

Theistic Approaches to Psychology

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### Introduction

Many critical psychologists might be surprised at the entry of a theistic approach to psychology in a critical psychology encyclopedia. They may fear that the use of theism or other religious ideas in psychology would promote a type of ideology that could be oppressive. Some psychologists may even believe that theism is the *most* oppressive of ideologies (Hart, 2009). Moreover, why should critical psychologists consider theistic approaches to psychology when theism is one of the most dominant belief systems in the world? If anything, theists—comprising a majority of the world’s consumers of psychology (Richards & Bergin, 2005)—would appear to be the ones with a power advantage over non-theistic minorities.

Oppression and dominance, however, are contextually situated (Fox, Prilleltensky & Austin, 2009). Although theism is undoubtedly a dominant and perhaps oppressive ideological system in some contexts, it is also the oppressed and relatively powerless minority in other contexts. Our primary focus in the latter case is Western academia. This particular context has suffered from what Gadamer (1960/2004) has called the “prejudice against prejudice” (p. 273). This prejudice against prejudice frequently supposes that frank prejudices are inherently dogmatic, hegemonic, and oppressive, whereas hidden prejudices are somehow more open, egalitarian, and less likely to be oppressive. The social sciences, especially, have participated in this supposition by framing method ideas as objective, and thus relatively free from prejudices, biases, and assumptions. Most religions, on the other hand, are quite explicit about their values and assumptions, so they have been excluded from consideration as guides for advancing knowledge. Indeed, they are often cast as the *other side* of the modernist dualism, because they are viewed as subjective rather than objective.

As we will describe, a theistic approach to psychology challenges both the objectification of method ideas and the subjectification of religious ideas, partly because all such idea systems are underlain with “subjective” values and unproven assumptions (Slife & Melling, 2011). A theistic approach may serve to highlight the more hidden assumptions and prejudices of method, which can be the more problematic for hegemony, dogmatism, and oppression. As Fox et al. (2009) put it, these prejudices “are institutionalized in subtle ways, making it harder both to understand their operation and to combat their presence” (p. 9). A theistic approach also means, as we will outline, demonstrating how theistic ideas can be productively used in the theory, research, and practice of psychologists. Rather than seeking to replace more conventional conceptions, this approach moves toward a pluralism in which it supplements or complements conventional practices and modes of inquiry.

### **Definition**

Part of the inappropriate subjectification of theism is the misconception that it varies greatly from person to person. There is certainly a sense in which this is true, because any such subsuming conception varies to some degree from individual to individual. However, any of the subsuming philosophies that might undergird the social sciences, such as naturalism, empiricism, and logical positivism, would likely also vary in much the same way (Slife & Williams, 1995). Actually, the notion of theism is quite straightforward, shorn of its subjectification. Consider Plantinga’s conception in this regard: “God is already and always intimately acting in nature which depends moment to moment... upon divine activity” (Plantinga, 2001, p. 350). In this sense, theism merely assumes that God is currently active in the world, including the psychological world. A *complete* understanding of the psychological world, from this premise, includes both divine factors as well as factors not typically understood as divine.

## **Keywords**

Theism, philosophy of science, naturalism, pluralism, religion, transcendence

## **History**

Theism has a long past, with a long line of scholarship in a variety of disciplines, but a short history in psychology. We can provide only the briefest of sketches of both, especially as they might pertain to psychology. First, relevant theistic thought can be traced to the Middle Ages, such as the Patristics, and even farther back to Plato (Nelson & Thomason, 2012). Since the Enlightenment, however, theism has been separated from traditional science, with psychology distancing itself from theism in the pursuit of modernist and naturalist scientific ideals. Consider a recent resolution of the APA Council of Representatives (2007) in this regard. Psychology and religion are conceived of as “distinct” enterprises, having roles “outside” of one other (pp. 3-4): “It is important for psychology as a behavioral science, and various faith traditions as theological systems, to acknowledge and respect their profoundly different methodological, epistemological, historical, theoretical and philosophical bases” (p. 2). The gist of this passage and others from the resolution is clear: theism should not be involved in psychological science.

