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OVERCOMING THE CHALLENGES: TOWARD A TRULY THEISTIC  
PSYCHOLOGY?

by

Brent S. Melling

A thesis submitted to the faculty of

Brigham Young University

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Science

Department of Psychology

Brigham Young University

August 2009

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BRIGHAM YOUNG UNIVERSITY

GRADUATE COMMITTEE APPROVAL

of a thesis submitted by

Brent Melling

This thesis has been read by each member of the following graduate committee and by majority vote has been found to be satisfactory.

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As chair of the candidate's graduate committee, I have read the thesis of Brent Melling in its final form and have found that (1) its format, citations, and bibliographical style are consistent and acceptable and fulfill university and department style requirements; (2) its illustrative materials including figures, tables, and charts are in place; and (3) the final manuscript is satisfactory to the graduate committee and is ready for submission to the university library.

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## ABSTRACT

### OVERCOMING THE CHALLENGES: TOWARD A TRULY THEISTIC PSYCHOLOGY?

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Several psychologists have attempted to articulate a theistic psychology or one consonant with their religious beliefs. Unfortunately, confusion over the concept of theism and a persistent naturalism in the discipline create substantial obstacles towards achieving a serious theistic psychology. It is suggested that these challenges can be overcome through examining alternative philosophies and methodologies for scientific psychology, exploring seminal articulations of God's activity, and providing a practical example of a theistic psychological research program.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This work takes as a theme that God is actively involved in all aspects of our lives (including the “psychological” aspects). In spending two years on this project, I have been constantly surprised by God and by how little I usually give Him credit for that involvement and help in my life. If “even the world itself could not contain the books that should be written” of all that God has done (John 21:25), surely this mere acknowledgements section is insufficient.

In addition to God, I must credit my family with instilling within me a love for learning, especially my angel mother, whom I never expected to follow into the teaching profession, but am grateful for her example in teaching professionally and in the home. Likewise, my sweet companion, Nicole, has been instrumental not only in the accomplishment of this thesis, but of all my life.

Finally, my mentor and exemplar, Brent Slife, deserves credit not only as one of the best of a wonderful cadre of teachers I’ve had the privilege to study under, but also as a wise advisor, inspired guide, and dear friend.

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## Chapter 1: Theism and Naturalism in Psychology

Many psychologists have expressed an interest in developing a theistic perspective for psychology (e.g. Collins, 1977; Jones, 1994; Richards & Bergin, 2005; Slife & Whoolery, 2006). In recent years, an increasing number of books, journals and professional organizations have been devoted to exploring this theme. William R. Miller (2005) enthusiastically challenges his readers to “Imagine... a theistic psychology” (Miller, 2005, p. 15). Richards and Bergin (2005) point to a “new zeitgeist” that has “helped to create a space for a theistic spiritual strategy in psychology and psychotherapy” (p. 69). Their 2003 casebook highlights more than a dozen psychologists who have detailed theistic approaches to psychotherapy.

Despite a common interest, the current literature on theistic psychology displays a wide array of perspectives on what theism is, from specifying certain values to offering a set of specific practices (Stevenson, 2007). Recent critiques of “theistic” conceptions for psychology have suggested that many of these attempts may be problematic for theists (Slife & Melling, 2006; Slife & Ellertson, 2004; Stevenson, 2007). Psychologists such as Slife (2005, 2007) and Richards (2005), as well as theologians such as Plantinga (1997), have pointed out that there is nothing *uniquely* theistic about all the aforementioned conceptions of theistic psychology. If the conceptual positions and values articulated in the current literature on theistic psychology could be held by any number of ideologies, even those that are *atheistic*, then a definition of theism that distinguishes it from non-theistic concepts is needed. For example, Richards (2005) and Slife (2006) note that theism necessarily entails the involvement of God as its defining feature, and, therefore, a

theistic theory or perspective for psychology would have to make explicit the current activity of God (see also Philipchalk, 1987; Slife & Woolery, 2006).<sup>1</sup>

As sensible and defensible as this definition of theism may be, the activity of God is not a typical psychological construct. Indeed, some would argue that this activity could not, in principle, be accounted for in psychological investigation because God is seen as non-empirical. As one critic argued, “God is incomprehensible [and thus] hardly a useful construct for scientific activity” (Helminiak, 2005, p.72, 2006). On the other hand, researchers such as Slife (2005) and Richards (2005) argue that, from a theist’s perspective, conceptualizing God’s activity in psychology is not only possible, but of critical importance to an accurate picture of the psychological world.

The purpose of this thesis is to explore whether a truly theistic psychology, such as that defined by Slife and Richards, is possible. This initial exploration entails answering two questions: First, how can the activity of God be conceptualized in a logically defensible way? Second, if such activity can be formulated, could it be successfully utilized by psychological researchers and practitioners?

In this thesis, I begin by addressing the definitional and conceptual issues involved in theism. I then argue that understanding theism, as articulated by Slife, Plantinga and Richards, cuts through some of the definitional confusion and marks a significant step in articulating a theistic psychology. However, much conceptual work remains. One issue to address is the possibility that attempts at theistic conceptualizations that avoid discussing God’s explicit and ongoing activity seem to be spawned by an

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<sup>1</sup> While the broad definition of theism would include polytheisms, monotheisms, and various other theistic conceptions, for the sake of clarity I will simply use the referent “God” to connote the aspects of deity referred to in these theistic traditions. Although the majority of the academic work reviewed here stems from the traditional Juedo-Christian-Islamic monotheism, the implications apply to theists generally.

attempt to cooperate with the implicit naturalism of the discipline. I next show how this pervasive naturalism counters efforts to develop a truly theistic perspective. To answer the questions raised by a uniquely theistic approach to psychological theory, I then review the main ways in which philosophers and theologians have conceptualized God's continuing activity in a meaningful way. Finally, I explore how psychologists might use these conceptualizations to do research and discuss their work theistically.

### Definitional Difficulties and Conceptual Confusions

In navigating the conceptual confusions that will be shown to suffuse the psychological literature that purports to be theistic, a well-articulated definition of God's involvement in psychology may be the best compass. In surveying the majority of writings attempting to explore theistic psychology, no definition is used consistently by psychologists. The myriad uses, however, seem to stem from a lack of attention to definitional and conceptual clarity rather than an intentional or a persuasive argument for an alternative definition. This lack of attention has led to a plethora of inconsistent uses, many of which may be incompatible with clearer understandings of theism. Diverse uses of the concept of theism have been applied to definitions of humanity, particular values psychologists should espouse, and specific therapeutic practices.

#### *Humanity*

Stanton Jones, a leader in the integration of psychology and theistic understanding, suggests that theists should focus on "an understanding of humanity as theists believe God made us" and not on "the activity of God" (Jones, 2006, p. 254). For Jones, viewing humans as made in the image of God is equated with viewing humans as

not “reducible to material existence... capable of meaningful agency... creative and actively meaning-making” (Jones, 2006, p. 254). As Slife and Melling (2006) note, “[this] position seems to be fairly widely held among conservative Christian psychologists” who believe that a theistic model is “more agentic than deterministic, more moral than amoral, and more holistic than reductive” (p. 281; see also Slife & Ellertson, 2004; VanderStoep, 2003).

C. Steven Evans (1984), another leader in the integration movement, suggests that a similar perspective on the self as created in the image of God is “the key to integration” (p. 175). In the seminal book *Judeo-Christian Perspectives on Psychology* editor William Miller follows up his challenge “dare we develop a theistic psychology?” with “what does it mean to be human?” suggesting that the book’s theistic perspectives will be confined to “views of the human person” (Miller, 2005, p. 16). As Slife and Melling (2006) argue, “the problem is that there is nothing uniquely... theistic about this model of human nature” (p. 281). Atheistic humanists, for example, regularly endorse an agentic view of humans (see *Humanistic Manifesto*, 1973). A distinctly theistic perspective must go beyond merely a unique view of human nature.

### *Values*

Some scientists emphasize the different, but not necessarily uniquely theistic, values associated with their theistic beliefs (e.g. Miller & Delaney, 2005; Wacome, 2003). Like the focus on human nature, the focus on values such as chastity or charity is problematic because there is nothing uniquely theistic about these values (Slife, 2006). A naturalistic or atheistic scientist could value and emphasize such virtues just as well as a theistic scientist.

For example, Robert C. Roberts (1992), in an article on psychotherapeutic virtues and theistic faith, emphasizes that the values described in Ellis's RET and Christianity are similar. While Roberts (1992) suggests that there are particular Christian versions of RET values, and cautions the wholesale use of RET, he maintains that mapping of virtues from secular to theistic approaches is a fruitful path to integration. In this, his focus on the "grammars of virtue" is similar to the position of Watson (2008) who suggests that theists primarily need a "translation" of the particular way in which they discuss a virtue, such as tolerance, to find that their positions are compatible with secular approaches. Again, the problem with focusing on values (whether shared or unique) is that it does not require a distinctly theistic worldview (see Slife & Melling, 2008). Many psychologists writing in a secular vein can and do promote chastity, charity, tolerance, and other typically theistic values (Humanistic Manifesto, 1973; Ellis, 1980).

### *Practice*

Another focus for theistic psychology has been on psychotherapy practice (see Richards & Bergin, 2004). Those who focus on practice generally advocate particular theistic strategies and interventions, such as meditation, scripture study, and prayer (Eck, 2002). However, while some commentators such as Eck (2002) emphasize that the "specific use of a spiritual discipline or practice should not be ripped from its spiritual heritage" (p. 317), those who advocate these interventions encourage their use by all sensitive and responsible therapists.

Austin Farrer, a theologian, cautioned against the idea that a theistic intervention, such as prayer, could be faithfully used without a theistic perspective. As he astutely observed, "if ever we pray to see whether prayer will work, it won't because it won't be

prayer anyhow” (Farrer, 1966, p. 108). He continues to explain that when we see theistic interventions as anything other than involving an active, present God (such as a treatment modality used by therapists with atheistic worldviews), then the intervention ceases to be theistic. It is something else entirely (Farrer, 1966). Because putative theistic and spiritual strategies in practice, values, and views of human nature have failed to provide psychology with a thoroughly theistic perspective, some have suggested that theism has only penetrated theistic psychology at a superficial level (Stevenson, 2007; Slife, 2005).

