

Foundations of Educational Psychology: Howard Gardner's Neoclassical Psyche

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ABSTRACT. This article is a theoretical examination of the implications of Howard Gardner's work in developmental and educational psychology (1983, 1993, 1999a, 1999b) for the structure of the psyche. The author accepts as axiomatic, in the context of this article, Gardner's educational manifesto (1999a) that all students should be taught disciplinary understandings of truth, beauty, and goodness. Rational inferences are then made indicating that the psyche that Gardner intends to educate and help develop is in the form of a *neoclassical* psyche and that it is structured by the capacities to *know* truth, to *love* beauty, and to *will* goodness.

Key words: Howard Gardner, psyche, structure

WHAT IS THE PURPOSE of schooling and education? This is such a crucial topic that thoughtful educational psychologists perpetually revisit it. It is particularly important to educational psychologists who teach the standard educational psychology course to education majors. These professors can help their students by using developmental and educational psychological theory and research to inspire students with a meaningful vision of the purpose of education and schooling (cf. Goodlad & McMannon, 1997). In this postmodern era, many teachers and psychologists have become cynical about whether education even has a purpose. However, the work of developmental psychologists, such as Lawrence Kohlberg (1984) and Carol Gilligan (1982), and the work of educational philosopher Nel Noddings (1992), provide excellent theoretical and empirical grounding to inspire elementary and secondary school teachers, as well as college professors, with a sense of purpose. Kohlberg's (1985; Power, Higgins, & Kohlberg, 1989) vision of the just democratic community and Gilligan's (Gilligan, Lyons, & Hanmer, 1990) and Noddings's (1992) beautiful work on creating a caring world are great background reading for students who are struggling to understand the purpose of schools.

During the past two decades, Howard Gardner's (1983, 1993) work in developmental and educational psychology has offered teachers and educational psychologists the *means* of education, but, until recently, he has not made explicit his theory of the purpose of education (the *ends* of education). His description of the means of education has been based on his research establishing the seven, eight, or nine intelligences. His work in the 1980s and early 1990s demonstrated that nearly all humans, regardless of culture, have seven basic intelligences (linguistic, logical/mathematical, spatial, interpersonal, intrapersonal, musical, and bodily-kinesthetic). Since that time, he has added an eighth intelligence, the naturalistic, and he is toying with the idea that there might be a ninth, the existential (Gardner, 1999b).

In his recent text, *The Disciplined Mind: What All Students Should Understand* (1999a), Gardner quite provocatively threw his hat into the ring of educational purpose. He put forth his educational manifesto: a call for a neoclassical education through disciplines of understanding. He argued that the multiple intelligences of all students should be mobilized to understand cultural examples of truth, beauty, and goodness. Gardner described his approach, inspired by Socrates, as “The Understanding Pathway.” He wrote that this understanding pathway is “for those who believe that human beings have a desire to explore and to understand the most fundamental questions of existence, and that curricula ought to be organized around the tackling of these epistemological concerns—familiarily, the true, the beautiful and the good” (1999a, p. 226). Gardner indicated that all cultures have found issues of truth and falsity, beauty and ugliness, and goodness and evil to be of central and enduring importance. What anthropologist would not agree that these topics are of fundamental value to each nation, each ethnic group, and each culture?

In an interview in *Educational Leadership* (Scherer, 1999), Gardner said, “I don’t actually advocate teaching directly about truth, beauty, and morality; that sounds like a graduate philosophy course. I advocate teaching those disciplines—history, science, the arts, and literature—that will present to students their culture’s image of what is true (and not true), beautiful (and not beautiful), ethical (and immoral)” (p. 13). This advocacy integrates well with Kohlberg’s work on morally principled thought (1981, 1984), as it implies that all educational objectives should be derived from the universal moral principles of truth, beauty, and goodness.

Gardner’s new approach to attaining the ends of education has much relevance to educational psychology. His arguments (1999a) for basing education on the pursuit of understanding truth, beauty, and goodness range from the cross-cultural clarity of these concepts, to their congruence with mind and brain research, to their established success in academic disciplines, including their usefulness in “teaching for understanding” and the

enhanced ability they provide educators to actually engage students in the learning process. It is not the purpose of this article, however, to vindicate Gardner's approach. Interested psychologists should read his aforementioned text (Gardner, 1999a) and evaluate the validity of his arguments.

My purpose here is to examine the implications of Gardner's educational manifesto in terms of the human psyche and to answer the question, "What must be the structure of the psyche in order to be able to understand disciplinary examples of truth, beauty, and goodness?" This is an important question for all educators and clinicians who believe that they should understand their students and clients to teach or counsel them well. In Gardner's language (1983, 1993, 1999b), this question is fundamental to the domain of the "personal" (interpersonal and intrapersonal) intelligences.