Theistic approaches to psychology challenge this need for separation by clarifying theism’s relationship to science, expanding the purview of science, and embracing a true pluralism for psychology. Theistic psychologists recognize not only that science and religion were historically united in many periods of history (Hart, 2009) but also that modernism has become the popular reading of recent history in this regard, casting religion and science as antithetical. Indeed, many now assume that theistic religion oppressed science, when the contrary was almost always the case (Hart, 2009). For example, the modernist interpretation of

Galileo's travails with the church is almost completely turned on its ear when a thicker account of that situation is known (Hart, 2009).

Theistic approaches to psychology generally oppose this modernist framing of science by recognizing that "The hallmark of science is the investigation of ideas, with investigation and method allowable in a variety of forms, including qualitative and perhaps even theistic forms" (Slife et al., 2012, p. 221). Gerald Holton echoes this pluralism in his 1973 analysis of scientific themata, along with the noted physicist Percy Bridgman: "The scientific method is doing one's damnedest, no holds barred" (Holton, 1984, p. 1232). A theist's approach to science is thus more pluralistic because it espouses openness to other method worldviews in addition to naturalism.

Slife et al. (2012) also provide numerous justifications for psychology's specific consideration of a theistic worldview, including its popularity among renowned scholars, its use among psychology's consumers (Richards & Bergin, 2005), and its dialectical contrast to many secular scientific assumptions. This last justification allows psychologists to become more aware of their current method assumptions as well as attend to parts of psychological phenomena that conventional methods may overlook.

### **Traditional Debates**

Obviously, a theistic worldview stands in stark contrast to many of the more traditional worldviews of science, notably naturalism. As Leahey (1991) explains, naturalism is the "central dogma" of many psychological methods and practices (p. 379). Its contrast with theism stems from its specific focus on *natural* events and topics as if they can be distinguished from *supernatural* events and topics. A theist does not make this distinction, and thus does not engage in this sort of dualism; God is just as involved in the "natural" as the "supernatural." Moreover,

naturalism typically entails an emphasis on the natural lawfulness of natural events. Although the theist is equally interested in the patterns and regularities of the world, naturalism often assumes that natural laws govern world events, whereas the theist views such events in relation to a supreme being (Taylor, 2007).

The potential unobservability of a supreme being poses an immediate challenge to many social scientists. Yet, the philosophy of naturalism also assumes unobservable entities, such as its natural laws (Bridgman, 1927/1993). Although the postulated manifestations of the law of gravity, say, are typically observable (e.g., footprint in the sand), the law itself has never fallen on anyone's retinas. The law of gravity is, rather, inferred from what has fallen on our retinas, its observable manifestations (Slife, Reber & Lefevor, 2012). This understanding of lawful activity is not different in kind from many theists' understanding of God's activity. Similar to natural laws, "God is an unseen entity that supposedly governs or influences world manifestations" (Slife et al., 2012, p. 224). There is no reason, then, that inferences cannot also be made about God's activity in the world in much the same way.

### **Critical Debates**

Given the Enlightenment separation between theism and science, many social science researchers have considered theistic approaches to psychology to be impossible, or at least implausible. Perhaps the most important critical debate then is: is this perceived implausibility due to the modernist stereotyping of theism and science, or is it, indeed, impossible to do respectable, scientific investigation from a theistic perspective? This general question is broken into two smaller questions (below): Can a theistic approach be investigated, and can it generate new knowledge and methods? Limited space prevents a comprehensive review of this research,

so an illustrative example is provided for each aspect. Lastly, theism's association with certain political ideologies is also examined.

