

Psychological Method and the Activity of God:

Clarifications and Distinctions

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We are gratified by the serious and substantive comments on the four-article argument that begins this special issue. We are especially pleased to have Stanton Jones (this issue) involved in this dialogue, whose comment we are to focus upon here. His work has been seminal to the integration project, and, true to form, his comment in this special issue poses intriguing challenges to both our collective argument and our particular part in that argument (Slife & Whoolery, this issue).

Specifically, Jones points to several matters that need further elaboration and clarification, which we intend to provide here. Indeed, Jones's (this issue) comment and, to a lesser degree, Tan's (this issue) comment have led us to develop and refine some of our first article's ideas, especially those concerning the activity of God and the need for interpretive methods. Even though we take issue here with a few of Jones's positions, we want to be clear that we view his comment as not only valuable but also basically complementary to our own perspective.

The Activity of God

Jones (this issue) is correct when he states that we view the activity of God as a "central omission of secular method" from the theist's perspective (p. 7). However, he questions this focus for two reasons. First, Jones desires a "thick" presentation of these ideas (p. 13). Theism, from his perspective, is too "abstract," and we would have to "tip our hand" to truly engage the important issues of integration (p. 13). Second, and

perhaps the more important concern, is that he believes our focus should be the “understandings of the human person” rather than the activity of God (p. 7). The latter focus is a bit of a red herring from Jones’s perspective, while the former is vital to the integration project and interpretive methods. We appreciate his role in our published “dialogue” because he allows us to address both of these important issues.

Regarding Jones’s first concern, we sympathize with his request for a thick presentation of these ideas, such as a focus on Christianity. Our general hermeneutical approach stresses thick description in conducting interpretive methods. However, descriptions *about* hermeneutical methods, such as Gadamer’s *Truth and Method* (1975), not to mention Jones’s (this issue) *own* article about needing thick description, are typically presented with more general and thus thinner language. Jones suggests focusing on Christianity, but we are hard-pressed to see how this focus is much less abstract than theism. As he well knows, there are many types of particular Christians, with widely varying theologies and beliefs. Describing Christianity *in general* allows very little truly “thick” description (Dueck, 2001).

Of course, if Jones wanted to focus on a particular issue that Christians have in common, then surely such a focus would be permitted. By analogy, a veterinarian who is concerned that all cats get rabies vaccinations should be able to say so. Indeed, a focus on only one cat, no matter how “concrete” or “thick” it may be, would misrepresent this concern. Similarly, we have chosen not to limit the applicability of our ideas to Christianity. We believe that the issue of God’s presence and activity concern other religions, and thus other theistic psychologists. We are aware, for example, of comparable concerns about the activity of God in Islamic science (Iqbal, 2002).

Moreover, divine activity is a central topic in integrative efforts between religion and the physical sciences (Lameter, 2006; Saunders, 2002).

Jones's second concern is that our focus on divine activity is problematic for integrative efforts in psychology. We should focus, instead, on how we are "made in the image of God" (p. 7). According to Jones, humans cannot be reduced either to natural laws or to a solely "material existence;" they must be capable of "meaningful agency" (p. 7). His position seems to be fairly widely held among conservative Christian psychologists. For example, many of the authors of the edited volume, *Science and the Soul* (VanderStoep, 2003), hold that the Christian model of human nature is more agentic than deterministic, more moral than amoral, and more holistic than reductive (see Slife & Ellertson, 2004 for a review).

Although we essentially agree with these scholars, the problem is that there is nothing uniquely Christian or even theistic about this model of human nature. As Jones notes, even secular humanists embrace this model. If this is true, then a change of models does not further the project of integrating religion and psychology because no religion is necessary. Nothing distinctly or uniquely Christian is being integrated. Some authors of the *Science and the Soul* volume (VanderStoep, 2003) appeared to view the uniqueness of Christianity as a different set of values or ethics, including differing ethical positions on such issues as abortion, homosexuality, and pre-marital sex. Yet again, someone who is non-Christian could hold these values. For that matter, no one would even need to be religious to hold such values or endorse such models of human nature, *whatever* the specifics of those values and those models.

