

# Psychology

## Supplement Contents

*Leaving Psychology Behind* by Paul Vitz.....2

*Psychology in Recovery* by Paul Vitz.....9

## Leaving Psychology Behind by Paul C. Vitz

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Modern American psychology, like the land of ancient Gaul, is divided into three parts. The largest and most familiar part is the popular psychology of "self-esteem" found throughout our society. Self-esteem and the obsession that everyone must have it is familiar to almost all of us these days. And self-esteem programs affect the lives of countless schoolchildren, as this idea – and ideal – have taken firm root in the world of education.

The second part of psychology derives primarily from a specific psychology experience: individual psychotherapy and counseling. By now, millions of Americans have seen a psychologist at some -point in their lives. When Philip Rieff and others describe America as a "psychological society" in which there has been a "triumph of the therapeutic," they are speaking mainly of psychotherapy and its effects.

Third comes what might be called "group psychotherapy" although it usually does not use trained psychotherapists. Today the best example of this kind of psychology is the recovery group movement. Beginning with Alcoholics Anonymous in the thirties, groups of people with some particular problem-especially an addiction-have gotten together for mutual support in following a program to facilitate recovery from their problem. Here again, especially in recent years, millions of Americans, including large numbers of Christians, have participated in such recovery groups.

This division of psychology into three types is necessary because each type has its own advantages and failures and each has a different relation to the Christian faith. In addition, each displays its own distinctive facets of the contemporary idolatry of psychology.

### The curse of Self-Esteem<sup>1</sup>

Historically, the concept of self-esteem has no clear intellectual origins; no major theorist has made it a central concept. Many psychologists have emphasized the self, in various ways, but the usual focus has been on self-actualization, or fulfillment of one's total potential. As a result, it is difficult to trace the source of this emphasis on self-esteem. Apparently, this widespread preoccupation is a distillation of the general concern with the self-found in many psychological theories. Self-esteem seems to be the common denominator pervading the writings of such varied theorists as Carl Rogers, Abraham Maslow, "ego-strength" psychologists, and various recent moral educators. In any case, the concern with self-esteem hovers everywhere in America today. It is, however, most reliably found in the world of education-from professors of education to principals, teachers, school boards, and television programs concerned with preschool children.<sup>2</sup>

Self worth, a feeling of respect and confidence in one's being, has merit, as we shall see. But an ego-centered, "let me feel good" self-esteem can ignore our failures and need for God.

What is wrong with the concept of self-esteem? Lots — and it is fundamental in nature. There have been thousands of psychological studies on self-esteem. Often the term *self-esteem* is muddled in confusion as it becomes a label for such various aspects as self-image, self-acceptance, self worth, self-trust, or self-love. The bottom line is that no agreed-upon definition or agreed-upon measure of self-esteem exists, and whatever it is, no reliable evidence supports self-esteem scores meaning much at all anyway. There is no evidence that high self-esteem reliably causes anything -indeed lots of people with little of it have achieved a great deal in one dimension or another.

For instance, Gloria Steinem, who has written a number of books and been a major leader of the feminist movement, recently revealed in a book-long statement that she suffers from low self-esteem.<sup>3</sup> And many people with high self-esteem are happy just being rich, beautiful, or socially connected. Some other people whose high self-esteem has been noted are inner-city drug dealers, who generally feel quite good about themselves: of ter all, they have succeeded in making a lot of money in a hostile and competitive environment.

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<sup>1</sup> With credit and apologies to *Newsweek* issue of 17 February 1992.

<sup>2</sup> Rita Kramer, *Ed School Follies: The Miseducation of America's Teachers* (New York: Free Press, 1991); see also Chester E. Finn, Jr., "Narcissus Goes to School," *Commentary*, June 1990.

<sup>3</sup> Gloria Steinem, *Revolution from Within: A Book of Self-Esteem* (Boston: Little Brown, 1992).