*Can a theistic approach be investigated?* Recent research studies suggest that theistic investigation is no more difficult to conduct than any scientific investigation of nonobservable psychological phenomena, such as memory, motivation, emotions, and attitudes (e.g., Reber, Slife & Downs, 2012; Smith, Bartz & Richards, 2007; Richards et al., 2009; O'Grady & Richards, 2010). To illustrate, consider the conventional, *nontheistic* program of psychological research devoted to understanding how it is that people form their "image of God." Apparently, a person's image of God significantly affects, and is affected by, human development, parenting, and even interpersonal relationships (Hertel & Donahue, 1995; Dickie et al., 1997; Dickie et al., 2006). Why is it that some people see God as exclusively loving and charitable, while others consider their supreme being as the Great Punisher? Most psychological researchers investigate how important authority figures—e.g., parents, teachers, and coaches— influence the formation of these images.

This type of subject matter may appear to readily lend itself to a theistic mode of inquiry, but actually few of its researchers even consider that experiences with God could be a factor in the development of a person's image of God (O'Grady and Richards, 2008; Slife & Reber, 2009). The absence of this consideration is never defended, rationally or empirically; it is merely assumed without justification because the naturalism of psychology automatically discounts not only the existence and thus experience of God, but also the possibility of validly gauging such experiences.

Nevertheless, Reber, Slife, and Downs (2012) modified and extended the work of these researchers to account for a theistic perspective. Using similar survey questions, they asked

religious participants about their experiences with God, which are no more or less difficult to measure than experiences with one's parents or other human authority figures (the conventional predictors of people's image-of-God development). Neither set of experiences is any more or less "observable" in the empirical sense. Reber et al. (2012) found that a large proportion of the variance in their participants' images of God came from the participants' reported experiences of God, even when controlling for parental attachment. These findings, along with many others on other topics (e.g., Smith, Bartz & Richards, 2007; Richards et al., 2009; O'Grady & Richards, 2010), illustrate how theistic hypotheses can be empirically investigated and tested, even using conventional quantitative research methods.

*Can a theistic approach generate new knowledge and methods?* Skeptics also question whether a theistic approach to psychological research is capable of generating new or different findings from naturalism. They may agree that theism is conceptually different from naturalism but presume that the naturalistic scientific method maps the "objective" world for both the naturalist and the theist. This presumption has recently been labeled the *myth of neutrality* (Flashing, 2010; Armstrong, 2011; Slife et al., 2012) and is another manifestation of psychology's "prejudice against prejudice," i.e., the desire for naturalistic methods to be neutral or free of biases and subjectivities. To help dispel this myth as well as illustrate the heuristic value of theism for generating new psychological findings and methods, consider some recent work on the detection of naturalistic prejudices, both in research (Slife & Reber, 2009) and in teaching students psychological topics (Reber et al., 2012).

Regarding didactic instruction, for example, Reber et al. (2012) predicted that teaching naturalistic psychology moves even theistically-oriented students away from their theistic beliefs. Their reasoning for this hypothesis was that naturalism is a disguised or hidden ideology

(Slife et al., 2012), and thus not a neutral set of assumptions, especially with regard to theists. In this sense, naturalistic psychology teaches students who were originally biased in favor of theism and theistic explanations to explain themselves and others in naturalistic terms (i.e., without reference to God's practical activity). For instance, theistic students, who would have originally explained their own and others' happiness with God as an active influence, would, after an undergraduate education in psychology, tend to explain their own and others' happiness without God as an active influence. This change in understanding would not have to be explicit. In fact, Reber et al. (2012) predicted that students' conscious and explicit attitudes toward theism would remain intact across their undergraduate education, especially in a religious environment. However, they also predicted that these students' *implicit* biases, such as their explanations of happiness, would shift increasingly toward scientific naturalism across their years of undergraduate work.

