

## DECONSTRUCTING PSYCHOLOGY

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### The Matters of Definition and Order of Inquiry

“Christians cannot trust psychology,”<sup>1</sup> says Ed Bulkley, but he doesn’t leave it at that. Bulkley wisely clarifies that, “When speaking of psychology or psychiatry...I am referring to them in the counseling or therapeutic sense, which involves efforts to diagnose and change human behavior, thinking, attitudes, values, and beliefs through ‘psychotherapies.’”<sup>2</sup> Bulkley further adds that he is not indicting “all forms of psychological research, such as those dealing with physical causes of psychopathologies, the physiological workings of the brain, or other non-value oriented studies.”<sup>3</sup> A later reference is particularly helpful, as he narrows the scope of the problem from everything related to psychology to a particular kind of psychology, made evident in Bulkley’s disagreement with the idea that “without the insights of secular psychology, pastors and churches are simply inadequate to deal with the deepest

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<sup>1</sup> Ed Bulkley, *Why Christians Can’t Trust Psychology* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 1993), 7.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 7-8.

hurts of modern man.”<sup>4</sup> While Bulkley at the first critiques psychology, as he writes it becomes evident that his contention is with *secular* psychology, not the discipline of psychology itself.

Greg Gifford illustrates the dichotomy in his article entitled, “Why biblical counseling and not psychology?” Gifford “affirms biblical counseling because we are committed to the Word of God as being authoritative Truth; because the only means of authentic change begins with faith in Jesus; and because the ultimate jurisdiction of counseling falls within the church. Our commitment to biblical counseling is an out-working of our commitment to these stated truths.”<sup>5</sup> Early in Gifford’s article, the problem is stated as psychology, but as he continues his explanation, it is clear that diagnosis is perhaps too general. Gifford adds, “biblical counseling is committed to the fact that in order to engage in psychology, one must be committed to the authority of God’s Word to articulate the nature of the soul and human behavior! This is where the psychology of biblical counseling differs from secular psychology.”<sup>6</sup> Importantly, Gifford recognizes that there is a psychology of biblical counseling.

John Street maintains the dichotomy as he laments, “The principles of psychology are presented as though they were on the same authoritative level as Scripture and compete for its jurisdiction as the sole authority in determining the

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 24.

<sup>5</sup> Greg Gifford, “Why biblical counseling and not psychology?” February 27, 2018, viewed at <https://www.masters.edu/news/biblical-counseling-vs-psychology.html>.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

well-being of the soul.”<sup>7</sup> Note the dichotomy as being between the Bible and the principles of psychology. There is no third option in play here, in contrast to the conclusions evident with Bulkley and Gifford. Likewise, Jay Adams trenchantly asserts that the dichotomy is unbreachable, and that if the two options are brought together, the first option (psychology) is taken while the second (the sufficiency of Scripture) is discarded:

Integrationist counseling seeks to combine the insights of psychology with those of the Bible...attempted integration of the Scriptures with worldly counseling beliefs, methods, and/or techniques inevitably means that in order to make them agree, the Scriptures are bent to fit the non-scriptural material that the counselor attempts to integrate with it. I believe the task is impossible without ending in a non-scriptural method.<sup>8</sup>

The first question that these observations elicit is simply “*What, in fact, is psychology?*” While Bulkley and Gifford at first condemn psychology in general, they later clarify that it is *secular or unbiblical psychology* that is actually the problem. Their clarifications illustrate that there may be a third option.

Psychology is from two Greek words *psuche* – soul, and sometimes mind, and *logos* – word or idea. Together the words communicate *the study of the soul and the mind*. As has been

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<sup>7</sup> John Street, “Why Biblical Counseling and Not Psychology?” in *Counseling: How to Counsel Biblically* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2005), 32.