A 1989 study of mathematical skills compared students in eight different countries.<sup>4</sup> American students ranked lowest in mathematical competence and Korean students ranked highest. But the researchers also asked students to rate how good they were at mathematics. The Americans ranked highest in self-judged mathematical ability, while the Koreans ranked lowest. Mathematical self-esteem had an inverse relation to mathematical accomplishment! This is certainly an example of a “feel-good” psychology, keeping students from an accurate perception of reality. The self-esteem theory predicts that only those who feel good about themselves will do well -which is supposedly why all students need self-esteem-but in fact feeling good about yourself may simply make you over-confident, narcissistic, and unable to work hard.

I am not implying that high self-esteem is always negatively related to accomplishment. Rather, the research mentioned above shows that measures of self-esteem have no reliable relationship to behavior, either positive or negative. In- part, this is simply because life is too complicated for so simple a notion to be of much use. But we should expect this failure in advance. We all know, and know of, people who are motivated by insecurities and self-doubts. These are often both the heroes and the villains of history. The prevalence of certain men of small stature in the history of fanatical military leadership is well-documented: Julius Caesar, Napoleon, Hitler, and Stalin were all small men determined to prove they were “big.” Many great athletes and others have had to overcome grave physical disabilities-and a lack of self-esteem. Many superior achievements appear to have their origin in what psychologist Alfred Adler called “inferiority complexes.”

The point is not that feeling bad about ourselves is good, but rather that only two things can truly change how we feel about ourselves: real accomplishment and developing “basic trust.” First, real accomplishment in the real world affects our attitudes. A child who learns to read, who can do mathematics, who can play the piano or baseball, will have a genuine sense of accomplishment and an appropriate sense of self-esteem.<sup>5</sup> Schools that fail to teach reading, writing, and arithmetic corrupt the proper understanding of self-esteem. Educators who say, “Don’t grade them, don’t label them. You have to make them feel good about themselves,” cause the problems.<sup>6</sup> It makes no sense for students to be full of self-esteem if they have learned nothing. Reality will soon puncture their illusions, and they will have to face two disturbing facts: that they are ignorant, and that the adults responsible for teaching them have lied to them. In the real world praise has to be the reward for something worthwhile: praise must be connected to reality.

There is an even more fundamental way in which most people come to genuine self-esteem-actually, to feelings of self-worth and what psychologists call “basic trust.” Such feelings come through receiving love; first of all, our mother’s love. But this foundational experience of love and self-confidence cannot be faked. When teachers attempt to create this deep and motivating emotion by pretending they “love” all their students and by praising them indiscriminately, they misunderstand the nature of this kind of love. Parental love simply cannot be manufactured by a teacher in a few minutes of interaction a day for each of thirty or more students. The child not only knows that such love is “fake,” but that real teachers are supposed to teach, and that this involves not just support but discipline, demands, and reprimands. Good teachers show their love caring enough to use discipline. Thus, the best, most admired teachers in our high schools today often are the athletic coaches. They still teach, but they expect performance, and they rarely worry about self-esteem.

Similar problems arise for those who try to build their own flagging self-esteem by speaking lovingly to their “inner child”-or other insecure inner selves. Such attempts are doomed to failure for two reasons: first, if we are insecure about our self-worth, how can we believe our own praise? And second, like the child, we know the need for self-discipline and accomplishment.

Self-esteem should be understood as a response, not a cause. It is primarily an emotional response to what we and what others have done to us. Though it is a desirable feeling or internal state, like happiness it does not cause much. Also, like happiness, and like love, self-esteem is almost impossible to get by trying to get it. Try to get self-esteem and you will fail. But do good to others and accomplish something for yourself, and you will have all you need.

The subject is vital for Christians, partly because so many are so concerned about it and partly because the recovery of self-esteem has been touted as tantamount to a new reformation. We must note, however, that self-esteem is a deeply secular concept-not one with which Christians should be particularly involved. Nor need they be. Christians should have a tremendous sense of *self-worth*: God made us in His image, He loves us, He sent His Son to save each of us; our destiny is to be with Him forever. Each of us is of such value that the angels rejoice over every repentant sinner. But on the other hand, we have nothing on our own to be proud of, we were given life along with all our talents, and we are all poor sinners. There is certainly no theological reason to believe that the rich or the successful or the high in self-esteem are more favored by God and more likely to reach heaven, indeed there is far more evidence to the contrary: “Blessed are the meek.”