### *Theistic Penetration*

Research by Stevenson (2007) demonstrated just how lacking theistic penetration is, even in psychological research with ostensibly theistic labels. She found many examples of scholars and practitioners using theistic peripherals or auxiliary characteristics derived from theistic assumptions but not unique to them. These peripherals include those discussed above: perspectives on human nature, traditionally theistic values, and theistically associated interventions. Stevenson (2007) emphasizes that these perspectives, philosophies, and activities, “although closely related or connected to theism, function in a subsidiary capacity.... Even though these elements are linked to theism, they are not core elements of theism nor exclusively theistic” (p. 12). To be truly differentiated from a psychology that could be endorsed by an atheist, a thoroughly theistic psychology “must be built upon the foundation of an active God” (Stevenson, 2007, p. 13). Such a differentiated starting point requires a clear understanding of what theism is and is not and how it could interface with psychology.

In conclusion, although some psychologists exhibit exuberance when attempting a theistic version of psychology, such a project is rarely carried out with careful

definitional understandings. Differing attempts at theism range from the endorsing of a particular set of values to the advocating of specific “spiritual” strategies, but these understandings are neither widely received nor necessarily theistic. The lack of a solid and widely accepted definition has led to conceptual confusion and misunderstanding of what theism is. This confusion has resulted in many psychologists attempting a theistic psychology that contains nothing uniquely theistic.

## Theism

### *Defining a Thorough-going or “Serious” Theism*

The wide array of ways in which theistic psychology is discussed strongly suggests a lack of general agreement on what theism even means. The confusion seems to result from a general lack of attention to definitional issues, rather than from competing articulated definitions.

While explicit articulations are rare in the literature, a few scholars have tackled the issue directly. Slife (2006), Richards (2005), and Plantinga (1997) give a surprisingly unified and coherent definition which serves to avoid some of the conceptual confusions of other approaches. For these and other scholars, theism is synonymous with affirming the existence, continuing involvement, and activity of God (Plantinga, 1988; Phillipchalk, 1987). Plantinga (1997) maintains that according to “a serious theism... God is already and always intimately acting in nature which depends moment to moment on divine activity” (p. 350). A thoroughly theistic worldview, then, is one in which God is not limited to the transcendent realm exclusively; God is also considered immanent in world events, including psychological events (Slife & Melling, 2006; see discussion below).

### *Distinct from Naturalism*

The possibility of God's active involvement in psychological events defines theism in contrast to typical understandings of science. Naturalism is frequently cited as the source of the current conflict between science and religion, as well as the seeming lack of strong theistic voices in the psychological community (Richards & Bergin, 2005; Slife, Mitchell, & Whoolery, 2004; Griffin, 2000; Hunter, 2007).

Naturalism assumes that God is not active in psychology because all behavior "without exception results from the operation of natural forces" (Collins, 1977, p. 88). While naturalism has been defined in many ways (Griffin, 2000), it is generally understood to imply that independent natural laws govern the processes and events of the world (Slife & Whoolery, 2006). God is considered to be irrelevant to these natural processes and events because they happen autonomously and, therefore, natural processes can be fully explained without reference to God (Slife & Whoolery, 2006).

Strong or through-going theism is, by definition, incompatible with naturalism because the latter maintains that full explanation of a psychological phenomenon is possible without recourse to the positing of any *non*natural force, such as God, while a serious theism requires that any explanation of psychological events utilizes a conceptualization of God's activity. Despite their definitional incompatibilities, many social scientists have sought ways to integrate naturalism and theism. These attempts have been labeled deism, dualism, and supernaturalism and supposedly allow theistic scholars to do "science as usual" while maintaining their theistic allegiance (see Slife and Melling, 2006). As I will show, these integration attempts ultimately illustrate the incompatibility.

### *Deism*

One popular integrationist tactic has been to maintain that while God created the world (including the natural laws) the world now runs autonomously without God's interaction. Often labeled "deism," this approach recognizes God as the ultimate or first cause, the prime mover, but this philosophy is consonant with naturalism following creation. Because God's active involvement ceases with the end of creation, God matters for the deist "without threatening the naturalism of psychology" (Slife & Melling, 2006, p. 281). This approach attempts a theism in which God is active at the beginning (or before the beginning) of time and a naturalism that is dominant thereafter. The use of distinct temporal categories in which either theism or naturalism rule fails to integrate them because they are never active at the same time.

### *Dualism*

Others seeking to integrate theism and naturalism maintain that God is currently active in the world, but this activity is restricted to certain realms. This view typically maintains a dualism – that the universe has two separate ontological realities, one, such as a spiritual realm, in which God is active and involved, and another, such as the physical world, in which natural laws are sufficient to explain all events. For example, psychologist Donald Wacome (2003) suggests that God is involved in the social world, but not the natural world. However, if psychological science only studies things in the natural world, then any psychological approach that maintains that God is only active in a different world is not even potentially theistic. From such a perspective, while theism and naturalism might simultaneously co-occur, they operate in separate and distinct ontological realities.

### *Supernaturalism*

The third common approach to integrating theism and scientific naturalism can be labeled *supernaturalism*. Supernaturalism is often taken to be equivalent to theism and thus is usually understood in contrast to naturalism (Griffin, 2000; see also Lewis, 1947). However, as Plantinga (1997) pointedly argues, they are not equivalent because a serious theism holds that God is “already and always intimately acting in nature” (p. 350) whereas supernaturalism suggests an independent natural law which God then interrupts (see also, Griffin, 2000). Therefore, there is an important sense in which supernaturalism is a form of naturalism because it maintains that, generally, natural law prevails. The difference between supernaturalism and naturalism is that the former provides for occasional exceptions, sometimes called miracles, where the normal natural law is temporarily and locally suspended.<sup>2</sup>

Again, this is not a theism because God’s activity is limited to only special and rare occurrences. In this system, natural law rules everywhere in the universe, nearly all of the time. God is not immanent nor important to the ‘daily grind’ of life, God is only present as an exception to it. Because natural laws are (temporarily) suspended in a supernatural miracle, theism and naturalism are never active in the same event. In this sense supernaturalism provides no genuine integration between theism and naturalism.

### *Attempts at Integration Demonstrate Incompatibility*

Rather than integrate theism and naturalism, these alternatives demonstrate their incompatibility. Theism and naturalism are never truly combined, for each of these

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<sup>2</sup> Because both deism and supernaturalism bifurcate the temporal world into instances in which God is active and instances in which he is not, they can both be seen as dualisms. However, to illustrate the diversity of ways in which God’s activity is curtailed, dualism is defined in this paper as specifically referencing a non-temporal separation of domains.

strategies assumes that theism and naturalism are alternately the fundamental explanation of reality. Neither can be true at the same time and place, or for the same event. Each restricts God's activity to certain times and places. Deism holds that God only has meaningful activity at the beginning of creation and then natural law rules forever after.<sup>3</sup> Dualisms restrict God's activities to limited realms, such as the realm of the soul, and deny that God could act in the physical world where naturalism is sufficient for understanding. Supernaturalism maintains that naturalism is valid for all times and places except for certain occurrences that interrupt or violate natural law. Supernatural miracles are explicitly violations of naturalism not integrations with it. Thus, these integration attempts, rather than integrating theism and naturalism, only serve to highlight their incompatibility—both are never true in the same time, place, or event. All of these strategies fail to develop a thorough-going theism wherein God is active in the world without restriction to time, place or circumstance.

The incompatibility of naturalism and theism at this general level suggests that whenever psychology relies on naturalistic assumptions, theistic ideas are automatically problematic, if not excluded entirely. As we will see, naturalistic obstacles to theistic ideas appear in every aspect of psychological science and thus a theistic perspective for psychology has much to overcome.

### Naturalistic Obstacles to Theism in Psychology

While understanding theism in the strong terms outlined by Slife and others cuts through the conceptual confusion, the implementation of this definition for psychology

<sup>3</sup> Alternative deisms (such as Mark Vernon's (2009) reading of positive psychology that suggests that God is only active at the end of time) hold that the naturally originated world is progressing towards the emergence of deity.

faces important naturalistic obstacles. These obstacles stem from the inherent incompatibilities of theism and naturalism and are manifest as disciplinary philosophical attitudes that equate science with naturalism, the naturalistic foundations of most psychological methodologies, and the absence of meaningful theoretical constructs of God's activity. The implicit naturalism in these broad components of psychology (philosophy, research methods, and theory) form the foundation of the purely naturalistic psychological practices currently found in the discipline and thus the obstacles to a serious theistic psychology.

*Naturalism as equivalent to science*

Perhaps the greatest obstacle stemming from naturalistic assumptions is the perception, held by many psychologists, that naturalistic philosophy is the only viable philosophy for science. For example, Johnson (1997) identifies the major obstacle to theistic claims as “the pervasive naturalism and neo-positivism of modern psychology” (p. 11). Then, invoking Danzinger (1979), Johnson (1997) suggests that “Modern psychology and therapy... have been unusually successful in laying claim to being the only authoritative approach to studying human nature and treating personal problems in the 20th century” (p. 12).

The naturalistic philosophy of the discipline is often assumed to be the only possible foundation for a science of psychology – thus cutting off theistic perspectives from serious consideration (Griffin, 2000). Leahey (1991) put it potently: “science in the twentieth century is firmly committed to naturalism.... Naturalism is science's central dogma” (p. 379). The assumption of naturalism in science impacts the foundational ideas and philosophies of psychology upon which our theories are based (Slife, 2008). Because

these ideas are foundational, they suggest and limit the particular methodologies that psychology will accept (Slife & Melling, 2008). Further, these foundational ideas influence the professional climate in which psychologists carry out their work, leading to an implicit bias against theistic psychologists (Reber, 2006). Because of this implicit naturalism, psychologists explicitly put theistic concerns outside the domain of psychology (APA, 2008).

Faith traditions are seen to have “profoundly different methodological, epistemological, historical, theoretical, and philosophical bases [when compared to psychological science]” (APA, 2008, p. 432). These differences suggest that theistic traditions “have no legitimate place arbitrating behavioral or other sciences” (APA, 2008, p. 432). Thus, a major obstacle to the formation of a theistic psychology is the perception that psychology is in pivotal ways equivalent to naturalism. Although such an equation has been challenged (Hunter, 2007; Kuhn, 2000; Taylor, 2007) it is certainly the dominant perspective in psychology today (Johnson, 1997).

