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A Matter of Perspective

Kristin Hansen

Faulconer’s paper is a call to hear, see and understand one another better. The author compares how four different major religious groups experience “the Law.” Through his inquiry into each group’s experience, Faulconer makes the argument that belief alone cannot account for the differences between each group. He finds that within each religious perspective the law provides each group with a way of organizing life that goes beyond differences in belief.

In this response to Faulconer’s paper, I will first address what I see as his call to professionals to hear, see and understand one another better and will discuss his approach for doing so. Using a distinction from Joseph F. Rychlak (1968, 1991, 1994), I will examine the role of perspective or point of view in Faulconer’s analysis and his struggle with whether immersion in the first-person point of view is truly possible. I will then comment on his claim that belief cannot account for the differences between these groups and make a further claim that his argument is true or false depending on the perspective or view one holds of human nature. Recognizing the perspective we are taking when we theorize in psychology, I believe, is of more immediate or of equal importance to Faulconer’s task of showing by example what type of theorizing can create greater understanding.

FOUR PERSPECTIVES OF THE LAW

Faulconer’s paper wonderfully plays with perspective. The author explores how we see, hear and understand each other by opening with a contrast between the secular world today and a more religious world prior to the fifteenth or sixteenth century. He discusses how relations between and among humans and the world “are in virtue of the symbols they use” and the meaning they give to their symbols. Prior to the fifteenth and sixteenth century, he addresses, how “religion was the ordering principle of the world” and thus religious meaning was given to symbols. Activities carried out by man reveal the divine. Man’s existence is a reflection of the sacred revealed symbolically. Beliefs are expressions of religion revealed; that is, religious “ritual and the rest, including belief, are expressions of a religious way of life, a way of life which sees the world in terms of the sacred...” (p.3).

Faulconer contrasts this view with our modern secular perspective that limits religion to morality. Religion becomes a set of beliefs one holds. Such beliefs are “conceptual representations of the ideal world...[and] are what make it possible for us to act in religious ways” (p. 3). Beliefs are the cause of action not religion. A secular perspective reveals man’s beliefs in his actions, rather than God’s order in man’s life. A shift in perspective occurs whereby the secular man no longer sees himself as an instrument in God’s hands revealing the divine but
as a holder of religious ideals who is acting them out. A religious ordering of life is no longer one’s point of view; rather, one sees oneself as acting on behalf of one’s self, or in other words, on behalf of one’s ideals.

These contrasting perspectives demonstrate how perspective can greatly change how one orders and organizes one’s life. Despite the predominant secular perspective, Faulconer still lives in a world that is largely symbolically ordered. He lives as a “believer.” He maintains a different perspective despite the prevailing view. He also demonstrates that the prevailing view is really only the view of some, when one examines how the law is understood, through outlining the “different though overlapping symbolic orders” from four modern day religious perspectives: Judaism, Islam, traditional Christianity and Mormonism.

Faulconer makes the claim that one must understand how members of each faith live in the world, to understand how they view the law. Capturing the essence of religion requires taking a perspective that views how the symbolic ordering of religious life gives form to life for the members of a particular religious faith. To simply compare religious beliefs misses the richer more complex picture of each perspective. The author writes, “...Understanding the social and psychical lives of religious people will require more than understanding their beliefs. It will require understanding their being-in-the-world” (p. 4).

Despite his professed use of “broad strokes of caricature” to compare the law across four religions, Faulconer provides a rich comparison that demonstrates his point. He traces the historical roots of each religious group and shows how each tradition has a different organizing principle for defining, experiencing and living the law. In Judaism, he shows how the law resulted in the combining of religion and ethical/moral life while the state was kept separate. Submission to God’s teaching predominates and one loves God by loving and knowing His scripture. Such understanding reveals how Judaism survived the destruction of its state and why a Jew may focus more on his or her love of the Torah, Jewish law given divinely by God, than love of God. Furthermore, it helps us understand, Faulconer writes, why the Roman conquerors had trouble understanding “the Jewish, and later the Christian, refusal to offer sacrifices to the Roman emperor” (p. 7). The Roman’s morality was not connected to nationality as was the case for the Jews and later the Christians.

