RESPONSE TO ROTTSCHAEFER, BECKLEY, AND KONNER

by James M. Gustafson

Abstract. All three articles properly locate my work as interactive between the sciences on the one hand and theology and ethics on the other. They disagree on whether tradition, science, or experience "trumps" the others when they conflict; Beckley shows the importance of tradition, which is slighted by the other two. Comments on each article indicate where further discussion is needed and where I have learned from the authors or agree with them.

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All three respondents to my work have more empathy for its intention and execution than many other published critics. They focus in part on the same, and in part on different, aspects of it, and make different judgments about how it is to be interpreted at some points, but basically affirm its value. Some others have affirmed its value primarily as a foil or as an agenda that evokes their own developed thinking; for this pedagogical effect I am also grateful. As Beckley accurately suggests, whether my constructive work in *Ethics from a Theocentric Perspective* will have deep and lasting effects is not yet clear. To be the subject of a "Profile" in *Zygon* at least potentially draws it into a wider circle of discussion.

All three authors locate me as a proponent of what Rottschaefer terms "mutually supportive interactionism" between theology and science. All three, I think, are clear that the interactionism does not imply full harmony, nor does it disallow mutually critical evaluations. I myself have written few theological critiques of science and its extension by some scientists into crypto- or quasi-theologies. Mary Midgley has produced deft critiques of science from a philosophical perspective; from theology, Langdon Gilkey has been more

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concerned to do so than I have been. In a review of Mary Midgley's *Science as Salvation* that editors entitled "Scientific Dreamers and Religious Speculation," I stated my agreement with her critiques but also my sympathy for and openness to these extensions from science as reflections of religious and moral seriousness (Gustafson, 1993). For one thing, the understanding of sciences by theologians and clergy is at least as naive and limited as is the understanding of theology and religion by scientists. For another, there is more serious wrestling with profound issues of existence in the passionate atheism of Steven Weinberg and Jacques Monod, and in the religious searching of Theodosius Dobzhansky and others, than there is in much theology and more popular religious writing.

But more important than these motives is the conviction with which all three authors seem to agree, namely that it is intellectually, religiously, philosophically, and ethically important that our thinking and living in the modern world be informed by various paths to knowledge and understanding. I have also become increasingly convinced that while ecclesiastical persons and some theologians are properly concerned with issues of "inclusive language," they often assume that deeper issues of God's existence and religious faith are somehow intact. For many laypersons, Protestant, Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, and Jewish, profound issues of belief and faith raised both by events and by ideas in our time remain suppressed or glossed over apart from engaging some project like my own.

The respondents seem to disagree about whether experience, science, or religious tradition trumps the others in my work when there is tension or conflict between these sources. I have long recognized this ambiguity in my work that allows for differences of judgment. I have probably exploited the ambiguity by stressing different factors in different contexts of discussion, in response to what I see or hear others overemphasizing.

Beckley is correct to indicate that there is solid evidence that my critique and my development assume the significance of the Christian tradition—at least much of the time. I cannot say that I have been fully consistent on this point. Certainly it is biographically the case that the Christian tradition has had precedence in my experience and thought. In this regard I would be a case in evidence for sociologist Philip Selznick's interpretation that "piety," with its particularistic traditions and loyalties, precedes "civility," with its universalistic and impersonal aspects, and that "civility and piety are by no means wholly antagonistic" (Selznick 1992, 387–94, 391). "Critical morality" follows and is developed in relation to "tradition" and "customary" morality in his interpretation. His line of

interpretation is applicable to religion and theology and to morality and ethics.

Beckley also correctly notes that had I not been explicit about how some well-established results of the sciences render dubious some cherished Christian claims there would be less controversy about my work. It is at those points that the sciences and experience raise serious questions, and trump traditional doctrines and beliefs. Rottschaefer would support this; his priorities are clear: religious experience trumps the tradition when there is conflict, and scientific findings trump experience.

I agree with Beckley that the two pieces I contributed to this number of *Zygon* do not do justice to the significance of the Christian tradition in my work. He rightly observes that I do not *derive* religious beliefs from the sciences. And he, with care, makes a case for ways in which the Christian faith and tradition affect what I have written about some practical matters, e.g., the idea of forgiveness as part of redemption in relation to matters of family and of suicide. Whether those moves require the tradition, are informed by it, or are simply coincident with it is an interesting speculative question, one I choose not to pursue. The theological backing for forgiveness clearly is not, however, an orthodox view of Christ as the atoner for human sin.

All three authors have attended to my discussion of experience, and particularly my description of the senses of dependence, of gratitude, etc. I heartily agree with Konner and Rottschaefer that whether these are general, if not universal, or particularistic is a matter that could be studied by various sciences of the human. Both of them, I think, might find various cultural or psychological explanations of these senses to be adequate; I have never claimed (to the best of my recollection) that these senses are "caused" by God, though I do believe they result from an experience of various powers bearing down upon us and sustaining us, which I came to name God. Religious naturalism, as I say in "Tracing a Trajectory," has never disturbed me; what I have written about these experiences or senses would not be threatened by the studies Rottschaefer and Konner indicate could be made. It is at this point that what could be explained, e.g., psychologically, can also be interpreted religiously and theologically from the point of references of a felt conviction about the presence of God or the Divine. This, of course, gets us to the question of why "nature" is not sufficient, or why I introduce God. The hermeneutical circle is here; tradition, and experience informed by the tradition, can cohere in significance with other explanations of the same experiences.