#### *Methodological Naturalism*

In addition to the obstacles to theism in psychology’s philosophies of science, naturalistic obstacles extend to the methodological level. Many theists recognize the contradictory philosophies of naturalism and theism (Richards & Bergin, 2004), but advocate for a purely *methodological naturalism* that supposedly is neutral to claims about God or God’s possible activity in the world (Griffin, 2000; Porpora, 2006). However, the methods employed by scientific naturalists were developed with certain implicit ideas about the world (Slife & Williams, 1995). These implicit ideas, such as

lawful naturalism, have implications for methodological practice that may prevent theistic understandings and explanations from being explored.

For example, naturalistic philosophies of method emphasize *replicability*. This stems from the assumption that the purpose of science is to discover the unalterable laws of the natural universe (Starbuck, 1899). However, this is not a neutral attitude towards God's activity as many aspects of God's involvement with the world cannot be repeated (Farrer, 1966). Examples abound: in Christianity the incarnation of Jesus Christ is fundamentally un-repeatable as is the calling of the last prophet, Mohammed, for Muslims. Doing truly theistic psychology may require a non-natural methodology that is not biased against important singular occurrences of God's activity.

*Sensory empiricism* is another example of a methodological bias towards naturalism that conflicts with theistic perspectives (Slife, 2008). This type of empiricism maintains that sensory experience gives the only accurate accounting of the world, implying that theistic inspiration, for instance, cannot be known (Slife, Richardson, & Reber, 2004). Many theists hold that the exclusive use of sensory empiricism in scientific research is a bias against their worldview because they hold that God's activity is rarely experienced solely through the five senses (Philipchalk, 1987). William James devoted a chapter of his *Varieties of Religious Experience* to "The Reality of the Unseen" (1902/2004) arguing that religious reality is often experienced without sensory empirical awareness.

Finally, naturalistic methods, as employed in scientific psychology, call for a strict *experimental control*. Among other requirements, this calls for the assignment of a variable independent of all other possible influences. From a theist's perspective, there

are problems with the very idea of an “independent” variable, as a God who is immanent in the world, as theism requires, could not be completely independent of any aspect of it. Therefore, traditional scientific methods, with the requirement of a researcher-controlled independent variable may be an impossibility from a theistic framework.

Understanding how to *do* science from the naturalistic perspective presents major obstacles to theistic perspectives. Psychology’s current methodological tools were not created to detect the activity of God and, subsequently, tell psychologists as much about God’s activity as a compass informs a meteorologist about air pressure. While this analogy suggests that there may be other tools (methods) more appropriate for theistic investigation, the dominance of naturalistic methods in the discipline presents a formidable obstacle to theistic psychologists interested in being consonant with their theistic assumption in their methodological practices.<sup>4</sup>

#### *No Theoretical Constructs of God’s Activity*

In addition to methodological obstacles, theistic researchers are also stymied in presenting their theistic ideas and theories due to a dearth of possible constructs for God’s activity in the discipline. Introductory psychology texts rarely mention God. Even in the sub-discipline of the psychology of religion and spirituality, God is increasingly being seen as irrelevant (see Helminiak, 2005, 2006). Some commentators explicitly argue against including such constructs: “Implicating God and relationship with God in psychology guarantees senseless and ultimately contentless discussion” (Helminiak, 2006). A theistic psychology will need to discuss God’s activity in psychology in a sensible and meaningful way. The lack of clear conceptualizations is surely a major

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<sup>4</sup> Griffin (2000) argues that this inability to examine or detect God’s activities with current methods has led many to assume that there is no such activity suggesting that methodological naturalism makes implicit ontological claims about deity.

factor in the perception that including God in psychology “guarantees... contentless discussion” (Helminiak, 2006).

### *Conclusion*

The current discipline is infused at every level with assumptions that challenge a serious theistic conceptualization. The methods stemming from naturalistic assumptions have built-in biases against theistic research. Additionally, there are no clearly articulated conceptualizations of God’s activity that could be applied and there is a push against creating such. Further, the assumption of naturalism as synonymous with science suggests that no integration of theism and psychological science is even possible and many attempts at integration have failed for this reason. Even if it is possible to conceive and articulate a theistic alternative to the naturalistic assumptions in the discipline, such a task challenges the philosophical bedrock of the discipline – suggesting a Kuhnian type revolution not easily understood or received.

### Overcoming the challenges

Given the deep conflicts between psychology’s naturalism and theism, is a truly theistic psychology possible? If theism is a possibility for the discipline, it would certainly require major shifts in the currently accepted philosophies of psychology. Therefore, in the remainder of my thesis I draw on philosophers of science and theologians and use theoretical analysis to investigate the possibility of a theistic psychology. This theoretical investigation will involve three major steps, each discussed in turn: 1) I use philosophers of science to consider alternatives to naturalism as the basis of science and thus alternative methodologies that might be compatible with theism; 2) I

explore possible theistic conceptualizations that could be used to understand and articulate the activity of God in psychology; and 3) I investigate the potential application of these conceptualizations to psychological science with a practical example.

*Step 1: Alternative Basis of Science and Alternative Methodologies*

In my first step, I draw on historians and philosophers of science to show that naturalism is one way to do psychological science, yet it is not equivalent to science. I will show that historical analysis reveals that naturalism is a particular paradigm for doing science and other paradigms exist, which may pave the way for the acceptance of alternative worldviews (such as theism) as a basis for scientific methodology. Many historians and philosophers have pointed out that the equation of naturalism and science is a relatively recent phenomenon and that naturalism might not be the best foundation for a psychological science (Bishop, 2007; Griffin, 2000; Hunter, 2007; Leahey, 1991; Reber, 2006; Taylor, 2007). Griffin (2000), for example, has shown that Newton developed his science of physics within a non-natural framework.<sup>5</sup>

While theistic (re)conceptualizations of psychology are not currently the norm, some initial forays into alternative methodologies are compatible with a theistic perspective. For example, William James's radical empiricism was specifically developed to be open to the "varieties of religious experience" (James, 1902/2004). Hermeneutic inquiry in general has been suggested as a requirement for theistic psychology (Richardson, 2006; Slife & Melling, 2006; Slife & Whoolery, 2006). Recently, Slife and Melling (2008) have suggested that qualitative research is superior to traditional psychological methodologies when dealing with theistic ideas. I will review

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<sup>5</sup> Gravity, to Newton, was a fundamentally non-natural, non-material force that evidenced Divine intervention (Griffin, 2000).

these preliminary explorations, giving specific attention to the compatibility of alternative methodologies with theism.

*Step 2: Theistic Theoretical Constructs for Psychology*

In this step, I explore the extant literature discussing God's activity. While the realization of alternative paradigms and methodologies would clear many of the naturalistic obstacles towards developing a theistic psychology, they, in themselves, do not actualize a theistic psychology. To achieve this goal, it will be necessary to explore actual conceptualizations of the activity of God that could be used by a theistic psychologist. As previously mentioned, the activity of God is not a typical psychological construct. However, there have been a few psychologists who have directly approached this issue (James, 1902/2004; Slife, 2006). Conceptualizations will also be drawn from thinkers outside of psychology who have written on the activity of God. Prime sources include philosophers such as Jean-Luc Marion (2000), C. S. Lewis (1999), James Faulconer (2004), and Alvin Plantinga (1997). I note the reoccurring themes across these conceptualizations. This analysis provides a basis for discussing God's activity in psychology research.

*Step 3: Practical Example of Theistic Psychology*

Finally, I synthesize my findings and develop their practical application to psychology. I explore an in-depth description of a specific psychological research program (prosocial behavior) conducted from a theistic perspective. In other words, this final section will attempt to give an illustration of psychological science that utilizes the activity of God and a theistic paradigm, thus demonstrating the possibility of a truly theistic psychology.

## Chapter 2: Naturalism Not Equivalent to Science

The idea that naturalism equates to proper science has been challenged by a number of critical thinkers in the philosophy of science (Griffin, 2000; Taylor, 2007; Hunter, 2007; Bishop, 2007; Clouser, 2005). Scholars who have traced the emergence of modern science (Griffin, 2000; Taylor, 2007; Hunter, 2007; Reber, 2006; Nelson, 2006) point out that notable scientists of earlier eras did their work from non-naturalistic positions.

For example, Nelson (2006) suggests that the great scientific thinkers from the classic Greeks through the Middle Ages not only worked from a non-naturalistic framework, but found theistic understandings interwoven in the work of “all truly educated people” with scientific and theistic knowledge forming an “essential unity” (p. 207). Even Bacon, who preferred more of a separation between theism and science, still saw his science as “begin[ning] from God” (Bacon, 1620/2000 as quoted in Nelson, 2006) and articulated a “soft naturalism” that “accepted the presence of the miraculous without attempting a naturalistic reduction of it” (Nelson, 2006, p. 208). Griffin (2000, p. 119-122) provides abundant evidence that Isaac Newton resisted naturalistic explanations of his own theories of gravity instead seeing them as evidence of a theistic agent. Thus, at least historically, naturalism has not been equated with good science, but rather science was explicitly associated with theism.

In addition to historical considerations, modern philosophers of science (i.e. Bishop, 2007; Griffin, 2000) have also argued that naturalism is an inappropriate foundation for social science. Bishop explicitly suggests that the depersonalization inherent in naturalism can even be “detrimental [to] academic and clinical psychology”

(Bishop, 2007, p. 8; see also Cushman, 1990; Hillman & Ventura, 1992; Fancher, 1995; Richardson, Fowers, & Guignon, 1999). He discusses various conceptions of science, arguing that “there is nothing like a consensus on [what] represents the ‘correct’ view of science” (Bishop, 2007, p. 12). Although he acknowledges the dominance of naturalism, his point is that there are alternatives, such as interpretive science (see also Held, 2007), and that these alternatives might be more appropriate for the social sciences.