Faulconer describes how Islamic law requires submission to God directly and no separation is made between the religious, moral and political because God is in everything. Muslims submit by obeying which is very different from the Christian form of submission, which involves yielding one’s will to God. While Judaism focuses on submission to the law in the Torah, Muslims are organized around submission to God.

Faulconer shows how traditional Christians are organized around the absence of the law, Christ having overcome the law through his Atonement. In contrast, he states that Mormons are organized around organization and family; that is the laws have been given to help Mormons organize themselves on the earth in preparation for Christ’s coming. Traditional Christians learn through Jesus’ teachings how to overcome the law and how to master their inner attitudes; Mormons must master inner attitudes and also demonstrate obedience to the law by which they want to live. Jesus sets the example for the highest law and Mormons can choose to live by that law or a lesser one if so desired. Like traditional Christians, the highest law requires that one live by the Spirit rather than by the law alone.

In summary, Faulconer describes how during different time periods and among different traditions, the world operated under different organizing principles. Furthermore, in our modern day, despite a prevailing secular view among different religious groups, there are very different ways of organizing reality. Faulconer claims that these different religious groups are, not only believing in different propositions, but they are living life differently. The fact that misunderstandings occur among different religious faiths and between those with secular views becomes understandable when seen through Faulconer’s examples of faithful Jews, Muslims, Christians and Mormons with varying ways of organizing life around the law.

THE TAKING ON OF ANOTHER’S PERSPECTIVE

Of course, even when one attempts to take on another’s view of how one experiences life, the task is very difficult. Faulconer acknowledges this. Faulconer writes that individuals of different faiths [such as a Mormon learning about Judaism] can learn about another’s beliefs but “the Mormon would have difficulty understanding the possibility of believing those things” (p.16). Faulconer’s point illustrates the need to get into another’s perspective and at the same time acknowledges the difficulty with doing so. How do we get into another’s perspective when we are hindered by our own biases, history and background?
And by what we do not see and understand, we may simplify and lose the richness of another's view. For example, some meditation researchers fear that the "Western lens" when applied to the study of meditation causes the loss of valuable understanding (Walsh and Shapiro, 2006). As is often the tendency in the West, reducing meditation to a relaxation response, a physiological mechanism, distorts the learning that can occur from a deeper understanding of the meditation process.

Recognition of one’s biases, background, and all that one brings to an understanding of another seems to be the first step in “getting into” another’s perspective. While recognizing that a Mormon would have trouble actually experiencing what it feels like to live as a Jew, Muslim or traditional Christian, Faulconer does not want to make a simplistic comparison of the beliefs of each of these faiths which might allow him to avoid his biases. Instead, he attempts to get into each perspective in spite of not being able to do so literally.

**HIDDEN ASSUMPTIONS IN PSYCHOLOGY’S PERSPECTIVE TAKING**

In psychology, a similar movement in perspective taking has arisen out of an appreciation for cultural diversity and sensitivity to one’s own cultural countertransference or cultural narcissism when working with clients, students and research subjects. Education is a key to opening up perspective and helping psychologists see, hear and understand others better and in more complex ways. Among medical professionals, there is a movement called “cultural humility” which, at its heart, helps professionals recognize their cultural blind spots while at the same time be open to learning about another’s perspective (Tervalon and Murray-Garcia, 1998). However, even if we have the desire to see, hear and understand from another’s perspective, we may fall short, not only because we have difficulty imagining the possibility of another’s lived experience as Faulconer so rightly points out, but also because our theories about human nature may limit our ability to see and hear even more deeply than our multicultural education allows. Faulconer is able to shift perspectives towards getting into the mind of another in a way that Western psychology does on occasion without awareness and most often does not, due to its prevailing theories of human behavior.

