

PHILOSOPHICAL AND RELIGIOUS IMPLICATIONS OF COGNITIVE SOCIAL LEARNING THEORIES OF PERSONALITY

by William A. Rottschaefter

Abstract. This paper sketches an alternative answer to James Jones's recent attempt to explore the implications of cognitive social learning theories of personality for issues in epistemology, philosophy of science, and religious studies. Since the 1960s, two cognitive revolutions have taken place in scientific psychology: the first made cognition central to theories of perception, memory, problem solving, and so on; the second made cognition central to theories of learning and behavior, among others. Cognitive social learning theories find their place in the latter revolution. Because of an ongoing naturalistic revolution in philosophy, these cognitive revolutions in psychology are having a profound effect on both descriptive and normative issues in epistemology and philosophy of science. From the naturalistic perspective, philosophy cannot adequately pursue its goals without the contributions of the empirical sciences, including psychology. The author concludes that the cognitive revolutions in psychology and the naturalistic revolution in philosophy have similar descriptive and normative import for the study of religion.

Keywords: cognitive psychology; cognitive social learning theory; naturalistic philosophy; naturalized epistemology; naturalized ethics; normative epistemology; religious studies.

What are the implications of cognitive social learning theories of personality (CSLTPs) for issues in epistemology, philosophy of science, and religious studies? This is a very large and important question, recently posed by James Jones (1989), who argues that CSLTPs, like those of Albert Bandura and Walter Mischel, have important consequences for epistemology and philosophy of science as well as for religious studies. In this paper I shall sketch an alternative to Jones's views, indicating where I think our major differences

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lie. Like Jones, I begin with psychology. From there I move to philosophy and, finally, to the study of religion.

TWO COGNITIVE REVOLUTIONS IN PSYCHOLOGY

Two cognitive revolutions have recently occurred in psychology in the United States, the first beginning around 1960.¹ From the 1920s to the early 1960s, psychology had been dominated by various forms of behaviorism that in one way or another denied a causal role to cognitions in human behavior (Hilgard and Bower 1981). The behaviorist hold began to loosen first in areas that have come to be called cognitive psychology, like those of perception, imagery, thought, memory, and problem solving (Gardner 1985). Somewhat later those areas of psychology concerned with agency, such as learning, personality theory, and social psychology generally, began to be influenced by the winds of cognitivism. To put it succinctly, the first revolution made cognition an acceptable part of the input side of the equation for human agency, and the second did the same for the output side. CSLTPs have to do primarily with output, not the input side of the equation.² In the most recent edition of their magisterial account of learning theories, Hilgard and Bower (1981) have argued that cognitive social learning theories, as theories of agency, have taken up the gains in cognitive psychology and begun to apply them to problems of agency. They contend that such cognitive social learning theories as Albert Bandura's will serve as integrating theories that explain cognitively based human behavior while drawing on the developing accounts of cognition in cognitive psychology that originated in information processing theories and computer science. Have these cognitive revolutions had any effects on philosophy? Indeed, they have; but that's in part because of another, larger revolution that has rocked philosophy.

A NATURALISTIC REVOLUTION IN PHILOSOPHY

Philosophical psychology has in recent years undergone a revolution of its own (Erwin 1978; Fodor 1968; Dennett 1978), and that revolution is part of a larger sea change in philosophy, what has come to be called *naturalized philosophy*.³ Naturalistic philosophers contend that solutions to philosophical problems require the best empirical and theoretical results available. Consequently, they have moved away from a priori modes of philosophizing, based on conceptual and linguistic analysis, and have realized that alleged conceptual necessities are bound by time and space, and thus are changeable and often inadequate for investigating philosophical problems. As a result,

although naturalistic philosophers retain the aim of maximum conceptual clarity, they reject the view that conceptual elucidations are the whole story, always taking precedence over empirical investigation, or that conceptual analysis can be fruitfully practiced without significant empirical input. Thus naturalistically inclined philosophers contend that the traditional problems of metaphysics, epistemology, philosophy of mind, and ethics will not yield to a method that employs only a priori speculation that is regimented by careful analysis and rigorous argument. Rather, these problems need to be addressed in light of the best relevant social and natural scientific data and theories.

