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Cover Page Footnote

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How Radical Are the Implications of Properzi's Christ-Centered Perspective on Emotion for Psychology and Psychotherapy?

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Properzi offers a perspective on emotion that is radically different from traditional secular theories of emotion and the psychotherapy approaches associated with those theories, but perhaps his Christ-centered perspective is even more radical than he perceives it. If it is strongly theistic and strongly relational, as it appears to be, then its implications would significantly alter the psychology of emotion and psychotherapy. These implications need to be explicated so it is clear what a Christ-centered perspective on emotion would mean to the discipline. I have fleshed out three radical implications regarding scope, relational ontology, and mastery discourse to demonstrate how significantly Properzi's perspective would alter the psychology of emotion and emotion-focused psychotherapies if it is as theistic and relational as it seems to be.

Keywords: theism, relationality, emotions, Christ-centered

Having focused much of my professional career on the relationship between faith, religion, and psychology, I am grateful for the opportunity to write a response to Properzi's very intriguing article. Properzi's work is timely, and his corrective to a growing emotionalism in Western society is critically needed. He rightly implicates, I believe, several problematic ontological assumptions in the secular psychological theories of emotion, including a long-standing mastery discourse that presumes a dichotomy between the rational and the emotional—and a necessary ascendancy of one over the other; an individualistic conception of identity that locates emotion (and reason) within the unique, bounded self; and a postmodern penchant for relativism that centers truth in the radically autonomous self and—more precisely—in one's personal feelings. His challenge of these assumptions offers a genuine and much-needed alternative understanding of emotion through a Christ-centered perspective on emotions, identity, and truth. Locating

emotions, identity, and truth in our relationship with a living, embodied being who is “the way, the truth, and the life” (Properzi, 2018, p. 5) has radical, altering implications for the psychology of emotions and psychotherapy. I greatly appreciate the way in which Properzi critically compares and contrasts the secular and Christ-centered approaches to emotion in this very thoughtful paper particularly because his analysis shows how drastically different naturalistic and theistic conceptions of psychological phenomena can be.

In my own work I have examined the extent to which a theistic approach to psychology might contribute to the advancement of knowledge within a

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discipline that has predominately treated God as being at most an add-on assumption to naturalistic explanations (Slife & Reber, 2009; Slife, Reber, & Lefevor, 2012). By centering emotions, identity, and truth in Christ, Dr. Properzi's (2018) paper clearly does not treat God as merely added-on. On the contrary, his perspective asserts that "emotions cannot transcend or be separated from Christ" (p. 5) and, as such, appears to fit comfortably within a theistic worldview, which, in contrast to a naturalistic worldview, assumes that the current activity of God is a necessary condition for psychological phenomena (Reber & Slife, 2013b). I use the verb "appears" here because, although in Properzi's perspective on emotions God is clearly important and may even be essential, the full scope of God's necessity is unclear and the radical implications that would follow from this idea that God currently takes an active role in emotions are not fully fleshed out. My intention in this response is to explicate for consideration by Properzi and the broader audience of his paper a few of the radical implications that would follow from the inclusion of God as a necessary condition of emotion.

RADICAL IMPLICATION I:
THE CHRIST-CENTERED PERSPECTIVE WOULD APPLY
TO THE EMOTIONS OF ALL PEOPLE

The worldviews of naturalism and theism assume very different ontologies. Naturalism assumes that only natural entities, events, and causes are necessary for explanation (Papineau, 2007). Consequently, naturalistic theories of emotion tend to posit a material-causal process or mechanism that operates according to natural laws, as in Darwin's assertion that emotions, like other traits, evolve according to the law of natural selection through the mechanism of inheritance (later to become genetics). Some naturalists would allow for the added assumption that God originally created or put in place the natural laws and mechanisms that now govern the evolution and expression of emotions, as in some forms of deistic theology (Slife & Reber, 2009). However, allowing God's inclusion in this way gives God no bearing on the explanation, prediction, or control of emotions presently because God is not currently involved. Thus, the naturalistic explanation is taken to be sufficient (De Caro & Macarthur, 2010).

