ABSTRACT. Drawing on Toulmin’s (1990) portrayal of the ‘dual trajectory of Modernity’, the predominant trajectory being tied to Cartesian rationalism and the other to Renaissance humanism, it is suggested that much of contemporary theoretical psychology appears to be congruent with widespread efforts to reappropriate the latter tradition and thereby to ‘humanize’ its inquiries. This apparent congruence notwithstanding, it is also suggested that much of theoretical psychology, in its very theoreticism, remains wedded to the Cartesian project. By moving toward what is here termed a ‘poetics of the Other’, there emerges the opportunity for a portion of the field not only to further extricate itself from the gravitational pull of theory, as ordinarily conceived, but also to explore modes of thinking and writing more closely tied to the humanities. ‘Theory’ remains viable from this point of view, but in a different way than that which is generally operative in current endeavors.

KEY WORDS: cosmopolis, hermeneutic, modernity, narrative, poetics

Reappraising the Age of Theory

In his important book Cosmopolis, subtitled The Hidden Agenda of Modernity (1990), Stephen Toulmin questions radically the ‘received view’ of modernity, which, in brief, posits two leading ideas: that the modern age began in the 17th century, particularly via the work of Descartes and Galileo, and that it was most appropriately characterized by ‘the adoption of rational methods in all serious fields of intellectual inquiry’ (p. 13), entailing a fourfold philosophical transformation from the oral to the written, the particular to the universal, the local to the general, and the timely to the timeless. Toulmin also speaks of this transformation as one from the practical to the theoretical—with ‘theoretical’, in this context, referring essentially to that fundamental intellectual orientation which seeks to capture in objective fashion the various phenomena of the world, from the cosmos to the polis.

The problem with the received view, Toulmin suggests, is not only that it is incomplete but that it has been used as a kind of ‘origin myth’ to support and legitimize a problematically abstract, decontextualized, rationalistic perspective on inquiry, including inquiry into the human realm. As such, his
aim in the book is to fashion a revised account of modernity and its sources, one that serves to show that, alongside the Cartesian/Galilean worldview, grounded in natural philosophy, was one promoted earlier by Renaissance humanists such as Montaigne, grounded in classical literature and committed to a ‘modest skepticism’ that has only recently come to be revalued through the work of writers such as Wittgenstein and Kuhn. The latter worldview, Toulmin argues, had effectively been ‘sidelined’, if not entirely eclipsed, by the former. Telling his own more complex story of the ‘dual trajectory of Modernity’ might therefore serve to show, among other things, that some ideas frequently designated as postmodern in fact have distinctly modern origins. It might also serve to underscore ‘our need to reappropriate the reasonable and tolerant (but neglected) legacy of humanism’ and ‘to find ways of moving on from the received view of Modernity—which set the exact sciences and the humanities apart—to a reformed version, which redeems philosophy and science, by reconnecting them to the humanist half of Modernity’ (p. 180).

Toulmin speaks of this project as ‘the humanizing of Modernity’, and it entails a return to exactly those aspects of practice and indeed of life itself that had been submerged under the weight of the rationalist agenda: to the oral, specifically with issues of ‘communication, rhetoric, and “discourse”’ (p. 186); to the particular, that is, to ‘specific concrete problems’ (p. 188) of the sort earlier addressed by case ethics and casuistry; to the local, such that there is increased attention to anthropology, linguistics and the social/cultural dimension more generally; and to the timely, which may be said to involve both time-boundedness (e.g. of the sort promoted by historicists) and moral/ethical urgency (e.g. of the sort promoted by those who seek to rectify social or political ills). ‘The task’, he offers, ‘is not to build new, more comprehensive systems of theory with universal and timeless relevance, but to limit the scope of even the best-framed theories, and fight the intellectual reductionism that became entrenched during the ascendency of rationalism’ (p. 193). We might think of this movement of which Toulmin speaks as broadly hermeneutic in orientation.