Questions about the philosophical implications of CSLTPs should therefore be viewed within the wider context of the naturalistic revolution in philosophy, in which all of the natural and social sciences are deemed to have potential significance for the solution of philosophical problems.

To be more specific, let's look at the effects that a naturalistic approach can have on the crucial disciplines of epistemology, philosophy of mind, and ethics. I select these disciplines for two reasons. First, they illustrate how the cognitive revolutions in psychology can affect both the input and output side of human agency. Secondly, Jones has focused on the effects of CSLTPs for epistemology in order to explore their consequences for philosophy of science and religious studies.

NATURALIZED EPISTEMOLOGY

To see the effect of the cognitive revolution on input, let's look at the discipline of epistemology. Until recently, traditional twentieth-century Anglo-American epistemology has gone its own way, separate from scientific psychology. Two doctrines have led to the denial that the data and theories of cognitive psychology could be important for epistemology. First, philosophers in the traditions of linguistic and conceptual analysis have been schooled to avoid the fallacy of psychologism, which required that empirical descriptions of epistemological concepts—for instance, inference, formulated in terms of psychological states and processes—be shunned because they are unable to provide the conceptual or logical necessity required of adequate definitions. Such definitions, it was claimed, are achievable only by careful conceptual and linguistic analysis; they were supposedly a matter of logic, not of scientific investigation, and constructing such definitions was a job for descriptive epistemologists, who deal with the adequate analysis and definition

of such central concepts as knowledge, perception, memory, and inference. For each of these concepts, as well as others, epistemologists sought necessary and sufficient definitional conditions. Indeed, it was argued that empirical claims about cognitive states and processes were dependent upon epistemological claims, since the definitions of the fundamental concepts employed by cognitive psychologists depended upon the work of epistemologists. Thus epistemology was foundational, as in the traditions of classical philosophical rationalism and empiricism on the one hand, and Kant, on the other (Rorty 1979). Necessarily, empirical cognitive psychology had to rest on the solid foundation of analytic epistemology.

The second way in which epistemology was significantly detached from empirical psychological input concerns the sharp distinction made by philosophers between the contexts of discovery and justification. The former has to do with the circumstances and processes by which ideas are obtained; the latter refers to how these ideas are assessed. From this perspective, empirical cognitive psychology is limited, by its nature, to issues concerning the context of discovery since it can only deal with factual issues, not with the normative concerns of assessment. Issues regarding the assessment of claims, including scientific claims, belong to epistemologists and philosophers of science, who engage in normative epistemology, the most important part of theory of knowledge. As the name implies, normative epistemology deals with epistemic norms and values—for instance, with the issues of justification and rationality.

With respect to normative issues, it was the task of the philosopher of science to provide canons of rationality and justification for the various sorts of scientific discourse, as well as to work out the logic of the scientific method. Just as traditional ethicists thought there was an unbridgeable gap between facts and ethical values, so too, in the case of knowledge, epistemologists found a gap between the processes of discovery and justification—between, for instance, mere belief and justified belief. Therefore, empirical data and theories about cognitive processes were at best relevant only for claims about the discovery process in science. Philosophers were quite willing to leave the merely factual, discovery side of science to psychologists, as long as they could retain sole possession of the logical, justificatory part.

In sum, philosophers assigned themselves the task of providing the foundational materials (i.e., basic concepts and standards) for all the sciences. Consequently, the potential of scientific psychology for making a contribution to epistemological issues within the perspective of traditional epistemology was nil.

This exalted account of the role of epistemologists has nevertheless given way to a quite different job description. This is not the place to recount the revolutionary tale (see, for instance, Brown 1989; Giere 1988; Hull 1988; Quine 1969; Sellars 1963; and Suppe 1977), but the consequences are apparent. Naturalistic epistemologists, without completely rejecting the instruments of conceptual and linguistic analysis, now contend that both their descriptive and normative tasks require the input of the neurosciences, evolutionary biology, cognitive psychology, social psychology, anthropology, history, and sociology (Brown 1989; Kornblith 1985; Goldman 1986; Giere 1988; Hull 1988). In their view, knowledge—considered, for instance, in its classical sense as justified true belief—is best elaborated by examining the results of the natural and social sciences. A priori analyses of basic concepts are no longer considered sufficient in the attempt to arrive at an adequate understanding of the basic units of knowledge. Moreover, it is realized that there is no once-and-for-all analysis of cognitive states and processes and their causes. Epistemological theories, like scientific ones, are always open to revision, or even elimination, in the light of improved empirical data and theories. Moreover, some naturalistic epistemologists maintain that the first cognitive revolution in psychology is important not only for elaborating descriptive theories of the nature and causes of cognitive processes and states, but also for constructing normative theories of cognitive justification, scientific methodology, and rationality (Giere 1988; Goldman 1986). Given the identification of successful cognitive processes, such as genuine perceptions or the formation of true beliefs, they aim to find and describe the reliable mechanisms, learned or inherited, by means of which we accomplish these cognitive tasks. The use of these reliable mechanisms, then, can be appealed to in justifying claims.