Dr. Properzi's (2018) paper appears to assert something quite different. From Properzi's perspective, "emotions cannot transcend or be separated from Christ, they can only be integrated into a wider system of reality that centers on Him" (p. 5). On this account, naturalistic explanations of emotion are not only inadequate, but they are also ultimately wrong—and not just for Christians, but apparently for all people. I write "apparently" again in quotation marks here because Properzi leaves the scope of his Christ-centered perspective unclear. Throughout the paper, as in the previous quote, he makes broad ontological claims about Christ and emotions, identity and God (e.g., p. 5), and truth and Christ (e.g., p. 9) without any qualification unique to Christians. Yet at other points in the paper Properzi seems to delimit the applicability of the Christ-centered perspective to Christians. He states, for example, that "*Christian therapists* that have an established relationship of safety and trust with *Christian clients* [emphasis added] . . . could explore the status of this particular spiritual orientation and emphasize its importance for overall emotional well-being" (p. 11). He also asserts that "Jesus' claim to be the Son of God has powerful and radical implications for all who desire to follow Him [emphasis added]" (p. 5; see also p. 7 and 10).

It is unclear whether this ambiguity concerning the scope of Properzi's Christ-centered perspective reflects any hesitation with asserting its universal necessity. Perhaps Properzi is aware of the divisiveness stereotypically associated with theistic religions, and he wants to avoid the appearance of proselytizing or claiming Christianity's superiority to other faith traditions. If so, such a concern would not be unique to Properzi. Many psychologists omit discussion of their personal faith and its relevant precepts in their scholarship to avoid any hint of religious bias. Some editors of journals on psychology and religion disallow any inclusion of theistic approaches to psychology in the articles they publish because they have "strong feelings about theistic psychology" (Park, 2017, sect. "Values of the Journal," para. 1) compromising the objectivity of empirical science. As a result, they deem papers that employ "theological constructs" in explaining psychological phenomena "inappropriate" (Piedmont, 2009, p. 1) for their journals. Similarly, some critics of theistic approaches to psychology, foremost among

them Daniel Helminiak (2010, 2017), assert that theistic approaches to psychology are based on personal religious beliefs, biases, and agendas that threaten to undermine objective science.

Given these concerns, Properzi could reasonably expect that his article would raise a number of questions about his seemingly universal claims that Christ plays a necessary role in emotions, identity, and truth. Readers may wonder: "If emotions are inseparable from God, why must God be the Christian God?" Or they might query, "If, as Properzi asserts, the Christian God is the necessary God of emotions, then does that mean psychologists must convert to Christianity or at least act as if Christianity is true for the sake of theorizing, conducting research, and practicing psychotherapy in relation to emotions?" They could also ask, "Would this Christ-centered perspective exclude and potentially discriminate against other theistic perspectives, such as Islamic or Jewish theistic conceptions of emotions, identity, and truth?"

These are reasonable questions, and it is completely fair and necessary to ask them of Properzi or of any advocate of a theistic approach. What is not fair, however, is assuming that these kinds of questions apply only or primarily to the theistic approach. Quite the contrary, questions like these apply to all worldviews, including scientists' vaunted naturalism. In naturalism's case many laypeople and some scientists mistakenly take for granted the idea that naturalists have a common and agreed-upon understanding of laws of nature. In fact, there are many competing conceptions of natural laws within naturalism, from metaphysical realities that act upon the world to mathematical descriptions of regularly occurring events to linguistic constructs that have achieved a high level of social consensus among scientists (Dixon, 2008). Different naturalistic thinkers take different positions on these conceptions, and they promote, debate, and test these positions against each other all the time. Indeed, it is a hallmark of science that proponents of these different concepts conduct experiments, publish articles, and give presentations in an effort to persuade their peers to accept their competing theories.

Why would we not expect and encourage the same thing of the various approaches arising out of a theistic worldview? Just as natural scientists take their conceptions of natural law to be true and promote

them in the marketplace of ideas, so too can theistic psychologists take different faith positions seriously and advocate for them strongly in their scholarship. As a matter of good scientific practice, these competing positions should be debated and tested against each other as to their capacity to advance knowledge within the discipline. A monolithic position and wholesale conversion to it would be unlikely, just as has been the case within naturalism. However, an enriched, rigorously evaluated, and pluralistically informed theistic understanding of emotion could emerge that could in turn be compared, contrasted, and tested against the various conceptions emerging from a naturalistic ontology—or from other ontologies—all in pursuit of furthering productive dialog and the advancement of the knowledge of emotions within psychology. To claim that there is something unique to theism that makes this impossible would be tantamount to an antitheistic prejudice (Slife & Reber, 2009).

