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# Theism and Psychological Science: A Call for Rapprochement

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THEISM AND PSYCHOLOGICAL SCIENCE:  
A CALL FOR RAPPROCHEMENT

*Michael J. Vogel, Tyler A. Gerdin, and Mark R. McMinn\**

ABSTRACT

The authors offer two arguments for the inclusion of theism in natural science. First, an argument against excluding theism is offered. Though early roots of science promoted a view that it is a way to accumulate knowledge that is untainted by presuppositions and traditions, postmodern critiques call this into question. Scientists have sometimes rejected religion as a context-dependent, tradition-based way of knowing, yet science itself is also context-dependent and tradition-based. Second, an argument for including theism in psychological is offered. Theistic beliefs are relevant insofar as they are part of human experience for many, they represent a form of human diversity, and they have been associated with some positive health outcomes.

*Keywords:* psychological science, theism, philosophy of science, ethics

To the psychologist the religious propensities of [individuals] must be at least as interesting as any other of the facts pertaining to [their] mental constitution. It would seem, therefore, as a psychologist, the natural thing for me would be to invite you to a descriptive survey of those religious propensities.

—William James (1902/1961, p. 4)

James, the founding figure of American psychological science, was committed to the study of religion (Fancher, 2000). For him, the scientific exploration of theism was as interesting as it was necessary for understanding the human experience. There was no desire to separate science and religion. However, this position began to shift during the 20th century as particular philosophical assumptions took root in psychological science (Miller & Thoresen, 2003). It now seems common to notice shelves full of

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bestselling books attempting to discredit theistic religion and demanding its exclusion from science (e.g., Dawkins, 1996, 2006; Dennett, 1996, 2006; Stenger, 2007). The once strong relationship between theism and psychological science is at present on the brink of collapse, and much is at stake.

In what follows, we suggest that the usual grounds for excluding theism are insufficient and begin by acknowledging some of the philosophical assumptions at the core of this debate.

#### THE ARGUMENT AGAINST EXCLUDING THEISM

The earliest justifications for science were predicated on belief in a divine being (Stark, 2003). It seemed that a divine being had created an ordered, intelligible world for humanity to freely explore, and the methods that would become central to science made this exploration possible. That a theistic worldview created the initial rationale for the scientific endeavor renders the present charge to defend the possibility of theism in science quite an intriguing paradox.

Although common objections to the inclusion of theism in psychological science are complex, they often pertain to incompatible ways of knowing. Owing to the fact that science seems accountable to highly rigorous, context-independent standards for knowledge, it has been given prerogative over the extra-scientific conclusions of theistic traditions. Context-independent refers to knowing that is reliable and not limited to particular reference points or audiences. We prefer this term to *objective* knowing. Context-dependent, on the other hand, refers to knowing that is reliable but limited to particular reference points or audiences. We prefer this term to *subjective* knowing. Extra-scientific refers to claims that are not known through scientific methods; they are situated outside of the province of science.

It seems that many psychological scientists reject the extra-scientific claims of theists because they are based on context-dependent and tradition-based ways of knowing. We contend that this view pervades many arguments for excluding theism from psychological science, and it has important historical and philosophical contexts that warrant some consideration. In the sections to follow, we provide a selected history for the philosophy of modern science, some postmodern appraisals of modern science, and the conclusion that there are insufficient grounds for excluding theism from psychological science based on the common objections to its inclusion.

*Early Roots of Science*

Though many individuals contributed to the origins of contemporary science, we focus here on two: René Descartes and Isaac Newton. Descartes left a most indelible mark on the annals of scientific and philosophical inquiry with his leap from radical skepticism to absolute certainty (see Toumlin, 1992). His ideas ushered in an era of scientific and philosophical progress that forever changed the pursuit for knowledge (cf. Buckley, 1987). Newton's extraordinary ideas about physics and the nature of reality revolutionized the scientific endeavor. The mysteries of the whole universe, it seemed, were now subject to the certainties of mathematics (Newbigin, 1995).