A result of this naturalistic revolution in philosophy is that epistemology, conceived naturalistically, yields its honored position as a foundational discipline and takes its place as a coworker with the natural and social sciences in attempting to account for both our scientific and nonscientific cognitive achievements.

NATURALIZED PHILOSOPHICAL PSYCHOLOGY AND ETHICS

A naturalistic revolution is also occurring in philosophical psychology (P. M. Churchland 1988; P. S. Churchland 1986; Dennett 1987; Fodor 1986) and ethics (Gibbard 1990; Richards 1987; Rottschaefer and Martinsen 1990; Ruse 1986). Moreover, it finds some of the

resources for its tasks from the second cognitive revolution in psychology, the one concerned with the output side of the equation. As is well known, social-learning theorists led the second cognitive revolution in psychology by providing strong evidence that human agency is cognitive and thus that behaviorist and neobehaviorist conceptions of human agency as a locus of forces are inadequate. The contributions of Bandura (1986; 1989) and other social-cognitive theorists have been to show the necessity for hypothesizing a set of self-referential cognitive capacities and processes. Thus, insofar as human agency is a learned capacity, social-cognitive theorists, along with social-learning theorists generally, have provided us with well-confirmed hypotheses about the mechanisms that lead to successful performance of a wide range of human endeavors. These endeavors range from the acquisition of personal and social skills, to habits that promote physical health and psychological well-being, to actions concerning long-term commitments like careers and family, to behaviors that are conducive to social welfare and ethical values.

From the perspective of the naturalistic philosopher interested in a theory of human agency, Bandura's work provides a rich field for consideration. In particular, the naturalistic philosophical psychologist will find that Bandura's work suggests an account of processes by which we learn to be agents. As such, this account identifies a set of reliable mechanisms for the achievement of various ends. What counts as appropriate ends will, of course, vary with the nature of the tasks under consideration. In the case of ethical behavior, the appropriate ends are justified moral action, derived from justified moral beliefs and motivations. A naturalistic ethicist can therefore look to the work of social-cognitive theorists for indications of those cognitive and motivational mechanisms and processes that reliably lead to morally adequate beliefs and motivations. Employment of these mechanisms, then, can be appealed to in the justification of moral beliefs and motivations. Similarly, the latter can be relied on in the justification of moral actions and practices. Thus the naturalistic ethicist sees a way to bridge the fact-value gap in the realm of moral values, just as the naturalistic epistemologist does in epistemic values. In this manner, she might use the work of social-cognitive theorists to build both a descriptive and a normative theory of how we learn to be moral agents (Rottschaefer 1986).

The successes of CSLTPs, of theories like those of Bandura and the Mischels (1976; 1977), also hold an important lesson concerning the debate about the proper methodology for studying and understanding persons. As Jones indicates (and is well known), social scientists and students of religion are divided whether the empirical

methods of the natural sciences are appropriate and adequate for understanding persons and societies. The familiar alternative to empirical methodologies is the hermeneutical method—but CSLTPs are the result of the application of the social sciences' empirical methods to questions about human agency. The methodology of Bandura and the Mischels, for instance, which is straightforwardly similar to that of the natural scientist, formulates hypotheses and tests them in natural and experimental situations. Moreover, mathematics is absolutely necessary for their work, as they seek correlational and causal generalizations of appropriate scope. By using an *empirical* methodology, they have established the significant role of cognitions in explaining important aspects of human behavior and mental functioning.

