__: Brent Slife.

[side remarks]

Q: Dr. Brent Slife is a practicing clinical psychologist and currently the Richard L. Evans Chair of Religious Understanding and Professor of Psychology at Brigham Young University. He's been honored with several awards for scholarship and teaching including the Presidential Citation from the American Psychological Association for his contribution to psychology; the Eliza R. Snow Award for research on the interface of science and religion; the BYU Alumni Professorship Award for Outstanding Teaching and Scholarship, and the Psi Chi Most Outstanding Professor Award. He served as the President of the Society of Theoretical and Philosophical Psychology, on the Council of the American Psychological Association, a regular editor for multiple journals, and currently is editor-in-chief for the *Journal of Theoretical and Philosophical Psychology.*

He's authored or coauthored over 200 articles and eight books. The titles of some of those books including *Taking Slides: Clashing Views on Psychological Issues* now in its 18th edition and used across the entire country to help students learn how to critically engage the field of psychology. *Critical Thinking about Psychology: Hidden Assumptions and Plausible Alternatives*, which was an APA best seller. *Critical Issues in Psychotherapy*. And admittedly one of my favorites, though it goes back a long time now, *Time and Psychological Explanation*. His newest book, entitled *Human Frailty, Vice and Suffering: Flourishing in the Context of Limits and Dependency* will be published by APA Books.

Throughout these works, Dr. Slife has rigorously and relentlessly examined the theoretical underpinnings of psychotherapy and scientific methodology including psychology's implicit assumptions of linear time, dualism, naturalism, and liberal individualism, just to name a few of the many philosophical issues he's tackled within psychology.

Beyond these critical analyses, Dr. Slife has explored constructive theoretical alternatives for psychology, drawing upon hermeneutics, proposing a relational ontology that attempts to shift away from psychology's penchant for individualistic approaches to human subjectivity. His research also looks into ethics, virtue, virtue ethics and definitions of human flourishing.

Finally, his work has also addressed difficult and not so easily reconcilable relations between theology, spirituality and psychology, asking, for example, whether belief in God matters to how we theorize, research and practice psychology. We are honored today to have Dr. Brent Slife with us.

A: Thank you so much.

Q: I want to start off on an historical note, trying to get a sense of how you got involved in theoretical psychology. Your mentor, Joseph Rychlak, was a student of George Kelly actually, so that makes you George Kelly's grandson, I guess?

A: Yes, it does. Very proud of that.

Q: It's a wonderful lineage. You have previously proclaimed your mentor to be the Kant of modern psychology, and one of Rychlak major contributions was his critique of modern psychology's over emphasis on material and efficient causality. Rychlak, instead, sought to refocus the emphasis back on final and formal causality. What influence did your mentor and his ideas have on your involvement and philosophical orientation toward theoretical psychology?

A: Marvelous question. If I could pause just to thank you, Brian. I've mentioned in our email exchange just how thoughtful you have been about reading my material and how generous your introduction was. Given that our mechanical breakdown delayed our flight, and so forth, I'm just thankful to the audience, and particularly Heather and David

and our cameraman, of course, for getting up earlier and you guys sticking me in the conference here somewhere. I'm very grateful.

So yes, I am proud to be an intellectual grandson of George Kelly. He and my mentor, Joe Rychlak, are some of the clearest examples of Kantians in psychology. Their attention to the pivotal role of the person's interpretation in experience was crucial to my eventual move to a hermeneutic framework. Less known, perhaps, was their advocacy of the dialectic. Joe's not particularly Hegelian, but he and Kelly did recognize the import of contrasting meanings, perhaps even "otherness," in the very definition and identity of meanings and experiences. For example, one cannot meaningfully judge people as "beautiful" without knowing what they might be like if they were "ugly." Even the profile or boundary of an object requires knowledge of both what it is and isn't to fully comprehend it. Kelly was one of the first to note this pivotal aspect of all meanings. They aren't just related to their similarities; they're no less related to their contrasts.

Kelly also realized the significance of a dialectical reasoning ability in what Rychlak would call free will, I would call human agency. A dialectical reasoning ability is necessary as a kind of option generator; it makes possibility possible. In judging someone as "good," for example, the dialectic also allows the judgment of "bad" to be possible, because the meanings of good and bad aren't completely separate meanings in this sense. To decide to turn to the right is also to have decided not to turn to the left, allowing us to have true options—the *otherwise* of a human agency.

Brian, you're also right that Rychlak influenced me in combining this type of Kantian outlook with a more Aristotelian framework. Most notably, Rychlak saw human nature in an Aristotelian final causal or teleological framework, with us all being essentially goal- or meaning-oriented creatures. Joe also used Aristotle's formal causality, more of a holistic understanding, to understand this goal-oriented nature within a culture. Because the person is seen as inherently goal- or even future-oriented, I felt this view necessarily begged ethical questions, such as: which goal or future is best? Which goods should I,

as a human being, strive for? And the answer to these questions is the reason I have been interested in virtue ethics and even theistic worldviews.