In conceptualizing a theistic science, having methods that allow an investigation of theistic concepts is an essential addition to the recognition that naturalism is not the only philosophy on which to base a science. While naturalistic methods inform most of the extant psychological research, the recognition of naturalism’s non-equivalence with science has encouraged an exploration of alternative research methods that are compatible with theism (Slife & Whoolery, 2006). In fact, it has often been the investigation of theistic issues that has prompted an exploration of alternative methods (see Belzen & Hood, 2006). Alternative research methods and their associations with theistic inquiry have had a long, if overlooked, tradition in psychology dating back to at least William James’s classic *Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902/2004). More recent thinkers (Richardson, 2006; Slife & Melling, 2008) offer expanded and refined articulations of the issues involved in theistically compatible alternative methodologies. These alternative approaches can be broadly categorized as radical empiricism, hermeneutics, and qualitative methods.

### *Radical Empiricism*

William James valued the contributions to knowledge made by sensory empiricism, but felt that a broader epistemology was needed. He called his own approach

“radical empiricism” by which term he suggested the research focus on the wider relationships and meanings between or among objects of the senses and not just the sensible objects themselves. He maintained that this focus on wider experience “is what distinguishes the empiricism which I call ‘radical,’ from the bugaboo empiricism of the traditional rationalist critics, which... is accused of chopping up experience into atomistic sensations” (James, 1909/1987, p. 778).

From this perspective “all our attitudes, moral, practical, or emotional, as well as religious” are as real and meaningful as are those objects present to our senses (James, 1902/ 1987, p. 55). In fact, James suggested that the sense of intangibles, or unseen reality, was “more deep and more general” and more impactful on the human psyche, than the traditional five senses (James, 1902/1987, p. 59). James largely associated religious experiences with such non-sensory phenomenon. These experiences, therefore, require an epistemology that goes beyond “any of the special and particular senses by which the current psychology supposes existent realities to be revealed” (James, 1902/2004, p. 44).

To seriously study religious phenomena that do not appear to the physical senses, James relied on narrative accountings of individuals’ experiences. James did not see this as an esoteric method accessible only to those with special qualifications, but suggested that “the *documents humains* which we shall find most instructive need not... be sought for in the haunts of special erudition—they lie along the beaten highway, and this circumstance... flows... naturally from the character of the problem” (James, 1902/1987, p. 12). Thus, he argues that the nature of his psychological inquiry directs him to study it this way. The result of this investigation, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, which

exemplifies his methodology through scores of personal religious narratives, is a testament to the power and appropriateness of this method of investigation.<sup>6</sup>

### *Hermeneutics*

Given that the hermeneutic tradition was started with the explicit purpose of seeking God's truth as revealed through scripture (Belzen & Hood, 2006), it should not be surprising that hermeneutics provides an alternative to naturalistic methods that is more compatible with theism (Nelson, 2006). Citing Gadamer (1960/1986), Belzen & Hood (2006) give a brief summary of hermeneutic method:

1. Investigation begins on the basis of a preliminary, intuitive understanding of the whole. This guides the understanding of the parts, leading to a judgment about the whole. This judgment then can be tested anew on a study of parts. This is a cyclic process that never ends... Understanding is therefore always finite, limited, and provisional.
2. One looks for meaningful relationships within actions and occurrences.
3. Emphasis is on the understanding of individual cases, whether this understanding can be generalized or not.
4. [U]nderstanding increases [through a fusing of] horizons...
5. Written texts and human narratives are taken seriously in their claim to truth...  
Truth is always contextual (Belzen & Hood, 2006, p. 15)

Although hermeneutics does not have a *necessary* association with religiously inclined psychology, it has several tenets that fit naturally into a theistic interpretive framework. For example, the idea that "human narratives are taken seriously in their

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<sup>6</sup> Additionally, the fact that it has never been out of print and is still regularly cited in academic press suggests that his approach has a wide appeal and a generally accepted validity and relevance.

claim to truth” (Belzen & Hood, 2006, p. 15), is often seen as essential for allowing theistic understandings to inform psychology (Gantt & Melling, in press).

As previously stated, many theists believe in important and meaningful, but singular events (e.g. the creation). While traditional, naturalistic methods discount non-repeatable events, hermeneutics does not because “a hermeneutic view [explains] that understanding often concerns events and experiences that are not repeatable [but] unique” (Richardson, 2006, p. 244).

At the very least, hermeneutics provides psychology with the opportunity to dialogue with theists in a way that does not reject, *a priori*, the reality of theistic truth claims (Richardson, 2006; see also Gantt & Melling, in press). Additionally, the process of hermeneutic dialogue can be explicitly consonant with theistic perspectives and can even “encourage us to rely on Divine Mercy” (Richardson, 2006, p. 244-345) because of the inherent humility suggested by the hermeneutic perspective. From a hermeneutic perspective, we must always be open to surprises, ruptures of our horizon. This can be seen as an opening for the activity of God (Slife & Whoolery, 2005; see also discussion below).

### *Qualitative Methods*

Often grouped with hermeneutic methods, but providing their own unique contributions, qualitative methods have also offered an alternative to naturalistic perspectives that is more compatible with theistic conceptions (Belzen & Hood, 2006). As Nelson (2006) argues, “qualitative approaches... offer possibilities [for] understanding how a theistic perspective might make a difference in our work” (p.278).

Nelson goes on to describe why this is so:

Qualitative methods... are more open to the kinds of values and methods that [are] part of a theistic framework of inquiry. Qualitative studies are (1) driven by phenomenon rather than method, (2) involve an examination of potential biases, (3) establish a relational engagement with the participants that encourages the investigator to acts out of love and care toward the people being studied, and (4) explicitly look for unpredictable events that challenge current conceptions of a phenomenon (cf. Gorsuch, 2002; Slife [and Whoolery], this issue). Obviously, the use of these methods does not guarantee a place for theism, but appropriately used the methods provide a space where theistically-informed inquiry can be conducted (Nelson, 2006, p. 278).

As Nelson points out, qualitative methods, like hermeneutic methods, are not necessarily theistic, but they do not have the inherent conflicts with theism that naturalism does (see above). One commentator expressed that some traditional measures seem “almost designed to ideologically ambush Christians” (Watson, 2008, p. 16). Slife & Melling (2008) expand this critique to all naturalistic methods and also suggest that some qualitative methods offer an alternative that could be consonant with theists.

They suggest, for example, that the qualitative practice of “studying unobservable meanings and relationships” (Slife & Melling, 2008, p. 46) could provide an opening for an investigation of theistic meanings such as revelation and agape love. Further, they contend that the meaning of theistic scriptures (such as Genesis or Al-Fatiha) cannot be adequately understood without such an appeal to unobservables. Qualitative methods also do not require the operationalization of unobservables that can distort theistic meanings (Slife & Melling, 2008).

While these approaches to method (radical empiricism, hermeneutics, and qualitative inquiry) are not necessarily explicitly theistic, they all have sufficiently different foundational assumptions from naturalism that many commentators have suggested that they can be compatible with theism. The existence of these methods allow for theists to do scientifically rigorous investigation without betraying their fundamental worldviews. Still, in and of themselves they do not provide theists with the conceptual framework to utilize the activity of God in their science.

### Chapter 3: Conceptions of Divine Activity

Although methodological and philosophical alternatives to naturalism provide an important contribution to overcoming the obstacles to a theistic psychology, they do not, of themselves, provide a conceptual framework sufficient to explore the activity of God. As previously discussed, the activity of God is not a typical psychological construct. In fact, there are some in the discipline who argue that God *should not* be conceptualized in psychological work (i.e. Helminiak, 2006). At least conceptually, God has been “exiled from psychology” (see Maier, 2004). To overcome this final obstacle to the development of a theistic psychology, this section will review the rare articulations of God’s activity within psychology (James, 1902; Slife & Whoolery, 2006). These insights are combined with additional articulations from theistic philosophers and theologians (Faulconer, 2004; Lewis, 1976; Marion, 2002; Plantinga, 1997). The results of an analysis of these perspectives shows three distinct, though related, themes: 1) Experience of Otherness, 2) Transcendent Immanence, and 3) Revelation. These conceptualizations of divine action are not conceptions of individuals’ mere *perception* of Divine Activity, but understandings that take seriously the “possibil[ity] that the sense of God originates in God” (Madsen, 1994).

#### *Theme 1: Experience of Otherness*

One common way that scholars have discussed God’s activity is the experience of otherness. God is experienced as a distinct being, not merely an interior conscience or the sum of our noble feelings (see James, 1902, p. 45). Additionally, God is experienced as transcendent, transmundane, or beyond the usual phenomena (Archer, Collier, & Porpora,

2004; Faulconer, 2003; Schwartz, 2004).<sup>7</sup> Invoking Levinas, Marion and other recent philosophers, Faulconer suggests that “the Other” is an essential term “that can refer to other persons, but its most important reference is to God” (Faulconer, 2004, p. 3).

Drawing on his philosophy of radical empiricism, William James collected and summarized an impressive array of first-hand accounts of God’s activity and, in so doing, touched on this aspect of otherness. He explicitly identified theistic activity, as one of his participants put it, as “a sense of an external presence” (James, 1902, p. 45). As real or realer than the sense of other beings, this particular presence is sudden, “neither seen, heard, touched, nor cognized in any of the usual ‘sensible’ ways” (James, 1902, p. 45). Still, consistent with his philosophy, James recognizes these experiences as genuine. This particular psychological sense of an unseen other is not tied to a specific time or place; people experience this “in the solitude of [their] room or of the fields [they] still feel the divine presence” (James, 1902, p. 368).

In speaking of the boundaries or margins of individual identity, James suggested that God’s activity is manifest through “incursions from beyond the trans-marginal region” (James, 1902, p. 354). For example, “prayer, or inner communion with the spirit thereof—be that spirit ‘God’ or ‘law’—is a process wherein work is really done, and spiritual energy flows in and produces effects, psychological or material, within the phenomenal world” (James, 1902, p. 359). Again emphasizing that this Godly spiritual energy comes from outside, James uses the word “inflowings” to describe the “help [that comes] in reply to... prayers” (James, 1902, p. 368); “the actual inflow of energy in the faith-state and the prayer state [are the] divine facts” (James, 1902, p. 383). This

<sup>7</sup> Levinas (1961/1969, 1982/1985) also references God as “Absolutely Other” but his meaning is a little different from that of the theists reviewed here).

phenomenon of transference from an actual other is grounded in human experience, for “through transmundane energies, God... produced immediate effects within the natural world to which the rest of our experience belongs” (James, 1902, p. 388).