<sup>8</sup> Jay Adams “Competent to Counsel: An Interview with Jay Adams” from *Tabletalk Magazine*, February 1, 2014, viewed at <https://www.ligonier.org/learn/articles/competent-counsel-interview-jay-adams/>.

well communicated in other contexts, it is vital to recognize the difference between a discipline and a worldview. Psychology, for example, is a discipline – the study of the soul and mind. Any particular discipline is part of the pursuit of an accurate worldview. So, the outcome of psychological enquiry will contribute to one's worldview, just as what an interlocutor concludes about prerequisite worldview concepts will shape one's psychological enquiry.

To illustrate, in any worldview, one must first consider the questions of epistemology – how one might arrive at truth, how one might be confident of what is truth, and what basis of authority one can trust in order to ascertain truth. Then one must answer the key metaphysical questions – what actually exists, what is value and good, what is the purpose or design, and what is going to happen. In order to know that one has arrived at the right answers to the metaphysics questions, one must depend entirely on their epistemological conclusions. If one relies on their senses and experience as the answer to their epistemological questions, they will likely deny the existence of God and the soul, because their tools for measuring experience are limited to the physical realm. If on the other hand, one relies on human reason as the epistemological key, then they may or may not affirm the existence of God and the soul when they begin to address the metaphysical issues. This is the same in any discipline – one's metaphysics is undergirded by one's epistemology, and the ethics prescriptions arise directly from the metaphysics conclusions.

One of the mistakes often made in many disciplines is moving to prescription before an accurate description is understood. Consider, for example, the mechanic who upon hearing a slight rattle in the engine prescribes a likely

expensive repair, when a closer examination might reveal that a screwdriver had been dropped into the engine area. Or consider the doctor who prescribes a medication because a particular malady is suspected, but not entirely verified. Often in such cases, the prescription either causes a negative reaction or possibly no reaction at all which might help correct the symptoms. Attending to the symptoms is important, but only with the proper understanding of causations or conditions.

In the same manner, there has been a great focus on the methods and tools of counseling, but perhaps not enough attention is being given in popular discussion to the *bases* of counseling that are rooted in the discipline of psychology – the study of the soul and mind. Consider that often we will hear the term “soul care.” While we may greatly prefer it to the term “psychotherapy,” lexically the terms are synonymous, and reference the treatment of the soul (and the mind). It is important to recognize that before we can engage in “care” or “therapy” *we must understand what a soul and a mind actually are*. While care and therapy are in the ethics aspect of worldview, having to do with prescriptions of how one should treat the soul and the mind, the actual definitions of the soul and the mind are necessarily within the scope of metaphysics enquiry. Before we can consider the prescriptions (ethics) we have to earn those prescriptions by addressing the descriptions (metaphysics), and before we can answer the metaphysical questions, we have to establish an epistemological basis for preferring one description over another. Hume says there is no soul. Nietzsche doesn’t care if there is one, because we can’t know for certain and we can’t interact with it anyway. The Bible asserts that the reality of the soul is an undergirding

principle of human life. Which is correct? What is our basis for preferring one description over the other?

### **Case Study: Determinism and Voluntarism**

One particularly interesting and important metaphysical disagreement is between determinism and voluntarism. Determinism is the idea that people are not free to choose, but their choices are determined by (usually) external forces. Voluntarism is a competing idea that people are indeed free to choose, and that external forces are not definitive. In the deterministic system, humanity is governed by external forces – by environment and experiences, in the perspective of secularists, and by God or original sin, in the perspective of theists. On the other hand, in the voluntarist system, human free will rules the day for both the secularist and the theist. For the secularist, there is no God with which to be concerned, while the theist must restrict the activity of God to ensure that He never violates the laws of free will.

It is fascinating that the secularist and the theist can agree on so much once the false dichotomy between determinism and voluntarism is adopted. For the secularist, the devices of determinism are merely vehicles for independence from a Creator and the requisite human responsibility. The secular determinist considers that humanity is not accountable for one's actions, and the theistic response is not to counter the undergirding determinism, but rather to simply assert that it is God who does the determining. Likewise, the secular voluntarist argues that one is not accountable to a Creator, and has varying degrees of culpability for decisions, while the theistic response is not to

challenge voluntarism, but rather the source of the free will, as if God has drawn a line in the sand He will not cross, so as to safeguard human free will.