Even before my Rychlak influences, I was interested in more theological and philosophical questions and became an atheist through high school and the first part of college. Philosophy is something I could use to out-argue my Southern Baptist friends. Philosophy too and perhaps ironically, brought me back to religion, especially when I realized that it was possible to think deeply, even intellectually, about religion. In this sense, Joe Rychlak was a model for me because he was a staunch Catholic who was also a critical thinker of the first order.

Q: One of the major theoretical considerations addressed throughout your writing and I want to explore with you today is the question of relationality. It's almost become a fad now in many parts of the field, where now different psychological models, including neurobiology, emphasize relationality as constitutive of the person. And, of course, at the other end of the spectrum there's Gergen's social constructionist versions of relationality. You've examined in your own work different kinds of relationality, namely a 'weak relationality,' which you've identified in some versions of psychology and what you're proposing as a 'strong relationality.' Could you discuss the distinction between those terms and how it overall ties in with your thinking about what you call a relational ontology?

A: Yes. Strong or ontological relationality has a fairly basic claim, that the context and the person are mutually constitutive of one another. They have, in an important sense, a shared being, and I certainly think that this kind of thinking is reflective of much work at this conference. The foil of ontological relationality—and I think all theoretical frameworks have a dialectical other, or foil—is abstractionism. An abstractionist ontology, by contrast with strong relationality, includes the basic assumption that things and events are most real when they are divorced or abstracted from their contexts. Contexts, such as surrounding environments or history, are viewed as confounding

variables that should be factored out to understand the thing or event. The laboratory tradition in science is a good example of this abstractionist tradition. Things are better understood when they're sterilized from the other things that surround or went before (or after) them, which relationality would completely dispute.

The abstractionist tradition also champions abstractions as our highest form of thinking. Abstractions have any number of manifestations, from theoretical propositions to universal principles to religious beliefs to mathematical formulas. They are often viewed in Western culture and Western science as the pinnacles of knowledge, whereas the strong relationist sees all these abstractions as helpful, but ultimately too thin and reduced to be the ultimate goal of knowledge. To really be useful, according to strong relationality, is for knowledge to be situated and understood as ultimately related to practices.

With that modicum of background into the two main ontologies—relational and abstractionist—I can now attempt to answer your question about the difference between strong and weak relationality. Put perhaps too simply, the ontological relationist sees most relationships as constitutive relationships, parts of wholes, where the parts not only cause the whole, but the qualities of the parts themselves stem from their relation to one another (the whole). The very identity or properties of a part, in this sense, come from its relationship to the other parts. The parts have, in a real sense, a shared being.

Weak relationists, on the other hand, do not typically understand connections as constitutive. They may care deeply about relationships of all types (e.g., interpersonal, interactive, systems), but they view the relationships among the parts of the system differently. First, they interpret the parts as fundamentally separable from other parts. We see this a great deal when theorists explain people from a liberal individualist perspective. Persons are first and foremost individuals from this perspective, with all of their necessary properties and qualities contained within them, including their biological properties and their psychological qualities. Secondly, these self-contained individuals

can influence one another, but they do so across the time and space that separates them, leading ultimately to a dualism of the subjective person and the objective surrounding environment. For a person to be influenced from a weakly relational (and liberal individualist) perspective, we would have to get the "outer" information "inside" the person, inside the mind which is itself seen as internal.

With strong relationality, by contrast, there is less emphasis on the inner and the outer. Minds are not necessarily "inside" of us, for example, because they are always and already situated within our socio-historical context—with parts of our mental memories, for instance, in our phones and our computers. Our interpersonal relationships also loom quite large, because they are literally part of us, part of our personalities. I am a node or nexus of relationships—a father, cousin, husband, interviewee, etc. The quality of our interpersonal relationships is vitally involved in the quality of our individual character, which recent developmental research is now discovering. A maturation process is not a movement from dependence as an infant to independence as an adult, with dependence vilified in such abstractionist or individualist concepts as Dependent Personality Disorder or co-dependence. Maturation and true development are, instead, a movement from one type of dependence to another. We are always dependent, and self-sufficiency is illusory.

Strong and weak relationists also view the connections or unity among community members differently. Weak relationists assume that abstractions, such as the beliefs of a religious community or the philosophy of a political party, bring people together and ultimately unify them. This viewpoint—unfortunate from a strong relational perspective—puts too much emphasis on similarities, with many of these communities presuming that the similarity of abstractions (e.g., beliefs, principles, propositions) are what attract and build unity, with differences and otherness as an ultimate threat to such groups. Dating websites such as eharmony.com and match.com exemplify this emphasis on similarities in a marital "community."