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<sup>4</sup> A. LaPointe, N. A. Mead, and G. Philips, *A World of Difference: An International Assessment of Mathematics and Science* (Princeton, N.J.: Educational Testing Service, 1989), p. 10.

<sup>5</sup> This is also the point of columnist Charles Krauthammer in the *New Republic*, June 1990.

<sup>6</sup> As quoted in Kramer, *Ed School Follies*. See also p. 210 in the chapter “Self-esteem Has Replaced Understanding as the Goal of Education.”

In addition, self-esteem is based on the very American notion that each of us is responsible for our own happiness. Thus, within a Christian framework, self-esteem has a subtle, pathological aspect: we may take the “pursuit of happiness” as a far more intense personal goal than the pursuit of holiness. Today self-esteem has become very important because it is thought to be essential to happiness: unless you love yourself, you will not be happy. But to assume that we *must* love ourselves, that God will not love us as much as we need to be loved, is a form of practical atheism. We say we believe in God, but we don’t trust Him. Instead, many Christians live by the very unbiblical “God loves those who love themselves.”

Another problem is that Christians have begun to excuse evil or destructive behavior on the grounds of “low self-esteem.” But self-esteem, whether high or low, does not determine our actions. We are accountable for them and we are responsible for trying to do good and avoid evil. Low self-esteem does not make someone an alcoholic, nor does it enable a person finally to admit his or her addiction and do something about it. Both of these decisions are up to each of us regardless of one’s level of self-esteem.

Finally, the whole focus on ourselves feeds unrealistic self-love, which psychologists often call “narcissism.” One would have thought America had enough trouble with narcissism in the seventies with the “Me Generation,” and in the eighties with the Yuppies. But today’s search for self-esteem is just the newest expression of America’s old egomania. And giving schoolchildren happy faces on all their homework just because it was handed in or giving them trophies for just being on the team is flattery of the kind found for decades in our commercial slogans: “You deserve a break today”; “You are the boss”; and “Have it your way.” Such self-love is an extreme expression of an individualistic psychology long supported by consumerism. Now it is reinforced by educators who gratify the vanity of even our youngest children with repetitive mantras like “You are the most important person in the whole world.”

This narcissistic emphasis in our society, and especially in education and religion, is a disguised form of self-worship. If accepted, America would have 250 million “most important persons in the whole world,” 250 million golden selves. If such idolatry were not socially so dangerous, it would be embarrassing, even pathetic.

### **Escape from Psychotherapy**

Although psychology has been justly criticized by both secular and Christian critics, there is plenty of evidence that it is often beneficial. How does psychology, in fact, help people? The research literature on the effects of psychotherapy and counseling is now reasonably clear. Most people do benefit from going into psychotherapy and counseling. About 60 percent of clients show some measure of improvement in their lives, as judged both by their own reports and by the reports of therapists.<sup>7</sup> Of course, a small percentage of people, especially those who were seriously disturbed before going into therapy or who had an inexperienced or incompetent therapist, are harmed; there are still others for whom psychotherapy seems to be essentially neutral.

Let’s look more carefully at what it is that helps people in the psychotherapeutic and counseling process. Research studies suggest positive outcomes in psychotherapy, but those outcomes appear to be unrelated to the psychological theories used by different therapists. That is, the psychological concepts guiding the therapy do not seem to have much causal connection to the positive effects. It does not matter a great deal whether the therapist uses Freudian or Jungian or Adlerian or humanistic or cognitive behavioral concepts. The client seems to benefit independently of the therapist’s arduously mastered training in a particular theoretical framework.

The major beneficial factors of psychotherapy reflect the character, or therapeutic virtues, of the psychotherapist and especially how he or she interacts with the client. Successful therapists are described as “empathic,” “supportive,” “caring,” and “patient.” Thus, one major contributor to the benefits of psychotherapy is the extent to which the therapist establishes a strong and positive relationship with the client — a relationship that lets the client know that the therapist is an ally.

