1986

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Recommended Citation

Foster, James D. and Moran, Glenn T., "Piaget and Parables Assimilated: A Response to Cole" (1986). *Faculty Publications - Grad School of Clinical Psychology*. Paper 104.

http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/gscp_fac/104

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Piaget and Parables Assimilated: A Response to Cole

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Dick T. Cole's critique of our integration of Piagetian learning theory and Christ's parabolic method focuses on two primary concerns. The first concern is that the Bible should not be used as data, and the second that current psychological concepts cannot be meaningfully related to biblical times. In response to these concerns it is argued that the parables are recorded lessons and not theological concepts as Cole suggests, that the underlying structure of biblical lessons is relevant to modern learning theory, and that cultural specificity does not hinder the learning process but rather is an essential part of it.

For the purposes of response, Dick T. Cole's article can be seen as having two major sections. The first section relates directly to our comparison of a Piagetian based teaching technique and one of the techniques used by Jesus, that of parables. The last section of Cole's article attempts to establish criteria for a valid learning theory and show how Piaget's theory fails to meet these criteria.

The second section, while interesting, nevertheless seems tangential to the theme of our paper. For example, Cole comments on our article by saying "Validating a psychological theory by comparing it to biblical themes may have its place in the pursuit of certainty, but by itself is insufficient. . . . What is needed is a critical analysis of psychological theories" (p. 51). We agree, and certainly an integration article such as ours would be insufficient to allow a theory to stand without additional experimental support and the usual critical analysis. We never intended our article to be the "definitive" statement on Piaget's theory and by no means suggested

critical analysis should be suspended because of certain scriptural parallels. Interested readers will find the experimental literature rich with research both critiquing and supporting Piaget's theories (e.g. Bower, 1971; Gratch, 1982). In this second half of the article Cole joins the critics of Piaget. Any article mentioning Piaget would have served Cole's purpose at this point.

Our response, therefore, will focus on the relevant first half of Cole's article. In this section of his response, Cole offers two main criticisms of our article: first, that we were wrong to use the Bible as data and second, that current psychological concepts cannot be meaningfully related to biblical times. We will respond to these two major criticisms and some other minor ones. Our article will conclude with comments on the unexpected implications of our article and some suggestions for where we should go from here.

Theological Concept or Archival Data?

One fundamental difference between Cole's conception of our article and ours can be seen in his opening paragraph and again

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later. In both cases he objects to our attempts to find a convergence between "psychological theory and a theological concept" (p. 49). Somehow, parables, their structure, and how they were used by Jesus, does not seem to us to be a "theological concept." We did not compare a psychological theory to a theological concept, rather we compared the basic components of a teaching technique based on Piagetian theory with the components of the teaching technique used by Jesus and suggested that the technique used by Jesus implied a learning theory similar in structure to that of Piaget. Cole's repeated reference to the parabolic method as a theological concept suggests a misunderstanding of our article and an approach to Scripture fundamentally different from ours.

Cole's view of Scripture and how it should be used is elaborated later in his article. Cole reduces the Bible to "a light" and "a way of seeing" (p. 50). Certainly it is, but in our view it is more. Cole also states that "the Bible is not a scientific (or psychological) textbook" (p. 50). We have used this cliché ourselves and it is particularly relevant for some disciplines. But surely the persistence of the integration question in psychology would indicate that the Bible has more to say about psychology than disciplines such as physics or biology. While the Bible is not a textbook in the strict sense it certainly does provide guidelines for mental health. For example, *Philippians* is a collection of good psychological rules designed to develop a positive set of attitudes and similarly, *Proverbs* provides rules for successful living. Indeed, the Bible gives us guidelines for self-acceptance, building positive relationships with others, and numerous other psychological helps.

We are sympathetic with Cole's concern over the use and abuse of Scripture, but must disagree when Cole suggests that we misused Scripture by treating it as data. Scripture is data in many instances. We believe that Bube (1971) was essentially correct when he identified the Bible as the primary data base for theologians and the person as the primary data base for psychologists. In this particular case, however, the Bible can serve as a data

base for psychologists. The parables of Jesus are available in the Bible, many are interpreted and the effects on people are often recorded. Cole's failure to see parables as recorded lessons instead of theological concepts creates confusion. When parables are understood as recorded lessons they can be seen as data and our study as archival research. We were not discussing theological concepts but rather specific lessons. For our purposes the Bible was treated as archival data.