Strong relationists, however, consider relational differences to be as important to the unity of communities as relational similarities, just as the dialectic with meanings and parts with wholes. For example, I can say without hesitation that one of the many strengths of my marriage is our differences, which are at least the spice of our marriage, and perhaps more substantively what I delight most in—Karen's many intriguing (to me anyway) differences from me. Because differences are less feared in strongly relational communities, conflicts and tensions are expected and seen as ultimately enriching the community rather than something to be feared or viewed as ultimately threatening. This understanding in strongly relational communities doesn't mean that just any difference (or similarity) will strengthen relationships or unify people. However, the strong relationist knows that we are constituted by the contexts of our moral traditions (unlike the liberal individualist) and can thus use these traditions as resources for understanding what differences are good and right (e.g., virtue ethics, religious traditions).

In any case, I hope that gives you a bit of an idea of how weak and strong relationships are different (and similar).

Q: What you said reminds me, on the political level, of Michael Walzer's concept of thick and thin, where there is this modernist belief that groups of differing cultures can be sufficient motivated and unified by a universal, common ethics that binds all people together. However, Walzer argues, it is rather the contextualist, thick understanding of one's moral discourse that actually moves one to action. And so I see a similar parallel between this and what you're discussing in regards to psychological science. Is that a fair comparison?

A: It is a fair comparison. Walzer's concepts of thick and thin clearly correspond to aspects of the two ontologies I'm describing here. The universal principles you are referring to are ultimately abstracted from their contexts, or the contexts would change them and they couldn't be universal or principled. This abstractionism also implies that the modernist in Walzer's account will ultimately extol some kind of similarity to the

principles or beliefs as a test of cultural unity, and identify differences as cultural threats. Such threats are frequently considered outliers or even infidels and thus need to be eliminated in some manner to save the group's unity (e.g., ostracism, terrorism).

I don't remember Walzer that well but in strong relationality the moral discourse that unites a community would be viewed as necessarily varied and textured. Similarities are never unimportant, but the strong relationist would expect rich cultural differences, given the varied moral traditions that could interpenetrate virtually any culture. If you asked, for example, a member of a Western religious group what unites them, they would likely provide an abstractionist reply. A set of propositional beliefs is often cited, for example, as if the similarity of belief is the main source of member unity.

A strong relationist, on the other hand, would predict that this unity of abstractions is ultimately illusory, because any reasonable inquiry into a member's individual beliefs, even within a devoutly religious community, would reveal significant uniqueness of belief and thus many differences with other members. The moral discourse that unites communities, then, has to be thick rather than thin and complexly textured rather than abstractly reduced to a set of principles. From a strongly relational perspective, the moral discourse that really brings the culture unity (e.g., a textured narrative) is the discourse of good and virtuous relationships within and outside the community (e.g., with their God). Good and virtuous relationships can be determined by any relational morality, such as virtue ethics or some forms of theistic ethics.

Q: Could you help clarify the connection between your use of the word strong relationality and your use of the term relational ontology? How are those two terms connected?

A: I apologize for the confusion. I use strong relationality and ontological relationality interchangeably, with "strong" used in the philosophical sense of "hard" (e.g., hard

determinist) or perhaps even more extreme. I certainly do not mean to imply that weak relationality is bad or wrong, but rather it's a softer or less stringent brand of relationality.

Q: And can weak relationality also represent another relational ontology?

A: Yes. I'm meaning to say that weak relationships are all that an abstractionist or individualist can conceive of, given their ontological assumptions of the ultimate separability of parts and wholes, persons and their communities, individuals and their traditions, present and past. In other words, I don't doubt for a minute that many abstractionists, even if they don't realize they're abstractionists, genuinely value and care deeply for interpersonal relationships. Therapists, for example, have long held that it's the relationship that heals, but the question here is what does relationship and healing mean. Is it the incorporation "inside" of "outside" abstractions (e.g., principles, beliefs) that heals, as in the weakly relational approach, or is it the shared being of the person and context in a manner that constitutes good character and cohesive community?

As a social psychologist friend of mind, Jeff Reber, would say, social psychologists aren't really "social" at all in the strongly relational sense, with a few exceptions. Strong relationality isn't apparently even available for them to use theoretically, which is a shame from my viewpoint. Instead, persons are automatically understood first as self-contained individuals and only later, after they interact, as social beings. Even after they've interacted, external influences must be brought "inside" the organism for them to be influential, whereas the strong relationist would assume that the outside cannot *not* be constitutive of the self. The context, including our body, one's history, a person's vision of the future, and the immediate situation, among other factors, is always and already part of who we are. I often tell my students that I couldn't be an instructor if they weren't in the class as my students. In other words, if I did what I usually do in class, including answering student questions, and no one was in the classroom with me, I'd be better identified as a mental patient rather than a patient instructor, and this identity would occur regardless of what I might incorporate "inside" my mind.