Even though James suggests a deep relational connection between God and man—suggesting the relationship is “*conterminous and continuous*” (James, 1902, p. 375-376, emphasis in the original)—he maintained that this connection was with an entity *outside* the self. He specified that the “helping power” has the quality of “exteriority” (James, 1902, p. 376) or otherness. James explicitly rejects the view that God is just a subjective notion without separate existence and specifically invokes theism when concluding that in the experience of “union, [God] acts as well as exists” (James, 1902, p. 377).

Modern French philosophers (e.g. Ricoeur, Marion, Courtine, Chretien, Henry, Franck and Brague) take up a similar tack in their discussions of transcendence, arguing that people “have experienced God and not just an idea of God” (Faulconer, 2004, p. 3). Marion argues that “saturated phenomenon”—those experiences of bedazzlement and amazement—are indicative of theistic revelation (Marion, 2000, 2002). This phenomenal experience with the divine is not subjective nor self-contained for it is possible “only by ‘revelation’ from the Father himself (Matthew 16:17)—so much does man lack the ability to produce, from himself, the concept adequate to what the intuition nevertheless gives him to see—precisely, the Christ” (Marion, 2002, p. 148). Further, the “superabundant glory” of the saturated phenomenon cannot come “from the obscured ideas of men, but from... the acts of God” (Marion, 2002, p. 149).

Despite emphasizing the transcendence or otherness of God, Marion, James, and others (i.e. Archer, Collier, & Porpora, 2004) do not hold that God is completely beyond human experience. Rather, for these thinkers, all our knowledge of God is grounded in human experience. Because of this grounding, psychology is in a powerful position to explore theistic activity; it is an outgrowth of the study of human experience (see Gantt & Melling, in press).

*Theme 2: Transcendent Immanence*

Just as God's transcendence does not prevent a connection to human experience, theistic academics have also contended that God is immanent in all of nature.<sup>8</sup> In contrast to a dualism that would separate the transcendent and immanent frames, these thinkers see God as "already and always intimately acting in nature" (Plantinga, 1997). This intimate activity with nature is important to psychology for two reasons: First, man is situated in nature; his psychological activity is a reaction to and an action upon nature. Second, as some maintain, a theistic account of nature suggests meaningful patterns intended for man to comprehend.

Christian apologist C. S. Lewis, for example, suggested that "natural laws" have no ontological existence, but are just observations of order (Lewis, 1979). Lewis attributed the "natural order" to God and suggested that God's activity could be understood in these meaningful patterns. "There is an activity of God displayed throughout creation... which men refuse to recognize" (Lewis, 1979, p. 6). Lewis suggested that repeated patterns in nature were meaningful communication from God for man, "some are reminders and others prophecies" (Lewis, 1979, p. 6). More to the point,

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<sup>8</sup> This combination of transcendence and immanence also distinguishes serious theism from the sort of pantheism that could be created by a naturalist labeling the laws of Nature "God."

Lewis argues that “any contrast between [God’s] acts and the laws of Nature is out of the question. It is His act alone that gives the laws any events to apply to. The laws are an empty frame; it is He who fills that frame – not now and then on specially ‘providential’ occasions, but at every moment” (Lewis, 1979, p. 47).

In this conception, Lewis is echoed by philosopher Alvin Plantinga who maintained “on the theistic conception the world is never ‘left to itself’ but is always (at the least) conserved in being by God” (Plantinga, 1986, p. 111). Plantinga describes how all encompassing this activity is: “according to serious theism, God is constantly, immediately, intimately, and directly active... in everything from the Big Bang to the sparrow's fall” (Plantinga, 1997). Such a broad sweep would surely include neurotransmitters, psychophysics, and other psychological subject matter. Our search for scientific laws in psychology would likewise be impacted for “natural laws are not in any way independent of God, and are perhaps best thought of as regularities in the ways in which he treats the stuff he has made, or perhaps as counterfactuals of divine freedom” (Plantinga, 1997).

Plantinga suggests that this view of God’s activity in nature has implications for our method of research. As “our knowledge [in part] comes by way of *general* revelation” we should “rely... more upon empirical inquiry [than] a priori theology... for the question how God acts in the world: We have no good grounds for insisting that God *must* do things one specific way... he is free to do things in many different ways... we should look and see” (Plantinga, 1997).

However, our empirical inquiry is not of the traditional naturalistic type.<sup>9</sup> Rather, as Lewis observed, it should be an inquiry into patterns of meanings that will allow the researcher to recognize the activity of God. This is because, as noted by psychologist Johnson (1997), “whenever the scientist encounters the creation, he or she will encounter some of the glory, wisdom, and power of God” (p. 16). This could include experiences such as marveling at the design of the human mind. Faulconer (2004) describes how this experience of a God-saturated world relates to the traditional understanding of experience:

“[R]evelation [of God-saturated phenomena] isn’t an exception to our experience of phenomena. Instead, revelation is the most radical or fundamental case of intuition. These philosophers argue that revelation is the basic way of experiencing the world—revelation and amazement and bedazzlement—even though in our workaday lives we have strategies for no longer being amazed and bedazzled. Most language and systematic thought is a strategy for allowing us not to be amazed by things so that we can get on about our business, but that fact seduces us into forgetting that revelation is the basic category of experience” (Faulconer, 2004, p. 8).

Therefore, our traditional empiric observations have not looked at the world as it is (with God active), but, rather, have ignored those revelations.

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<sup>9</sup> Marion suggests that, traditional sensory empiricism, such as sight, fails to account for a God-saturated world, because “the intensive magnitude of the intuition that gives the saturated phenomenon is unbearable for the gaze” (Marion, 2000, pp. 198-200). “Not bearing does not amount to not seeing; for one must first perceive, if not see, in order to experience this incapacity to bear. It is in fact a question of something visible that our gaze cannot bear; this visible something is experienced as unbearable to the gaze because it weights too much upon that gaze; the glory of the visible weights, and it weights too much” (Marion, 2000, p. 200).

If God is involved in every aspect of the world, our psychological inquiry could be opened to exploring that possibility. Instead of seeking purely “objective” or “unsaturated phenomena,” we should seek hermeneutic meanings—God’s ordered patterns. As Marion (2002) suggested, this is possible because the active God “delivers the proper meanings and orders the intuitions according to the concepts missing up to this point” (p. 149). God “made the hermeneutic... of everything” (Marion, 2002, p. 149). These are the rich understandings that go beyond the mere “objective” description of objects. God’s active sharing of these hermeneutics suggests the concept of revelation.

### *Theme 3: Revelation*

Revelation is a reoccurring and central theme of scholars discussing the activity of God. While both a sense of otherness and a realization of the hermeneutic meanings of God’s activity in the world could be classed as revelations, this theme refers more specifically to what Plantinga (1997) calls “God’s *special* revelation” (in contrast to *general* revelation discussed above). The category of revelation contains several facets, including ruptures of meaning and knowledge as well as emotional impact.

Ruptures include surprises, awe, amazement, bedazzlement and similar experiences of being “struck” (see Marion, 2000). Additionally, this category includes insights and gaining alternative perspectives on previous understandings. Carl Jung exemplified this concept in an interview shortly before his death:

“To this day, God is the name by which I designate all things which cross my willful path violently and recklessly, all things which upset my subjective views, plans and intentions and change the course of my life for better or for worse” (reported by Sands, 1961).

C. S. Lewis reported a similar view: “My idea of God is not a divine idea. It has to be shattered time after time. He shatters it himself. He is the great iconoclast” (Lewis, 1976, p. 76).<sup>10</sup>

This shattering, rupturing, or upsetting is the revelation of the saturated phenomena that Marion discusses (Marion, 2004). It includes the apprehension of the hermeneutics of the natural world discussed above as well as specific knowledge and concepts: “such a word, name and concept could... only [come] by revelation from [God] the Father” (Marion, 2004, p. 148). In any case, the former understandings, and their attendant limits, are interrupted and a new intuition, a new understanding is given. As Faulconer points out, “transcendence... always occur[s] within a content” (Faulconer, 2003, p. 82).

Slife (2005) reviews the literature of hermeneutic and phenomenological philosophers who studied this intuition and reception of new and better understandings. Referencing research suggesting that both “normal science” and humans in general almost always simply engage in confirmation bias, he asks “Why would we ever, given these proclivities toward our own biases, notice their violation?” and answers, “Those who have studied these violations carefully agree that somehow there is a rupture of our biased world which originates from *beyond* that world” (Slife, 2005, p. 18). Furthermore, these scholars are “increasingly pointing to various forms of divinity as the source of this other-worldly rupture” (Slife, 2005, p. 18). Already such insights are seen as “inspired” and “a gift from God” in the context of scientific discovery (Slife and Whoolery, 2006, p. 225). While Slife shares Faulconer’s concern that humans are capable of ignoring and

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<sup>10</sup> That Lewis’s experience with God was of a real Other can be seen by the paralleled way in which he talks of his wife (Lewis, 1976, p. 16).

resisting ruptures, he sees great promise for a theistic psychology that encourages and attends to them in both the discovery and justification phase of scientific research.

William James documented the impact of these ruptures and identified divine action with a revelation of a new reality and a change in human perceptions. An experience with God can be a “direct perception of fact” without any necessary sensory perception (James, 1902, p. 314). This increase in knowledge or “genuine perceptions of truth [are] revelations of a kind of reality” (James, 1902, p. 55) and can be habitual as in the examples of “the Hebrew prophets... in Mohammed... in many minor Catholic saints, [and] Joseph Smith” (James, 1902, p. 354).

The learning of new truths or knowledge can also be manifested as a deepened sense or understanding of formerly known things. In addition to “perceiving truths not known before,” there is “an appearance of newness beautif[ying] every object” (James, 1902, p. 184). James also expressed that, “When we see all things in God, and refer all things to him, we read in [formerly] common matters superior expressions of meaning” (James, 1902, p. 352). This “deepened sense of significance” bestowed by God applies to things that people have heard and believed all their lives, but are now understood “in an entirely new light” (James, 1902, p. 283). Similar to the insights from theme 2, James quoted Charles Kingsley’s experience of walking in a field to show that these greater meanings are typically experienced as “a feeling of an enlargement of perception” in which “everything... has a meaning. [It is a] feeling of being surrounded with truths” (James, 1902, p. 285). This God-given increase in understanding significance and meaning can also have a transforming effect on the individual experiencing them; “The personality is changed, the man *is* born anew” (James, 1902, p. 180).