#### *Central Hypothesis*

My central hypothesis is that the structure of the psyche, implied in Gardner's work, is a *neoclassical psyche*, a psyche that consists of at least these three capacities: to know, to love, and to will. My secondary hypotheses are that each of these capacities has a natural object, or what might be called a goal, or in Aristotelian language, a *telos* (an ultimate end). The object of the capacity *to know* is truth; the object of the capacity *to love* is beauty; and the object of the capacity *to will* is the good. Translated into the standard vocabulary of 20th and early 21st century psychology, the capacity to know is termed *cognition*; the capacity to love is classified as an *affective ability*; and the capacity to will is called *conation* (Hilgard, 1980; Snow, Corno, & Jackson, 1996).

The psyche that Gardner intends to educate is aptly referred to as a neoclassical psyche because it is reminiscent of the psyche described by Socrates in Plato's *Republic* (trans. 1937, bk 4). Socrates explained that the psyche consists of three parts: the logical-rational (*logiston*), the spirited or affective (*thymia*), and the desiring (*epithymia*). This description of the psyche is also neoclassical in relation to the psychology of the medieval period among both Christian and Islamic scholars.

Thomas Aquinas (in the *Scholastics*; Tallon, 1997), Ibn Síná (also known as Avicenna), and Ibn ‘Arabí (Leahey, 2000) all wrote extensively on the capacities of the soul (the psyche) to know, to love, and to will. Those medieval Christian and Islamic scholars, however, did not specifically consider the structure of the soul to be based on the three faculties of knowing, loving, and willing; yet, Immanuel Kant, often considered the greatest modern philosopher, did. He wrote in his *Critique of Judgment*, “There are three absolutely irreducible faculties of the mind, namely, knowledge, feeling, and desire” (as cited in Hilgard, 1980, p. 109). Despite behaviorism’s reign throughout much of the 20th century, during which the concept of the psyche, and particularly the will were banished, and despite the current emphasis in the discipline of psychology upon cognition, many psychologists have continued to frame the structure of the psyche in terms of the capacities to know, to love, and to will (cf. Hilgard, 1980; Danesh, 1997).

If understandings of truth, beauty, and goodness (Gardner, 1999a) are to be the purpose of schooling, what must be the nature of the learner’s mind, the learner’s psyche, to be able to achieve this purpose? If a student is to understand the difference between truth and falsehood, the psyche must have a capacity to seek the truth, and this is classically called *knowing*. The ability to understand beauty implies the capacity to love. The notion that beauty is the object of all love is less obvious and more controversial (see “Loving Beauty,” which follows). The capacity to understand and experience the good requires the psyche to have a will.

### *Knowing Truth*

It is fairly easy to argue that the object of knowledge is truth. One can simply ask, when a student wishes to know something, does she or he wish to know the truth about it or does she or he desire falsehood? Clearly any student desires truth, and not falsity. Of course, in this postmodern era, scientists question whether truth is knowable, whether truth exists, and whether all truth is relative. It is not my purpose in this article to resolve those thorny epistemological questions. Yet, as Gardner stated in *The Disciplined*

*Mind* (1999a), he was not advocating that there is a single, absolute truth, but rather that students need to focus their academic studies on searching after truth and discovering the criteria that the various disciplines have put forth as their standards of its validation. Even if, as most professors think, there is no “Truth” with a capital “T,” the supposed discovery of that fact would have to be considered “a truth.”

### *Loving Beauty*

Whenever a student feels love for something, is it really the beauty of that object, person, or idea that he or she loves? In Plato’s *Symposium* (trans. 1937), Socrates, the archetype of educational psychologists, argued that the object of all love is beauty; that love must always be a “love for beauty,” and never for “ugliness” (201A). Alexander Nehamas (1989), in a relatively recent translation of the *Symposium* (1989), summarized: “the Form of Beauty, . . . according to Socrates’ speech, is the final object of all love (209E–212A)” (p. xi). Socrates described a developmental pathway in which a youth first loves beautiful objects and then the body of a beautiful person. Next the youth notices that beauty itself is not confined to one body, but that all beautiful bodies participate in the *form of beauty*. Then the youth, as he or she matures, recognizes beauty in the customs of the culture and in learning, and finally he or she comes to recognize *beauty itself*.