In both cases, the foundational principle of determinism or voluntarism as the metaphysical undergirding is often not even considered. It is in this responsive dance (between secularist and theist), that secular theories of psychology assert human independence from God, while the theistic response is to refute the conclusion, but not the foundation itself.

Determinist	Secular – environment, experience Sacred – God, original sin
Voluntarist	Secular – free will, no God Sacred – free will, restricted God

Sigmund Freud<sup>9</sup> and B.F. Skinner, for example, were both overt in their determinism, though their responses to treatment in light of that deterministic foundation differed greatly. Skinner’s determinism importantly serves as the very basis for the behavioral sciences. Skinner suggests that, “If we are to use the methods of science in the field of human affairs, we must assume that behavior is lawful and determined. We must expect to discover that what a man does is the result of specifiable conditions and that once these conditions have been

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<sup>9</sup> E.g., Sigmund Freud, “The Psychopathology of Everyday Life,” *The Standard Edition of the Complete Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed., James Strachey, et al, VI (London, 1953), 253-254.

discovered, we can anticipate and to some extent determine his actions.”<sup>10</sup>

On the other hand, Thomas Szasz argues from the voluntarist perspective, acknowledging that, “My opposition to deterministic explanations of human behavior does not imply any wish to minimize the effects, which are indeed significant, of personal past experiences. I wish only to maximize the scope of voluntaristic explanations – in other words, to reintroduce freedom, choice, and responsibility, into the conceptual framework and vocabulary of psychiatry.”<sup>11</sup> Jay Adams, the father of nouthetic counseling, appeals to Szasz repeatedly in *Competent to Counsel*, suggesting that based on Szasz’ observations, “There seems to be little question, then, that much re-thinking is called for. And Christians ought to be foremost among those engaged in such re-thinking.”<sup>12</sup>

While none should question the wisdom in Adams’ challenge for Christians to rethink and to lead in that process, it is curious that he appeals to a secularist and a voluntarist to provide an impetus for progress in the discipline. It is also worth noting that as a Reformed thinker, longtime Presbyterian pastor, and full Calvinist, that Jay Adams would be most comfortable with the determinist versus voluntarist perspective, as the voluntarist approach would have been more compatible with an Arminian understanding of human volition and its relationship to God. The point here is that secular psychology is built on certain foundations, and only some of

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<sup>10</sup> B.F. Skinner, *Science and Human Behavior* (New York, MacMillan, 1953), 6.

<sup>11</sup> Thomas Szasz, *The Myth of Mental Illness* (New York: Harper, 1974), 6.

<sup>12</sup> Jay Adams, *Competent to Counsel* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1970), 4.



those foundations are being exposed by their theistic practitioners, while others are adopted without consideration. Ultimately, the issue is whether or not God has authority over His creation, and whether He has the authority to operate outside of the restrictions of either determinism or voluntarism. But how would we answer this central metaphysical question?

### **Deconstruction: Peeling Back the Layers of Psychological Inquiry**

It is generally recognized that there are three divisions of history relative to scientific inquiry: premodern, modern, and postmodern. This threefold division considers the modern era, with Descartes' rationalism and Bacon's method, as its centerpiece. The premodern era was a time of superstition and unexamined beliefs, illustrated in the myths of the Greek pantheon. The postmodern era is a reaction to the failure of the modern era to deliver peace and prosperity through technology, as instead the modern era ended with the crash of world war and atomic destruction.

Roughly a millennium before the modern era began, Greek philosophers like Parmenides and Heraclitus began to lead Greek philosophy into naturalistic pursuit. The idea was that in order to find reliable answers, we must begin to examine the world around us and dispense with any ideas of the supernatural, instead preferring that which we can interact with – looking within the natural realm for our answers. The Greek naturalists were doing a form of science that was very limited, but their naturalistic presupposition would have great impact on forthcoming generations.