For the field of psychological science, the Cartesian legacy informs a number of significant philosophical assumptions regarding the standards of claims to knowing, whereas the Newtonian legacy influences several philosophical assumptions primarily about the nature of reality. These have helped to form the usual grounds for excluding theism from psychological science; they define what science is and what it is not. Although a comprehensive review of their impact (or that of other influential figures) is beyond the scope of this article, we briefly discuss the early roots of four such assumptions.

*The Cartesian legacy.* Descartes (e.g., 1637/2007) influenced psychological science in at least two fundamental ways. The first is evident in the broad scientific ambition to discover context-independent knowledge (cf. Newbigin, 1995). This is an extension of the Cartesian summons to reject the context-dependent ways of knowing embedded within all traditions (Cottingham, 1988; Matson, 2000). Since at least the 17th century, context-independent knowledge has been separated from and preferred over context-dependent ways of knowing (Newbigin, 1995; Van Belle, 2005). And, because modern science appears to be so well sanitized of context-dependent knowledge, many seem to render it more true or legitimate than other ways of knowing (Newbigin, 1995). Therefore, it is considered authoritative and is privileged over the extra-scientific conclusions of many traditions (this position is typically called *scientism*). Science has become venerated as a result of the Cartesian program, whereas theism has been categorically dismissed for its context-dependent, tradition-based ways of knowing.

A second fundamental way that Descartes influenced psychological science is apparent in its justifications for what counts as knowledge (Murphy, 1997). These justifications stem from his presumption that

structures of knowledge should be built in a gradual, floor-by-floor manner on established foundations (Cottingham, 1988; Matson, 2000). The Cartesian program also tends to distrust any claims that do not follow a linear, bottom-up approach to knowing; alternative approaches are considered less valid (Murphy, 1997). Psychological scientists generally embrace this theory of knowledge (called *epistemological foundationalism*). In doing so, they justify their research activities as extensions or clarifications of those things already known through the methods of science, and they assume that their scientific conclusions will justify future research activities. However, many theistic traditions tend to make claims that are not knowable in this way, which inclines some psychological scientists to discredit them completely. Descartes' epistemological foundationalism has forever shaped scientific knowing and served as an impetus for excluding the extra-scientific approaches to knowing used by many theistic traditions.

*And all was light.* Newton (e.g., 1687/1999), with his remarkable accomplishments in physics, also shaped the field of psychological science in at least two important ways (Newbigin, 1995). First, he provided a mathematical account of complex phenomena in the natural world using more basic units of matter (Feingold, 2004; Murphy, 1997). His calculations of mass and force explained "everything from the movement of the stars to the fall of an apple" and seemed to reveal a model of reality independent of faith commitments (Newbigin, 1995, p. 29). In other words, the Newtonian program not only categorized the world into more basic elements (a position on reality called *atomism*), it also made sense of more complex phenomena using only those basic elements (*reductionism*: Murphy, 1997; Van Belle, 2005). It did so without a theistic explanation of reality; the universe seemed to make sense independent of a divine being (Newbigin, 1995). The impact of this shift cannot be underestimated for psychological science. It has resulted in the rejection of theistic truth claims that are not reductionist; explanations of reality now must be purged of a divine being (Van Belle, 2005).

The apparent success of Newton's atomist-reductionist model has resulted in a second, though related, influence over psychological science. It follows from his presumption that all phenomena can and should be explained by reference to physical matter, motion, and natural laws (Van Belle, 2005). The Newtonian program ascribes to a model of reality that can be manipulated to produce any desired effect, like a grand machine, and which science seems to promise the means to control (Murphy, 1997; Van Belle, 2005). This position on reality is called *mechanical materialism*. For the field of psychological science, this serves as a primary working

premise in the pursuit of knowledge (Murphy, 1997), making claims about causation in the material world privileged over alternative explanations of reality. Since theists tend to hold extra-scientific explanations of reality, which are unknowable through the methods of science, they are rejected under the Newtonian program. Many psychological scientists refuse to accept any theistic claims about reality that are not knowable through the methods of science.

