

Commentary on Daniels and Soltis

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DANIELS: WHAT PSYCHOLOGY CAN DO FOR EDUCATION

I'm going to begin by reconstructing Daniels's paper a bit. My purpose is to make apparent certain aspects of his arguments, in case what I consider to be a major point was not so intended by the author. That this is possible or even likely is suggested by the fact that the order of topics in my commentary bears only slight resemblance to the order in Daniels's paper.

Daniels puts forward the case for the importance of purpose and perception in understanding mental activity. His argument is rooted in his definition of a person as having not only goals, but second-order goals—the ability to consciously manipulate personal goals. This ability, actualized primarily through language, allows us to control and alter our perceptive capacities. Three kinds of perceptions—achievements, receptions, and realizations—are thus at the heart of education and, therefore, according to Daniels, should also be at the heart of educational research.

Daniels builds his case by arguing that many of the concepts that characterize human mental activity are polymorphous rather than generic or descriptive—the example he uses is the concept of thinking. The term *polymorphous* is used in a sense that implies that a concept is complex, multifaceted, and difficult to analyze. Thus, he argues, standard models of research that rely on operational definitions or behavioural analysis do not apply. A central theme of his argument is that the three types of perceptions are kinds of “cognitive seeing,” rather than skills that might be achieved by practice. Skills—and the examples are all physical skills—are relegated to a lower status and are seen as the intertwining of receptions and movements. Receptions, the fundamental outcomes of education, are not skills and therefore cannot be analyzed as such.

To investigate psychological questions that he considers worthwhile, Daniels recommends joint conceptual and empirical activities involving philosophers and psychologists and aimed at development of what he calls a “pedagogy of persons.” By this, he intends that educational research should concentrate on investigation of the conditions that are optimal for “people to have receptions of a defensible kind.” Daniels contends that the failure of

philosophers and psychologists to engage in such work has been partly responsible for the adaptation of misleading and/or useless research models involving concepts such as skill, process, problem-solving, and domain, all of which he considers ill-advised.

Daniels argues that philosophers should help psychologists to focus on the purposeful nature of human mental activity, and on the centrality of perception. In general, his point is well taken, and I quite agree. I am going to question, however, both whether it is aimed at psychology, and whether it comes from philosophy. That is, I wonder about the range of its applicability, as several strands of psychology seem not to need this redirection. As examples, school counsellors, those who study learning from a constructivist perspective, and those interested in motivation and attitudes all come to mind. In fact, I would argue this middle group are actively carrying Daniels's message for him as they proselytize methodologically among their colleagues. The other side of this question, then, is whether Daniels's advice is that of a philosopher, or simply that of a psychologist who disagrees with the paradigm encompassing the offending concepts—skill, problem-solving, and so on. Thus, I have to ask about the timeliness of this exhortation and whether Daniels is aware of the range of epistemological perspective and methodological choice available in educational psychology. As an aside, I will also suggest that concepts as vague and multifaceted as thinking and cognitive seeing will do little to aid the jointly conceived research program envisioned by Daniels.

My second point is in defence of skills analysis, problem-solving, and other such approaches to understanding the learning process. I sense from his discussion that Daniels has two concerns about psychological research as he sees it practised. The first is that psychologists are using methods more appropriate to an analysis of a physical than a mental activity. In contrast, I believe there is a place for reductionist, laboratory-type work in educational psychology. I say a place only, for I see it as necessary but not sufficient to finding answers to educational problems. Some aspects of some objectives of schooling can be dissected, taught as skills, and practised.

Daniels's second objection is that psychologists are treating a small component of thinking as the whole of thinking. It is of course true that many researchers hope that the long-range outcome of problem-solving research in a disciplinary context (e.g., mathematics or social studies) can be generalized to other areas of life. However, most, I would suggest, see solutions arising out of long-term multidisciplinary research efforts, and not directly and uniquely out of the narrow methodology that they have chosen as appropriate for their particular research interests. Daniels has painted a caricature of the expectations of such researchers.

My final comment concerns Daniels's conception of practice and his analogies to physical skills. My attention here is focused on Daniels's statements that problem-solving is not like jumping, that it is logically absurd to practise problem-solving, and that running, unlike kicking a ball, is not a skill. His conception of practice seems to be constant repetition, which he sees as absurd for problem-solving. If you accept that conception, he is right, but I believe it is inapplicable to both problem-solving and jumping. Any elementary methods text for teaching mathematics or coaching track and field will bear me out. (Also, and this is not central, Daniels contends that running can be differentiated from jumping by the absence of required skills, as there is nothing to learn about running. In fact, there are teachable skills involved in successful competitive running. Daniels's choice of analogies detracts from his case.)

SOLTIS: THE PERSISTENCE OF PARADIGMS

Although I enjoyed reading Soltis's paper, my overall impression is that it failed to deal directly with the topic at hand. This was particularly frustrating in that, on the occasions when the author did deal with the interface between philosophy and psychology, I found myself wishing he had said more.

The paper gives a historical overview of philosophy and psychology, arguing that Dewey and Thorndike have provided paradigmatic conceptions of how philosophy and psychology should address themselves to education. To demonstrate that these paradigms persist to this day, he traces the pure and applied interests of Thorndike through Piaget and Skinner to Kohlberg and Bruner. He then outlines the demise of the behaviourist school and the (re)emergence of cognitivist approaches, all within a discipline of psychology, both pure and applied. He cites Pressey as the founder of an independent discipline of educational psychology, also with its pure and applied aspects.

He parallels this analysis of psychology with a recounting of Dewey's work, again as both scholar and educator. Soltis argues that Dewey has "carved out a basic place for philosophy in tandem with psychology," with the first providing problem definition and wisdom and the second supplying empirical knowledge. He then treats one example in considerable depth—perhaps too much given the topic—by tracing the development of analytic philosophy, criticizing Scheffler's work as narrowly conceived, and praising the broader approach of Peters, who provides a "comprehensive view of the best form for education and society to take." He outlines contrasts among the visions of the good held by Dewey, Peters, and the newer neo-Marxist

philosophers but argues that they all fit the Deweyan paradigm in aiming at this same comprehensive view, philosophy in tandem with psychology. He concludes this section of the paper with a brief recounting of some recent reconceptualizations of the educational enterprise, showing the continuing contributions of philosophical analysis to education.

For me, the most interesting aspects of the historical perspective in Soltis's paper are two shifts that take place as we are led through the decades of the development of educational philosophy and psychology. The first is from nondisciplinary interests in education to disciplinary ones, and the second is from disciplinary subspecialties to distinct disciplines. Using Thorndike as an example, we can see two relatively separate lines of interest: academic psychology of the learning process and practical improvement of the schooling system. As the work of Thorndike and his successors proceeds, we see not only a coming together of the academic and practical interests but also the development of a distinct discipline separate from the parent. At the same time, we have the emergence of education as a discipline rather than as simply a human activity.

Soltis goes on to suggest that these two paradigms in philosophy and psychology have endured because they serve fundamental human needs: the need to understand how things work and the need to deal with basic human issues and understandings. The final section of the paper asks and answers the question of whether philosophical and psychological analysis must maintain separate identities, focusing respectively on ends and means. His conclusion, and what I feel should have been the starting point for a more thorough discussion, is his negative answer: psychology is as much a conceptual and argument-producing activity as philosophy, and philosophy is as instrumental and means-oriented as psychology. This is the point at which I found myself wishing for more. While I accept the point as fundamentally true—it is difficult to imagine a philosophy of science were this not so—it did not follow, as I expect the author intended, from the previous material.

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