

Religious Belief versus Scientific Knowledge in Undergraduate Students of Psychology

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1. Introduction

Several works by Wittgenstein present excellent testimony of the conflicts which build faith and, at the same time an actual model that one must not avoid addressing such conflicts from the standpoint of personal life experience despite the precision that one must develop in regards to the philosophical and scientific language. Furthermore, as stated by Abreu-e-Silva (in press), "Philosophy is seen by Wittgenstein, in its objectivity as an activity of language criticism, and in its subjectivity, as self-analysis activity".

This perspective of approaching knowledge construction also as an outcome of *work on oneself* inspired the reflections introduced in this study. The reflections were based on the results of a research undertaken with Psychology students from the Catholic University of Brasilia – UCB, Brazil. We consider the epistemological oppositions between science and religion as an issue overcame yet once the similarities and differences between them have been sufficiently studied by logics, as illustrated in the writings of Weingartner who analyses the scientific and the religious beliefs in various levels in a detailed and formal way (Weingartner, 1994) and shows that regardless of what is commonly believed, it is possible to apply logics to religious problems (Weingartner, 1998). Abreu e Silva (in press), inspired by Wittgenstein's statement: "I am not a religious man, but I can not help seeing everything from a religious perspective" proposes that Clinical Psychology would be more effective in its specifically therapeutic action if it considered daily human phenomena through a religious point of view, since a pure innocuous scientific perspective has been ineffective to relieve the most fundamental human suffering.

This work, therefore, proposes that during their educational process, psychology students should be asked to conduct important reflections about their own subjectivity through the activity of language criticism and extract from them a rich experience for their future professional career. In order to accomplish that we need to avoid theoretical reductionism, and assume that it is not a task for Psychology to dispute the ontological reality of God or a transcendent dimension. It is its task to consider the studied subjects, clients' convictions and to respect and understand the acquired meaning of these convictions in the context of their lives.

2. Religion and Psychology: The Supposed Rivalry

On one hand, contemporary introductory psychology textbooks systematically avoid the subject of religious phenomena in the human experience, or in what is conventionally called "Psychology of Religion". On the other hand, history shows that Psychology, since its origins in Philosophy until its contemporary format, was constructed by men in their efforts to understand such phenomena. If it is possible that a number of the academic psychologists would have had difficulties speaking about the subject, it is also true that the great figures in history of Psychology, such as Brentano, Wundt, William James, Freud & Jung,

did not avoid it. In fact they pursued it on their own account, intensively reflecting about the question in the context of their own inner life.

Clinical psychology, which is fundamentally based on the concept of "help", is the chosen field of most of the psychology students since the beginning of their studies. Its foundation is religious, however, under a rationalist shelter, moreover in a secularised culture and in its urge to seek the scientific status, the clinical psychologist aims to show that his work is not only independent from religious beliefs but also, in a certain way, it is its declared rival. The price of this intent is an artificial established dichotomy, frequently at the expense of the lived experience (*Erlebnis*). A paradox is then created: the very avoidance of the fundamental object of clinic – the *life-world*.

The mentioned paradox creates a great discomfort, as expressed by the Psychology students. It is experienced in several ways, for example: in a tendency to live their religious orientation or the cultivation of their own beliefs as an heresy in the academic context. By being considered heretic, the theme tends to be avoided resulting in a black spot between belief and knowledge. In this way, when religious themes are dealt within an interview in an authentic and moving relationship, the students' initial reactions are cathartic (because the topic until then has been repressed), or tense (expressed by long silences, distrust looks, nervous smiles and half smiles, jokes as if to gain time to approach the theme in the perspective of the *lived experience*).

Under the name of a supposed asepsis between the belief and the knowledge universes, the *belief* of that rational variables of science negatively affect the religious position and the *belief* that irrational variables of religion negatively affect science are frequently cultivated. This sterile attempt establishes a false dichotomy, as if science and religion were disputing over the same prize, which is the correct description and explanation for the psychological phenomena. Frequently students statements denounce their teachers' assumptions within the academic context: the prize belongs to science. In this way, it is cultivated in that context the position that religious belief is pejorative, minor and innocuous; and therefore must be uprooted due to its posed risk of contaminating the intellectual education by undermining the true scientific knowledge development.

In the context of a supposed rivalry between psychological knowledge and beliefs of religious nature, the subjective, affective and cognitive impact of the studied contents during the courses is expressed in the students' *life-world* in different ways: personal conflict between belief and knowledge; inter-personal conflict with family, teachers and peers; insecurity or doubt regarding the distinguishing criteria between psychopathology and religious experience; preoccupation regarding ethical issues in the future relationship with religious or atheist patients.