Q: So let's switch to the topic of dualism since we've already started there. You've already suggested that dualism is a problem in some forms a weak relationality. What role does the issue of dualism play in your own work, and what is your critique of it, particularly as it applies to science.

A: Sure. I see the dualism of abstractionism, especially the dualism of subjectivity and objectivity, as pervading the work of many psychologists. The widespread notion in research, for example, that "bias is bad" is, I believe, a by-product of the dualist notion that investigators are supposed to clear away all subjectivity, such as biases, to get to the pristine objective world. The dualism here is the simple assumption that the subjective can be separated from the objective. The strong relationist, by contrast, does not make this assumption. In fact, the relationist assumes one of several forms of non-dualism, where the subjective and the objective cannot be separated, where our interpretations, values, and even biases are part and parcel of not only our experience of the world but also any form of knowledge.

What I believe that you and I, Brian, have discussed to a limited degree concerns the application of these dualistic assumptions to other types of relationality, such as social constructionism. As you know well, Ken Gergen is a leading social constructionist whom I have criticized for not being relational enough. His book, *Relational Being*, is a marvelous relational work at so many levels. Still, he is fundamentally only weakly relational because his brand of social constructionism contains dualist assumptions that ultimately separate the subjective, or the inter-subjective in his case, from the objective.

My criticism might make more sense with a simple example. Consider the hypothetical of a careless male driver killing a little girl with his truck. Most witnesses of this incident will experience at least one meaning, the tragedy of the little girl's death. The question for us here is: what is the source of these meanings? The most likely answer to this question among psychologists would be two forms of dualism. The first is an

individualist form of dualism, where the psychologist contends that the tragic meaning stems from the individual witnesses endowing the objective event with subjective interpretation. In other words, the source of the tragic meaning is the individual's subjectivity; the objective crash is not meaningful in this sense. An objective rendering of the crash would consider the force of the truck in relation to the physiology of the girl, etc., but this solely objective description is not supposed to consider the tragedy of a little girl's life cut short.

Now most social constructionists would be rightfully critical of this individualist account. Because the tragic meaning of the girl's death is socially constructed, that is, constructed culturally through our interpersonal relationships and interchanges with one another, the subjective account of the individualist has to be wrong. Indeed, Dr. Gergen claims expressly that this kind of social constructionism precludes the dualism of the individualist, because the source of the tragic meaning lies in the relationship of the people to one another—a kind of relationality. The witnesses in this case must have learned from their culture how to interpret the girl's mangled body. The source of their meaning, in this sense, is inter-subjective rather than subjective.

Nevertheless, what is rarely discussed among social constructionists is that the objective outcome of the crash—the little girl's dead body—still contains no tragic meaning. This meaning stems solely from the negotiated (socially constructed) meanings of the culture, which are then imposed onto the body. The body itself is meaningless in this regard. I say it this way because the separation of the objective and inter-subjective, the essential dualism, is preserved. The only change is from the subjectivity of the individual to the subjectivity of the culture, each still providing the meaning for the mangled body. Even the morality of this meaning—that the driver shouldn't have caused this tragedy—is itself constructed in this manner. That is to say, the girl's dead body has nothing, in principle, to do with either the tragedy or the injustice of the crash. The girl's body is neutral or free of values altogether.

This is not a strongly relational account in my view, because it is not an account in relation to the complete context of the event. It is insufficiently relational because it takes account of the *inter*personal context, the constructors of the culture, but it doesn't take account of the *im*personal context, the truck having killed the girl. It is true that the truck and the dead body are not constructors, in which case they cannot participate in the social construction of the tragedy, but it is not true that the *im*personal situation is not itself a contributor to the meaning. In other words, the girl's mangled body is itself a real meaning, a violation of a "form of life," to use Wittgenstein's term, or a "human constant," to use Taylor's phrase. The tragedy of a life cut short is not merely "created" or "invented" by the individual or the culture, to use some of the terms from Gergen's book; the mangled body makes its own contribution to the tragedy; it's at least partially constitutive of the meaning.

The strong relationist can readily admit that there are other contributors to the meaning, including the individual's own interpretation and the culture's shared interpretation, but the situation itself is also a pivotal contributor. There is a moral reality or even a truth to the situation itself, implying that the person who stands over the mangled body and judges it to be "delightful" is at least morally wrong, no matter how different their culture or unique their subjectivity. In the later Wittgenstein, to delight in a girl's dead body is to commit a mistake of grammar, because his notion of grammar is as normative as it is semantic or syntactic. As I've said to Gergen himself, if he and I were to hike up one of our Utah mountains, the steepness of the mountain can be interpreted in many different ways. However, this steepness cannot be socially constructed away; the impersonal mountain itself contributes to the meaning of our hike. For this reason, then, the social constructionist account is *in*completely relational and is ultimately dualist in the classic Cartesian sense.