Also important are the therapist’s experience and skill at intervening with interpretations of the client’s behavior, and his or her ability to challenge clients’ distortions and misunderstandings about themselves and others. The therapist must be more than just a sympathetic, supportive friend. He or she must be able to help clients confront destructive patterns from the past and confront reality. In short, the therapist must give clients support but not let them off the hook. Or, more simply, the therapist must provide both mercy-and justice: tough love.

Positive effects are also due to attributes of the clients themselves. For example, clients must be committed to the therapeutic process. The most obvious way such commitment shows is in a willingness to come to the sessions in the first place. Large numbers of people, for various reasons, are so uncommitted to therapy and the therapist—in many cases, so unconvinced of the benefits—that they do not stay past

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<sup>7</sup> Michael J. Lambert, David A. Shapiro, and Allen E. Bergin, “The Effectiveness of Psychotherapy,” in *Handbook of Psychotherapy and Behavior Change*, 3d ed., Sol Garfield and Allen Bergin, eds. (New York: Wiley, 1986), p.160.

the first few sessions. (It is uncommon for fewer than four or five sessions to have much effect.) But many clients are committed, and this “client-commitment effect” can also be described as the client’s *faith* in psychology. These days many Americans seem to have more faith in psychology than in their religion.

This account of the factors behind the benefits of counseling may be a bit oversimplified but it is generally true. Naturally, professional psychologists are disconcerted by this account, for it suggests that most of the specialized training in psychological concepts, theory, and so on, is unrelated to the positive outcomes of therapy.

But we need to add a few qualifications to this general summary. Some evidence suggests that cognitive and behavioral approaches are slightly superior to traditional talk therapies in terms of their actual results. Cognitive approaches are those that emphasize the control of thoughts, emotions, and behavior through rational strategies. For example, a cognitive therapist might help clients develop methods by which to substitute certain positive thoughts every time depressing thoughts came to mind. Behavioral approaches emphasize the control of behavior: they rely in large part on the use of reinforcements to strengthen positive behaviors and punishments to discourage negative behaviors. For example, a marriage might be strengthened by the simple requirement that the wife is to stop nagging and the husband is to start showing love through kisses; or a problem child could be improved when there is no TV if homework is not done.

A number of points need to be made about cognitive-behavioral psychology. First, it works best for specific and clearly bounded problems, such as phobias, anxiety attacks, modest depressions caused by particular negative thoughts. Second, this kind of psychology is based on, conscious thought and reason—which means that it is consistent with the “psychology” found explicitly in Scripture. Much of the Old Testament wisdom literature, such as Proverbs, clearly embodies this kind of approach to the mind—and to the problems of life.<sup>8</sup> In the past, many pastors have based their advice to troubled parishioners on this sort of “psychology.” Today’s cognitive and behavioral psychology is more systematic and carefully developed, but the underlying principles are the same. Finally, cognitive-behavioral psychology, for all its benefits, is not the kind of psychology that people so wildly embrace today.

In short, we can say that the benefits of psychotherapy and counseling come primarily from the therapist’s empathic support and wise interventions, combined with the commitment and confidence of the client both in the counseling process and in the counselor. And yet, despite the benefits of individual therapy and counseling, many people remain trapped in their past; many cannot stop licking their psychic wounds and continue to believe that psychology is the answer to their basic misery. Despite emotional catharsis and support from therapists, many people remain as unhappy and unproductive as they were before they entered therapy: they remain unchanged. The benefits of the psychological support and knowledge they have received in the therapeutic sessions have been slight.

### **On Being a Victim**

Many clients are unaware of the negative effects of the process of psychotherapy. The very act of constantly looking at and talking about one’s past can generate *new* forms of psychological pathology and exacerbate old problems. For example, although many people have suffered from traumatic events in their childhood, they are unaware that this understanding can have harmful effects. The perception of oneself as a victim creates in many people feelings of self-pity, and an understanding of their life as determined by the past and therefore being unchangeable.

