Held suggests the more complex formulation of Edward Polz (1992), who understands human experience as incorporating both situated and universal elements.

The conflict between the conventional and the interpretive approaches are indicative of one of the most serious of the problems that contemporary psychology needs to address. Elsewhere (Meehan 2009), I have argued that the solution cannot be found in compromise between the two, limited and thus flawed approaches, and Held's critique makes it clear that modification of the postmodern approach is not the answer, either. What is also clear is that both research traditions embody crucial insights. Conventional psychology has, without question, often mistaken situated findings for universal psychological attributes, but it has also produced some extremely valuable work on human cognition (e.g., Miller, Galanter & Pribram



1960), social interaction (e.g., Haney et al. 1973), and psychotherapeutic process (e.g., Weiss et al. 1986). Likewise, the essential corrections to traditional narratives about the history of science that have followed from Thomas Kuhn's (1962) seminal work in the sociology of science have made it quite clear that, in many of its aspects, science, including scientific psychology, is socially constructed. And this insight remains important even though some have used Kuhn's work to advance philosophical agendas that are too far from realism to be compatible with scientific investigation.

The essential point, of course, is that any valid philosophy of psychology would have to be open both to the legitimate findings of conventional research and to the sociology of science. The development of such a program lies beyond the scope of *Psychology's interpretive turn*, which is primarily a critical work. But no critique can be advanced without reference to affirmative tenets, and the constructive aspect of Held's critique suggests some grounds upon which such a task might be attempted. The constructive thrust of Held's argument can be found primarily in the use she makes of the philosophical resources she marshals in the course of her argument. One particularly salient example is her adaptation of Thomasson's work, which defends the ontological status of human-scale *objects* against assertions of the priority of fundamental physical particles. In being used to assert the objectivity of *psychological structures*, these arguments do not lose their importance for the philosophy of physics, and Held, by adapting them to the philosophy of psychology provides a true middle ground: one from which both physicalism and cultural relativism can be subjected to reasoned criticism.

Ultimately, the most important aspect of the philosophical position from which Held confronts the hermeneutic and neo-pragmatic assumptions of both postmodern and middle-ground theorists is her assertion of the validity of reason. Here again, her approach allows for a critique of both physicalists, who mistrust the reasoning that connects observable phenomena to unobservable posits, and postmoderns, who believe reason to be socially constructed: clearly a more legitimate middle ground between the two extremes than could arise from either compromising between the two or from modifying either. And, once again, the strategy that allows her to establish this ground is the application of philosophic approaches that are different from those of either the positivists or of the postmoderns – in this case Pols' insight that human understanding is not to be reducible to either universals or purely existential situated elements.

As noted above, Held's book is not an easy read. No book that poses a fundamental challenge to such an important an intellectual project as that of her subjects could be easy and Held's task is complicated by the variety of different approaches taken by her middle-ground theorists. Her treatment of this diversity is extremely generous in its attention to specific arguments of the various authors and in the profusion of extended quotations which allow the reader to encounter the opinions she discusses in their author's own words. Held's own argument is profound and richly suggestive of alternative solutions to a long-standing problem in the theory of psychology. Though complex, the book is well worth the effort, as both the arguments she addresses, and the position she develops, are important ones.

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