Western psychology has hidden assumptions in its theories for explaining behavior (Slife and Williams, 1995). Reductionism, such as metaphysical, temporal, materialistic, mechanical, and biological, found in Western psychological theories of human behavior offer the illusion of simplicity but have “problematic implications for the meaning of human life and human being themselves” (Slife and Williams, 1995, p. 163). Rychlak (1991, 1994) makes a similar claim that the mechanistic reductionism present in modern day psychological theorizing does not give an accurate portrayal of human nature and instead presents one that ignores meaning and human agency. Even postmodern theorists, whose theories account for meaning and relatedness, still make assumptions about the role of the environment in shaping behavior and have difficulty conceptualizing free will (Slife and Williams, 1995).

Avoiding such reductionism is the central theme of Faulconer’s paper. He presents us with a paradox: can we understand another’s beliefs even though we can never have the possibility of believing those things? Faulconer addresses this paradox by suggesting that “understanding requires what hermeneutic philosophers call a ‘fusion of horizons.’” According to the author, to truly understand another, one must try to understand temporarily another’s position as if it makes sense. Faulconer wants to understand the other person, “psychically, existentially, conceptually” as if he were in the other’s shoes. From this place, Faulconer’s judgments about the other’s perspective falls away and he cares only for his view from within the other’s perspective. While Faulconer completely immerses himself in another to see through the other’s eyes, he still struggles with the reality of whether such an immersion is possible. Rychlak (1994) provides an overlooked contribution that I believe helps us begin to address whether Faulconer’s immersion is possible.

**THE INTROSPECTIVE / EXTRASPECTIVE DISTINCTION**

Rychlak (1994) makes a distinction between introspective and extraspective theorizing. Extraspective theorizing occurs when we study human behavior from the “outside.” This is the type of theorizing that we presently do in psychology. We view humans at a distance and compare groups of individuals. Individuals are viewed as independent of their environment, but living in it. Given this independence, individuals are comparable on single dimensions or on combinations of dimensions such as appearance, beliefs (expressed thoughts), expressed emo-
tion, and behavior. In other words, when we theorize about human nature from an extraspective perspective, we attend to the reported “contents” of the mind and look at data concerning reported mental contents, reported emotional experience, and biological and environmental factors. We tend to explore the interaction between biology and the environment and try to distinguish the proportion of biological and environmental causes. Even when we ask a research participant to reveal motivation and intention about reported mental contents, we can never truly know the “truth” for that person because we are outside him or her. We become judges of human behavior and guess at motivation and intention. The role of the observer’s influence on the reality being observed is not taken into account though we know that the observer’s presence can change what is being observed (Orne, 1962).

In contrast, from an introspective perspective, we can theorize about human behavior from within the individual. Rychlak (1968, 1994) distinguishes an introspective perspective from the concepts of objective and subjective. For Rychlak, “objective” means that which can be communicated and “subjective” means that which cannot be communicated. An introspective perspective is not just referring to subjectivity and is not looking from the outside at a person noting his or her subjectivity. Rather, from an introspective perspective, we are in a first-person understanding of the person and from here we are within the individuals’ unique background, culture and environment in each moment of time (Rychlak, 1994). Rychlak writes, “As introspective theorists we are in the heads or hearts of the item we are observing; we identify with the object of investigation. The targeted item being explained is situated ‘here’ and not ‘there’” (p. 10). As we theorize about human nature from an introspective perspective or a first-person point of view, we are able to observe “agency” as the central conceptualizing capacity of the individual who has been placed in a temporal existence, both in body and in environment (Rychlak, 1994). It is only in theorizing from an introspective perspective that we are able to see and hear on a perceptual level as well as a spiritual level.

From an introspective perspective, we become the individual with a spiritual as well as a biological nature, organizing (choosing) reality meaningfully. From an introspective perspective, we are no longer concerned with guessing another’s intentions, instead we are in another’s truth and are enlightened by the reality that we are experiencing another individual choose and organize experience. Like Faulconer, who writes, “seeing things from another person’s point of view means understanding such things as the law in the way that the person understands them” (p. 17), we get “inside” another’s perspective. From “inside” another’s perspective, we know about another’s experience and empathize with the other whom we are “within,” while from an extraspective perspective, we are always on the “outside” and trying to have empathy, guessing at what another experiences and knows.