The New Cosmopolis?

Toulmin’s basic account of this humanistic ‘reappropriation’ squares well with much of what has been happening in the pages of Theory & Psychology over the course of the past decade. In returning to the dimension of the oral, with its corollary emphases on communication, rhetoric and discourse, we can see the contours of pursuits such as discourse analysis and discursive psychology. In returning to the particular, there come to mind efforts in narrative psychology and ethnography. Returning to the local is generally consistent with ideas embraced by cultural psychologists and sociolinguists;
while returning to the timely, in the two senses referred to above, would seem consistent with efforts on the part of social constructionists and critical psychologists, among others. Judging by appearances, then, many recent trends in theoretical psychology are largely in keeping with the new cosmopolis identified by Toulmin.

But appearances can be deceiving. What we tend to find in a good portion of contemporary theoretical psychology is, I suggest, a sort of hybrid enterprise: committed, on the one hand, to many of the ideals found in Toulmin’s fourfold return but, on the other, still wedded to the rationalistic abstractness of the Cartesian worldview and still committed to the separation of the sciences from the humanities. Discourse analysts, for instance, may find themselves searching for that system of precise textual notation which might best allow meanings to be pinned down, gotten right. Social constructionists may find themselves building elaborate theoretical models that aspire faithfully to depict this or that sphere of (constructed, dialogic, relational) reality. There may be talk of hermeneutic, even deconstructive, ‘methods’, the presumption being that these areas of thought too can, and should, be codified somehow, concretized and systematized so as to become transportable, transformed into techniques and tools that others might use when dealing with their own recalcitrant data. Old habits die hard—particularly so when they are supported by those who call the institutional shots.

In a certain sense, it might therefore be suggested in this context that much of contemporary theoretical psychology both embraces and disavows its own humanistic commitments. The movement toward the oral, particular, local and timely, I would argue with Toulmin, is at base humanistic (directed toward ‘concrete details of practical experience’ [p. 43]) through and through—even for most of those who consider themselves ‘anti-humanists’ or ‘post-humanists’. The bottom line is, there is simply no reason to explore these concrete details or unmask authority or critique power relations or address matters of social injustice (etc.) unless one values other people and cares about their fate. At the same time, however, it can also be said that significant vestiges of the Cartesian project remain operative in much of theoretical psychology, manifesting themselves, ultimately, in new waves of theoreti-
cism, modeled still (even if unwittingly) on the rationalist agenda. While Toulmin seems to urge us to extricate ourselves from theory—at least in its abstract, rationalistic form—much of theoretical psychology, despite its aspirations toward humanizing the landscape of inquiry, remains thoroughly enmeshed within it.

As an important aside, it should be noted that certain of the more ‘skeptic’ trends within theoretical psychology would appear to be more in keeping with the new cosmopolis outlined by Toulmin, especially as concerns the attempt to resurrect Montaigne and company. There is, however, a significant difference between the two, and it is precisely the difference
between a classical or pre-Cartesian perspective and a post-Cartesian perspective on inquiry: whereas the former mode of skepticism is 'modest' in its appraisal of what can be definitively known, leading in turn both to an affirmation of ambiguity and to critical self-consciousness about one's own claims, the latter often amounts to 'destructive nay-saying', as Toulmin (1990) puts it, to denial and negation. Taking this idea one step further, it can be argued that this very stance of denial and negation is itself parasitic on the epistemic certitude it refuses, which is yet another reason for why the Cartesian framework remains alive, in theoretical psychology and elsewhere. In short, then, the spell of this framework is manifested in two distinct ways: in the persistence of abstract theory, even when applied to phenomena that are either beyond theory's reach or better framed as matters of practice, and in a form of skepticism that may be construed as a kind of reaction-formation that perpetuates objectifying modes of thought even as it refuses them. The result is that much of contemporary theoretical psychology remains in a liminal state, mid-way between the old cosmopolis and the new: despite the desire on the part of many to humanize their inquiries, indeed to bring them closer to the concerns of the humanities, there remains a kind of gravitational pull backward, toward the rational, the scientific, the theorizable. What is to be done? More specifically, what would it take for theoretical psychology to move beyond this liminality and to follow through on the humanizing process?

