

Christian Anthropology -- Psychology

The word psychology means the study of the soul. It is the foundational awkwardness of the new barbarian that he seeks to study psychology without believing in the soul. Therefore he seeks to interpret all the traditionally-considered powers of the soul either as highly-developed (perhaps over-developed) animal functions, or as the output of advanced computer functions accidentally (but “fitly”) grafted onto a biochemical system.

Previous to the birth of psychology as a separate discipline, the study of the soul was carried out either directly and philosophically within the province of moral theology, or, indirectly but very effectively, through the literary arts, especially drama. Secular psychology, however, was born among unbelievers and although there are now eminent Catholic thinkers in this field, unbelievers still guard it as their province, ignoring or shunning the work of believers as much as possible, and even directly claiming that all traditional concepts of sin are destructive. (Note, as a point of logic, that this merely makes belief in sin the new sin, and furthermore, if such notions are destructive, notions of virtue must also be harmful.)

For this and other reasons, many Christians have chosen to rename their study of the nature of man: Christian Anthropology. This name directs our attention to the entire life of the human person.

WHAT IS MAN?

To understand the nature of man, we must consider that he participates in three levels of being:

The physical, meaning the electro-chemical and mechanical-gravitational systems of the world;

The
, meaning the level of mind that he shares with the higher animals and also what he shares with the computers he makes;

And the spiritual, which includes his rationality and his openness to a relationship with God.

And yet man is a single and unified creature, not a hybrid of some kind or a mechanical apparatus with a kind of ghost inside, nor a type of monkey with an angel inside. Man is a single organic whole: a body whose parts operate within the ordinary relationships of the electro-chemical aspect of nature; a mind whose responsiveness is played out within the normal pathways of a nervous system similar to that of the animals; and a personal nature which is open to God without violating either the electro-chemical systems or the neural systems of his bodily existence. These three levels are inter-related so that the disabling of any level may also disable the action of other dimensions; yet no level may be reduced to another.

Biologists have acquired enormous insight into living systems by considering their electro-chemical background; and yet even the activities of a horse or a dog -- let alone a man -- are far beyond any conceivable soup of chemistry and physics. This is because a living body has an internal principle of organization which unifies its responses to the world. Chemically, this interior principle is reflected in the unique chromosomes of the individual, incredibly intricate molecules which mysteriously govern its specific growth, repair, and response to change; but even such a marvelous chemical infrastructure does not wholly explain the psychological interiority of a living being.

In the animal kingdom, the living principle of an individual is sometimes called (by philosophers) a material soul, because animal responses to the world may be extraordinarily intelligent, and yet they do not look beyond the material world as we do.

Man has a deeper capacity of mind than even the most intelligent of the animals. He has a consciousness of self, and his capacity for speech enables him to work with symbols in an entirely new and profound way. Thus his intelligence is open to the consideration of abstractions, even of truth itself, and of beauty and goodness. This opens entirely new dimensions of intellectual activity.

Moving upward and outward from these endowments, man's soul is open to personal love, even the love of God, and to a glimpse of and a yearn-

ing for a world beyond this one. Although his daily affections may be directed to plants and animals in various ways -- especially to his domestic animals -- yet in his personal nature, he recognizes something different when he considers other persons. His ability to choose and sustain relationships with persons, including persons far away in time and space, and to use his intelligence for their service, is a new feature in the cosmic system.

Man's openness to God, and even his openness to other men as persons, constitutes his spiritual nature. It is not something separate from his body or from those dimensions of mind which he shares with the animals; but it can be distinguished. It is a new dimension of soul, perhaps analogous to the way that a cube is a new dimension of "squareness," a new fulfillment of the unrecognized potentials of the simple square.

Christian psychology is the study of man, not just in the limited sense that he shares a psychology with the animals, nor of his inner spirit exclusively in its religious yearning, but of his entire humanity: his individuality, his history, his desires and personal relationships, including his relationship with the source of his being.

Other systems of psychology may consider only the material motivations of pleasure or power; alternatively, some religious believers choose to despise our physical nature and turn themselves away from material beauty and human relationships.

Both of these truncated psychologies are anti-cultural; both lead to confusion and darkness.

CHRISTIAN ANTHROPOLOGY

Christians have a high concept of man, for the origin of his soul in God implies a spiritual nature, spiritual capacities, and a spiritual calling. Although our failings are clear and sorrowful, they never overshadow the invitation to be truly good, truly like our heavenly Father. Furthermore, our life is eternal, and whatever griefs may plague our life on earth, a merciful justice will prevail at last. The serenity of this faith enables believers to face great suffering and overcome enormous difficulties without losing

their sense of direction or their hope and joy.

The specific spiritual capacities of man are two: rationality, which underlies the search for truth, and free will, which means we can respond by choice to both truth and love, including the love of God. Reflect on this: if thoughts cannot be freely chosen in appreciation of their rational consistency, no search for truth is possible, and if love cannot be freely chosen, it is certainly not love. .

And yet, spiritual capacities notwithstanding, men are not angels. Our bodies, including the hormonal systems which so strongly color our perceptions and thoughts, have much in common with the animals around us. Our nature is dual: for every exalted thought of a man, there is an electro-chemical event in the physical brain and a run of hormonal activity. For this reason, damage to the human physical system can prevent the development of clear thought. Furthermore, emotionally painful events in the life of an individual may lastingly inhibit clear thought on related topics. For these and other reasons, the search for truth is often interrupted and confused.