Our question in this light is a simple one: where is God in these values and models? Would not a fundamentally distinguishing feature of many theistic religions, including Christianity, be that a loving God is immanent in world events, including psychological events? If God's activity is limited for Jones and the authors of *Science and the Soul* to only *non*-psychological events, then there would seem to be little need to integrate psychology and religion. Many secular ideas could accommodate the changes of models and values these scholars advocate. If, however, they believe that God somehow plays a role in, and is thus required for a complete understanding of, psychological subject matter, where is this role in regard to these models and values?

Perhaps these models and values stem from humans being "made in the image of God," as Jones asserts. God created humans in a specific way and revealed the importance of specific values. However, this assertion implies only deism, not theism. That is to say, these models and values would only require a God as creator and not a God who is currently involved in world events. The former is not a Christian or even a theistic God, yet deism is extremely tempting because it fits so nicely the naturalism of psychology: God created the order of the world that psychologists investigate, but God is no longer involved in the world (naturalism), and psychologists do not need to take divine influences into account in their theories, methods, and practices.

We do not think for a moment that these Christian scholars are deists. Christianity – as with many theistic religions, including Judaism and Islam – is rife with scripture and reports of God's continuing activities in the world. Still, these scholars are also psychologists, where human models and values are part of their professional training, but God's activity in psychological events is not. Is there a tendency in doing

integrative scholarship to focus on commensurable differences, such as human models and ethical values, and to downplay the issues that naturalism is completely incapable of subsuming, such as God's immanence from a theistic perspective?

In our first article, we answer this question affirmatively. We focused on the activity of God because we believe it to be one of the most important issues in integrating psychology and theistic forms of religion. It is certainly one of the main distinguishing features between the naturalism of psychology, where God does not matter, and the theism of many religions, where God does matter. We now see more clearly, however, the complexity of this issue – thanks to the comments of Jones and Tan. For example, God *does* matter to the deist, without threatening the naturalism of psychology in its present form. For many psychologists who believe in God in this deistic sense, no integration is necessary, which is undoubtedly why so few seem to be interested in the integration project (cf. Jones, this issue).

Strong versus Weak Theism

Jones's and Tan's commentaries have helped us to see that further distinctions are necessary to clarify the main thrust of our first article. As Tan (this issue) put it, Slife and Whoolery "overstate their case" (p. 8). We now see that weak theistic positions are available that allow theistic psychologists to avoid the activity of God issue altogether. We want to describe a few of these here to distinguish them from the strong theism of our first article. We do not believe that devout Christians, such as Jones and Tan, are weak theists in their religious or theological positions, but we do want to acknowledge the temptation to compartmentalize issues, such as God's current activity, for the sake of being a psychologist *and* a Christian.

Both forms of theism, strong and weak, assume the existence of God, hence the term “theism” for each. However, each considers this divine existence quite differently. Weak theism, for instance, limits this existence or its manifestation in some way. It is “weak” because its theism only extends so far. It may limit God’s existence to some places and not others, or some times and not others. Or, it may assume God’s existence is little more than an abstract philosophical proposition that has no practical import. Believing that “God exists,” as a valid intellectual proposition, is not necessarily the same as believing that God exists in the practical or functional sense of making a difference in the world or mattering in our lives.

A strong theist, by contrast, must affirm not only the theoretical existence of God but also the concrete possibility of the practical or functional existence of God. Making a practical difference does not have to mean some miraculous or supernatural efficient causation. God could be inherent in the way in which the world reveals itself to us truthfully – more as a formal or final cause (Faulconer, 2005; Griffin, 2000; Marion, 2000). A strong theist, in this sense, is a thorough-going theist because the position of theism – God’s theoretical *and* practical existence or presence – is extended generally. Deism is usually distinguished from thorough-going (strong) theism for just this reason. Deism allows only a passive God who is not functionally present following Creation, and thus not currently active in the world. In this sense, a deist can endorse the philosophical proposition that God currently exists, but God does not exist in any currently practical sense – a weak theism.