Moreover, seeing oneself as a victim frequently results in an increase in resentment and a deeper hatred toward the people responsible for one’s suffering. The status of victimhood often gives rise to a strong sense of moral superiority, not only toward the particular perpetrators of the client’s traumas but to similar people in society at large. Thus, those who had bad fathers often reject all parent and authority figures wholesale. This sense of self-righteousness can prevent any real understanding or empathy with those who caused our suffering and can isolate us even further from others—except fellow victims. We conveniently forget that those who hurt us were often, themselves, abused in childhood too.

Here a new problem with psychology must be raised. There has been an explosive increase in the number of people who claim to have been abused physically, sexually, or emotionally in childhood. A common perpetrator is an alcoholic father, or a step-father, or a cold, emotionally abusive mother. Many of these claims are undoubtedly correct, as much adult psychopathology has its origin in childhood abuse. The sins of the fathers are indeed visited unto the third and fourth generation.

But there is now evidence that a growing number of these claims are seriously distorted or even false. For example, distorted memories often combine two or more figures. Hence a person may fuse the memory of an uncle or neighbor with memories of the father and then accuse the father of incest when it was actually the other man. Sometimes the memories can eventually be sorted out: “corrected.” But

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<sup>8</sup> See Miriam Adahan, *EMMET: A Step by Step Guide to Emotional Maturity Established Through Torah* (Jerusalem: Feldheim, 1987). This is a Jewish cognitive psychotherapy based on the Torah, the first five books of the Bible.

when false memories derive from very early years, they are often so convincing that they can never be corrected. And in some cases the memory is completely made up—it is an early fantasy recalled as though it were true. The problem of people who report mistaken memories as true has become serious enough that the phenomenon is called the False Memory Syndrome. A growing nationwide group of parents has formed to support each other and reject charges based on the false memories of their children.<sup>9</sup>

One must always remember that charges of abuse are criminal charges and are extremely destructive to those accused. In actual criminal cases there may be some opportunity to rebut the charges, to hear the other side. But psychotherapy is a one-sided process, and therefore simple fairness requires that both the client and therapist should always be aware that claims of abuse may be false or distorted.

Christians in psychotherapy and recovery groups must keep in mind that they have a special responsibility not to condemn a parent, as we are not to condemn anyone. We can be the jury and convict a parent of sin or destructive behavior, but we can never be the judge who passes the sentence. We must remember that vengeance is the Lord's, not ours.

Another consequence of a fascination with the past is the use of enormous amounts of time and energy, so that little remains for doing something positive with one's life. Major decisions, including marriage and a career, are put on hold for years while the past is worked through and stewed over.

Finally, this preoccupation with the past can lead the client into an attitude of moral irresponsibility. As people become preoccupied, even obsessed, with their personal psychotherapy, they often evade responsibility for their present life, fail to acknowledge their own contribution to their psychological problems, and refuse to accept responsibility for change. We have all met people for whom psychology has had some or many of the distressing effects listed above. Perhaps we may recognize them in ourselves. It is from such effects that many need to escape.

But it does not help simply to exhort people to stop being fascinated with their past or to tell them to forget about their dysfunctional family. Something must happen to help the person release the past and start creating a new life, an attitude of looking forward to the future. How are people to escape from a past-oriented, passive, deterministic, and self-preoccupied victim-status? Let me briefly describe the major processes that make this move possible.

Frequently the first step is *forgiveness*. We must decide—and be willing—to forgive those who have hurt us in the past. This is often difficult because it means letting go of what others owe us. If they have done us wrong, to forgive them is not only to cancel that debt but to renounce our moral superiority. Forgiveness is a complex process that involves many stages, as different aspects of resentment and hatred surface over time. But however difficult, forgiveness is absolutely essential if clients – if any of us – are to be freed from the past.

Next comes *reconciliation*, that is, going to the person (if available) and being reconciled and at peace with him or her. This is not recommended for everyone or for every situation, and reconciliation rarely means saying, “I forgive you.” Much more frequently it means asking, “Will you forgive me?” Reconciliation helps reestablish a previous relationship, which some painful estrangement had broken. In some cases, reparation will also occur; if you have clearly harmed someone, you may overtly or discreetly be able to make amends.