James also explored the affective components of these ruptures. Although he identifies several emotions that Divinity can evoke, James distinguishes these from the typical (or non-theistic) experience of the emotion by *solemnity* (James, 1902). While James suggests an experience with God can awaken joy, fear, sorrow and gladness, these are a solemn joy, a solemn fear, a solemn sorrow, and a solemn gladness. While James pointed to individual's experience of "indescribable awe" (James, 1902, p. 285) associated with holy experiences he suggested that the experience of joy is often primary and can stem from the resultant gladness of deliverance from fear (James, 1902, p. 57). James identifies this release from anxiety as a particular and central form of religious (and theistic) experience. Calling it "assurance" he describes it as "the loss of all the worry, the sense that all is ultimately well with one, the peace, the harmony, the *willingness to be*, even though the outer conditions should remain the same" (James, 1902, p. 184). Thus, theistic experience is one in which meanings have an affective component, a "strangely moving power" (James, 1902, p. 284).<sup>11</sup>

### *Unique Themes*

In addition to the major themes explored above, some scholars have provided unique conceptions of God's activity that may be of benefit to those seeking to construct a theistic psychology. While they can certainly be related to the themes already explored, they provide additional nuances to God's activity for psychology. Faulconer, for example, suggested that God was experienced as a call (Faulconer, 2003, p. 3). This insight makes contact with Levinas's perspective on divinity, that God was experienced in the ethical call and obligation in the face of the other (Olson, Knapp, & Peer, 2004). Plantinga suggested a major activity of God was giving revelation in the form of scripture

<sup>11</sup> Marion expresses this moving power as "glory, joy, excess" (Marion, 2000, p. 200).

and prophets (1997). He also suggested that all human activity could be considered God's *indirect* activity, as God sustains all the world, including human action and is, therefore, at least partly responsible for it (Plantinga, 1997).

One of the most unique suggestions for conceptualizing the activity of God was William James's identification of a connection in the margins of consciousness. The God-instigated changes in meaning, knowledge, and emotion discussed above can lead to religious conversion in which these things "previously peripheral in [a man's] consciousness, now take a central place [and] form the habitual center of his energy" (James, 1902, p. 147). He cites numerous cases of "sudden" conversion as possibly explained by this unseen process. James (1902) went as far as to suggest that if Deity "can directly touch us, the psychological condition of [God's] doing so *might be* our possession of a subconscious region which alone should yield access" (p. 180).<sup>12</sup> In fact, this suggestion helps explain why researchers and laypeople so often ignore the activity of God, because "The hubbub of the waking life might close a door [to higher spiritual agencies] which in the dreamy subliminal might remain ajar or open" (James, 1902, p. 180). He re-emphasizes this point: "If there be higher powers able to impress us, they may get access to us only through the subliminal door" (James, 1902, p. 181). In explaining that the "psychological mechanism" of transcendent experiences is associated with "that great subliminal or trans-marginal region" of which "science is beginning to admit the existence, but of which so little is really known" James (1902) opened an avenue for research that has yet to be pursued (pp. 316 & 378).

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<sup>12</sup> James was sensitive to the negative connotation associated with the research that used the label "subliminal" and was not wedded to the term, suggesting that readers could "call it by any other name you please" (James, 1902, p. 357).

#### Chapter 4: Sketch of Theistic Research Program

The above considerations do much to overcome the current naturalistic obstacles to a theistic psychology. The insights from philosophy of science have created an opening for the consideration of theistic perspectives by showing that naturalism is not equivalent to science. As we have seen, alternative methodologies such as radical empiricism, hermeneutics, and qualitative inquiry provide avenues of scientific investigation free from the constraints of naturalism and thus, possibly, open to theistic questions. Further, conceptualizations of God's activity from scholars in psychology, philosophy, and theology have provided the conceptual framework for articulating, discussing, and understanding specifically theistic issues. The final step is to bring these various pieces together to begin to articulate a theistic psychology in the practical sense.

Consequently, I will first refer to the current lack of theism in academic work and outline a number of research studies that showcase this deficiency (e.g. Cassibba, et al., 2008; Krucoff, et al, 2005; Luhrmann, 2004). A discussion of these specific examples of missed opportunities will highlight how a theistic perspective *could* have been involved in research and set the stage for a broader discussion of theism in research. I will then describe a research program not typically associated with theism or religion, namely prosocial research, to demonstrate the feasibility of applying themes of theistic activity to psychological research in general.

##### *Lack of Theism in Current Literature*

As previously discussed, examples of serious theistic research are rare in the literature. Much of the application of theism to practical concerns has occurred in conceptualizations of therapy (see, e.g. Richards & Bergin, 2004; Stevenson, Eck, & Hill,

2007) and therefore, literature on psychotherapy would seemingly provide the best examples of serious theism. However, Stevenson's (2007) review of this literature suggests that this might not be the case. Although she found many reports of peripherally theistic therapies (utilizing concepts associated with theism or a type of incompatibility strategy like deism, dualism, or supernaturalism), she identified only one piece that met the criterion of being truly theistic: Slife, Mitchell, and Whoolery's (2004) work on the Alldredge Academy. In summarizing her review, Stevenson says, "most of the [allegedly] theistic text[s] explicitly or implicitly describe God as non-existent, a mere belief, or ultimately insignificant" (Stevenson, 2007, p. 56).

Outside the literature on therapy practice, examples of theistic research seem even rarer. Although William James's seminal work, *Varieties of Religious Experience*, was written from a theistic perspective, revisitations of James's work today are often carried out from an explicitly naturalistic perspective (e.g., Carden, Lynn, & Krippner's *Varieties of Anomalous Experience: Examining the Scientific Evidence*, 2004). While major journals will occasionally print articles investigating theistic topics (e.g. Cassibba, et al., 2008; Krucoff, et al, 2005; Luhrmann, 2004), as we shall see, these authors use of naturalism as a framework for their conceptualizations, data collection, and discussions and explanations do not allow the activity of God to be examined in a meaningful way. Three brief examples from the current literature – religion and health, image of God, and experience of God research – will be used to exemplify the missed opportunities to utilize theism in all stages of psychological research.

*Missed opportunities in conceptual frames: Health Psychology and God.* As Slife and colleagues have shown, a theistic conceptual framework for psychological research is

absent in even the most likely of places, the psychology of religion (Slife, 2006; Slife & Nelson, 2006; Slife & Reber, 2009). For example, when discussing religion and health, Meyers (2007) points out, “even after controlling for [various naturalistic factors] mortality studies find much [lower rates] of mortality” for active religious believers (p. 574). While such statements might suggest to theists a perfect place for discussing God’s activity, this theistic interpretation has not been investigated. Citing health and religion researchers such as Kabat-Zinn, Lipworth, and Burney (1985) and Dennett (2006), Slife and Nelson (2006) suggest that they “work to explain the effects of religious participation or spiritual practices with mechanisms that can be explained in [naturalistic] social psychological or neurobiological terms, extracted from their context and duplicated in a secular framework” (p. 290).

As a more specific example, consider Krucoff, et al.’s study on prayer and coronary health (2005). Using traditional (naturalistic) scientific methods, they randomly assigned a large N (748) of cardiovascular patients to either a prayer or a no-prayer group (control). Group assignment was controlled to be double-blind and prayers were operationalized to specific protocols and standardized across prayers. After a statistical analysis of group differences, Krucoff, et al. (2005) concluded “masked prayer [does not] significantly improve clinical outcome” (p. 211). Because of the close adherence to a naturalistic framework in this study, there was no place for the application of a theistic explanatory framework, despite studying a very theistic concept (prayer to God). At no time did the authors even intimate that God could have responded to the prayers, positively impacted any of the patient’s health, or done anything at all. Prayer (and patients’ health) was examined without any reference to God. Farrer’s criticism seems

appropriate, “if ever we pray to see whether prayer will work, it won’t, because it won’t be prayer anyhow” (Farrer, 1966, p. 108).

As Farrer (1966) rightly points out, claiming to come to theistic conclusions from a naturalistic conceptual framework is self-defeating at best. Speaking specifically about health and religion research, Slife and Nelson (2006) emphasize that “[w]hile much is gained by this research, ultimately an active, sovereign God cannot be treated in this instrumental fashion without obscuring the very thing we are trying to understand” (p. 290). Had Krucoff et al. (2005) not obscured God’s activity, they might have drawn on the themes discussed above and suggested that those who pray were praying to an actual Other who was inextricably involved in the natural (but not naturalistic) world and thus could have direct effect upon the physical health of the participants. Furthermore, the possibility of God’s surprising ruptures might have suggested that any health effects instigated by God were unique and not necessarily tied to particular experimental conditions. Finally, with a theistic perspective, research on health could be reconceptualized from being primarily concerned with clinical outcomes, mortality rates, and positive affect to what these experiences mean. For example, a pain or illness might have a greater (theistic) purpose and may contribute to positive outcomes such as faith, empathy, or tenderness.

*Missed opportunities in method: Image of God research.* As a particular illustration of the lack of theistically informed psychological data collection, Slife and Reber (2009) review examples from the considerable corpus of research on the image of God (e.g. Cassibba et al., 2008; Granqvist, Ivarson, Broberg, & Hagekull, 2007 see also Dayringer & Oler, 2005; Rizzuto, 1985). Slife and Reber (2009) suggest that the

naturalistic bias is so prevalent in psychological research that even investigators who have access to more applicable—but theistic—constructs will still prefer to use naturalistic methods. In Cassibba et al. (2008), for example, researchers investigated participants' relationships with parents through interviews about participants' actual experiences with their parents. However, when investigating participants' relationships with God, they avoided using a similar measure of actual experience. They instead used a number of demographic and behavioral variables, even though the authors themselves acknowledged the impoverished nature of such a methodology for getting at a relationship with God (Cassibba et al., 2008). The methodological issue here is that direct experience with God, unlike experience with parents, was presumed to be inaccessible or unavailable. Cassibba et al. (2008) could have used a theistic framework with their interviews or their numeric measures, but instead opted for a naturalistic framework in all their methods.

In suggesting, for instance, that an interview done from a theistic perspective might have granted Cassibba et al. (2008), access to the theistic meanings they were seeking, Slife and Reber (2009) argue that their omission of such a method constitutes serious, if unconscious, discrimination against theism.