If, as it appears, Properzi's theistic approach assumes that Christ is a necessary condition of emotion for all people, then Properzi ought to take that stand definitively and own its radical implications. Other researchers with different theistic perspectives on emotion, as well as those with different naturalistic perspectives, can and should do likewise. Each of these scholars can and should challenge and critically evaluate these competing views rigorously in a shared endeavor to understand this complex psychological phenomenon, similar to Properzi's critical analysis of secular and Christian perspectives on emotion in this paper. If, on the other hand, Properzi's perspective is not theistic or if it is weakly theistic, as in deism, then Christ is not currently necessary to the explanation of emotions for anyone, including Christians—though Christians might add Christ onto the naturalistic explanation in some inconsequential way. This weakly theistic approach would take the teeth out of Properzi's argument that emotions are inseparable from Christ and that our identities must be swallowed up in His identity. Finally, if Christ for Properzi is a currently necessary condition for only Christians' emotions, then a number of theological concerns come to bear (e.g., as to whether Christ is the life and the light of the world, the Alpha and Omega, etc.), and Properzi needs to revise the broader claims he has made in this paper to reflect this limitation. Moreover,

such a position would suggest that Christians need a different psychology to explain their emotions than those of people of other faiths and naturalists. Perhaps Properzi has considered these implications, but it would be clarifying and helpful if he would share his position in relation to them more explicitly.

RADICAL IMPLICATION 2:
EMOTIONS ARE RELATIONAL PHENOMENA

By locating the way, the truth, and the life of emotion in Christ, Properzi's article implicates a seismic shift from what has been a long history of atomistic conceptions of emotion to a relational conception of emotion. Atomism is an ancient concept developed originally by the Greek philosophers Leucippus and Democritus, who postulated that the universe consists of tiny bits of matter and empty space. They named the tiny bits of matter "atoms" and asserted that atoms contain within themselves the properties that are needed to explain them. Empty space has no substance and no properties and therefore cannot contribute to the makeup of the material world or to explanations of reality.

In psychology, the chief atom of concern has traditionally been the individual. Individuals are thought to contain within themselves the substances and properties needed for their explanation as well as for the explanation of any larger social groups they compose. The space between individuals, because it is empty of any material, is assumed to have no qualities in itself and is therefore incapable of contributing to psychological explanation. Given this perspective, it is not surprising that psychologists locate emotions within individuals, emerging from the material that makes them up. Emotions are regulated and expressed by the self. This self-containment perspective is at the heart of the issues Properzi discusses throughout his paper. Concepts of expressive individualism, identity politics, radical autonomy, narcissism, authenticity, subjectivity, self-determination, personal truth, and so on can exist and have currency in psychology and the public marketplace of ideas only if an underlying atomism is assumed.

Therapy, too, is suffused with atomism. Therapists often teach clients to reframe their emotional expressions in ways that implicate self-containment. When a

client says, "My wife makes me so mad," for example, many therapists train the client to rephrase that statement more atomistically, as in "I feel angry when I observe my wife behaving in x, y, or z way." Outside of the therapy office, it has become quite commonplace for people to use similarly atomistic language regarding emotions (as well as thoughts and behaviors). When a sibling teases another child and the child loses his temper, for example, parents often chasten the child with these words: "You may not be responsible for your sibling teasing you, but you are responsible for your emotional reaction." The message is clear: "Your emotions are contained within you, and as a result you alone are accountable for them."

Properzi's (2018) Christ-centered perspective seems to suggest something radically alternative to atomism, but here again there is some ambiguity. At some points in his paper Properzi treats emotions and identity atomistically. He defines emotions as "concern-based construals' . . . that integrate a number of cognitive-affective realities *in the individual* [emphasis added]" (p. 8). This integrative concept may suggest a less materialistic perspective, but it still appears to be one that is self-contained "in the individual." Further on he writes of "emotions that emerge within us" (p. 6), which idea is wholly consistent with secular atomistic psychological theories of emotion. Finally, when he speaks of aligning personal identity, values, and actions with Christ's values and identity (p. 6), it is reminiscent of correspondence ontologies in which the alignment of two separate self-contained realities is the goal, such as the objective world and one's subjective representation of it.