Beyond Theory

My own conviction is that there exists the need for at least a portion of theoretical psychology to move beyond theory—as ordinarily conceived—altogether. To put the matter somewhat differently, I would suggest that a portion of the field simply abandon its commitment to theoretical scientificity and that it become more closely tied to the humanities. I offer this not out of anti-scientific fervor but rather out of the belief that exploration of the 'concrete details of practical experience' lends itself far more readily to poetics than to theoretics, and that the movement beyond theory may better attune us to the ethical—even ethico-religious—dimension of inquiry into the human realm. On some level, this program of inquiry is already underway, even if unbeknownst to some of those involved.

Martha Nussbaum (1990), drawing especially on Aristotle, has offered some helpful ideas in this context in her own emphasis on practical wisdom in contrast to theoretical understanding and in her spirited defense of narrative. Not unlike Toulmin, she argues that this shift of emphasis allows for a concern with 'historical particularity' in a way that simply is not available to theory: if in fact one is concerned with the particular (as she believes we ought to be), and if one wishes to be sufficiently attentive to
the contingency and accidental nature of experience, one must move to a
different, more historical and literary, program of inquiry. Stories, she
writs, can better accommodate 'the incompleteness and neediness of human
life, its relations of dependence and love with uncontrolled people and
things' (p. 389). The turn toward the poetic, I would argue, moves still
farther in this direction, resisting, if need be, the possible consolations of
narrative form in favor of the 'free verse' appropriate to much of human
experience. What it also does is allow us to think about difficult issues such
as 'reality', 'knowledge' and, especially, 'truth' in a different, and perhaps
more adequate, way than theoretical discourse ordinarily allows. 'Modern
painting, like modern thought generally,' Merleau-Ponty (1964) has written,
'obliges us to admit a truth which does not resemble things, which is without
any external model and without any predestined instruments of expression,
and which is nevertheless truth' (p. 57). Art, he continues, 'provides us with
symbols whose meaning we never stop developing. Precisely because it
dwells and makes us dwell in a world we do not have the key to, the work
of art teaches us to see and ultimately gives us something to think about'—
and, I would add, to feel—'as no analytical work can' (p. 77). In speaking of
the poetic, therefore, I speak essentially of the desirability of opening up
dimensions of thought and feeling that theoretical discourse, in its customary
forms, cannot readily accommodate.

Toward a Poetics of the Other

The movement beyiond theory entails a concern not only with the 'concrete
details of practical experience' (Toulmin) and 'historical particularity'
(Nussbaum), but with the good—difficult though it is, of course, to speak
about it in definitive fashion. As suggested earlier, much of theoretical
psychology is already committed to some or other version of the good: the
unoppressed person or group, the subject freed from the clutches of capitalist
capital, the theoretical perspective that calls into question the ideological
commitments of other theoretical perspectives, presumably not only to expose
their pretenses but to offer something better, something more valuable to
human beings. Often, the ethical moment goes unacknowledged or un-
avowed, perhaps because of the 'fear' that doing so will somehow lead to
essentialism or reification. The fact nevertheless remains that much of
theoretical psychology, wittingly or not, has its own ethical axes to grind.