While these Greek naturalists were largely secular, later theists like Thomas Aquinas appealed to natural law as sufficient to offer us the metaphysical explanations we sought. Aquinas certainly recognized a Creator but modeled epistemological and theological methods that enabled one to look to the creation rather than to revelation for life's great answers. His *Summa Theologiae* showed how an entire theology could be developed absent a dependence on special revelation. The Protestant Reformation represented a return to the Text as the epistemological basis for answering the metaphysical questions, as Philip Melancthon in particular addressed issues of the soul and mind, and is credited as having a thoroughgoing psychology,<sup>13</sup> and perhaps even as originating the term, if Volkmann's assertion is correct.<sup>14</sup>

Descartes followed the Thomistic model rather than the Reformation example, with natural law rather than the Text providing the epistemological foundation for discovery, and with an acknowledgment of the Creator, yet with little dependence on His word, Descartes' rationalism and Bacon's scientific method won the day, and set the course of inquiry for the next four centuries. Now wisely, both men recognized the limitations of scientific inquiry and their rationalistic moorings, but the discarding of special revelation was comprehensive enough that as psychology developed, there was little call for considering Biblical foundations. As Galileo put it, "The intention of the Holy Ghost is to tell us how to get to

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<sup>13</sup> Frank Hugh Foster, "Melancthon's Synergism: A Study in the History of Psychological Dogmatics" in *Papers of the American Society of Church History*, Volumes 1-2 (New York, Knickerbocker Press, 1889), 185-204.

<sup>14</sup> Francois LaPointe, "The Origin and Evolution of the Term "Psychology" in *Rivista Critica di Storia della Filosofia*, Vol. 28, No. 2 (APRILE-GIUGNO 1973), 138.

heaven, not how heaven goes.”<sup>15</sup> Galileo’s comment illustrates the growing schism between science and the applicability of the Bible.

By the time Darwin arrived, there was an increasing number of people who viewed the Bible to be inaccurate pertaining to scientific matters, and Darwin’s evolutionary suppositions continued to sway opinion particularly in the scientific community. For many, Darwin’s theory provided the final naturalistic nail in the divine coffin. As Nietzsche would put it, “we have killed” God,<sup>16</sup> as this type of scientific perspective made God unnecessary and irrelevant. As one clever soul put it, “The immaterial has become immaterial.”<sup>17</sup>

It is from within this seedbed that modern psychology became prominent as a discipline. By that time Melancthon’s and the other Reformers’ influence had long been eclipsed by the naturalistic foundations of Darwin and Nietzsche. In the mid-nineteenth century, Wilhelm Wundt (1832-1920) worked to establish a physiological psychology that would be an interdisciplinary bridge between physiology and psychology, contributing to both. Wundt applied experimental and research methods used in physiology to the discipline of psychology, including inductive experimental science, and ultimately sought to develop a *scientific metaphysic* that would explain all

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<sup>15</sup> Galileo Galilei, “Letter to the Grand Duchess Christina” (1615), translated and reprinted in Stillman Drake, *Discoveries and Opinions of Galileo* (New York: Doubleday, 1957), 186, reprinted in D. C. Goodman, ed., *Science and Religious Belief 1600-1900: A Selection of Primary Sources* (The United Kingdom: Open University Press, 1973), 34.

<sup>16</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, Walter Kaufmann ed. (New York: Vintage, 1974), 181-82.

<sup>17</sup> Ted Elliot and Terry Russo, “Pirates of the Caribbean: At World’s End” Gore Verbinski, Dir., Disney, 2007.

aspects of spirit and mind as related to physical processes and stimuli.<sup>18</sup> In seeking metaphysical answers with empirical means, Wundt used necessarily limited methodology to search for answers that extend far beyond the capacity of naturalistic tools. Like the Greek naturalists long before him, Wundt was pioneering a discipline with a deliberately limited worldview without understanding what would be lost by shutting the door to the possibility of the extra-natural.