To measure this implicit shift, two relatively new methods for measuring biases were created to gauge the explicit and implicit prejudices of these students, both using standard psychological techniques for measuring such biases. In the case of implicit biases, for example, the Implicit Association Test was adapted to gauge implicit *faithism*, the potential prejudice against people of theistic faith. This new instrument is an example of how a theistic approach can foster the development of new measures. The results are preliminary and only cross-sectional data are currently available, but they are clearly in line with these theistically-informed predictions. Perhaps more importantly, they suggest the possibility not only that theistic students do shift their biases but also that supposedly neutral psychological findings and practices can move students to a different implicit understanding of the world.

The development of new methods would not preclude the development of an entirely new philosophy of science. Because current philosophies of science are generally founded on naturalism, we would not rule out the possibility of a theistic philosophy of science. Indeed, preliminary conceptualizations in this regard are currently being discussed (Johnson, 2007; Plantinga, 2011; Slife & Woolery, 2006).

*Political Ideology.* One final “critical debate” concerns theism’s association with certain political ideologies. In the United States, for example, many citizens would almost equate various forms of theism with conservatism. Yet there is nothing about theism that weds it to a particular political ideology. Liberation theology, for instance, is a political movement within the Catholic church, beginning in Latin America in the 1950s. The term “liberation” stems from the conviction that theists should work for liberation from unjust social, economic, and political conditions. This movement is one of several within social Christianity, with a history and range that extends to the work of Francis of Assisi, Leo Tolstoy, Martin Luther King, and Desmond Tutu. However, many theists of all stripes, such as Islam and Judaism, have movements and histories of social and liberationist theism.

### **International Relevance**

International work from a theistic perspective has only just begun. Kari O’Grady (2012), for example, provides an instructive illustration of theistic implementation in the recent disaster in Haiti. Her work includes general clinical interventions as well as a more specialized account of individual and community trauma. In all her conceptualizations, she avoids the temptation to syncretize the naturalistic and the theistic, and yet she provides what appear to be viable, theistic approaches to these important therapeutic issues.

As another example, Eric Johnson (2012) casts a vision for a theistic approach to psychology that entails international meetings and dialogue not only across various forms of theism, including Animism, Polytheism, Monotheism, Trinitarian theism, Pantheism, Panentheism, and Atheism, but also across various forms of transcendence, including Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism, and New Age representatives. Conversations across these traditions would not preclude working within them. Christians could work on specifically Christian approaches to psychology and Muslims could work on Islamic approaches to the discipline, and so on. However, that work would be examined in relation to the work of other traditions as part of a larger whole, much like the interdisciplinary work of many universities. Perhaps even more intriguingly, subsections of these meetings could explore commonalities across associated traditions, such as the Abrahamic religions of Islam, Judaism, and Christianity. This vision of theistic approach to psychology is obviously anything but monolithic.

## **Practice Relevance**

If a theistic approach to psychology can not only investigate theistic hypotheses but also generate new findings and methods, as we have illustrated (see Critical Debates), can these investigations and findings lead to new and functional psychological theories and applications, such as those that might inform psychotherapy? Only the briefest of affirmative answers is possible here, given our space limitations.

*Theory.* The usual “personality” theories have long been viewed as sufficiently comprehensive and diverse, if not too diverse, to accommodate human thought and behavior (Slife, 2012). However, few if any of the mainstream theories make the assumption of a currently active and practically relevant God. This assumption is typically avoided because God is not considered to be real or knowable. Even when psychological theorists have imported

philosophies steeped in theism, they too, like conventional image-of-God researchers, have often ruled out or overlooked theistic considerations and features (Slife et al., 2012). One of the more striking instances of this naturalistic theoretical bias involves the importation of Martin Buber's work, most famously by Carl Rogers (Slife & Reber, 2009). However, we could discuss the theistic theorizing of any number of other scholars whose ideas have been imported into psychology, including John Macmurray, Soren Kierkegaard, and Emmanuel Levinas.