Q: A lot of your work has dealt with hermeneutics and, part of what I heard you saying in your last response, to borrow from that traditions terminology, is that there's a horizon

in which the person operates as they encounter such event. How has hermeneutics influenced your own thinking in light of a nondualistic strong relationality?

A: It's heavily influenced my thinking. I see everything I've been discussing with you as complementary to, if not completely consistent with hermeneutics, indeed, primarily inspired by hermeneutists such as Taylor, Gadamer, Heidegger, Ricoeur, and Richardson. Strong or ontological relationality itself is a hermeneutic ontology. Even the hypothetical of the mangled girl is probably best considered an explication of hermeneutic realism, where the meanings of the world are real. The term "real" here does not imply subjectivity-free, objective entities. Meanings are contextually and interpretively bathed, but they're real in and through that bathing, much as the witnesses to the tragedy of the girl would feel that the meanings are inherent in the crash, even though they don't occur without their cultural and individual interpretation.

This new, meaning-oriented understanding implies that the world consists of meanings rather than objects. Psychologists, in the spirit of abstractionist dualism, have viewed their subject matter, such humans, as natural science objects. Objects in this sense are conceived as though context doesn't matter, and so the objects themselves do not essentially change with changing contexts. Persons, for example, are considered to have personality traits that rarely change. This table is always a table, no matter the context. Also, objects are defined in terms of what they are, not what they aren't, so there is no difference or otherness involved in the qualities or identities of objects. The person, for this reason, is automatically assumed to be an essentially unchanging entity in which otherness is viewed more as antagonist rather than protagonist in the narrative of one's life.

Q: I want to pick up on that theme of otherness for a moment given the nature of this conference as Psychology and *The Other*. Levinas, in particular, has strongly influenced many of the scholars at this conference. But there seems to be a tension I find, between, say, a Levinasian conception of otherness and the hermeneutic tradition as handed down

from Heidegger and Gadamer, where hermeneutics, according to Levinas, is not sufficient and, more importantly, it's not most fundamental. Rather, otherness is a primordial experience out of which hermeneutics later emerges. Do you perceive this tension between these different philosophies and how do you reconcile these approaches in your own work given both influences on your thinking?

A: You're right that I do find both the Levinasian and hermeneutic traditions inspiring my own work, so I certainly don't see them as enemies of each other. I might even make a case for them being somewhat complementary to one another, as I know my Levinasian friend, Ed Gantt, would agree.

Let's begin with the hermeneutic tradition where, as we've said, meanings are not only real and shared but also inherently value-laden. Given this nondualist tradition, as I've described, these inherent values are not imposed subjectively onto an objective reality, as if we are the controllers of the values. These values are, instead, part of reality itself, implying that like the rest of reality they can lay claim to us, perhaps even control us to some degree through our experience of them. They thrust themselves upon us. We could even say in a Levinasian manner that they thrust themselves upon us from a height, with some mattering more than others. And surely no hermeneutist would argue with the probability that this moral realism, this very real ethic, is likely most poignant and significant in regard to our interpersonal relationships, which Levinas, of course, fleshes out through the particularity of the person's countenance, etc. As the hermeneutist Svend Brinkman contends, its the claim of morality or ethics that forges the starting point of the practical hermeneutic—a contention Levinas might find compatible.

As for the otherness of the Levinasian Other, of the person's face, for example, I think I've already explained how meanings from a hermeneutic perspective have an inherent dialectical quality. Meanings are never just what they are, and they aren't related to other meanings solely through their similarities. No, they also reach out to and require for their very identities what they're not, the otherness of themselves. As my old mentor, Rychlak

would put it, meanings "reach beyond themselves," they're overdetermined, so otherness is expected and badly needed. Again, it also makes sense to me, an ontological relationist, that Levinas would single out interpersonal meanings in this regard, and so I'm not sure I see why there have to be tensions between the two traditions.

Q: But to the degree that Levinas rejects ontology, Levinas' thought appears to be problematic for you if you want to maintain ontology as a fundamental concept in your own thought?

A: Well, part of a truly relational ontology is the relation among the meanings or categories of philosophy, such as the categories of ontology, epistemology, and ethics. I think far too often philosophers get caught up in which of these categories gets priority. In fact, to decide which category comes first is to make the assumption that ontology and ethics, as pertinent examples, are separable as meanings, and I don't really accept that these categories are separable. I would argue, instead, that all ontologies have ethical implications and assumptions, and all ethical frameworks have ontological implications and assumptions. Although the distinctions among such categories are practically helpful, it doesn't necessarily follow that these categories are completely separate from one another.