Beckley is correct that I do not follow Schleiermacher, whose

theology was premised on an immediate experience of God. Rottschaefer, I think, overinterprets the possibility of "religious experience" per se in what I have written. Language is difficult here, as elsewhere; I could perhaps refine my ideas of the senses, their religious significance, and piety more by developing how what I wish to convey is related to the idea of "religious dimensions" of experience, or the idea of "the religious" as developed by John Dewey (1934). Beckley correctly points out that I acknowledge that experience is interpreted; indeed it is filtered through schemata we have tacitly or explicitly developed. In this respect, fundamentally, the theologian is no different from other scholars, who not only interpret experiences via concepts from their disciplines but probably refract some of their own experiences of the world through those concepts.

The nest of matters relating science and ethics are brought up both philosophically and practically by Rottschaefer and Konner. The former clearly has been thinking about these matters in relation to some of the same literature that has recently engaged me, as evidenced by his idea that "moral values are emergent, natural properties supervenient on natural nonmoral properties." In my current work I am attempting to evaluate various ideas and metaphors by which we linguistically relate "values" to "facts"; "emerging," "supervenient on," "constituted by," "dimensions of," and other terms are used by authors seeking to overcome the radical fact-value differentiation while insisting that the values are never completely reducible to facts. I am not yet satisfied that "supervenient on" and "emergent" are the best choices—but I have not yet resolved what language is best.

I can heartily agree with Konner that "knowledge of the facts should change the argument and, in some cases, the conclusion." I have argued that scientific findings affect not only how we understand the occasions of moral choices, but insofar as ethics is based on some descriptive premises about moral agents, about their actions, the circumstances in which they act, etc., the findings ought to affect ethical theory as well. I agree with Rottschaefer that our understanding of moral agency is, and ought to be, affected by relevant sciences of the human, as he agrees with me that the sciences ought to inform our understanding of the place of the human in the larger scheme of things.

Konner helps me formulate the "authority" (not his word) of literary sources in thinking about morality and religion. "They are adduced as part of the evidence of human experiences, as recorded by some of the keenest observers ever to have watched the passing

human scene." They are "part of the maze of the human sciences." Thus he corrects my interpretation of his use of them in *The Tangled Wing*. My distinction in "Explaining and Valuing" was based too much on the usage of "data" as bits of information within the framework of scientific explanations. While helped by Konner, I note his use of "maze"; it is a wonderfully perplexing maze, not easy to get out of when one gains different insights about the human from different literatures, some of which come from different cultures. I find myself in more complex mazes as I seek to evaluate the adequacy of different theories of human nature and activity in the light of the dense, thick accounts of novels and dramas. Finally, I suspect, some larger framework of coherence determines how an author uses literary, scientific, religious, and other sources in an interpretation of human life and action. Certainly what still divides Konner, Rottschaefer, and me is the choice of that larger framework of coherence. They do not endorse my theocentric perspective per se.

Rottschaefer and I would need to discuss more what he means by objective values. I am not sure I grasp adequately what he means when he says that in my approach "it is God's purposes that are constitutive of objective moral values." We may very much agree, but I prefer to avoid the language of "objective" values since it turns my attentions to arguments by persons like Max Scheler, Nicolai Hartmann, and others whose views of objective values I found unpersuasive; I see my view of values to be primarily relational.

I close with brief comments on each respondent. Rottschaefer is not known to me personally, nor, I confess, are his writings known to me any more than mine were to him until recently. His scientific naturalistic philosophy certainly takes into account much that my theocentric perspective does, and it is designed to avoid or resist certain tendencies we both find in much of traditional theology and religion. Our most basic difference, as I understand his work, is that I adduce aspects of the western religious traditions in my interpretive framework; this affects the interpretation of the meaning and significance of what we agree on.

Beckley has been one of the most serious scholars of my work, particularly *Ethics from a Theocentric Perspective*, for a long time. As noted above, his contribution to this number of *Zygon* redresses an imbalance that would be present for readers unacquainted with more of my work than the two essays included here. Beckley's interpretation, and his criticism, are astute and careful. I can only hope that he will find the occasion to rethink the methods and substance of Christian theological ethics which he endorses in my work.

Konner is too modest about his young man's work in *The Tangled Wing*. That youthful work testifies to the breadth of his learning, the height of his intelligence, and the profundity of his humanity. Ten years ago some senior University of Chicago faculty from medicine, biology, and education and I proposed a model for at least part of collegiate education that would center on biology and move out to affect how social sciences and humanistic studies could be reinterpreted in the light of biology; *The Tangled Wing* was in many ways the impetus for, and centerpiece of, that proposal. I am not as hopeful as Konner is that an increasing understanding of human nature will achieve what he aspires—modestly—for it. Nor do I expect a widespread religion to develop. I am, as I indicated in "Tracing a Trajectory," more occupied with the intersections of the various disciplines and the difficulties in negotiating their different descriptions, explanations, interpretations, and valuations of the same phenomena or events. But academic preoccupation aside, Konner's response is both intellectually challenging and personally moving. In many ways it is in the tone or spirit to which I aspire in my own work: "piety" and intellect interfused. I suppose that is why there is affinity between us and between our work, for which I am grateful.

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