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Psychology, religion and world-loyalty: Commentary on Is there a pervasive implicit bias against theism in psychology? (by Brent D. Slife and Jeffrey S Reber).

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Abstract

This paper provides a critical commentary on Slife and Reber's paper entitled "Is there a pervasive implicit bias against theism in psychology?" Drawing upon A.N. Whitehead's process philosophy, the paper challenges the bifurcation between naturalism and theism and suggests that religion be better conceived as world-loyalty than as supernaturalism.

"Religion is world-loyalty" (Whitehead, 1926, p.60.)

Brent Slife and Jeffrey Reber (S&R) make the case that there is a pervasive bias in psychology that flows from a largely hidden prejudice that discriminates against those who adhere to a theistic worldview. Theists, they argue, are discriminated against on multiple levels, from the design and interpretation of research studies to the exclusion of core theistic features of well-known theories. Such accusations are clearly quite serious, and suggest that many or even most psychologists are routinely violating their ethical codes. The call that S&R appear

to be making on behalf of believers is thus similar to those made in recent years to critique psychology along feminist, post-colonialist, disabled and queer-theory lines. Such critiques point to an unrecognised limitation in the cosmology promulgated by techno-scientific mentality and practice, and hence to the provincialism of this 'worldview.' However, whilst these radicals challenge techno-science with an ethico-political vocabulary drawn for the most part from the social sciences and humanities (Curt, 1994), S&R assert their views from a (marginalised?) province with deeper roots, a longer pedigree, and a somewhat larger (disenfranchised?) constituency: religion.

The gravity of these accusations makes it important to be clear about the meaning of the terms in use. Clarity is also important because the significant contribution of S&R's paper is, arguably, not that it serves as the spur for a witch-hunt, but that it provides a much-needed *lure* to systematic reflection on questions of ontology. They raise the question of what concept of nature is assumed in mainstream psychological research and in theistic alternatives. Ontological concepts are the background of our explicit and workaday analytic categories in psychology. For many psychologists, however, such questions are nothing but pre-modern sources of noisy confusion best skipped over in the name of clear formulations. The value of clarity, therefore, needs to be briefly finessed. Any "world view" – and not just scientific "naturalism" – can be aptly conceived as a zone of clarity surrounded and energised by a vague background (a 'social imaginary?'). This dark penumbra constitutes prejudice since it comes before explicit judgement and recognition. Clarity is the active exclusion of this noisy background. This formula by which the background is implicated in the

foreground can only mean that we must give thanks to that excluded noise for the small signal we receive.

With respect to core concepts, S&R present their argument in relation to a contrast between *theism* and *naturalism*. Thus a juxtaposition with the abstraction *naturalism* is pivotal to their efforts to “clearly define theism”. The danger with this approach is that one can end up merely juggling two abstractions. Naturalism, for example, is presented as oriented towards “nature” whilst theism is oriented towards the “supernatural”. It is thus assumed that God – although not “unconcerned with natural... processes” - is *identified* with the “supernatural”. The key questions are then framed in terms of whether or not supernatural “events and processes” (or even “theistic entities”) exist in a “difference-making way”. To the extent that most psychologists exclude the supernatural from their experimental designs (especially when they take the professional risk of studying it as a subjective phenomenon to be explained naturalistically), they can then be accused of already having made a decision with respect to the legitimacy of a theistic worldview. One need only accept the further assumption that all “worldviews” are equally legitimate (because equally “meaning-oriented”) to set the postmodern quasi-political scene of denouncing the “dominant world view” in the name of a subjugated alternative. In this case, both dominant and subjugated “worldviews” will doubtless be hardened into neatly bounded reifications that provide convenient short-cuts to truth, the better to make war with: stand up and be counted - are you a theist or a naturalist?