In the case of ontological relationality, there is no question in my mind that this ontology implies the moral value of virtuous relationships. I've written about this in several articles, and the ethic that stems from this ontology is one of the foundations of my own approach to psychotherapy. Similarly, I view Levinas as fitting nicely into the tradition of hermeneutic realism, where meanings are most fundamentally real and meanings are contextual, value-laden, etc. I may read Levinas differently from some others, because I would agree that he appears concerned with the priority of these philosophical categories in early works, such as *Is Ontology Fundamental?* However, I'm less sure that he views them as separable in later works, such as *Otherwise Than Being*. Is it just possible that his main concern was the false prioritizing of ontology in philosophy, which I would

heartily agree with, rather than the prioritizing of a totally separate ethic? Maybe my problem is that I read hermeneutics through Levinas (or the reverse), but whichever way it is, I view them as more complementary than contradictory.

Q: Yes. So, you are rejecting some of the Platonic and later Cartesian ontologies that have been there?

A: Great point. A relational ontology, in the Platonic or Cartesian sense, is more of an anti-ontology. I tell my students its more anti-theoretical than theoretical, because the theoretical tradition in psychology is connected more to postulated universals that cannot allow for the changeability of context, abstractionism again. Sure, we're sitting here talking in quasi-theoretical terms about ontological relationality, but it's not the talk or the terms that comprise this ontology; it's concrete relations themselves. Strong relationists readily acknowledge the linguistic reduction of any description or articulation. Language is necessarily abstract and thin, to use Walzer's term, especially in comparison to the richness of practice or lived experience. However, relational ontologists do not take their *description* of concrete relational experience to be the fundamentally real. They take the rich and detailed practices and experiences *themselves* as the fundamentally real.

Q: So there are other, more fruitful, ontologies that don't abstract the way those philosophers did?

A: That's correct.

Q: Speaking of the Other, theistic approaches in psychotherapy has been another theme in your work. You've engaged in some major critiques against psychology for the way in which its methods are biased against the world view of religious individuals, and you also propose some constructive means for how conversations between religion, theology,

spirituality and psychotherapy may take place. So, what are some of the ways in which you have thought about a theistic approach within psychology?

A: Yes, the philosophy of theism has attracted me primarily because it highlights, again, through a kind of dialectical otherness, the embedded naturalism of psychology—what Jamie Smith and Charles Taylor call its "immanent frame." Yes, I think that a naturalistic framework has captured American psychology and even Western culture. In fact, I see it across virtually all the disciplines of the Western academy. Naturalism is the taken-for-granted worldview that only natural events matter and only naturalistic explanations are valid. This view is not something empirically derived; it's an assumption made before we conduct our empirical methods. So why can't we question it to understand its impact on our discipline? Why can't we contrast it with theism to highlight its features and its qualities?

I guess I see the answer to these questions as relevant and significant regardless of whether one is a theist. Yet I've been surprised at the ad hominem directed at me, as if the only reason I might explore the relations between these two dominant worldviews of Western culture is my own presumed dogmatism. It's only marginally accepted to discuss issues related to transcendence, but to discuss God as a centerpiece of theism is to offend any number of modernist sensibilities, especially in the academy. I've now written the lead article for any number of special journal issues on theism, and the replies to these types of articles are fascinatingly all over the map, from "you're absolutely crazy" to "you have incredible courage." Another way to put this emotional bias is that naturalism is incredibly embedded in our academic psyche—it's almost an academic sacred cow, at least in psychology.

I should probably comment a bit on the notion of methodological naturalism, to which many psychologists would say they subscribe. Methodological naturalism is typically understood as qualitatively different from metaphysical naturalism, as if the epistemology of naturalism (its methods) can somehow exist apart from a set of assumptions about the

ontology of naturalism (its metaphysics). As you might guess, from my comments a few minutes ago, I don't see how these categories of philosophy—epistemology and ontology, in this case—can be completely separated. Why would someone argue for the use of methodological naturalism unless they had a worldview—a set of assumptions about the reality of the world—in which they thought this methodology would be successful? Methodological naturalism would at least be less effective in a truly theistic world, a world in which God's actions were at least a necessary condition for all events and things. In a theistic world, methods would presumably be more effective when preceded by prayer, and any explanations that didn't include God in some manner would be incomplete or flat wrong.

The real scandal, from my perspective, is the psychology of religion. Here, with few exceptions, researchers investigate the phenomena of religion using methods and explanations that cannot recognize the possibility of divine action. In many cases, these researchers are attempting to capture the meaning of prayer or ritual or forgiveness, but they are prevented from making the most pivotal assumption of the theists they're investigating—that God is vitally involved in all these activities and practices. Needless to say, they capture very little of these meanings. Perhaps worse, they turn these practices into naturalistic meanings that would be anathema to most theists. Forgiveness and prayer, for example, are turned into instrumental concepts that they advocate should be used for greater happiness and flourishing. In fact, one of the most striking differences between a naturalist and many theists is the whole notion of human flourishing. For most theists, it's not about them at all, including their own flourishing; it's about their God flourishing, whether or not human theists are flourishing in any conventional sense.