Finally, the psychologically troubled person needs to *repent*. Clients must face their need for repentance. Usually when forgiveness has taken place, they are in a position to see how much they have contributed to their own pathology. They choose to hold on to anger and resentment, they choose to hate. They choose to be morally superior, to wallow in self-pity. And they can see how they have hurt others: sometimes in retaliation, but many times harming innocent people. Most of us remember ten times we have been hurt for every one time that we have hurt others. In our account books, we only keep one side of the ledger carefully: what others have done to us!

Experienced and sober therapists have long been aware that our culture has been endowing psychotherapy with an unrealistic power to transform people's lives. Wise therapists know that they help many to overcome certain problems, but they also know that psychology is not the answer to life. Sigmund Freud once said about psychoanalysis that “the best it can do is to return the patient to the normal level of human misery. “ Psychology cannot make you happy—and it cannot even make you fully “whole” psychologically. Only those in heaven will have perfectly healthy minds and bodies. In this world, we will *perpetually* be somewhat sick, mentally and physically. We do not need to be psychologically sound to know and love Christ for which we should be profoundly grateful.

### **Recovery from Recovery**

Recently, group forms of psychotherapy have become extremely popular. Alcoholics Anonymous, Adult Children of Alcoholics, Al-Anon, Overeaters Anonymous, and many other kinds of groups have been helpful to millions of Americans. Such groups are generally

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<sup>9</sup> The False Memory Syndrome Foundation has headquarters at Suite 128, 3508 Market Street, Philadelphia, PA 19104.

described as “recovery groups,” as their aim is to help people recover from addictions or traumas that often have their origin in childhood experiences and dysfunctional families.

No definitive research demonstrates the benefits of any of these groups-especially the more recent groups, such as those that focus on the psychological problems of relatives of addicts. But there is a fair amount of research on the programs of Alcoholics Anonymous. At present, it is not clear that AA is the only or even the best way of overcoming alcoholism. Behavioral programs, intensive in-patient hospital programs, and other strategies are also successful. This is not to deny that millions of people have benefited from AA, but the almost religious veneration that AA frequently receives may be unjustified.

Most recovery groups are based on “twelve step” programs, originally developed by Alcoholics Anonymous. The underlying concept is that alcoholism-or a different addiction-is a disease. There is now good evidence that the disease theory of alcoholism is mistaken.<sup>10</sup> An addiction is very serious and destructive, but it does not appear to be a disease. That is, recovery from alcoholism requires a moral choice and cognitive commitment to change. No true biological disease can be changed by an act of the will and by commitment. If so, the problems of cancer and AIDS would have been licked long ago.

In twelve-step programs, the first step is for people to admit, to themselves and to others in the group, that they are helpless to do anything on their own about their addiction. Although this step expresses the person’s total helplessness, the statement itself is understood to be a first act in overcoming the addiction. Nevertheless, some people have criticized this first step as reinforcing a sense of fatalism and passivity.<sup>11</sup>

Many of the steps have a strong religious or moral component. The second step invites the person to “come to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.” The fourth step declares: “Make a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.” A social dimension is represented in the group meetings themselves and in the help that the members often provide for each other outside of the meetings. In short, these recovery groups have quietly revolutionized psychology by introducing major dimensions almost completely absent in traditional psychotherapy: the religious, the moral, and the social.

The founders of Alcoholics Anonymous, serious Christians, based their first recovery group on these steps. These basic principles represent a qualitatively different approach to personal problems as compared to standard individual psychotherapy. Such factors account for the positive religious or spiritual character of most recovery groups, for these are all profoundly Christian ideas. Other religious elements include confession of one’s past failings and (when appropriate) attempts to reconcile with those whom one has harmed. Whatever the ability of AA (in comparison with other approaches) to stop people’s drinking, there is good reason to believe that these religious principles have greatly facilitated the reconstruction of many people’s lives and produced a wide variety of psychological benefits. No doubt recovery groups offer such benefits as friendship and solace for loneliness; yet the main psychospiritual appeal of such groups is a sense of the power of God and sorrow for sin, placed within a context of social support.