Moreover, it also seems that explanations of human agency in the cognitive categories that these theories have postulated are much more successful than either the empirically based, noncognitive accounts of behaviorists or the nonempirically founded, cognitive theories of those who use the hermeneutical method. Thus it is reasonable to conclude not only that CSLTPs use the empirical methodology of the natural sciences, but also that empirical methodology is the basis of CSLTPs' explanatory and predictive power. Thus the methodological message of CSLTPs is that empirical methodology is not only *not* foreign to disciplines concerned with persons, but it is the methodology of choice. In other words, the naturalistic philosophical psychologist will draw the normative conclusion, from data about the relative successes of empirical and hermeneutical methodology, that the former is preferable to the latter.

Thus the naturalistic revolution in philosophy maintains that both the descriptive and normative tasks of philosophers are crucially dependent upon the findings of the natural and social sciences. For philosophical psychologists, epistemologists, and ethicists, this implies that what it means to be a human agent in both its epistemic and moral dimensions cannot be discovered without close collaboration with natural and social scientists. Given the cognitive revolutions in psychology and the naturalistic revolution in philosophy, what are their implications for the study of religion?

A REVOLUTION IN RELIGIOUS STUDIES

Let me spell out the implications for the study of religion of the naturalistic approach I have outlined. If we make the plausible (but far from uncontroversial) assumption that religion is about the

personal and communal pursuit of ultimate truth and goodness, questions about the nature of persons, knowledge, and right action are absolutely central to religion. Given naturalistic assumptions about how best to pursue these questions, it follows that the natural and social sciences are essential for the study of religion. For many students of religion, this would not be a particularly revolutionary recommendation; but of course for others it would be considered quite subversive.

The relevance of the natural and social sciences for the study of religion seems to be both methodological and substantive. If we accept the lesson we have drawn from the successes of CSLTPs about the proper methodology for studying persons, it appears that the appropriate methodology for religious studies is empirical.⁴ Then, at the substantive level, descriptions and analyses of religious phenomena should be informed by the best empirical data and theories. Finally, and most controversially, the study of religion can and should become evaluative. Although purely descriptive, comparative approaches to the study of various religions have served the useful purpose of severing the academic study of religion from the apologetic uses of traditional theological discourse, they nevertheless seem to suffer from the same value-neutrality assumptions that are derived from positivist postulates about the gap between fact and value, which continue to plague the social sciences. But if the naturalistic lessons I have sketched are correct, then the fact-value dichotomy, with respect to epistemic and moral values, is false. This implies that the study of religion as the personal and communal search for ultimate truth and goodness is essentially an evaluative discipline, but not only in the sense that it is concerned to describe and explain the multiple, varying manifestations of this pursuit, past and present. It is also in a position to begin to evaluate the historical and current attempts to achieve these goals. In other words, given some indications of the goals being sought, students of religion who adopt a naturalistic approach are interested in describing and accounting for the more reliable means that have thus far been discovered by individuals and communities for achieving the goals of the religious life.

Let me illustrate what I have in mind with respect to both descriptive and normative issues, first from the discipline of philosophy of religion and then from the academic study of religion, or religious studies. The traditional Anglo-American philosophy of religion has not suffered a normative malaise. Indeed, it has been routinely involved in assessing the adequacy of various conceptions of God, soul, afterlife, etc., and in evaluating claims about the existence and

nature of such phenomena. Traditional philosophy of religion has not, however, been naturalized. Both its descriptive and normative tasks have been carried out in the rarefied atmosphere of relatively a priori speculation, governed by careful conceptual analyses and rigorous logical arguments. Most of the time the material upon which the philosophers in this tradition have labored represents a generalized Christian or Deistic point of view. Naturalizing philosophy of religion would mean, in the first instance, that the facts, data, and theories about religion as a worldwide and perduring human phenomenon would become the material for philosophical work. In addition, both the descriptive and normative phases of the philosopher of religion's study of the ontological, epistemological, psychological, and ethical sides of religion would be informed by the natural and social sciences.