### *Appraisals of Modern Science*

It seems the Cartesian program has succeeded in convincing many psychological scientists that they can know in context-independent, tradition-free ways. However, many postmodern philosophers (e.g., Foucault, 1972; Kuhn, 1996; Lakatos, 1981) have argued that science is itself a context-dependent paradigm—a tradition. For instance, Polanyi (1974) suggested that becoming a scientist involves apprenticeship to a tradition of knowledge to acquire the necessary skills and worldviews to carry out future scientific endeavors (see also Newbiggin, 1995). This is, in no small way, a significant objective of graduate training as a psychological scientist. Students learn to *indwell* the scientific tradition and rely on particular methodologies and landmark studies to continue the acquisition of knowledge (Polanyi, 1974). It seems that psychological science is a tradition and has context-dependent ways of knowing. This is not necessarily a bad thing, but it does deserve some consideration insofar as it serves as a major premise for the exclusion of theistic traditions from psychological science.

Not only is science a tradition, it is many traditions. The *demarcation problem* in the philosophy of science (e.g., Feyerabend, 2010; Lakatos, 1981) has highlighted that there do not seem to be very clear distinctions between ways of knowing that are scientific, pseudo-scientific, and non-scientific. Although they share some basic assumptions (e.g., falsifiability, reproducibility), the various disciplines of science employ vastly different methods to know about reality. Perhaps the methodological differences within the natural sciences are as great as those between the natural and social sciences. Further, the gap between astronomy and biology is at least as wide as that between psychological science and theism. Science is not a monolithic unit of an accepted method, but rather it is a collection of various scientific traditions (Midgley, 2004, 2011). Among other things, post-modernity has concluded that Descartes' search for a single foundation of context-independent, tradition-free knowledge has been unsuccessful.

Regarding Newton's atomist-reductionist model of reality, postmodernists would have us consider that the assumptions of science are "not based on particular scientific evidence" and are themselves extra-scientific in essence (Midgley, 2011, p. xiv). In other words, atomism, reductionism, mechanical materialism, epistemological foundationalism, and scientism are each philosophical conclusions; they cannot be known through the methods of science (Midgley, 2004, 2011). All of science, including psychological science, is rife with extra-scientific claims about reality.

### *Insufficient Grounds for Exclusion*

Theism relies on tradition-based, context-dependent ways of knowing and makes extra-scientific conclusions about reality. But so does psychological science. This is not an attempt to discredit scientific knowing; rather, it is an attempt to defend psychological science from a dangerous misconception. Psychological scientists are able to do good work because of their philosophical assumptions which are unavoidably context-dependent, tradition-based, and extra-scientific (cf. Hayes, Strosahl, & Wilson, 1999). Furthermore, choosing to reject claims that are not tradition-free, context-independent, and scientific would both exclude theism from psychological science and fundamentally undermine the scientific endeavor. It would cut off the nose to spite the face. Although psychological science and theism utilize different methods to know about reality, it does not necessarily follow that they are completely incompatible or irreconcilable. It also does not follow that theism should be excluded from psychological science because it relies on tradition-based, context-dependent ways of knowing and makes extra-scientific conclusions about reality. That conclusion is a bias of scientism, and it ignores many thoughtful appraisals of the modern scientific endeavor. Taken together, these common objections yield insufficient grounds for the exclusion of theism from psychological science.

### THE ARGUMENT FOR INCLUDING THEISM

A divine being may or may not exist. Such a determination is beyond the realm of science; it is extra-scientific. Regardless, theism ought to be considered in behavioral science for various reasons. We suggest three: relevance, ethics, and utility, though more could certainly be offered.