THE POSSIBILITY OF THE FIRST-PERSON PERSPECTIVE

Is it, therefore, truly possible to take an introspective perspective? Depending upon the task, a “first-person” type immersion is possible. First a process/content distinction must be made to analyze further Faulconer’s struggle with whether immersion is possible. Rychlak (1994) defines a process as “a discernible, repeatable course of action on the basis of which some item(s) under description is/are believed to be sequentially patterned...[while] a content is an ingredient that is produced, conveyed, or otherwise employed by a process” (p.4). In trying to understand how a process that we all share works, such as cognition, theorizing from “inside” a person is possible because we can look inside ourselves and generalize to others. This is what Rychlak does. According to Rychlak, this type of theorizing is necessary to account accurately for human meaning making, affective assessment, and agency. However, when we try to understand the specific contents of another’s perspective from an introspective perspective, we are, of course, limited by our own biases.

Like Rychlak, Faulconer climbs inside the individual and reflects on what Rychlak would call process; he is observing that individuals with varying backgrounds have a relationship to the law depending upon their background knowledge, faith, shared community and shared way of experiencing life. This type of immersion is possible. However, where immersion becomes difficult is when Faulconer goes a step further and observes specific mental and emotional contents that such an individual would experience. We can only assume Faulconer is limited by his biases in this process. He admits to being “a believer” but we are not told anything further about his background so we are not entirely sure how well he is
getting into the mind of the Jew, Christian, Muslim and Mormon.

It makes sense that Faulconer struggles with whether immersion is possible and when process and content are teased apart, it seems that immersion is possible with part of his task and not as clearly for the whole of it. Nevertheless, the reader experiences vastly different ways of experiencing the law from each of his insightful descriptions and furthermore, Faulconer’s paper is a call to understand how another experiences and relates to life and each other from inside that person’s perspective. We see how Faulconer appreciates the intertwining of process and content and why he finds that a comparison of belief alone, contents, would not be helpful in our understanding of each other. Faulconer is able to appreciate such intertwining of process and content because he takes an introspective perspective. While taking an introspective perspective is challenging, its difficulty should not keep us tied to the less problematic but more limited extraspective approach.

ALLOWING FOR MULTIPLE AND NOT NECESSARILY EQUAL PERSPECTIVES

While Faulconer shows us the benefits and validity of an introspective perspective, at the same time, he seems to invalidate or deny the benefit of an extraspective perspective. An implication of Rychlak’s introspective and extraspective distinction is that it allows for multiple perspectives to be valid independent of whether one is better than another. In contrast, Faulconer seems to want to claim that the introspective perspective is more valid than another, thus closing off, in my opinion the potential for diverse perspectives. Just as Faulconer gives a voice and validity to different religious faiths’ view of the law, he does not at the same time give a voice to both the introspective and extraspective perspective. I will demonstrate this by looking at Faulconer’s claim that belief is not enough to distinguish different religious groups view of the law.

I agree with the claim that belief is not enough if one theorizes from an introspective perspective. As Faulconer has clearly demonstrated, getting into a particular group’s perspective to view the lived experience of that group in relation to the law provides a much richer account than a comparison of beliefs. However, unlike Faulconer, I would argue that belief can account for the differences in different religions’ view of the law, from an extraspective or third-person perspective. In theorizing from an extraspective point of view, a comparison of individuals’ spoken beliefs about the law makes sense. However, such a comparison would obviously lose the richness that Faulconer observes when viewing a group’s experience of the law from within the group. Both perspectives can contribute something to the final analysis even if one might subsume the other (Rychlak, 1994).