Many psychologists are also dualists in this same, weak theistic sense. Dualism basically assumes that God exists and is active in some portion of the world – such as the

subjective, the spiritual, or the soul – but God is functionally nonexistent and thus not active in some other portion of the world – the objective, the natural, or the material. The philosopher Rene Descartes is famous for this kind of weak theism where God’s activity is relegated or limited in some way. For example, he relegated God’s immanent activity primarily to the soul (rather than the body). Limiting God’s role in the world has become common in psychology, in large measure because of the dominance of Cartesian dualism in the discipline (Richardson, Fowers, & Guignon, 1999).

The Christian psychologist Donald Wacome (2003) illustrates a variation of this form of dualism when he seems to hold that God is involved with some entities of the world but not with others, as in this passage:

Christians, unlike deists, believe that God miraculously intervenes in his creation, but our essential commitment is to God’s intervening in human history; in human experience; and, above all, in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus – *not to God’s intervening in nature as such*. We accept a great variety of explanations of things *coming about by natural processes* that are what they are in the world God has created without feeling the need to postulate divine interventions (italics added, p. 200).

Here, Wacome (2003) distinguishes his position from deism because he believes God is *currently* active in the events of humans (e.g., their history, experience). However, he could be read as postulating a deism of nature where God created the processes of nature but they are now “coming about by natural processes.”

This type of weak theism allows researchers to assume that God does not matter for the topic of interest, especially in science. Because the subject matter is typically

thought to be the objective or natural world, God is either no longer present (deism) or was never present (dualism). This way of thinking is a direct parallel to the traditional fact/value split in scientific methods. Scientific facts supposedly stem from the objective or natural portion of the world, whereas values (and divine influences) stem from the subjective or spiritual portion of our experiences. For this reason, methodologists have traditionally assumed that research methods do not need to take into account values, just as they have assumed that these methods do not need to take into account God's role. Traditional methods are thought to deal exclusively with the value-free and God-free aspects of the world. Either God's role is practically insignificant (as in deism) or entirely absent (as in dualism).

God and Method

This weak theism has given even religious psychologists license to ignore the possibility of God's role in psychological events. Our focus in the first article was method in this regard, where the assumptions that undergird and guide psychological method are either naturalist or weak theist. In both views, God does not currently matter for the subject at hand. No method text in psychology – for that matter, no mainstream text in psychology generally – even mentions a role that God *could* play. More relevantly, no formulation of the philosophies that underlie and guide these methods makes any allowances for such a role. If God were viewed as *really* significant to the psychological topic at hand, these divine influences would surely be acknowledged, if not featured.

We are aware that many psychologists view conventional methods as neutral or even irrelevant to the possibility of this divine role. In other words, they seem to argue

that God *could* play a role but that psychological researchers are using the methods of science to describe *how* these events occur, with or without a God. Here Jones seems to agree with our analysis of this argument in our first article – no such neutral or objective description is possible. All methods are always and already formulated with values and assumptions that lead researchers to selectively attend to certain aspects of reality and even use certain explanations over other explanations – all due to the implicit worldview they bring to bear. Even the notion that these methods provide an “incomplete” description still assumes that this description is neutral *as far as it goes*. Yet, there is no neutrality in *any* portion of a description. All scientific descriptions are colored by the researcher’s biases and assumptions.