It is evident from Wundt's work that the problem is not in the discipline itself. Just as none would argue the importance of an empirical physiology, applying empirical methods to any inquiry has great value, as long as the subject can actually be observed. The problem arising from Wundt's program was the epistemological presuppositions that metaphysical truth can be arrived at through empirical means. That is not a problem with the discipline, it is deficiency in the worldview. Wundt, widely recognized as the father of psychology, brought a worldview to his discipline, shaped his methods accordingly, and set the trajectory for all who would later engage the discipline. Wundt's presuppositions and worldview footsteps are shared by many later contributors to the discipline of psychology. Some later students of psychology would agree overtly with the worldview foundations of Wundt and would consequently not question the prescribed methodologies. Others might not recognize that Wundt and the empirical discipline he pioneered were directed by naturalistic

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<sup>18</sup> See William Wundt, *Principles of Physiological Psychology*, Edward Titchener, trans., in *Classics in the History of Psychology* by Christopher Green (Ontario: York University), viewed at <http://psychclassics.yorku.ca/Wundt/Physio/>.

presuppositions, and also would fail to question whether the assumptions and methods were too narrow.

Ivan Pavlov (1849-1936) observed what has been coined classical conditioning, providing empirical data to undergird behavioristic and deterministic ideas. Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) recognized that there were other major influencers like experience, culture, and environment that would shape the psyche. In studying those especially, he found the deterministic factors that he thought provided greater explanation. Jean Piaget (1896-1980) applied the same principles to developmental psychology, recognizing that the human psyche develops differently in early years. Carl Rogers (1902-1987) built on Nietzsche's self-focused existentialist ideas to encourage self-actualization and to minimize judgment. B.F Skinner's (1904-1990) behaviorism and operant conditioning were built on the same deterministic and materialistic premises as Wundt's ideas. Abraham Maslow (1908-1970) developed a human hierarchy of needs that attempted to account for the material and immaterial needs of humanity, but all within naturalistic limitations. Scores of other influential thinkers have pursued the discipline of psychology through the lens of the humanistic naturalistic worldview, and all arrive at similar results – not because they are engaging a wrongheaded discipline, but because they have engaged the discipline through the wrong lens.

The task for us is to acknowledge that the discipline can and must be engaged with a holistic perspective on metaphysics, recognizing that the *material* cannot provide comprehensive explanations if humanity is in fact also comprised of the *immaterial*. Further, if reality extends beyond the natural, then we must also be willing to engage the extra-

natural, or the supernatural. If we are willing to recognize this foundational key, then we can and should certainly engage scientific pursuit, but should do so without discarding the Creator's voice. To be certain, the Creator's voice must be recognized as *the certain authoritative data on any subject*, if indeed He has created.

### **Three Observations: Preface to Further Psychological Inquiry**

When we deconstruct psychology, we observe three things. First, the discipline of psychology is, in itself, not at odds with the Bible, nor does the discipline necessarily disregard the authority of the Creator. Just as in any other discipline, the foundational premises will shape methodology, and methodology will shape one's understanding of reality. If one begins with the epistemological premise that God is the source of authority, and that His word is the authoritative communication of His truth, then, if one is being consistent, one will engage the discipline of psychology just like any other discipline – through the lens of the Scriptures, being totally subject to their authority. The discipline isn't the problem, incorrect premises and presuppositions are the problem. There is nothing inherently wrong with pursuing the knowledge of the soul and mind – in fact, such pursuit is necessitated in order to understand the work God does in sanctification and our connectedness to that work.<sup>19</sup>

Second, the discipline of psychology must first be descriptive, then prescriptive. The discipline attempts through

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<sup>19</sup> E.g., 2 Corinthians 12:15, 1 Thessalonians 5:32, Hebrews 4:12, 3 John 2.

various methodologies to observe influences and factors that shape the psyche. If one limits methodology due to the wrong epistemological premises (as does the humanistic naturalist), then the descriptions will largely be wrong, even if there are many truths observed along the way. Further, it would be foolish to discard truths discovered in any discipline simply because their discoverers held to wrong presuppositions and employed limited methodologies. Truth is truth and discarding truth because of disdain for the one who discovered it or for the means by which it was discovered is akin to the logical fallacy of *ad hominem*. Gravity is gravity, whether Newton's beliefs align or do not align with ours. Newton didn't create the law of gravity; he simply discovered and considers the natural laws in place that affect gravity.