Is the Bible Culture Bound?

Cole argues that a "particularly modern idea (Piaget's theories)" cannot converge with a "particularly ancient event (Jesus' teaching style)" (p. 49). Further he believes that human beings have experienced major changes in the "psyche" since New Testament times. While he leaves "psyche" undefined, he does distinguish it from "human nature" which has a "certain constancy." In the study of history we are often struck by the similarities between ancient and modern people rather than their differences. Many of the questions characterizing philosophy, physiology and psychology have persisted across the centuries. Questions about human nature, our place in the universe, how memory functions, how people learn, and so forth, have repeatedly been asked. Themes in literature, and the performing arts have also changed little over the centuries and revolve around conflict between good and evil, the corrupting influence of power, love and jealousy, and so forth. Which of these questions or themes Cole would consider a result of "psyche" and which could be categorized as reflecting human nature is unclear since his terms are undefined.

Psyche is variously defined in psychology dictionaries as mind, the principle of life, self and soul (Wolman, 1973; Chaplin, 1968). If we assume that Cole is referring to mind with the term "psyche" then a change in "mind"

might suggest a fundamental change in the way people learn. To support his contention that the psyche has changed through history he cites Van Den Berg's 1961 book, *The Changing Nature of Man*. Van Den Berg's text reads as a history of ideas. For example Van Den Berg traces the emergence of concepts such as the continuity of present with the past and the development of new conceptions of the life span (i.e. the addition of adolescence). Certainly Van Den Berg is correct when he points out that ideas have evolved, but there is nothing in this that precludes acquiring these new ideas through the processes outlined in our article. In fact, Van Den Berg seems to focus on what people thought about at different points in history and not on how these thoughts were acquired, which is our focus. The idea of a changing "psyche" is intriguing but is not well developed by Cole and left us unconvinced. We would encourage Cole to expand this idea into an article and better support his contention.

Obviously, Cole's assertion that the lessons taught by Jesus are more effective when understood in cultural context is true with some parables. Especially since the parables contain events and places that are not as common today, such as shepherds tending sheep (Matthew 18:12-14). The content, however, is functionally independent of the structure. We pointed out in our article that the structure of parables remained constant while the content changed and that a structure valid then, would be equally valid today. While the illustrations Jesus used might be culturally based, his methodology is not. Similarly, Van Den Berg's historically changing content would not necessarily negate our arguments concerning the structure of the learning process since infinite variations can be used within the structure we outlined.

By focusing on the content of the parables, Cole correctly pointed out that they tend to be best understood in the proper cultural milieu. Such cultural specificity is essential to the learning process we described. Good lessons (i.e. parables) begin by activating the schemes of the listener and activation is achieved by beginning with the familiar. A good lesson by

our definition would necessarily be situation specific or culture bound because the underlying structure dictates it. Certainly we could end up with sprained ankles if we failed to consider cultural differences and tried to jump with scriptural lessons directly from the era of Jesus to today. Construction of modern lessons, however, using a conception of learning similar to that of Jesus should result in no injuries.

Additional Concerns

Cole also questions the value of our article on the basis that it adds nothing to our confidence in psychological theory. He states "convergences between secular theories and theological concepts are made by persons, in a specific context, for a particular reason Making the convergence has not solved the problem that deciding what converges and what does not converge is always a subjective choice" (p. 49). Cole places limits on integration that we believe are too restrictive. Yes, there are subjective choices that are made in the process of developing theory and integration, but a true convergence would not be person and situation specific. The approach to "truth" is marked by increased generalizability, and improved integration should have the same result. While we believe that "truth" is still out of the grasp of learning theorists we do not agree with Cole that finding a convergence as we did in our article adds nothing to our confidence in psychological theory. The Bible makes it clear that we are to examine what we hear with the Scriptures as the Bereans did with Paul (Acts 17:11). If we see support in Scripture for any "truth" should that not give us more confidence? Scriptural parallels add to the existing experimental evidence and broadens the base of support for the theory. A wider base of support should result in increased confidence.

In a few instances we found ourselves confused by Cole's comments and at times he seemed to be critiquing us by agreeing with us.