But what if religion were not instantly identified with the “supernatural” but, on the contrary, with what Whitehead calls “world-loyalty”? What difference would it make if we set up the debate not in terms of a dialectic between the natural and the supernatural, but in terms of the experiences that we draw upon to define the *concept* of nature? This would be the ontological move that takes the task of truth rather seriously and that refuses to accept the short-cuts of either “naturalism” or “theism”. Are the experiences expressed by Christ, for example, to be accommodated *within* the concept of nature or are they to be excluded from it? Are only those experiences of Galileo that were mediated by his telescope to be included in the concept of nature, or are we also to include those expressed in his *Dialogue concerning the two chief world systems*? When we use expressions like “only natural events”, what in fact do we *mean* by “natural events”? We would then not take the martial stance of hardening the categories and forcing identification, but would instead take the risk of *exposing* science to theology, and theology to science. This is the way proposed by Whitehead in his aptly titled volume ‘*Religion in the making*’ (1926\1996, p.79): “You cannot shelter theology from science, or science from theology; nor can you shelter either of them from metaphysics, or metaphysics from either of them. There is no short cut to truth.”

Thus, in the spirit of emphasising the ontological and not the martial aspects of S&R’s paper, I would open up the question of their use of the terms “theism” and “naturalism”. The term theism slips unnoticed between two meanings. On the one hand it is a quite general term that might be taken as synonymous with the word “religion”: it suggests merely belief in God or Gods.

Much of Slife and Reber's paper appears to emphasise this meaning (see their footnote 3), giving the sense of a general debate between equally meaning-based religious and naturalistic worldviews. They seem to assume, for instance, that what they call "theistic entities" are simply supernatural entities. Theism in this broad sense becomes a universal abstraction that could be used to denote the supernatural aspects of any deity-centred belief, from Viking polytheism to Calvinism. On the other hand, however, theism denotes a quite specific doctrine that assumes a *personal* God that is *active* in the world. This specific doctrine emerged in the 17th Century as a point of contrast with *deism*. Although the actual details are quite complicated, deism is typically characterised in relation to the idea that once God had created the world, he absented himself from it, allowing it to follow its own natural course without need of divine intervention. This particular settlement provides an elegant rationale for maintaining a belief in God whilst simultaneously keeping Him out of politics and law and clearing an autonomous space for the development of techno-scientific rationality. Theists, as S&R briefly note, were concerned to retain a 'practical' relationship with a personal God.

Both theism and deism are quite specific theological responses to the scientific revolution that climaxed in 17th Century Europe. Both thus exemplify the fact that religion is not a fixed fact but a process *in the making*, both directly contributing to, and responding to, developments in science and metaphysics. S&R could do more justice to this fact when they describe "deism and dualism" simply as two "categories of conceptions" that are "candidates" for rendering a religious world view "compatible" with "the popularity of science". This position

understates the intimate connections between scientific and religious ideas and misses the sense in which the birth of what they call “scientific naturalism” was inseparable from novel religious notions associated with, for example, deism and theism. Of course it is notoriously difficult to establish the private religious views of figures such as Newton and Hobbes, since their times made privacy prudent. Newton is often associated with deism, for instance, yet his numerous religious writings suggest complex mixtures of deist, theist and Unitarian ingredients. What seems certain is that for Newton, science (or rather “natural philosophy”) was the ideal territory on which to clarify theological matters. As he put it in the General Scholium of his *Principia*: “This most beautiful system of the sun, planets, and comets, could only proceed from the counsel and dominion of an intelligent and powerful Being”. Newton’s mechanistic universe devoid of immanent teleology thus entails the paradox of concentrating all teleology into the form of a divine mechanic, who designed the world for purposes we cannot hope to grasp. This ‘deist’ tendency is nevertheless accompanied by a ‘theist’ (interventionist) assumption that “This Being governs all things, not as the soul of the world, but as Lord over all; and on account of his dominion he is wont to be called *Lord God* "pantokrator," or *Universal Ruler*.”