By contrast, consider Jim Nelson's work (Nelson & Thomason, 2012) as a notable exception. He not only includes and keeps intact the theistic core of major theistic thinkers; he also shows how these thinkers can be credible and effective resources for psychologists in their theorizing. A theist can, of course, operate from any number of traditions, including Islamic and Jewish traditions, among many others, but much of Nelson's work is set in the Christian tradition, especially the early Church Fathers of the Patristic era. Nelson describes how these early scholars solved many theoretical puzzles that befuddle psychological theorists today (Nelson & Thomason, 2012).

*Practice.* Similar to methods and theories, psychological practices are themselves underlain with systems of assumptions or worldviews (Rychlak, 1981). These worldviews often reflect the same secularism and naturalism as most sets of ideas in mainstream psychology (Richardson, 2005; Richards & Bergin, 2005; Slife, 2012). Consequently, psychotherapists are generally teaching their clients, even theistic clients, to explain themselves as if God does not matter (Slife, Stevenson, & Wendt, 2010). This teaching could, of course, be correct; the problem is that it is often merely assumed and taught *implicitly* in therapy, rather than explicated and examined with sensitivity and awareness (Slife et al., 2012).

As a supplement to the implicit naturalism pervading mainstream therapeutic practices, several psychotherapists have recently initiated a movement toward the inclusion and use of theistic therapeutic practices (e.g., O’Grady, 2012; Richards & Bergin, 2004, 2005; Slife, Stevenson, & Wendt, 2010; York, 2009). Some psychotherapists may even desire an eclectic combination of naturalistic and theistic ideas and practices for various reasons. After all, not every client will agree with the assumptions and biases of a theistic approach. Nevertheless, it is also important to note that this type of disagreement applies equally to naturalistic approaches, since naturalism is itself a system of assumptions and biases—a worldview or an ideology—about which many clients, both theistic and non-theistic, might not agree (Richards & Bergin, 2004). For this reason, we believe it is ethically imperative to identify the conceptual assumptions of *all* psychotherapies in order to provide clients with the information needed for truly informed consent.

### **Future Directions**

A theistic approach to psychology is in its nascent stages, to be sure. Still, it has proven its preliminary worth and viability in the theory, research, and practice of psychologists. To say, even at this preliminary stage, that it “cannot be done” is simply wrong because it *is* being done, as our illustrations evidence. What is needed now is a chance for this approach to compete fairly in the marketplace of psychological and scientific ideas. Fair competition, however, is easier said than done (Slife & Reber, 2009). Because so many psychologists have trained in taken-for-granted philosophies and theories that automatically exclude even the consideration of theistic approaches, these psychologists presume that this exclusion is due to theism’s unsuitability for scientific exploration. Our clear contention is that this presumption is not true (Plantinga, 2011). Most training and research philosophies merely reflect the modernity and dualism of psychology,

including its “prejudice against prejudice,” not the intellectual or methodological fertility of a worldview such as theism.

In the end, the future of theistic approaches is probably tied to the advance of *real* methodological pluralism in psychology. We emphasize “real” here because the worldview of naturalism still undergirds the practice of a variety of methods (Slife & Melling, 2011). To effect a genuinely pluralistic methodology is to consider not only a diversity of procedures but also a diversity of the worldviews that guide the procedures. The advent of qualitative methods heartens us, because these methods, when understood correctly (Packer 2011), are typically guided by a different worldview than quantitative methods (Slife & Melling, 2011). Still, both quantitative and qualitative researchers have typically adopted different forms of naturalism, and thus have agreed on the *a priori* dismissal of theistic theorizing. This type of dismissal is, for us, distinctly *unscientific* and *uncritical*, because decisions about what matters are made *before* investigation and examination. The theist, in this sense, merely wants to push the pluralism and diversity envelope a little further. If a theistic approach can be done, as we have demonstrated here, why not allow it to take its place among the other schools of psychological thought, to rise or fall on its own merits to the discipline?

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