For example, he comments on our article by saying "it misses the point that psychological theories attempt to capture the here-and-now, that is, living, everyday experience. The living world is our proving ground for psychological theory" (p. 50). Does this necessarily preclude taking a "here and now technique," developed from theory, based on "living, everyday experience," and attempting to validate it with archival data? As another example, he argues that the Bible should act only as a light; "Through the Bible, the Holy Spirit points the Christian psychologist in the direction of God's creation" (p. 50). It was the reading of Scripture that gave us our insights regarding this particular teaching style of Jesus. Yet, Cole chides us for following through with his suggested process. Are we to limit the Holy Spirit and keep it from pointing us to Scripture? By relating these Scriptures to learning theory are we not attempting to better understand God's creation in a more meaningful way?

Finally, Cole implies that we are trying to validate the Bible with psychology. Cole objects to this and states, "The Bible becomes the best interpreter of Jesus' teaching style, not Piaget" (p. 50). We anticipated objections from this perspective and attempted to write the article in a way that would prevent the reader from reaching this erroneous conclusion. Since our study of parables was initially independent of our study of learning theory, the Bible *was* the source for interpreting a teaching style of Jesus. It was only after the parallels became apparent that we considered integration. We believe that most readers of our article would come away feeling that Piaget's learning theory is given more credibility because of what Scriptures tell us of Jesus and not the other way around. At the same time we do not object if discoveries in any field, including psychology, help us better understand Scripture.

Unexpected Implications

One purpose of our article was to introduce an application of Piagetian theory that some might not be aware of and at the same time show what we believe to be parallels

between the underlying structure of Christ's parables and the method discussed. What we did not fully comprehend, until after we read Cole's response, was that our article could be read as a validation of one learning theorist at the expense of others. If indeed Piaget's learning theory was to be labeled "truth" on the basis of scriptural parallels then other theorists and systems could be labeled "wrong," at least among Christians. To Christian learning theorists who are Piagetian critics, such as Cole, and adherents to competing systems this would surely be a dissonance-producing situation.

To reduce the potential dissonance in our colleagues we would like to caution against overgeneralization. We argue that this one particular teaching style is consistent with both Piaget's theory and the methodology of Jesus, and therefore, the implied learning theory should be looked at carefully by teachers. Further, we believe that this teaching method is particularly effective. At the same time we recognize that learning is complex and multifaceted and that psychology is not yet ready to declare one learning theory or one teaching technique as the definitive approach for all learning types and in all learning situations. We should also remember that Christ did not limit himself to the use of parables. Two-thirds of Christ's teaching was through other methods (Stein, 1981).

We would like to further suggest that it might be fruitful for Cole, or others who do not object to examining Scripture for this purpose, to examine the parabolic method to discover commonalities with other learning theories. Can other learning theories be better understood from understanding the pedagogy of Christ and vice versa? Such an analysis might prove useful in bridging the gap between competing theories of learning.

Conclusion

While it is common for responses such as this to state that the critic "missed the point," it is more consistent with our article to deal with Dick T. Cole's response from a Piagetian perspective. Cole has not "missed the point,"

rather he has assimilated our article into his existing schemes and as those who have read our article or who are familiar with Piagetian theory know, "inherent in assimilation is modification; new information is modified by the listener to fit into existing schemes" (Foster & Moran, 1985, p. 98). As we have shown, Cole's assimilation results in a response to an article that seems slightly, but significantly, different from the one we wrote. For example, his perception leads to a critique of an article that integrates a "theological concept" and "psychological theory," while in actuality we wrote an article that compares two teaching techniques and the underlying theoretical structure. In his article Cole argues that the parables of Jesus are culture bound and irrelevant to our modern psychology. But, we were suggesting that it is the "parabolic method" that is relevant to modern pedagogy and that the technique is not hindered by cultural differences but rather would produce such cultural specificity. Where Cole focused on content, we focused on structure. These differences, and others, need to be considered by the readers when evaluating both articles.

Finally we want to recognize that assimilation is not limited to critics and we accept the possibility that our response is to our assimilated version of Cole's article and that Cole may feel that we too "missed the point." We are also hopeful, however, that somewhere there are readers who accommodated in response to our article and are now seeing Piaget in a new light, parables in a new way, and perhaps are teaching more effectively.

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