It is in this novel type of *scientific theology* that we find perhaps the clearest expression of the bifurcation between the “natural” and the “supernatural” that Slife and Reber both struggle with and take for granted. This bifurcation is not something *real* which an adequate theology might bridge or overcome. It is the product of an abstraction of thought whereby all aim, creativity, variety, subjectivity, experience and novelty is evacuated from the

conception of the natural universe and concentrated in a sphere considered “supernatural”. The poles of the abstraction are two sides of the same coin. We must not mistake this abstract *concept* of nature - drawn from a few experiences of, for example, planetary motion – for nature itself. For Newton, the natural world is a world of brute material fact governed by what he called “blind metaphysical necessity”, always and everywhere the same. The limitations of this understanding of nature have been recognized for almost a century, but it carried much weight for 200 years or so, and still lingers on amongst many psychologists. It should not be so surprising that such a concept leaves the diversity and creativity evident in the world somewhat unexplained. Newton’s settlement, of course, was to explain it by recourse to the will of God. As he put it: “All that diversity of natural things which we find suited to different times and places could arise from nothing but the ideas and will of a Being, necessarily existing” (op cit, 506).

The “supernatural” concepts are thus intimately associated with the “natural” concepts, and the limitations of one are hidden in the assumptions of the other. Hence, on the same page as the quotation above, Newton’s argument that the discourse on God certainly belongs to Natural Philosophy is based upon the twin assumptions that: a) “every particle of space is *always*”, and, b) “every indivisible moment of duration is *every where*”. Given these assumptions about matter, time and space, it would be erroneous to suggest that the Lord of all things might be *never* and *no where*. On the contrary, He too must exist *always* and *every where*. As Whitehead discusses at length in *Process and Reality*, however, after the relativity and quantum revolutions there is no justification for

assuming that the universe is essentially composed of brute 'stuff' occupying timeless space in the manner of "simple location" (Whitehead, 1928/1985. p. 137). For Whitehead, post-Newtonian physics suggests instead that time is atomic and 'epochal' in nature, and that space is not composed of ever-enduring particles, but of actual occasions or events: *occurrences* and not *endurances*. If we are not to recycle spurious notions of the supernatural, we cannot avoid facing the ontological challenge of an adequate definition of the natural. If nature is not mere brute materiality, then surely we have to rethink the place of creativity, variety, subjectivity, experience, aim, and so on *within* the concept of nature. This rethinking cannot but challenge the neat compartments established by the dualistic settlements of the likes of Descartes, Kant, Dilthey or Habermas, and hence cannot but unsettle what might previously have been comprehended supernaturally as 'thought', 'history' or 'communication'.

In short, I suggest that the concept of theism is too limited for the task S&R allocate to it. Furthermore, when it is used as a broad generality it remains tinged with the tacitly assumed colouring of its more specific usage as a movement contrasting with deism. In this use it brings unacknowledged baggage including an unhelpful association of religion with the "supernatural" and a preoccupation with the theme of a personal God's intervention in the world. The latter is aptly illustrated in statements such as "Theism necessarily assumes that a currently active God... is necessary for understanding the world" and "theists see their supernaturalism, specifically the activity of God, as ... involved with nature and the natural world." The concept of *religion* would be more suitable, since this would acknowledge that the positions involved are far from unitary

and, indeed, that the fiercest critic of religious belief is one who holds another religious belief. The Bible, for instance, is replete with condemnations of idolatry: “For I desired mercy, and not sacrifice; and the knowledge of God more than burnt offerings” (Hosea, 6:6); “I hate, I despise your feast days” (Amos, 5:21). Obviously, the conceptions of a personal God at play in different religions and indeed within the same religion can vary enormously. God can be figured as an enemy to be conciliated; as a glorious tyrant to be obeyed out of honour and fear; as an omnipotent universal mechanic; or as a companion to be imitated. With respect to the theistic assumption of a personal God mentioned above, however, it is quite notable that many of the great religions disavow the notion of a personal God as substratum to the nature of things. Whitehead (1926\1996, .p.62) comments on this as follows:

“Throughout India and China religious thought, so far as it has been interpreted in precise form, disclaims the intuition of any ultimate personality substantial to the universe. This is true for Confucian philosophy, Buddhist philosophy, and Hindoo philosophy. There may be personal embodiments, but the substratum is impersonal. Christian theology has also, in the main, adopted the position that there is no direct intuition of such an ultimate personal substratum for the world. It maintains the doctrine of the existence of a personal God as a truth, but holds that our belief in it is based upon inference... and not a direct intuition. This is the general doctrine of those traditionalist churches which more especially claim the title of Catholic; and contrary doctrines have, I believe, been officially condemned by the Roman Catholic Church:

for example, the religious philosophy of Rosmini. Greek thought, when it began to scrutinize the traditional cults, took the same line”.

If the Roman Catholic Church condemns doctrine based on the possibility of a direct intuitive experience of a personal God underlying the universe, then this is likely to be informed by the fact that such a basis for religious experience is guaranteed to generate disagreement and hence will provide no firm basis for doctrine. As an aside, this has interesting implications for S&R’s criticism of the *Image of God* research programme for not using the same measure for “relationships with parents” and “relationship with God”. If Whitehead is correct, then most of the world’s religions would agree in treating these two relationships rather differently, since they agree that the latter, unlike the former, is a matter of inference rather than direct intuition. The main point in this respect, however, is that the notion of a direct intuition of a personal God should not be taken for granted as a religious precept. Indeed, there have been at least three broad and simple answers to the question of the nature of God that should be given fair consideration (Whitehead, 1926\1996, p. 68): a) The doctrine of immanence typical of Eastern Asia, which is based upon the notion of a self-ordering impersonal order; b) The doctrine of transcendence associated typically with the Semitic concept of the ultimate metaphysical fact of a divine personal creator; and c) The doctrine of pantheistic monism in which the actual world is partial description of God whose full description demands recourse to the concurrent existence of something like the Semitic concept in b). I fear that the notion of *theism* cannot do justice to all of these notions.

Having taken issue with the notion of theism, it is also necessary briefly to raise some questions about S&R's contrast notion of naturalism. I have suggested that what is at stake is not principally a distinction between the natural and the supernatural, but a re-thinking of the concept of nature as such. For this reason, I suggest following the tradition that distinguishes a concept of nature characterized by mechanistic materialism from a concept characterized by the notion of *life* or *organism* (see Brown and Stenner, 2009). It is not naturalism per se that is the problem, but the now discredited tradition of inheritance that is called *materialism*. If much of psychology has indeed excluded themes that are central to religion, then this may have less to do with an anti-theistic bias towards naturalism than with a more or less tacit commitment to the theologically informed idea of materialism.

The argument sketched previously about the theological basis of the Newtonian worldview with its nature / supernature distinction mirrors some of the points that S&R make about the religious inspirations of many of the New Psychologists, such as James McCosh and Noah Porter. My point is that these issues, historically speaking, have deeper roots than is often thought. For example, in discussing McCosh and Hall, S&R make the claim that the origins of the modern bias against what they call theism "go back to the very start of the discipline", a start that they identify with the 19th Century development of the New Psychology in the US. Elsewhere I have suggested that a key source of modern psychology can be found earlier, in the new compact between science, politics and law that saw the articulation of the modern conception of natural rights that would enter (in the form of the great declarations of rights) into the

constitutions of the modern nation-state (cf. Stenner, 2004). The modern polity comes to legitimate itself not on the basis of a rational understanding of divine order, but on the basis of a scientific account of the essential nature of human nature prior to any imposed sociality. This scientific scrutiny of human nature thus, importantly, takes place alongside a juridico-political project of founding and legitimating a social order: *potentia* (in the sense of natural powers), and *potestas* (in the sense of juridical power) are brought together in a new guarantee of legitimate political order. Even if an institutionalized discipline bearing the name 'psychology' had not yet emerged, the invention of natural rights marked a point at which *political* questions were met with *psychological* answers.