I'm also quite struck by how the reification of naturalism spawns bad scholarship. Clinicians have long admired a number of noted theists, such as Martin Buber, and have even adapted their ideas to their therapeutic work. The intriguing thing, when considering the bias of naturalism, is how all of these adaptations immediately exclude

divine action in the process. Buber, for example, is abundantly clear in all his work that God cannot be excluded from I-Thou relationships, yet therapists who have written about these relationships have not only excluded this divine action, they have done so without any defense or justification, as if this exclusion needs no defense, as if everyone understands it can't be included, despite what the author of the ideas himself thinks. My point is that the assumptions of naturalism are as deep and as taken-for-granted as any set of assumptions in the academy. It's an amazing thing to me.

Q: In light of your own thinking, and being a practicing clinician, how does this theism inform how you conceptualize the therapeutic experience?

A: I like that you refer to the conceptualization of experience, because there is undoubtedly a number of theistic psychotherapists who use their theism at least informally. They surely wouldn't reject insights about a therapy case that they might consider spiritual promptings. If they're serious theists, they'd surely pray for their clients, if not expressly ask for divine guidance. So there's likely to be a lot of informal theism and therapy going on. Your question is intriguing because it raises the possibility of whether theism can be formalized as a meta-theory from which thoughtful conceptualizations of clients and therapeutic strategies can be born. My answer to this possibility is "of course." If I, as a therapist, believe in the import of God in the world, why wouldn't I attempt to formalize this import into therapy conceptualizations and strategies? Allen Bergin and Scott Richards have done just that in their recent books.

I realize that some psychologists would object to the therapist's use of theism on clients who aren't themselves theistic, but this objection is funny to me—because I don't see them objecting to the use of naturalism on the vast majority of our clients who are theists. Again, they tend to view naturalism as less value-laden or less assumptive, when my own investigations show naturalism to be just as value-laden and assumptive, and naturalists can easily rival theists in their dogmatism about their respective worldview. I'd also contend that theistic therapists do not have to use religious rhetoric with nonreligious

clients. They can be just as spiritually prompted, and thus just as theistic, without mentioning it to the client. They can be just as guided by, for example, a Judeo-Christian ethic without mentioning it to the non-theistic client. Truth be known, most non-theistic therapists are ultimately guided by a Judeo-Christian ethic, usually without knowing they are and typically without giving the underlying theism of this ethic any acknowledgement.

My own theistic therapeutic approach would pull a great deal from strong relationality. Strong relationality is deeply embedded in the Trinitarian tradition of Christianity, for example. Colin Gunton is a great source for these ideas, as are the Patristics, the early church fathers. I have adapted these ideas into some important strategies about how virtuous relationships might occur, not to mention how to love and be loved. My own clinical practice consists primarily of people with problematic marriages, so my focus on relationships fits nicely. As you may know, Brian, a very successful therapeutic boarding school in West Virginia is based on my ideas—the Greenbrier Academy. It's a 55-bed facility for adolescent women. Even its accredited high school is based on strong relationality.

Q: With the time we have left, I want to just wrap up with a question about how you perceive your work has been received by the larger psychological community. If we look at the field of psychology today, there has been a lot of great work done in theoretical psychology, yours being one of the principle voices in this conversation, to help psychology reformulate its assumptions in order to become less dualistic, more relational, more accepting of religion and theology. But upon looking at where the field currently is and the directions it seems to be heading, its focus on evidenced based treatments, grounding personhood in neurobiology, etc, the impact of theoretical psychology on the larger discipline is not apparent to me. How have you perceived your work being received in the discipline in particular?

A: It's an interesting question that I don't really consider very often. I guess I just do what seems right and good for the discipline and for humanity, and then let the chips fall where they may. I guess I care about the outcome to some degree, but I don't control it and don't fret over it. You're right, of course, that not every department is clamoring for a theoretical psychologist—perhaps an understatement. You're also right that much of the rising neurobiological approaches assume a problematic reductive materialism. Still, I see all sorts of hopeful signs. It probably depends on where you look. It probably also depends on how you view change or impact. When theoretical psychology is so broad brush—examining ideas that undergird the entire discipline—it might seem to follow that any impact would itself imply a similarly broad brush, but I just don't think it has to be gauged in that manner. In fact, I think that broad-brush impact is often subtle rather than sweeping, with little sprigs of their manifestations sprouting here and there.