TAKING NOTE OF PERSPECTIVE IN PSYCHOLOGICAL THEORIZING

Faulconer’s paper highlights the presence of perspective in how we theorize about human behavior. Psychologists infrequently recognize the perspective from which they are viewing their clients, students and research subjects. Instead psychologists move between a first- and third-person perspective with little understanding of the implications. For example, some Western meditation researchers describe the meditational attitude as being a passive process (Benson, Beary, and Carol, 1974). While focusing inward is a fundamental part of meditating, researchers are viewing the meditator from an extraspective perspective. Therefore, they observe the meditator to be passively present to awareness. They know that the meditator is aware of his or her internal state, however, until they “get into the mind” of the meditator, they can not understand that meditation is hardly a passive project. Actively, the meditator is continually observing the contents of mind and body and the thoughts and feelings that arise in such (Hansen, Nielsen and Harris, 2008).

This distinction between introspective or a first-person perspective and extraspective or third-person perspective theorizing goes unnoticed throughout psychological research and theorizing. While there are many examples, I will give only a few. For example in cognitive psychology, minds and/or brains are said to “process information.” While this would be true when observing another human being, receiving stimuli and giving a response, or even observing areas of his or her brain light up on an MRI scan, this would not be true from a first-person perspective. From an introspective perspective, information is not passively “processed.” Instead, one climbs “into the person’s perspective” and understands that stimuli observed are meaningfully organized. As our theoretical perspective shifts from third- to first-person, cognition moves out of passivity (e.g., “information processing”) into activity; we describe the individual as “observing.”
“meaningfully organizing,” and even “choosing” what and how to organize experience. For example, from an extraspective perspective, habits are seen as different from new learning. However, from an introspective perspective, habits differ from new learning only in linear time. From an introspective perspective, habits are the result of once organized behavior; that is, habits were once chosen; habits were once new learning.

In clinical psychology, in moving from an extraspective to an introspective perspective, the meaning we give our clinical work shifts. For example, from an introspective perspective, new meaning is given to a client’s passivity, which could be activity to avoid an intrusive therapist, who, like the client’s parents, attempted to take away the client’s agency. Psychotherapists often take an introspective perspective without conscious awareness of doing so. For example, the client/therapist experience of an “aha moment” indicates a type of joining and empathy that occurs between therapist and client and can best be explained when viewed from an introspective perspective. From an introspective perspective, the therapist is able to understand exactly what the client needs emotionally joining with the client in his or her experience. However, all too often therapists, who are able to give accurate and healing empathy to clients, resort to the language of an extraspective perspective in their theorizing, reducing the client’s challenges to biological and environmental causes. In their use of extraspective theorizing to explain to the client the causes of his or her problems, therapists end up objectifying the client. This is because extraspective theorizing requires objectification or viewing another at a distance while the empathy given required an ability to take an introspective perspective. They undo the healing empathy they have given to clients whose problems, from an introspective perspective, could be said to stem from a history of being objectified and treated without empathy by primary caregivers.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Faulconer’s paper sheds light on how we can understand one another’s cultures more deeply and richly through getting into another’s way of experiencing life, something that a comparison of belief alone cannot capture. Rychlak’s (1991, 1994) distinction between introspective and extraspective theorizing illuminates the difference between immersing ourselves in another’s perspective versus merely observing at a distance. It further helps us determine when immersion is generalizable and when it is limited. Without first recognizing that I am approaching my understanding of human nature from a theoretical perspective, either the first- or third-person, I will not be able to make clear judgments about many things: how I explain my treatment to my clients, how I conduct my research, how I explain my research to the research community, how I teach psychological theory and research, and how I choose who will influence my learning about psychology and human nature. I personally desire to learn from and communicate about human nature from an introspective perspective. However, I can still learn from those who take an extraspective perspective even if this is not the grounding upon which I choose to stand.

Faulconer’s paper is an important call to see, hear and understand each other with greater empathy and appreciation for the richness and complexity each of us experience in life. While some will be converted by Faulconer’s call to take an introspective perspective, it is, we might recognize, a matter of perspective. I submit, that both ways of theorizing in psychology are valid perspectives. Using Rychlak’s insight, analyzing religions based on belief is a valid perspective if one thinks about human nature from a third-person perspective, however, as Faulconer so wonderfully demonstrates, a much more interesting and colorful picture and pathway emerges when our perspective moves toward greater empathy and greater “getting within” another even if this task is challenging.

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