Thomas Hobbes – whom Leo Strauss (1971, p. 182) describes as “the founder of liberalism” - was key to such developments. Hobbes articulated a novel account of natural right on the basis of materialistic ideas from natural philosophy according to which the human being is construed as a physical mechanism undergoing bodily motion guided by a will newly defined as “the last appetite in deliberating” (cf. Stenner, 2004, p.24). Hobbes’ rethinking of natural right is thus based upon a materialistic ‘psychological’ discourse in which the fundamental right of self-preservation is grounded in what is allegedly the most powerfully motivating passion: the fear of violent death. Once this source is adequately recognized, the story goes, there will be a solid natural basis for a lasting social order based on reasoned self-interest. Although publically, Hobbes tended to present himself as a theist (in the narrow sense), there is much in his work that sets in motion a strong atheistic trajectory. For example, one factor

obscuring the 'foundational' recognition that the fear of violent death is the strongest passion is the fact that for many religious people, fear of God or hell fire can trump this fear. As Strauss discusses, the success of Hobbes' scheme depends upon the breaking of such enchantment through the cultivation of popular enlightenment by way of the widespread diffusion of true scientific knowledge. In this sense, the security of the liberal social order (concerning *potestas*) depends directly upon the widespread circulation and acceptance of a materialistic discourse of nature (concerning *potentia*). It is the combination of these two powers (*potestas* and *potentia*) that forms the matrix from which modern psychology was born. I have suggested (e.g. Stenner, 2004, p.20) that challenges to Hobbes' account of the relation between a scientifically defined human nature and politics, at first philosophical (e.g. the responses of Locke and Rousseau), inevitably became an epistemological discourse "in which issues of methodology assumed increasing importance and according to which scientific disciplines would come to individuate".

To sum up, I urge that it would be premature to take for granted a distinction between the natural and the supernatural that maps onto a split between naturalism and theism. Instead, this bifurcation should itself be viewed critically as the product of a modern alliance between the scientific and the juridico-political that, in my view, underlies the emergence of modern psychology. It leaves us with a scientific cosmology committed to an outmoded materialism and with a religious cosmology committed to supernaturalism. As a result, the authoritative discussion of human nature has been dominated by a limited form of *belief* (i.e. materialism) that passionately, and in the name of

enlightenment, draws attention to the crasser and more predictable aspects of human experience and expression (Stenner, 2003). As Darwin reminded himself in his notebooks with respect to the publication of *The Origin*: “To avoid stating how far I believe in materialism, say only that emotions, instincts, degrees of talent... are hereditary... because brain of child resembles parent stock” (Darwin notebooks, Gruber, 1974, p. 80).

The experiences at the core of the great religions (those recounted in the life of Christ, or Mohammed, or the Buddha, for example), in contrast, are *rare* experiences of *exceptional* people that concern important issues of *value* and the cultivation of virtuous character. Such *supernormal* experiences are by definition more diffuse, general, abstract and difficult to pin down than are the relatively normal experiences of disciplined observation that typify scientific knowledge. A world-loyalty, however, demands that we attend to *all* experiences and not just those which we can predict, control and be reasonably certain about. The vague and dark places exist in nature, and they are real and important. Pure enlightenment spells death: life on earth would be impossible without the mixed chiaroscuro of light and dark made possible by our atmosphere and by our planetary rotation (Serres, 1997, p. 41). The value of Slife and Reber’s paper, to conclude, is akin to the light on the miner’s helmet: it lures us back into the cave of presupposed cosmology. Perhaps the provincialism of scientific naturalism is due to a tendency to linger only in regions of clarity or, as the Sufi inspired proverb has it, to look for the lost key only in the pool of clarity created by the street lamp. Just as the likelihood is that the key lies in the shadowy bushes, so

too, perhaps, the metaphysical cave contains treasures that might transform the light of the exterior.

“The present type of order in the world has arisen from an unimaginable past, and it will find its grave in an unimaginable future.” (Whitehead, 1926\1996, p. 160).

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