To illustrate my point with respect to religious studies, let me comment on the provocative study by J. Samuel Preus, *Explaining Religion* (1987), in which Preus traces the historical development (from the sixteenth century) of what he calls the naturalistic research program in religion, or the attempt to understand the origins and causes of religion in nonsupernatural terms. He contrasts this program with the traditional theological program of faith-seeking-understanding, and also with the view of some students of religion that religion deals with the sacred. Both of these views, he contends, either prohibit or discourage explanations of the sacred in terms of the nonsacred. The naturalistic research program whose history he traces has affinities with what I have called the naturalistic approach in philosophy, insofar as it attempts to bring to bear upon the phenomena of religion the best empirical data and theories available to students of religion. But what is at best only implicit, if present at all, in Preus's account of the naturalistic research program is the notion that a thoroughgoing naturalistic approach can provide not only descriptive and explanatory resources but evaluative resources as well. The study of religion should help us not only to understand the nature of religion more deeply and better explain its origins, developments, and persistence. It should also assist us in evaluating how well its manifestations help us individually and communally in attainment of its goals.

Finally, from the perspective of naturalistic philosophy, these evaluative resources, along with the descriptive and explanatory ones, can and should be applied to traditional theology. Whether or not this can be done while maintaining the stance of faith-seeking-understanding is a question that I cannot pursue here, but it is important to note that naturalism does not necessarily entail

atheism (Rottschaefer 1988). However, naturalism requires a non-dogmatic adherence to religious beliefs and practices, one that is open to revision on the basis of the data and theories of the natural and social sciences.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, let me state how my answer to Jones's question about the significance of CSLTPs for epistemology, philosophy of science, and religious studies differs from his. Jones argues that CSLTPs provide for epistemology the notion that the human mind is active in its pursuit of knowledge and that it uses schemata to acquire, organize, and use the information it receives. This means that epistemology must be constructivist. In Jones's view, a constructivist epistemology has enabled philosophers of science to make progress in resolving issues about the nature of scientific knowledge. In addition, CSLTPs have implications for religious studies, allowing us to explain James's notion of optimistic and pessimistic religious personality types as well as empirical and hermeneutical methodologies in religious studies.

If Jones is seeking materials that have been important for recent advances in epistemology and a philosophy of science, I believe that he has been laboring in the wrong mine. These materials come not from the second cognitive revolution in psychology, in which the development of CSLTPs played a part, but from the first cognitive revolution—that is, from cognitive psychology. In addition, Jones has missed much of the value of the materials he has extracted. The second cognitive revolution has implications not so much for the input side of human agency as for the output side. Jones not only misses much of the descriptive material provided by the CSLTPs for understanding human agency but, most importantly, does not recognize their normative implications for human agency in general and moral agency in particular. As a result, his assessment of the implications of CSLTPs for religious studies severely underestimates their value. Moreover, although I agree with Jones that CSLTPs *do* have significant implications for philosophical and religious issues, it is important to note that these implications are only part of a much larger impact that the natural and social sciences must make, substantively and methodologically, on both philosophy and the study of religion. Nevertheless, Jones has raised an important question for philosophers and students of religion and has suggested a fruitful area to explore.

NOTES

1. By *revolution* I mean merely significant change. I do not use the term in its Kuhnian sense of a discontinuous transition from one period of science to another in a particular discipline.

2. Jones refers to the theories of Albert Bandura, Walter Mischel, and others within the tradition of cognitive social-learning theory as "theories of personality." I shall use both the former designation and Jones's interchangeably. Since Jones is interested in cognitive social-learning theories within the context of persons as agents, his use of the term *CSLTPs* fits his purposes. However, it should be noted, as he does in passing, that cognitive social-learning theories usually deny the existence of personality in its usual psychological sense of a set of relatively permanent traits often fixed by early childhood experiences.

3. Not by any stretch of the imagination can it be claimed that all of philosophy has become naturalized or that all philosophers have become naturalistic philosophers. Indeed, the naturalistic revolution may be relatively isolated. I am concerned with the *nature* and *implications* of the changes in philosophy that the movement toward naturalization represents, not its extent. Obviously, I think that these changes are important and that their effects will be widely felt.

4. Paradoxically, Jones associates empirical methodologies with an understanding of reality as *impersonal* while at the same time championing CSLTPs as scientifically based accounts of persons in their active agency. Skirting the normative issue, he merely concludes that CSLTPs can explain the preferences for either empirical or hermeneutical methodologies.

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