What sorts of axes are they? Many contemporary trends appear to be
largely epistemological, oriented either toward historicizing phenomena that
are too often deemed outside of history, or toward desubstantializing phenom-
ena that are too often hypostatized into essences or things. Dialogical concep-
tions of self, for instance, serve as a corrective to monological conceptions;
relational perspectives serve as a corrective to individualistic ones. On an
initial glance, then, these kinds of conceptual transformations are mainly in
the interest of more adequately representing the phenomena in question, of
showing that they are better framed this way rather than that. But aren’t they
also in the interest of underscoring the ultimate importance of dialogue and
of relationship and, finally, of building a more fully human community?
Bakhtin is often employed as one of the primary sources of dialogic
thinking, and for good reason. But isn’t Buber’s advocacy of the dialogical
principle (1965) or his attempt to show the centrality of the ‘Thou’—the
primacy of ‘I–You’ over ‘I–It’, ‘the mystery of reciprocity’, the significance
of the ‘between’—as relevant? ‘In the beginning’, he writes, ‘is the relation’
(1970, p. 69). Is it possible that some of the significant trends we have
witnessed in theoretical psychology over the past decade embody something
like a religious impulse?

Lévinas (e.g. 1996, 1998) goes even farther. The concern at hand is not
only with dialogue and reciprocity but with the radically Other, indeed with
c onsidering the Other primary. It is precisely here that we return to the limits
of theory. ‘Concrete reality’, Lévinas (1996) writes, ‘is man’—and woman
—‘always already in relation with the world. . . . These relations cannot be
reduced to theoretical representation. The latter would only confirm the
autonomy of the thinking subject . . . the subject closed in upon itself’
(p. 19). Note the implication here: the project of theory, which ‘entrapsthe
real and secures it in its objectness’ (Heidegger, 1977, p. 168), is correlative
with the primacy of the sovereign subject, the Cartesian cogito, seeking to
represent the world qua object, thing, It. The displacement of emphasis from
the cogito to the Other, in turn, requires the movement beyond theory,
toward the poetic, where truth becomes less a matter of adequacy to the
object than fidelity—phenomenological and ethical—to others, particularly
those in need, who call forth our responsiveness and care. Hence the idea of
a ‘poetics of the Other’.

In referring to the ‘Other’, I have thus far spoken exclusively of people, of
those others with whom we are in relation. In the spirit of James (1902/1992)
especially, however, let me also suggest that the idea of the Other may
usefully be extended to those non-human regions of ‘otherness’ encountered,
for instance, in aesthetic and religious experience as well. These too entail
the displacement of the cogito and, arguably, require different modes of
thinking and writing than those ordinarily associated with theoretical re fle c tion.
Significant though they may be, these dimensions of experience have
generally been considered to be outside the purview of psychology ‘proper’.
Theoretical work is oriented toward the theorizable; the untheorizable,
therefore, is effectively banished from concern. But this is a mistake, and it
is one that has severely constricted the discipline’s field of meaningful
inquiry and imaginative expression. A poetics of the Other might serve
as a valuable point of entry into this difficult, largely uncharted, arena of
thought.
One important question remains: Where is theory in all of this? In this last set of ideas, in particular, I have in some sense underscored the need for theorizing the untheorizable, that is, for including within the scope of the theoretical enterprise those dimensions of experience that appear to exceed or resist theoretical representation. How is this possible? According to Steiner (1989), ‘The word “theory” has lost its birthright. At the source, it draws on meanings both secular and ritual. It tells of concentrated insight, of an act of contemplation focused patiently on its object’ (p. 69). It was not until the latter half of the 16th century, ‘with the inward shift and displacement of understanding into the ego’, that the term became associated with ‘a subjective speculative impulse’ to be ‘tested and proved by corresponding facts, by the mirroring evidence of empirical reality’ (p. 70). Heidegger (1977) also notes that the idea of theoria, posited by the Greeks as ‘the reverent paying heed to the unconcealment of what presences’ (p. 164), has largely been ‘buried’ by the modern rendition. The implication is an interesting one. The notion of theory ‘at the source’ sounds much like poetics, as it has been presented here. The movement toward a poetics of the Other, therefore, far from representing the wholesale abandonment of the theoretical enterprise, may more appropriately be framed as an attempt to fashion theory beyond theory. The challenge is a significant one.

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