*Relevance*

Social scientists study human experience which has been profoundly shaped by religious values and beliefs throughout history. If psychological science and the clinical methods that emerge from psychological science are to remain relevant to the questions and struggles of everyday living, then religious faith must be considered. Though religion has become less important to United States residents over the past 15 years, the decline is not as remarkable as the persistently high rates of faith. In 2010, 80% still reported religion to be very important or fairly important to them, down 7% from 1992. Almost two-thirds (61%) belonged to a church or synagogue and 39% had attended services in the past seven days (Gallup, 2011).

Psychologists and those studying psychology tend to be less religious than the general population, which may give them a skewed view of the religiousness of others. Table 1 shows the importance of religion to various groups, with data coming from various studies that the authors have been involved with in recent years. Among a large group of university students ( $n = 1800$ ), 76.1% reported their religion is very or fairly important to them, a number quite consistent with the Gallup poll results just described. In contrast, only 20.7% of American Psychological Association (APA) leaders (divisional presidents and representatives on APA Council) described their religion to be very or fairly important. Rates among other psychology groups vary, but all are substantially lower than the general public: 35.5% of doctoral students, 40.7% psychology interns, 52.5% of doctoral faculty, 23.1% of doctoral program Directors of Clinical Training (DCT), and 29.0% of internship DCTs reported religion to be very or fairly important to them (Vogel, 2011).

While these numbers reflect disparity between psychologists and the general public, it is important to note that psychologists, and those in training, are not utterly non-religious. For example, one-third of doctoral students in psychology and over half of their faculty reported religion to be personally important. Over 15 years ago Shafrankse (1996) concluded, "it appears that psychologists may be more similar than dissimilar to the general population in their religious views and faith commitments" (p. 160). The same holds true today, suggesting that theistic values are important to consider insofar as they are relevant to how many psychologists and psychologists-in-training understand life and even more pertinent to those outside the field of psychology.

Table 1. *Importance of Religion among Various Groups*

Group	<i>N</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Std Dev</i>
Undergraduate students	1800	4.0	1.1
Doctoral psychology students	110	2.7	1.4
Predoctoral psychology interns	59	3.0	1.3
Doctoral faculty	40	3.3	1.4
Doctoral DCTs	26	2.7	1.3
Internship DCTs	38	2.8	1.1
APA leaders	63	2.3	1.2

*Notes:* All participants answered the question, "How important is your religion to you?" on a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1, "Not at all important, I have no religion" to 5, "Very important, it is the center of my life." Data were collected as parts of different studies. The undergraduate student data came from Louwerse, McMinn, McMinn, & Aten (2008). Data regarding APA leaders came from McMinn, Hathaway, Woods, and Snow (2009). All other data are from Vogel (2011). DCT = Director of Clinical Training. The overall difference between groups is statistically significant,  $F(6, 2129)=60.44, p < .001$ . Post hoc comparisons using Scheffe tests reveal differences ( $p < .05$ ) between undergraduate students and all other groups and also between APA leaders and doctoral faculty.

### *Ethics*

The inclusion of theism in psychological science is not only a matter of relevance but also a matter of ethics. Psychologists in the APA are supported (if not mandated) by the *Ethics Code* (APA, 2002) to increase scientific knowledge related to the beliefs, experiences, and values of theistic individuals. This is not a new development, as they have been encouraged to do so for almost two decades (see APA, 1992). Including theistic religion in psychological science satisfies an established ethic to demonstrate respect for worldview considerations that are important to most Americans.

There are also reasons to believe the ethical impetus for considering theistic religion within psychological science is growing. As the sociopolitical milieu of the US continues to change, the value of multicultural diversity becomes ever more important (APA, 2003). This is as much the case for theistic religion as it is for any other dimension of diversity, such as ethnicity, sexual orientation, or gender. The APA has responded at an organizational level to the ethic for multicultural sensitivity by launching The Task Force on Enhancing Diversity in the APA, hiring a Chief Diversity Officer, and promoting psychological science to diverse populations (e.g., Anderson, 2008). Theistic religion, as a relevant dimension of multicultural diversity, is ethically important in the APA (e.g., APA, 2003, 2008) and warrants consideration in psychological science.