SOUL AND FAITH

In the context of faith, the study of the soul is the study of the intellectual and emotional life of man, and of the relationship between them, but it is also the study of the social and relational life of man, and even, to some extent, of his relationship with God. All the true findings of secular psychology have their appropriate place in this Christian investigation, but always at the center of our own study is the revolutionary Christian idea of "person" — an individual with rationality and relative free will. Rationality is indeed essential -- practically and conceptually -- to free will, because if a choice is not based on conscious awareness of truth, it can only be based on the physical and emotional situation of the individual and his immediate perceptions; this is the case with animals.

It should be emphasized that the concept of person is originally and profoundly Christian. Although the word has an older Greek root relating to drama, the modern sense was shaped by the

discussion of the Persons of the Trinity in the early centuries of the Church.

The faith that such a being as a person may exist in the material world is nourished by reflection upon the love of God and especially reflection on the Incarnation, but is continually weakened by the experience of sin, which throws into such sharp relief the monkey side of our nature. Indeed, not only does the gift of personality come from God, but the ability to notice, treasure, and develop this commonplace miracle depends upon life in God. It is a curious fact that the most powerful aid to remaining serene in our faith in human life is loving meditation before the Blessed Sacrament.

These reflections return us to our curricular starting point, theology: for the study of our relational life must include the study of the normal development of a relationship with God, what is usually called spiritual growth.

The writings of St. Teresa of Avila and St. John of the Cross, of St. Ignatius and St. Francis de Sales, of St. Therese of Lisieux and other spiritual writers are normative in such a pursuit, but all the saints were men and women whose powerful relational lives took their sustenance from a relationship with God. The secular psychologist supposes this relationship to be completely fictitious, yet the evidence of history is otherwise. All psychologists well know that the effort to sustain one's life with fiction leads to pathologies; yet the saints were known to be productive, humorous (occasionally hilarious), and emotionally robust to the end.

SOURCES FOR STUDY

There are, therefore, several sources for the Christian study of psychology:

1. Christian philosophy, a rational investigation of the nature of man,
2. Moral theology, the traditional way of thinking about interior strengths and pathologies,
3. Secular psychology, especially as leavened by believers,
4. Lives of the saints which offer an expanded insight into what men can

accomplish, and

5. Works of drama and fiction, especially from the wisest Christians such as Shakespeare and Tolkein, which provide an intuitive approach to the understanding of mankind.

SECULAR PSYCHOLOGY

Modern psychology, denying spiritual reality, seeks to reduce all man's interior life to its least elements — electro-chemistry or the self-centered and time-limited habits of an animal nature.

Where the failure of psychology is acknowledged, but revealed faith is still rejected, men seek to open themselves to the transcendent without a proper recognition of its dangers. Some of these dangers are simply the same as those in the material world — greed for transcendent bliss or power is like any greed: it destroys the human capacity for love. Other dangers arise from relationships with intelligent but fallen angelic beings who lead men astray.

STUDYING THE NON-SOUL

For the radical secularist, a type of pseudo-scientific pagan, study only counts when a man studies what can be measured, weighed, and counted. Even in psychology, this means studying the interior life exclusively in terms of things that are exterior, obviously a problematic undertaking, even granting that human interior experience is supported by physical events in the body and brain. How is the student to measure the study of himself?

Nevertheless, among the modern pagans, psychology is boldly intended to replace religion as the study of the soul. In their view, religious experience is reduced to its emotional overflow, which can naturally be quantified to some degree. Religions themselves, religious associations, are regarded as highly-organized and disreputable flights of fancy.

Within the anti-culture, the concept of sin is specifically singled out as the most destructive influence in the history of mankind, since it leads to shame and emotional repression. (None of the psychologists who talk this way have ever been sin-

gle women walking home at night in a modern city, hoping against hope that certain drives will have been either sublimated or repressed in the men who may turn up before they get home.) An atmosphere of social scorn for the religious and spiritual, has developed, scorn especially for Christianity, wherein the most spiritual of all realities truly inhabited the human frame. In its reductive approach secular psychology has, ironically, become the study not of the soul, but of the denial of the soul.

IT FLOWS FROM GNOSTICISM

It stands to reason that those whose ideas of God are Gnostic – definitively undefined — cannot base their concept of man on anything very clearly stated. An awkward attempt to maintain a transcendent concept of man outside Christianity does occasionally crop up in psychology courses but it has no foundation.

On the other hand, the honest study of psychology, even in a secular context, gives orderly support to the concept of ongoing personal growth and gives new names and descriptions to the things Christians have long and systematically observed. It

is perfectly clear that immaturity and dysfunctional behavior are elements of what has always been called sin or the consequence of sin; it is obvious that these evils must be made to diminish in the human community if mankind is to prosper.

The vast and unfathomable difference between Christian and secular psychology is in the area of hope. Christians have a transcendent source of power for the necessary transformation of troubled persons; the secular psychologist or psychiatrist, starting with Freud, has always had a very bleak outlook on interior healing. He may be able to expose certain immediate sources of interior suffering and bring what relief that knowledge offers, but he cannot heal. Studying Freud to learn about the human soul may be a poor idea, but studying him to learn how bleak is the psychology that hates God is altogether enlightening.

PSYCHOLOGY HAS PARTICULAR DANGERS

Because of the explicit intention to replace religion with psychology, this field is potentially the most hostile environment possible for a Christian, and by the same token, potentially the most important. Paul Vitz, mentioned in the margin above, wrote the article on psychology and religion in the Encyclopedia of Psychology, though it seems the most recent entry was someone else's work.

It was a longstanding practice to use psychological diagnoses as the excuse to lock up dissidents in the Soviet Union. Such methods could be used again, because the redefinition of mental illness and of developmental retardation is ongoing and is sometimes more closely related to politics than to the ability to make a thoughtful contribution to society.