

Naturalism, Psychology, and Religious Experience: An Introduction to the Special Section on Psychology and Transcendence

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Pastoral psychologists are routinely caught between the proverbial rock and hard place. As they know all too well, they are attempting to bridge a historically wide gulf between science and religion. On one side of that gulf lie the methods and findings of the highly successful natural sciences. Many feel that modern psychology has been distorted by a kind of “physics envy,” dazzled as most of us are by the achievements of modern science and technology (Bishop 2007; Slife and Williams 1995). As a result, we lose touch with the other side of the gulf—other ways of knowing, including such things as intuition, judgment, ethical and spiritual insight, revelation, and religious experience (Freeman *in press*; Richardson et al. 1999; Taylor 2007). Pastoral psychologists and other religiously minded psychologists often need and call upon *many* ways of knowing, whether conventionally “scientific” or traditionally “religious” in nature. Can this gulf be bridged, especially when these ways of knowing involve sometimes radically differing assumptions and even worldviews? Should it be bridged?

One answer to this question is seemingly methodological, sometimes labeled *methodological naturalism*. The model for this approach, whether in psychological research or therapy, is the natural sciences, which have abstracted away from the dense, meaningful realities of everyday life and struggles to construct explanatory and predictive laws or models of impersonal nature. This kind of naturalism is often viewed in psychology as value-neutral and thus as creating no “gulf” in the first place (cf. Reber and Slife *in press*). Indeed, in the natural sciences many of the values of everyday life *are* less important, if not irrelevant. For example, it would likely be inappropriate to evaluate some new development in quantum physics on the basis of competing political visions or differing understandings of the good life.

The situation is quite different in psychology, however, when dealing with theories of personality or psychotherapy or, say, with research into the conditions of something like “well-being” (Richardson 2005). Therapeutic ideals like Jung’s individuation, Kohut’s

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healthy narcissism, cognitive therapy's rational living, existential psychotherapy's authenticity, and any given measure or concept of well-being all entail some vision of the good or fulfilled life for humans that goes far beyond any sort of merely methodological approach. The same is true of ethical or spiritual values of forgiveness, humility, reverence, and love of God and neighbor that are central in one form or another to pastoral and religiously minded psychologists (Freeman 2004; Taylor 2007). Methodological naturalism doesn't give us any guidance in sorting through these diverse and often conflicting secular and religious ideals (Bishop 2007; Reber and Slife *in press*).

But that doesn't mean we don't need guidance. Unfortunately, psychology's need to self-identify first and foremost as "science" leaves other ways of knowing and other kinds of experience underdeveloped if not unexplored. As a result, methodological naturalism often slips into what is termed *reductive* or metaphysical naturalism, which insists that all notions of God or transcendence are entirely irrelevant to explaining or understanding the natural or social worlds (Bishop 2007; Slife and Reber 2009). They simply don't exist in any real or objective sense, and therefore natural science modes of inquiry represent the only road to any kind of genuine or useful knowledge. It is highly debatable whether or not this kind of reductive naturalism is required for appreciating or engaging in natural science inquiry (Plantinga 2011). Nevertheless, it remains the worldview of choice for a great many in psychology, partly because it is viewed as the most objective or least value-laden of the worldviews available for the discipline (Freeman *in press*; Reber and Slife *in press*).

The authors of this special section question this view of naturalism. It has become clear in recent years that reductive naturalism, especially in the social sciences, is anything but value-neutral or even value-lessened. In fact, it often seems to serve as a "disguised ideology" (Bernstein 1983; Richardson et al. 1999) that meets the naturalist's need, like every human's, for some sort of guiding moral outlook. For example, Slife et al. (2003) point out the paradox in naturalism that good psychologists and psychotherapists are often regarded as gravely unethical if they are not value-neutral or at least strive for this neutrality. A little reflection suggests that this demand is as much a moral and social ideal as it is a scientific ideal—valuing value-freeness (Richardson 1998; Taylor 2007). One can't be any more value-neutral in doing psychology or psychotherapy than in raising one's children or being a good friend.

The dominance of a naturalistic outlook in psychology confronts pastoral psychologists and others with a particular dilemma that we might term *the compatibility issue* (Slife and Reber 2009). The issue is: Are naturalistic forms of explanation, for example personality theories or theories of behavior change, compatible with or perhaps even complementary to religious ideas, especially theistic ideas and spiritual values? If the answer to this question is "yes," then the religiously oriented psychologist can proceed without problem to combine naturalistic psychological theory and therapy—be it psychoanalysis, self psychology, or cognitive therapy—with religious understandings of things like reverence, neighbor love, the value of prayer, or the importance of forgiving one's enemies. One might even hold that the psychological ideas and techniques learned in secular training deal with the *process* of therapy while the ideas of sectarian religion make up at least some of the *content* of therapy, without the two being in any serious conflict. From this perspective, the "gulf" is neatly bridged and the worldviews of naturalism (or modern secularism) and theism are complementary, if not mutually enriching.