Yet, at other points in the paper, Properzi speaks of emotions as transcendent of the self (p. 4) and "markers of a self in transformation and in union with its Source" (p. 7). Concepts of "self-emptying" (p. 6) and of our identity being "swallowed up" (p. 11) in Christ's identity clearly intimate a dissolution of any presumed hard boundaries of separation. Instead of self-containment, we contain Christ, and Christ contains us. As Properzi puts it using Christ's own words, we abide in Him and He abides in us, like the vine and its branches (p. 8). This makes the location of emotion harder to pin down as the boundaries of identity are fluid and permeable, and emotions appear to be more shared or between us than within us. These statements, in

contrast with those connoting self-containment, make it difficult to discern just how relational Properzi's concepts of emotion, identity, and truth are. Certainly, if the truth is a person, if emotions are inseparable from that person, and if our identity can be swallowed up in the identity of the person, then all these things are more relational than atomistic. However, there are weak conceptions of relationality that assume atomism (Slife & Wiggins, 2009). Properzi leaves the question open as to the strength of the relationality in his Christ-centered approach.

If Properzi intends a strongly relational theism, then the implications for the psychology of emotion would be significant. First, a strongly relational Christian theism assumes that we are always and already in a relationship with Christ and therefore are never self-contained separate beings (Reber & Slife, 2013a). Our identity, then, is at least in part dependent upon Christ. The statement from Neal Maxwell quoted by Properzi (p. 11) demonstrates this point clearly. Maxwell states that the only thing that is uniquely our own possession is our will. Everything else comes from God. So who we are has everything to do with our relationship with Christ, and consequently our emotions cannot be understood apart from that relationship. Our very capacity to feel, express, and understand emotion depends upon Christ.

Second, emotions are relational phenomena that happen between us as much as they do within us. I am reminded of Martin Buber's statement that "spirit is not like the blood that circulates within you but like the air in which you breathe" (1958, p. 39). This simile resonates with us when we think of moments of deep empathy in which we have taken into ourselves other people's emotions—sometimes when we do not even want to—and we experience a degree of merging of self and other (Cuff, Brown, Taylor, & Howat, 2016). Many Christian scriptures reinforce this relational notion of emotions being like the air in which we breathe. "We love Him because He first loved us" (1 John 4:19) connotes a breathing in of His love that allows us to exhale His love back. In Matthew 6:22, we learn that His light can enter the eye and fill the whole body. Self-emptying and taking into us "the bread of life" (John 6:35) and "the fountain of living water" (Jeremiah 2:13) suggests an exhalation of the air of the natural man and an inhalation of the Spirit. Similarly,

when we breathe out the emotions of a fallen world and breathe in the emotions of Christ, His emotions become for those moments of inhalation a part of our being and identity.

Third, emotions ensue from the way in which we relate to each other, just as the fruits of the Spirit that Properzi mentions (p. 9) follow from our will being swallowed up in Christ's will. In this sense, statements like "my wife makes me angry" and "I feel angry when my wife does x, y, or z" are both problematic. Anger between husband and wife is not a product of a billiard ball causality between the atoms of individual selves, but it also is not a wholly independent agentic act of the individuals involved. Instead, it is the fruit that will most likely grow out of a relationship that is contextually constrained in a particular way. That is, the way in which husband and wife are presently and historically positioned in relation to each other and the broader culture discloses or illuminates anger as a "specially favored mode of resolution" (Merleau-Ponty, 2002, pp. 441–442), or a way of being and relating to each other around sensitive topics, like the handling of family finances. This is not unlike the way in which a door has become the specially favored way of exiting a room in our society as opposed to a window or a wall, or how a knife and fork are specially favored utensils for eating steak and potatoes in American culture as opposed to eating with one's hands or chopsticks.