A great deal of the intra- and inter-personal conflicts are anchored in the opposition between the contents of belief as posed by the scientific discourse and its contents as posed within the religious sphere.

If both were placed in different, although complementary planes, such conflicts would no longer exist. However, few students are able to grasp this difference and understand the conceptual confusion when the scientific speech (which follows a criteria of the natural forces with logical and empirical verification) tries to cover the theological plane (whose criteria is a transcendent revelation), and vice versa.

Furthermore the uncertainty to distinguish psychopathology from religious experience is anchored on a dichotomy established by the psychiatric speech (or "vocabulary") which created an opposition between the normal and the pathological. Again, this is much more an opposition between the content of a belief in its supposed scientific origin (which also prescribes values and life styles it recommends, for example medication or other alternatives of psychiatric treatment) and the content of a religious belief (which can recommend prayers for example). In this direction, if the content of a religious belief is based on the idea of evil, sin or the good and evil fruit, the criteria in Psychiatry has varied throughout history depending on their approach emphasis, e.g. organic, empirical, psychodynamic or cultural.

Frequently the student's concerns regarding to ethics is based on the demand of impartiality in the practice of clinical psychology. This supposed impartiality is supported on the scientific neutrality myth, which seeks to refrain from any beliefs when conducting the therapeutic work. In this sense, some psychology students come to admit that they are gradually adopting psychology as their religion. This is based on a belief that psychology will make it possible for them to accomplish the *ideal of helpfulness*, sustained by the mystical attitude of dedication to the other without falling in the abusive power of a guardianship, a supposed characteristic of a religious authority. This expectation also hides an ethical dilemma: the repudiation of the religious theme would not also be an abuse of guardianship power, in this case, legitimated by the supposedly scientific authority assumed by Psychology?

Fortunately, the ethical concerns are not based only on the model offered by the scientific neutrality myth. Many students seem touched and receptive to the opportunity of a space to discuss and elaborate their own religious beliefs, which can enable them to deal better with their future patients' beliefs. In this case, a better personal and professional development is demanded in order to deal with the theme and shelter *the lived experience* in its diversified expressions, including the religious one. In other words, it is required a psychology that would be established upon technical knowledge only, but also, recognised in its expressive action. And this implies in accepting the need of a double dynamism: firstly to qualify the patient's *felt experience*, that must not be replaced by a discourse which disregards the reality of human suffering which usually comes along with it; and secondly, to recognize that science and knowledge are built in and through language, not allowing the naive acceptance of a pure a naturalist observation cut apart from the evidence that every observer, in their case that the psychologist is a human being and therefore a bearer for language, desires, and after all, beliefs.

3. Conclusions

In spite of semantic borders given by language, the interview method allowed student's speech to appear as a general symptom of scientific production. In this way, we conclude for a demand of a greater integration between

the scientific contents studied in psychology and the theological dimension, in order to create conditions for the psychology students to deepen their epistemological reflection, and simultaneously to create alternatives to review their meanings of religious or scientific beliefs.

Due to the fact that education in psychology gives priorities to theories that are constructed under a rationalist shelter and simultaneously aims at developing the student's capacity of critical and ethical review of the dogmatic assumptions, a defensive ideology is created. This leads many students to an exercise of uprooting the religious belief in their own subjective experience. This exercise is lived with suffering and anguish. It remains then the questions: the destruction of determined dogmas is only possible by their replacement at expense of the development and maintenance of other dogmas as it seems to be felt by some students? Or, would it be possible a more integrative approach for the sake of the psychology student's and their future client's mental health?

Considering that religious position is not affected significantly by the rational variables of science (once both can shelter different kinds of beliefs), but by the psychological ones (and many of them unconscious), here we defend a psychology education that is able to contemplate *the religious* as an object for reflection. Until the belief phenomena are appropriately considered, a conceptual confusion will remain and the scientific attitude will be mistaken for ideology, defensive or not. Once it is supported by the paradigm of control, such ideology limits itself to border *the speakable* (the proper scientific domain) it aims to replace the paradigm of *surrender*, the domain of the ineffable, unspeakable where the limits of that control are suspended.

From the ethical standpoint, this replacement is unbearable, the *lived experience* denounces that what is actually meaningful for the search and fulfilment of the existential meaning resides beyond the technical and elaborated knowledge. If the psychology students do not realise that, they will continue reproducing the supposed rivalry between scientific and religious belief. Among its other serious implications, this conceptual confusion will be more effective at enabling the psychologist to fight in the work market (competing with the religious leaders for example) than to prepare the psychologists for a more respectful clinical practice concerning the more fundamental human questions.

References

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