However, if the answer to the compatibility question is "no," the gulf between naturalism and religion rears its ugly head and we have all sorts of problems. The naturalism of psychology is plainly *not* compatible with the theism of many religions; the two must conflict in at least subtle ways. The worldview of reductive naturalism can be defined in

many ways, but all or most of these definitions assume that God is irrelevant to everyday life and living. Just this one assumption can mean there are crucial and sometimes unnerving differences in practical implications about the psychological world and the good life (Freeman 2012; Murdoch 1970). Also, there will at least occasionally be clashes between different values or priorities in living one's life. Ideas like happiness, success, or the kinds of relationships one best pursues with others will sometimes diverge.

The authors of these articles question the idea that typical psychological concepts can be completely harmonized with serious convictions about the importance of a sense of transcendence, an affirmation of spiritual values, and the contribution of religious experience to the best sort of life. We believe that anyone who struggles honestly with these tensions can make real progress. However, we encourage readers to consider how difficult and confusing it can be even to clearly diagnose the problem. It is hard to pin down how naturalism and its disguised ideologies shape our perspectives and professional work, which is necessary to rethinking them at their root (Slife 2004). We also may not fully appreciate how much we have lost touch, partly because of our secular and naturalistic training, with the richness of religious experience and thus have diminished our ability to discern how spiritual perspectives (or their absence) play themselves out in everyday life and psychological healing (Freeman *in press*).

In the three articles that follow, three theoretical psychologists attempt to address these issues. We discuss some of the key ways in which we think naturalism (its virtues notwithstanding) colors and distorts the field of psychology. We try to identify fundamental misconceptions that make it difficult to embrace the possible reality and importance of religious experience in human life. And we try to say a few things that might help refresh our sense of transcendence and religious experience in a world where many, it seems, are earnestly seeking them.

Mark Freeman begins the set of three articles by explaining how psychology's identification with naturalism has put important phenomena "out of bounds," beyond its purview. He describes, through one of psychology's parents, William James, as well as incisive observers, such as Louis Dupré, Jean-Luc Marion, and Iris Murdoch, how at least some of the out-of-bounds phenomena are vital to psychology's project. Not only does the Good and the good life—endemic to any counseling session—ultimately require a transcendent frame of reference (Murdoch 1970); any viable concept of the self is always "more than mere self." Indeed, without its transcendent dimension, Freeman writes, selfhood is deprived of the very space it requires for self-realization. The hidden assumption of naturalism, in this sense, deprives psychologists of a full understanding of who we really are and could be. Indeed, for psychologists to exclude the transcendent *a priori* is to be profoundly "unscientific" because the exclusion "forecloses on the challenge of imagining other-than-naturalistic ways of conceiving of who and what we are."

Brent Slife broadens the discussion in the second article to the social sciences because he believes that psychologists can learn important lessons from this bigger picture. A prominent example is the vaunted disciplinary reflexivity of anthropology. Anthropologists, to their credit, have made a point of reflecting on their disciplinary practices and premises to detect and account for the biases that might affect their gathering and interpretation of data. Nevertheless, as Slife explains, many remain blind to the pervasive philosophy of naturalism. He describes one particular encounter between the African tribe of the Azande and the world-renowned anthropologist, Evans-Pritchard. For Slife, this interaction between the well-intentioned Evans-Pritchard, with his unconscious naturalism, and the witchcraft-oriented Azande becomes a negative model for what can happen to the well-meaning, naturalistic psychotherapist who interacts with religious clients, especially if the therapist has little awareness of the naturalistic assumptions of psychology.

In the final article, Frank Richardson describes how psychology's secularism is a set of "unexamined assumptions" that has obstructed even religiously oriented psychologists from taking religious experience and transcendence seriously. He seeks to find a "few guiding principles" that might be important for overcoming these obstructions. Richardson begins by dismantling the "encapsulated self," the one-sided individualism of much of psychology, but then moves to a hermeneutic vision of the discipline that is large enough to encompass transcendence and religious experience. Along the way, he draws creatively on Peter Berger's notion of "many realities," Eugene Long's concept of the "experience of ultimacy," and Vaclav Havel's call for "transcendence in the postmodern world." He points ultimately to a disciplinary tent that is sufficiently capacious for psychologists to put their convictions and claims into "open and searching dialogue with others." Still, he warns, a dialogical psychology of this sort cannot be wedded to a "dogmatic naturalism and instrumentalism or to a narrow postmodernism that just tries to remain detached from any and all regimes of truth."

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