One such sprig could be the boarding school I was privileged to help found. It surely says something about our present era in psychology that a therapeutic boarding school can be based on "ontological relationality." Ask anyone at Greenbrier what the academy is based on, and they will not only give you that phrase, but they will also tell you what it means. Moreover, there are reliable reports that Greenbrier, and especially its success, is changing the therapeutic boarding school industry. Suddenly, everyone is focusing on relationships. My entrepreneurial friend is, as we speak, putting our philosophy into modules that he thinks can be exported to the Middle East, where he believes there is a crying need for such boarding schools.

Consider as another sprig the changes we've seen in psychology's methodology. Who'd have thought even 20 years ago that psychology would be this methodologically pluralistic? I don't doubt for a minute that our theoretical writings on philosophy of social science have played a pivotal role in that important impact. You mention evidence-based practice as a negative example, partly perhaps because I've been critical of that movement. Still, any thoughtful review of those developments in psychology would see it as a move from the narrowly and naively empirical to the more broadly

empirical in the spirit of William James. Is this movement where I would want it to be? Of course not. But has theoretical psychology helped it to change in directions that appear to be more thoughtful and more inclusive? I think it has.

Another sprig could be the movement toward theism we discussed earlier. Why would a half dozen leading journals do a special issue on this controversial topic if it weren't being considered seriously? And why is it being considered seriously? I can attest that it's not due to a bunch of religious fanatics trying to convert a "godless psychology." It is, instead, a bunch theoretical psychologists who are attempting to bring thoughtful and incisive scholarship to bear on important issues. Again, is this movement where I'd like it to be? No. But I fear that we often don't appreciate the subtle but real changes that occur because we increase our expectations as we go.

I can think of a dozen other sprigs, from our enhanced awareness of psychology's replication problems to thoughtful discussions about neurophilosophy to greater sophistication about human agency—all pivotally driven, I believe, by theoretical psychologists. As a more personal example, my son, Nathan, recently won a national award for a dissertation that is an obvious theoretical contribution. In it, he shows how his own discipline of student affairs, specifically the literature used to train its doctoral students, is completely overrun with a liberal individualist philosophy. He makes wonderful points about how the people who are managing our college students outside of the classroom are crypto-missionaries for this ideology. I believe it's quite clear that he's helping an entire field to be more reflexive, more critical of itself in healthily skeptical ways.

Q: So, if you were to speak prophetically right now to psychology, what would you say? What would be the message you would want to convey about what the field needs right now?

A: Prophet I am not, but if psychology could just be aware of its own worldview—for example, that our methods are not indisputable aspects of logic but are instead facets of an indigenous psychology—I would be in disciplinary bliss. This awareness might allow us to see that our investigations and their results are works of interpretation rather than works of objective description. It would also mean that there are non-empirical aspects of psychology that need to be taken into account—theoretical aspects in which theoretical psychologists might be important resources.

I would also advocate that psychologists be trained in truly critical thinking skills. I say "truly" because so much of what passes for critical thinking in psychology is really just the application of logical rigor, such as the application of the logic of science. This form of thinking, I would contend, is better understood as rigorous thinking, which is not unimportant but isn't critical thinking. Truly critical thinking, as most educators know, is the knowledge of one's current assumptions as well as the awareness of possible alternative assumptions. In fact, I'd argue that we won't have a meaningful awareness of our current assumptions without an awareness of assumptive alternatives. This kind of critical thinking might allow us to always keep the "other" in view, even as we explore our conventional ideas.

Q: So one last question, and then I want to give the audience an opportunity to ask some questions. You have a new book coming out through APA books. In that book, as well as other work you're planning, where is your own research taking you in the future?

A: I would certainly want to continue my probe of strong relationality and a theistic approach to research and practice. However, this exploration would necessarily require an exploration of the "others" of these philosophies, namely abstractionism and naturalism respectively. In fact, I'm sometimes more enamored with the others, because they are such fascinating hidden influences in so many fields. As I mentioned earlier about naturalism, it's the hidden system of assumptions across all the varied disciplines

of the academy. Wouldn't it be fruitful to understand the impact of these assumptions as well as what a system of alternatives might provide?

I'm also interested in liberal individualism and virtue ethics. The new book you mentioned is a contribution to virtue ethics, particularly overlooked aspects of humanity such as our frailty, dependence, suffering, and even evil. It's co-authored with Blaine Fowers and Frank Richardson. Hermeneutics will remain my primary inspiration. I'm currently investigating the significance of a hermeneutic moral realism, important to such scholars as Heidegger and Taylor. Is it possible to frame a nondualist, meaning-oriented approach to morality that is real and not totally dependent on our subjectivity and cultural conventions? Such a question may seem highly theoretical, but I view it as central to many of my clients who seem bereft of a moral compass in their practical lives.

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