Still, the key limitation of (the science of) psychology is in its inability to offer prescriptions necessary to properly treat the psyche. Science can arrive at accurate descriptions (if the right assumptions and methodologies are applied), but prescription is another matter entirely. Just as science can teach us how to clone animals, for example, science cannot tell us whether or not we *should*. We must look beyond the scope of empirical science to help us with the ethical questions. A thoroughgoing psychology (a) must be built on proper epistemological foundations, (b) must accurately describe the reality of the human psyche and its relationship to the Creator, and (c) must arrive at proper prescriptions. Science, with its empirical limitations, *cannot* accomplish these three things. The discipline of psychology, by definition, then, must extend far beyond the empirical, or it will be insufficient at best, and totally misguided at worst. It cannot be *simply* scientific, but must include broader processes.

A third observation we must make in deconstructing psychology, is the absolute necessity of *reconstructing psychology properly*. We have observed throughout the history and development of psychology that many influential thinkers have worked from naturalistic premises. Consequently, the trajectory of the discipline has been largely limited to empirical observation and has been markedly anti-supernatural. Yet, if we have indeed been created, and if the Creator has communicated to us in the Scriptures, then we have been provided with the foundational principles, and the continually guiding truths upon which to properly ground the discipline of psychology.

In the case of our being the products of the Creator, we must look to our Creator to understand His perspective on who and what we are and how we are to care for Him, for others, and for ourselves. Soul care or psyche-therapy (or whatever else we may wish to call it) can only be rightly engaged when we get the descriptions and the prescriptions right. His word on the psyche, the soul, the mind, etc., is the first and the final word. “For the Lord gives wisdom; from His mouth come knowledge and understanding.”<sup>20</sup> It is because of this universal truth that we are warned by the Apostle Paul to “see to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deception according to the tradition of men, according to the elementary principles of this world, rather than according to Christ.”<sup>21</sup>

Philosophy according to the traditions of humanity—with limited humanistic perspective, and according to the basic (observable?) components of this world is simply empty

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<sup>20</sup> Proverbs 2:6.

<sup>21</sup> Colossians 2:8.



deception. That philosophy keeps us in bondage. However, if on the other hand, our philosophy is *according to Christ*, that is no empty deception. *That* is not bound up in the basic principles of this world, limited by what we can observe in the various laws of nature. Instead, we discover there our freedom, because He is the way, the truth and the life, and no man comes to the Father but through Him.<sup>22</sup> He is the Creator who speaks to us with authority,<sup>23</sup> who knows the design of humanity,<sup>24</sup> and is the ultimate standard of what we are intended to be like.<sup>25</sup>

If we fail to pursue that kind of philosophy, and the disciplines that stem from it, then we are relegated to be, as Joyce puts it, “the ‘fallible man who attempts to speak authoritatively.’ That man has always been with us, as both comforter and misleader, ever struggling to fit his rules around the oldest of mysteries—the one that Greeks called the psyche, cognitive scientists call the mind, and people of faith call the soul.”<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> John 14:6.

<sup>23</sup> Matthew 7:29.

<sup>24</sup> Psalm 139, Hebrews 4:12-13.

<sup>25</sup> Romans 8:28-29.

<sup>26</sup> Kathryn Joyce. “The Rise of Biblical Counseling” in The Pacific Standard, September 2, 2014, viewed at <https://psmag.com/social-justice/evangelical-prayer-bible-religion-born-again-christianity-rise-biblical-counseling-89464>.