“[W]hether Cassibba and her colleagues (2008), and the other image of God researchers (e.g., Reinert & Edwards, 2009), consciously intend it or not, their exclusion of their participants' God experiences, implies their experiences of God are not a necessary or relevant factor in the development of images of God... By not assessing these theistic experiences and perceptions the researchers omit what is for the participants an essential factor in the development of their images

of God... Cassibba et al., (2008) do acknowledge the limitation of this operationalization but their bias against including the participants' own theistic framework for understanding their experiences precludes the researchers from using anything beyond a problematic proxy" (Slife & Reber, 2009, p. 13).

Instead of using problematic proxies, Cassibba et al. (2008) could have investigated participants' experience with God directly, using a type of radical empiricism wherein the lived experiences of participants is taken seriously. As mentioned above, they could have used the same type of semi-structured interview that they used to explore participants' relationships with parents to explore participants' relationships with God. Additionally, the quantitative measures they used as proxy for relationship with God could have been reconceptualized to address relationship with God directly. For example, Cassibba et al. could have asked participants to rate frequency and intensity of experiences with the transcendent or divine expressed in a number of ways (e.g. items such as "I felt connected to something greater than myself" or "I felt called to do an act of kindness," see Hardy, et al., forthcoming).

*Missed opportunities in interpreting the findings: Experience of God.* Perhaps a more striking example of the need for theistic interpretations can be seen from Slife's (2006) criticism of Luhrmann's (2004) work. The latter gives credence to Christian evangelicals' experience of God's activity. However, in her *explanation* of these experiences and the phenomenon of an increase in theistic conversions, she only cites naturalistic factors such as "the rise of modern media and the attenuation of modern relationships" (Slife, 2006, p. 17). As Slife (2006) observes, "Nowhere in this explanation... does she discuss that God Himself could have something to do with how

evangelicals experience their relationship with God” (p. 17). This case is striking because while Luhrmann seems open to the possibility of theistic experiences, “when she is engaged in formal explanation [the justification context of science], she seems to rely entirely upon naturalistically acceptable factors. The possibility of a divine factor... is not discussed” (Slife, 2006, p. 17). In addition to ignoring possible theistic explanations the lack of consideration of a divine factor also runs the risk of seriously distorting the experience of the theist.

Drawing on the themes discussed in the prior chapter, this “divine factor” could have been discussed in a number of ways. For example, divine ruptures could be the precipitating factor in the recent increase in faith noted by Luhrmann (2004). The transforming power of such ruptures, especially to see the world in new and surprising ways, surely could be a powerful way to theistically explain religious conversion and experience with God. Indeed, William James used just such an explanation in his chapter in *Varieties* on conversion.

*Conclusion.* In each major stage of scientific research – theory generation and concept construction, investigation and data collection, and discussion and justifying explanation – the current literature appears to have missed the opportunity to do theistic psychology. While it is striking that the psychology of religion literature would showcase this particular absence, a theistic perspective for psychology should make a difference for all types of research, not just the psychology of religion. To illustrate this fact, the remainder of this chapter will describe an application of a theistic perspective to a psychological topic outside the subfield of psychology of religion, namely, prosocial research.

### *A Theistic Reconceptualization of Prosocial Research*

Prosocial research, including altruism, helping behavior, cooperation, etc., has had a long history in psychology and has recently experienced a renewal of interest and activity (Dovidio, Piliavin, Schroeder, & Penner, 2006). Currently the field displays a wide array of theoretical perspectives on prosocial behavior (e.g. neurological, evolutionary, cognitive, and personality perspectives). However, all of these perspectives are carried out in an essentially naturalistic framework. For example, Dovidio et al. (2006) in their social psychology text on prosocial behavior summarize the current state of the field: “Humans are biologically predisposed to act prosocially [through] at least two evolutionary processes” (p. 312). In addition to laws like natural selection, they suggest that environmental influences “shape” our behavior (Dovidio, et al., 2006, p. 312). Furthermore, they suggest that “People [will help] because helping will produce both tangible and intangible benefits for them” and “when they believe that helping represents the most cost-effective action” (Dovidio, et al., 2006, p. 313). Not only is there a lack of a direct discussion of God and God’s activity in their summary of the current literature, but, as we shall see, a theistic perspective could contribute significant alternative conclusions to the current discussion of prosocial research

In the theistic conceptualization of prosocial research, theism offers distinctive features at every level of inquiry. The first phase of research that is examined here is the conceptual stage. This includes conceptualizing research questions, hypothesis generation, framework selection and other initial exploration issues. The second phase of research considered here can be broadly labeled data collection and is associated with traditional method issues. Finally, the interpretation of research findings is explored from

a theistic perspective. This last phase of research consists of explanations of the data collected. Unique to this theistic conceptualization will be a reliance on the theistic themes delimited in the previous chapter, such as the otherness of God, God's immanent involvement in the world, and God's revealing ruptures. These themes when combined with the alternative methodologies discussed above will illustrate how a theistic psychology could provide serious contributions to a rigorous psychological science.

### *Conceptualizing the Framework*

In the current, naturalistic conceptualizations of prosocial behavior, helping actions can only be conceived as arising out of natural processes. Therefore the initial framework limits research to the "interdependent relationship between our genetic heritage and environmental influences" (Dovidio, et al., 2006, p. 312). When framing the issue of prosocial behavior from a theistic perspective, however, other possibilities are opened. For example, the situations in which participants serve others might be saturated with theistic meanings that would not be detected by a focus on naturalistic genetics or environment.

One theistic possible understanding is that God could be calling to participants (whether or not they recognize the call), inviting them to charitable acts. This call could be a particular kind of rupture, interrupting the typical ways in which participants interact with the world. I will discuss in a subsequent section how these types of theistic conceptions can be studied. Conceptualizing them is our primary task here. For example, if ethical calls are a type of divine rupture, setting up a contrived laboratory helping scenario might not elicit the same kind of rupturing call from God that would be manifest in a situation in which genuine help was needed (see Olson & Israelsen, 2007). As an

illustration, consider the set up of Milgram's famous shock experiments. While the procedures employed might have deceived participants into thinking that the confederate needed help, God might have not been so deceived, and thus not revealed the same moral obligation to the participant that they would have experienced if there had been a genuine need. A theist might have accounted for the high compliance rate, not as a product of the presence of authority, but as partially explained by the lack of a prompting from God calling participants to a particular action (do not shock). At any rate, the contextual nature of invitations to charity from God might be a helpful way for prosocial researchers to understand why some people help in some situations.

Another example of a possible theistic conceptualization for prosocial research stems from the otherness of God. This sense of otherness could be tied to the recognition of the needs of others and could provide researchers with rich questions for investigation, as in cases of moral exemplars such as Mother Teresa and Gandhi. Theistic researchers might raise questions such as "Why did these exemplars make this sort of contact with otherness when others did not?" "Is the invitation to serve experienced commonly or with regularity, but resisted or ignored?" "How does responding to God's invitations affect frequency and quality of future invitations?" Instead of understanding prosocial behavior to be motivated by a type of hedonism where people only help because "helping will produce both tangible and intangible benefits for them" (Dovidio, et al., 2006, p. 313), helping behavior could be seen as evidence of a desire to serve God or ensuing from being touched by the love of God (*agape* in the Christian tradition). Such radical reconceptualizations will, of course, lead to alternative methods of data collection to access these particular meanings.

When theistic researchers conceptualize prosocial behavior, they could also take advantage of William James's thoughts on God's activity in the transmarginal regions of consciousness. This perspective would resist seeing persons as pleasure calculators who help "when they believe that helping represents the most cost-effective action" (Dovidio, et al., 2006, p. 313). Instead of a deliberative process in which participants "must decide that something is wrong, that... help is required... that they have personal responsibility to provide this help [and] they have to decide whether they can provide the [needed] assistance" before helping (Dovidio, et al., 2006, p. 313), it may be that God's call to serve is manifest in altruistic acts the rationales for which are more tacit than deliberative. Those who engage in prosocial behavior, then, may not have already rationally deliberated on their actions, although they may later be able to give *post-hoc* explanations (see also Olson & Israelsen, 2007). If this conceptualization is taken seriously, psychological scientists should be sensitive to the possibility that only asking for deliberative reasons for altruistic acts from participants may bias participants to only give answers that include deliberative reasons, whether or not the participants initially *had* deliberative reasons. If participants have non-deliberative reasons for behaving prosocially (whether in addition to deliberative reasons or apart from them), then the exclusive seeking of deliberative reasons would constitute a serious research design flaw. As we will see in the following section, theistically oriented methods could specifically seek understandings of participants' behaviors that may not be fully conscious or deliberative.

In conceptualizing theistic research, investigators could set up their study in such a way that would recognize potential theistic ruptures (see Slife & Whoolery, 2006). This

could be manifested by a degree of flexibility in planned methods and conceptualizations. In this manner, a theistic perspective even suggests that God could be active in the experience of psychological scientists as well as that of their research participants. Current methods texts emphasize not changing experimental design once the study has begun. However, as William James (1902) cautioned, “The pretension, under such conditions, to be rigorously ‘scientific’ or ‘exact’ in our [study] would only stamp us as lacking in understanding of our task” (p. 30). An openness to surprising findings and reconceptualizations of the subject matter, even by the researcher, would lead to a more whole understanding of prosocial behavior than an attempt to capture the phenomenon with an overabundance of precision. Thus, this conceptual framework is closer to the flexibility inherent in the hermeneutic circle and many qualitative methods than the fixed methods often associated with naturalistic research.

Again, from a theistic perspective, as investigators move from their conceptualizations of research to collecting data, they would keep in mind that God could interrupt (or rupture) that research process. Therefore, investigators should be ready to alter experimental designs and specific methodological practices *as they are practicing them* and be open to new understandings and directions while collecting data and interpreting it. Indeed, as Feyerabend (1975) and others (e.g. Kuhn, 1996) have chronicled, the most significant discoveries and insights in science have come from scientists ignoring or excepting traditional methods and explanations. Again, alternative methodologies, such as hermeneutics, would be more amenable to theistic understanding, and therefore new (and theistic) discoveries, than the traditional methods of psychological inquiry.