We appreciate Jones’s agreement, in this light, that some of these “colorings” include theological biases and assumptions. For a researcher to assume, however implicitly or explicitly, that God is irrelevant, nonexistent, or a later “add-on” to a description is to assert significant theological ideas about the nature of the world, with important practical and professional implications. With these ideas, for example, students and clients are taught that most psychological events and topics can be explained and understood without God. The essential message is that God does not matter. Yet this message is a theological position, not a secular neutrality or a research finding.

What if a psychologist believes that God *does* currently matter in the events and topics of psychology? What should this person do to address the theological biases of the discipline? Jones is correct that we believe little can be done without first moving to an interpretive philosophy of science. He laments that we do not draw a direct connection between theism and this philosophy of science, but we are a little puzzled by this lament.

The very idea that we are moving from the traditional value-free stance of researchers to the value-laden stance of interpretation (in terms of those values) seem to us a straightforward connection. Valuing is interpreting. We fail to see how value-ladenness, or even theology-ladenness, does not lead *directly* to an interpretive philosophy of science.

Perhaps there is some confusion about the phrase “interpretive methods.” For example, we never intended our four-article argument to be a “how to” manual for conducting psychological research. Rather, these articles aimed for, at least in part, a reformed *philosophy of psychological science* that allows for the dialogue of psychology and theism. The phrase “interpretive methods” also connotes that some methods are interpretive and others are not. Although this is correct in the sense that some methods *explicitly* take the interpretations of researchers and their participants into account, it is not correct in the sense that interpretive methods are the *only* methods that stem from philosophies, assumptions, and values. All methods contain unproven values and assumptions that guide their conduct, and are thus interpretations, whether or not they acknowledge and explicate them. The utility of traditional psychological methods, in this sense, is that they bring a useful interpretation of the world to bear – naturalism.

Still, this is also a major reason that an interpretive philosophy of science is insufficient for the theistic psychologist: interpretive methods are frequently considered to be indifferent to the values of theism. If we understand Jones correctly, he considers us to argue that interpretive methods have been “uniquely drawn from theistic presuppositions” (p. 8). We were apparently not sufficiently clear that our claim is not that interpretive methods require theism but that theism requires interpretive methods.

Indeed, it is this lack of theistic grounding that led us (Slife & Whoolery, this issue) to postulate and incorporate a specifically theistic component into interpretive methods (i.e., divine “ruptures”). In other words, we do not believe that the previous formulators of interpretive methods explicitly considered these methods to incorporate divine influences. We believe, however, that such methods can be *reinterpreted* to fulfill a theistic philosophy of science, hence our exploration of this reinterpretation in the final section of our original article.

Conclusion

We want to acknowledge, in concluding, that psychologists with weak theistic positions should have no problem using conventional psychological methods for the realms of the world they deem to be God-free. However, these psychologists should keep in mind that these assumptions are theological or philosophical in nature, and thus must be dealt with and defended as such. On the other hand, strongly theistic psychologists should expect problems “integrating” their religious beliefs with the naturalistic methods of psychology. After all, such an integration is a clash of worldviews. Moreover, a move to interpretive methods will be insufficient because these methods were not formulated with God’s role in mind. In other words, they were not conceived as though God truly mattered for the topic of interest.

How then is such a method conceived? We offer one, admittedly sketchy (and thin) exploration of how such a philosophy of science could be outlined in our first article. We realize that this outline needs to be fleshed out considerably to be really useful, and other theistic sketches are welcomed. Its purpose was to show how a theistic philosophy of science is possible, and perhaps even how it can subsume the discoveries

attributed to other methods. It is not, in this sense, an attempt to “capture” God or these divine activities (Jones, this issue, p. 7). No such reduction is possible, especially from a hermeneutic perspective (see Richardson, this issue). It is, rather, an attempt to illustrate how God’s activity in the world *could* matter to the philosophy of science underlying our methods. Such a philosophy would, at least, allow theistic interpretations and inferences of psychological topics and events, and, at best, lead to an interpretive knowledge of God’s influences, at least for those who have “ears to hear” (Mark 4: 23).

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