It is important to note that we are not compelled to exit rooms by the door, or to eat meat and potatoes with forks and knives, or to get angry with our spouse. We could do otherwise. However, given the constraints of the context, we are highly inclined toward doing and feeling what is physically, societally, and relationally favored. This is particularly true in cases of trauma. The former world heavyweight champion boxer Mike Tyson once said that "everyone has a plan until they get punched in the mouth" (as cited in Berardino, 2012), meaning that the experience of a trauma can narrow the constraints of a context so strongly that all other possibilities than the one most favored (e.g., fight or flight) will fade away. Indeed, when traumas like physical and sexual assault, abuse, violence, and combat occur and/or are recalled, the only emotional air available to breathe in within that context is often that of fear, anger, shame, and sorrow.

The Book of Mormon prophet Nephi, who on several occasions was traumatized by his brothers Laman and Lemuel, could not help but breathe in his brothers' anger. As a result, he found himself feeling similarly angry toward them. As he describes the constraints of his context and the air in which he was forced to breathe at that time, he notes that "I am encompassed about, because of the temptations and the sins which do so easily beset me" (2 Nephi 4:18, *The Book of Mormon*). Nephi's words, "*do so easily beset me*," and Merleau-Ponty's words, "*specially favored modes of resolution*," can be taken as synonyms here. They both show how powerfully context can influence our feelings. Later in that same chapter, Nephi utters a prayer in which he begs his Father in Heaven to "encircle me around in the robe of thy righteousness" (2 Nephi 4:33). This request is in direct contrast with being "encompassed about," because of temptations and sins. In Buber's terms Nephi is crying out for the Lord's context—for His merciful and redeeming air to breathe in—so he can exhale the anger he holds within him and inhale the love of God. Similarly, from a Christ-centered perspective on emotion, disciples of Christ, recognizing how easily emotions do beset us in the relational contexts of our everyday lives, would desire a close redeeming relationship with Christ as often as possible. In those moments in which intimate connection with our Savior is achieved—when we are encircled by His air—then, as Nephi's prayer illustrates, emotions like charity will be specially favored over other emotions, like anger, and are most likely to ensue.

RADICAL IMPLICATION 3: NEITHER REASON NOR EMOTIONS ARE OUR MASTER

If Properzi's Christ-centered approach to emotions is strongly relational and strongly theistic, then it suggests a radical alternative to the mastery discourse of modernism in which the rational mind is supposed to reign in the passions. It also runs counter to the rising mastery discourse Properzi describes so well, in which one's personal feelings—and the expression of those feelings—reign supreme over all else. Both of these mastery discourses are really just different sides of the same atomistic coin. A relational ontology of emotions, on the other hand, displaces reason and emotion from

the self-contained individual and locates them in the relational air in which we breathe or in what Einstein and Infeld (1938) referred to as "the field in the space between" (p. 244). Physicists of the 20th century discovered that the "space between" physical matter is not empty of properties, as atomists had long supposed. It is full of qualities that contribute to phenomena and are necessary for scientific explanation.

When, as Properzi describes, we abide in Christ and He abides in us, "the field in the space between" us is filled with His spirit and with His divine emotions. As we submit our will to His and breathe in His spirit and His emotions, then it is Christ and His emotions that master us, guide our thoughts and actions, and suffuse our relationships. At the same time, Christ breathes in whatever feelings we exhale in repentance and faith. Through His atoning mercy He can redeem our emotions, sanctify them as only a God can, and breathe them back to us anew. Then like the disciples on the road to Emmaus, our hearts will burn within us, and we can love with His love. In this way neither reason nor personal emotions hold the reins. It is not an intrapersonal mastery dynamic at all. It is interpersonal. Christ's emotions, like His spirit and His reason, guide and direct us under His yoke and His burden, which is light.

This theistic relational mastery discourse has significant implications for psychology and especially for therapy. Rather than endeavor to help clients gain control of their emotions by training them to think more rationally or by accepting and expressing their emotions as personal, inviolable truths, therapists would seek to support and strengthen a closer relationship between their clients and Christ. Therapists would assist their clients in self-emptying and submitting their will to the will of the Savior. They would help their clients walk a path of discipleship in which they share the air with Christ and can breathe in His emotions and yield to His will.

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