As our understanding of religion continues to develop, we become increasingly aware of the interconnections between theism and other dimensions of diversity (cf. Constantine, 1999). To be sure, considering theistic religion is helpful to better understand the racial and cultural identities of most, if not all, Americans (Cross, 1995; Harry, 1992; Leong, Wagner, & Tata, 1995; Smart & Smart, 1992; see Vogel, 2011).

### *Utility*

In years past, it was not uncommon to find psychologists trumpeting the deleterious effects of theistic belief (e.g., Ellis, 1962, 1971, 1980, 1983; Walls, 1980), but scientific results showing various health benefits associated with religious and spiritual beliefs demanded a change (e.g., Koenig, McCullough, & Larson, 2001). The flagship journal of the APA, *American Psychologist*, published a special section on health and religion less than a decade ago (Hill & Pargament, 2003; Miller & Thoresen, 2003; Powell, Shahabi, & Thoresen, 2003; Seeman, Dubin, & Seeman, 2003). Though not every religious variable is positively associated with increased health, the beneficial nature of various religious and spiritual activities and beliefs is quite striking.

McMinn, Snow, and Orton (in press) suggested several ways that religion, including theistic religion, may help promote health. First, religion provides a sense of meaning, which can be especially important during difficult seasons of life (Slattery & Park, 2011). The meaning derived through theistic beliefs may also promote altruistic and pro-social behaviors, which have been shown to help mental health (Post, 2005; Schwartz, Meisenhelder, Ma, & Reed, 2002). Second, theists often belong to faith communities that provide social support. Shared beliefs and rituals provide hope and healing during normal life stressors and transitions (see Pargament, 1997). Third, religious communities offer resources and help amidst times of struggle and trouble. Clergy often provide counsel and support for parishioners, and many clergy are open to collaborating with psychologists to help others in times of need (Edwards, Lim, McMinn, & Dominguez, 1999; McMinn, Aikins, & Lish, 2003).

Clinicians have also become increasingly open to considering religion and spirituality, both as a matter of human diversity and as a protective factor in mental and physical health (Aten & Leach, 2009; Aten, McMinn, & Worthington, 2011; Miller & Delaney, 2005; Pargament, 2007; Richards & Bergin, 2005; Sperry & Shafranske, 2005). Rather than trying to disabuse clients of their faulty religious beliefs, as some clinicians once promoted

(e.g., Walls, 1980), today's clinical psychologist is mandated both by ethics and research to be respectful of clients' theistic beliefs.

## CONCLUSION

More than a century has passed since James (1902/1961) first encouraged psychologists to explore the religious experience. Some (e.g., Allport, 1961; Koenig, McCullough, & Larson, 2001; Plante, 2009; Shafranske, 1996) have taken this task seriously, whereas others (e.g., Ellis, 1962, 1971, 1980, 1983; Walls, 1980) seem to have been reluctant to include theism in psychology. We believe the philosophical assumptions of modern science have been used to justify the usual arguments for excluding theistic religion from psychology. However, the appraisals of postmodernity (e.g., Feyerabend, 2010; Lakatos, 1981) have challenged many core assumptions of the scientific endeavor and called attention to its context-dependent, tradition-based ways of knowing. This does not invalidate psychological science, which has immensely benefited humanity, but rather defends it from the misconception that it is without assumptions that are shared within its particular community. Furthermore, we contend that the relevance, ethical support from the APA, and utility of theistic religion are among the many reasons to include it in psychological science. We hope the split between science and religion over the 20th century will be corrected by a rapprochement during the 21st century.

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