### *Collecting the Data*

This alternative initial framing of prosocial behavior has many implications for research methods. Because the theistic frame suggests that God is at least potentially involved in all situations, the naturalistic idea of laboratory experiment in which all variables are strictly controlled by the researcher can no longer be seen as the ideal. This is not to say that laboratories and manipulated variables have no use in theistically investigating helping behaviors. The distinction is that in the theistic frame actions (and variables) undertaken in the laboratory are hermeneutic meanings that are enacted in a context that includes God. For example, a typical naturalistic laboratory measure of prosocial behavior might be refraining from an aggressive action (i.e. blasting sound or sending shocks).<sup>13</sup> The naturalistic perspective would see an experimental intervention (the “independent variable”) as responsible for differences in levels of prosocial behavior (refraining from aggression). However, as a theistic perspective would see God as immanent in all things, including the laboratory, there could be no true “independent variable.” The experimental manipulation would simply be seen as one way for participants to act meaningfully in the laboratory context (a context which would include God as well as opportunities for aggression; see above for a discussion of theistic alternative conceptualizations of Milgram’s shock experiments).

Theistic prosocial investigators would ensure that whichever method they engaged in would be done from a theistic perspective. For example, theistic researchers might employ a qualitative interviewing to ascertain participants’ experience with God in helping situations. As with William James’s radical empiricism, the theistic experiences

<sup>13</sup> See Bushman, Ridge, Das, Key, & Busath, 2007 for an interesting attempt to apply this type of measure to a situation with obvious theistic potential.

then provided by participants could be taken seriously as genuine experiences with the divine (see also, Gantt & Melling, in press).

In addition to probing participants' explicit theistic articulations, and taking these experiences seriously, skilled researchers could also ask specific questions to draw out such experiences. Given that altruistic motivations (and theistic activity) may be tacit, or transmarginal, interviewers with a sound understanding of theistic conceptualizations might be able to help sensitize participants to these issues, making what was tacit explicit. Having conceptualized a number of ways in which God could be active in participants' experiences, investigators could specifically probe for the varieties of these experiences. Because a theistic perspective would see God as potentially as active in the life experiences of non-theists as well as theists, such interviews could be conducted without a reliance on religious rhetoric (or necessarily mentioning God) and thus reach a wider audience. Drawing on themes previously discussed, such questions could be as diverse as "Did you feel a sense of responsibility to something or someone greater than yourself?" and "Were you surprised by a realization of emotion or understanding in this situation?"

A more specific example of the utility of theistic conceptual themes in data collection could be an inquiry into the meanings that subjects see in the world. Given the discussion of the theme of transcendent immanence, this would be an inquiry into the meaningful patterns that subjects recognize in their surroundings, not the "objective" reality of such. In the case of prosocial research, investigators would focus more on what the conditions or personal circumstances *meant* for an individual. Given C. S. Lewis's observation that some of the meanings individuals make of their circumstances "are reminders and others prophecies" (Lewis, 1979, p. 6), it might be profitable to ask

participants what former experiences they recollected prior to, during, or after the helping. Researchers interested in the effect of bystanders on helping behavior might explicitly ask subjects what noticing onlookers meant to them. Did the participants, for instance, experience the bystanders as a divine rupture of their awareness, prompting them to help? Investigators might further ask participants if they saw the situation objectively and rationally performed a calculus of needs, or did they make a connection between the situation and a transcendent meaning?

A similar openness to theistic themes could be manifested in other methods of investigation. Surveys, for example, could be constructed to specifically inquire about a persons' sense of transcendence, transformative experiences (i.e. ruptures), and meaningfulness (with or without religious rhetoric, depending on the participants). However, unlike in naturalistic frames of investigation, the results of such assessments would be seen as meaningful interpretations of reality—as in the hermeneutic tradition—rather than the translating of intangibles into objective, exact measures. As previously mentioned, quantitative measures could also be used theistically to examine frequency and intensity of theistic, prosocial experiences (i.e. “How often this week did you feel a call to serve another?” “How often were you struck or surprised by a sudden realization?” “How intense were these experiences compared to usual?” see Hardy, et al., forthcoming).

The theistic theme of otherness could be explored through various assessments of participants' sense of external presence and how such presence is represented by various individuals. As previously mentioned, William James observed of this external presence or otherness that “through transmudane energies, God... produced immediate effects

within the natural world to which the rest of our experience belongs” (James, 1902, p. 388) and that these effects are often experienced as significant emotions like joy, peace, and love. Researchers could therefore make observations of changes in the emotional and energetic state of participants in helping situations. For example, if a participant seems initially disinclined to help, or unsympathetic to the plight of another, but then seems to have a sudden burst of empathy or attitudinal alteration, this could be interpreted as the action of God upon the individual.

Some may see the attribution of God’s action on the individual as somewhat removed or “far” from the observational data itself. However, from a theistic perspective, attributing a burst of empathy to “environmental stimuli” or “mechanistic genetics” is *just* as “far from the data”. Nothing in the experience or observation of an increase in empathy directly suggests these types of explanations. Rather, they are familiar naturalistic interpretations that have been placed onto the data (see James, 1905/1987, pp 19-22). The data themselves are “underdetermined,” or in other words, the data can always and “in principle” be interpreted in multiple ways (see Slife and Williams, 1995). While interpretations like genetics or reinforcements may be very familiar to modern scientists, the notions of familiar and unfamiliar are not the same as close and far from the data. The interpretation of close and far is more determined by one’s perspective, especially the worldviews of naturalism and theism. What is most likely to be involved in a “burst of empathy,” then, are the conditions that seem most plausible from the perspective of the interpreter. In the case of the strong theist, nothing could be more intimate with, and thus “close” to, this burst of empathy than God Himself.

### *Interpreting the Findings*

While many of the methods for researching prosocial behavior from a theistic framework may seem to have a lot of overlap with similar methods employed from the naturalistic frame, the understanding of what is being studied, and the meaning of that research, is vastly different. These differences are perhaps best illustrated by the altered interpretation of the data. Although the interpretation phase of research has many similarities to the pre-investigatory conceptual stage (and indeed, in a type of hermeneutic circle, feeds back on the same) it is distinct in that this phase reexamines initial conceptualizations by drawing on the results of investigatory tests (research data) and showing their implications.

While an academically rigorous theistic explanation must go beyond simply saying that God is, or could be, responsible for a particular psychological phenomenon, such a recognition is a fundamental characteristic of theistic interpretation. The themes summarizing conceptualizations of God's activity provide a helpful source of how a researcher can go beyond simply invoking God as an uncritical assumption. For example, the Jamesian insight about God radiating invitations to prosocial behavior through the subconscious of individuals suggests a rich explanatory framework that has great potential for extensive elaboration.

A specific example of data interpretation in theistic prosocial research could be seen in how long-term prosocial behavior is explained. Whereas traditional naturalistic explanations might focus on the evolutionary history that would produce a Mother Teresa or a Gandhi, a theistic research might explain their behaviors as making contact with a sense of otherness. In a very real sense, these altruistic persons might be connecting with

something that is greater than themselves and transcends the typical reasons for service. A theistic discussion section would seriously consider the possibility that a sense of the divine and a call to moral action from beyond the immediately apparent world may better explain the behaviors of moral exemplars.

Theistic explanations can also address conceptual difficulties apparent in the naturalistic frame. A prominent prosocial researcher recently commented on the “seeming paradox [of] people who have been victims of violence or abuse becom[ing] caring and helpful” (Staub, cited in Dovidio, et al., 2006, p. 341). This phenomenon is a paradox from the point of view of naturalism because this worldview holds that future actions must be consistent and continuous with past causes (primarily environmental and genetic). However, the theistic theme of ruptures suggests that there can be striking discontinuities with what has gone on before. Furthermore, the emotionally transformative effects of theistic ruptures noticed by James and others provide an explanation, cogent with theism, as to how a victim of violence can be transformed by God through that experience and become dedicated to prosocial behavior.

Although the foregoing is only a brief sketch, merely suggestive of the possible alternatives that a theistic perspective could offer psychology, it shows that a theistic psychology that is academically rigorous is a practical possibility. At all levels of scientific research a theistic psychology utilizes theistic conceptualizations and alternative methodologies to provide a viable options for scientific inquiry. Alternative philosophies, methodologies, theistic conceptualizations, and research practices all reinforce the potential of a consistent and comprehensive alternative to naturalism.

## Conclusion

At this point it is apparent that the answer to the question “Is a theistic psychology viable?” is “Yes!” Although there has been abundant interest in developing a theistic psychology, especially among psychotherapy researchers, analysis of this and the broader literatures of psychology has shown that a truly theistic perspective has yet to be actualized. An investigation into these attempts revealed that a pervasive naturalism created significant challenges to a theistic perspective. Attempts to reconcile naturalism and theism in a way that would allow a psychologist to do both simultaneously (such as deism, dualism, or supernaturalism) were unable to integrate the two worldviews and these attempts simply revealed their incompatibility.

The first step in overcoming these challenges was to show that naturalism is not equivalent to science. Good and rigorous science can and does occur without naturalism to guide it. Alternative scientific methodologies were discussed that were more open to theistic experience. To provide the substance of theistic research, academic explorations of the activity of God were reviewed and thematized. These provided the conceptual basis for constructing a psychological research program from a theistic prospective.

As this analysis shows, a theistic psychology is not impossible. Not only is it possible to conceptualize God’s activity in a way that is congruent with theists’ experiences and scholarly discourse, but such conceptualizations can be meaningfully applied to psychological research. At each phase of scientific research, multiple examples of this application showed a wide variety of practical implementations of a theistic framework.

Still, this initial exploration has only skimmed the surface of possible applications and theistic themes; much of the rich application of theistic perspectives remains to be articulated and discovered. While there may also remain significant practical challenges to the implementation of such a radical alternative, especially given the long dominance of naturalism, a theistic perspective for psychology is conceptually viable and could offer the discipline a greater range of explanations and understandings. As William James (1909) stated “There are resources in us that naturalism with its literal and legal virtues never reckons of [i.e. harkens to], possibilities that take our breath away, or another kind of happiness and power, based on giving up our own will and letting something higher work for us, and these seem to show a world wider than either physics or philistine ethics can imagine” (p. 305). A truly theistic psychology would allow this wider world to be explored and these grander possibilities to be investigated.

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