Upon first reading this argument of Socrates, many may assert that people often love ugly things. However, with investigation into the features of an ugly object that a person loves, one will discover that the person finds those features beautiful. For example, much modern art is ugly and evocative of anxiety (an emotion that many find repulsive and ugly). Yet many artists and art critics claim to love such art; they express their admiration in such statements as “Society is deteriorating all around us, and I love this piece of art because it perfectly captures the anxiety of our times.” Their phrase, “perfectly captures,” implies that they find beauty in the symmetry between the mood of the times and the abstract representation of it in the art (cf. Parsons, 1987).

This concept may be framed in everyday life. When one says, “I love potato chips,” one may be unconsciously intending the meaning, “The taste of potato chips is beautiful.” When one says, “I love this sunset, this forest, this mountain,” one is saying, “I love the beauty of the sunset, the forest, and the mountain.” When one says, “I love this book,” one is saying that the ideas and prose in the book are beautiful. When one says, “I love this person,” one may be saying, “This person’s body, mind, and psyche are beautiful.”

### *Willing the Good*

Is one of the objects of the human psyche to *will* goodness? When one considers all the evil in the world, it seems obvious that we humans often will, or choose, the evil. In *The Disciplined Mind* (1999a), Gardner described the Holocaust at some length. It is difficult to read or think about the Holocaust without coming to believe that humans often choose to commit evil. Socrates, however, took exception to that belief. He claimed that the human psyche could only will goodness for itself. Because we humans are often ignorant, however, and do not know the truth of our circumstances, we often will something that is bad, even though we think it is good. In Plato’s dialogue, the *Gorgias*, Socrates said, “We will to do that which conduces to our good, and if the act is not conducive to our good we do not will it” (trans. 1937, 468c). Hitler’s actions during the Holocaust may be an example of this ignorance. He thought it was good for himself, and for the Germans, if the Jews were destroyed. He was ignorant about the equal worth of all humans, and ignorant, even, that Jews are human.

Even if the reader does not agree with this argument, there is one argument that nearly all humans, and most philosophers of ethics, believe: It is only through having a will, perhaps even a *free* will, that morality is possible. It is only our ability to choose, to make decisions, to will, that makes an action good or bad (viz., Frankena, 1973; Danesh, 1997). If we were totally determined by our genes and by the environment, with no free will, then we could never be praiseworthy or blameworthy; we could never judge an

action as good or bad. It is only through our intentionality, through our will, that a behavior becomes good or bad.

For example, a person finds a lost wallet, looks at the person's address in it and delivers the wallet back to him or her. Was this action good or bad? We, as bystanders, can only know this by knowing the will of the person returning the wallet. Did the person intend justice or mercy by returning the wallet? If so, we call it good. Was the person only hoping for a reward? Then we might be reticent to call it a good action. What if the person was a citizen of Nazi Germany and noticed that the wallet contained papers identifying the owner as a Jew, and when the person returned the wallet he brought along a Gestapo agent so that the Jewish person would be "sent away"? In this case, we might call the act evil, even though the Nazi returning the wallet might think that in helping Jews be arrested he was doing "good" for the State of Germany.

Regardless of the quality of these examples, discussing good and evil with students necessarily implies that the human psyche has a capacity to will, to have volition and intentions (cf. Frankena, 1973). Issues of good and evil become meaningless if we do not have the capacity of the will. Although postmodernists might wish us to believe that the concept of good and evil is meaningless, we might ask them if it is "good to choose to believe that goodness does not exist." Answering this question, in any way, proves that the speaker does believe in the good (cf. Habermas's "Universal Pragmatics," 1979). It is structurally the same as when postmodernists state, "There are no absolute truths." We can simply ask, "Is that true?" Any response to this question indicates that the respondent believes in "truth." For example, if postmodernists say, "Yes it is true, there is no truth," they have just claimed a truth about truth. If they say, "No, I am wrong," then they are asserting that their claim was not true, which is also claiming it was "true" that it was "not true."

Thus, when individuals discuss good and evil, as Gardner has prescribed, they do so under the necessary presumption that humans have a will. And as shown in the early

discussion of this article, the will is a *part of*, or an aspect of, the classical and neoclassical description of the psyche.

*In Summary*

Therefore, if we, as applied developmental or educational psychologists, choose to educate our students by applying Gardner's prescription of using examples of truth, beauty, and goodness from the disciplines of history, art, science, and literature (Gardner, 1999a), then we are educating human psyches that are structured around the capacities to know, to love, and to will.

This neoclassical psyche has its roots in the classical works of Plato; the elements of it are discussed throughout the writings of medieval Christian and Islamic philosophers; it is affirmed by Immanuel Kant's philosophy, and it continues to be a force in contemporary educational psychology (Hilgard, 1980).

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