Nonetheless, serious religious criticisms must be made of these recovery groups. Despite the theistic emphasis, all the twelve-step programs omit forgiveness of others (and of oneself) as an explicit step. This is a central problem and a surprising omission. After all, the Christian faith has long focused on the importance of forgiveness, and even the secular world is slowly beginning to take note of this most healing of interpersonal processes. My friends in AA, however, point out that forgiveness often occurs in somewhat indirect or reduced forms because AA emphasizes (and rightly so) getting rid of resentment. In any case, forgiveness, which is enshrined in the Lord’s Prayer, is a Christian *requirement*: we must forgive others if we wish to be forgiven ourselves. Only recently have some Christian psychologists and others begun to recommend the introduction of forgiveness into recovery group psychology and family therapy. This is an important new development.<sup>12</sup> Forgiveness will certainly serve to complete many people’s recovery process.

Within recovery groups, other problems affect a growing number of People. The problems can be viewed as psychological side effects of the recovery process itself. Just as a drug, though generally positive, may have negative side effects for some users-and for some, the side effects may be worse than the disease-so a psychological process can have negative and profound effects. What side effects have been observed in recovery groups? First, the notion that God is to be understood as each individual defines him (or her or it) is not only fundamentally heretical, but it can also promote psychological harm. For certain people, God becomes little more than a narcissistic projection of their own needs and desires-and of their strange views and eccentricities. Some decades ago the popular ventriloquist Edgar

<sup>10</sup> See J. Orford, *Excessive Appetites: A Psychological View of Addictions* (New York: Wiley, 1985).

<sup>11</sup> Stanton Peele, *Diseasing of America: Addiction Treatment Out of Control* (Boston Houghton Mifflin, 1989).

<sup>12</sup> An important recent example of this is David Stoop and James Masteller, *Forgiving Our Parents, Forgiving Ourselves* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: Servant, 1991). The authors state the problem clearly: “Once you realize how deeply you may have been hurt by those in your family, forgiving them may seem like the last thing you want to do. But in fact, forgiveness is crucial to your spiritual and emotional health. It is the key to freedom from the pain of the past” (p. 155).

Bergen had a dummy named Charley McCarthy. God is some people's Charley McCarthy: they make Him say and think what they say and think. The notion of a God of justice whose "thoughts are not our thoughts," and the "fear" of whom is "the beginning of wisdom," is seriously at odds with this sort of do-it-yourself deity.

Another problem with recovery groups is that their claims are becoming extreme, even irrational. The wild enthusiasm for recovery groups and especially for the theory that the dysfunctional family is the universal cause of our psychological problems is a sign of a cresting fad-another American psychological enthusiasm. For example, a prominent recovery group psychologist said that "Ninety-four percent of all families are dysfunctional." Perhaps "dysfunctional" is understood so loosely that the statement is meaningless, such as, "Ninety-four percent of all people are not completely physically healthy." On the other hand, without research, statistics, and other good evidence, such claims are so ridiculous that those who make them may be classified as modern snake-oil salesmen selling the newest universal cure for whatever ails a person. Because such statements invite backlash, the very real contribution of recovery groups might be thrown out along with their overblown claims.

In recovery groups it is not uncommon to hear critical and condescending remarks about the church in general and individual churches in particular-and about people who are misguided enough to be outside of recovery groups. As one AA friend of mine put it, "There is an often voiced sentiment in the rooms of AA that their spirituality represents an attitude toward God that is superior to that held by organized religion." As a result, attitudes of self-righteousness are far from rare. Such comments as "If you are not in recovery, you're part of the problem," make this clear. The recovery group can become a little church. When it does, it is its own little sect: it is not part of the Body of Christ. It has no theology or tradition that can put brakes on the normal human tendency to develop self-serving biases and error.

In other words, just because a recovery group has driven out a devil of addiction does not mean that seven new and worse devils cannot come to take its place-and one of the worst of these new devils may be spiritual pride. Perhaps one of the most reliable ways to avoid the cult-like effects of recovery groups is for members to attend regular church services, where they truly belong to Christ's church.

Finally, there are people for whom the recovery group process itself becomes an addiction. They replace their dysfunctional family with a dysfunctional recovery group; they become, once again, an "enabler" and defend and cling to the recovery group as they once defended and clung to their family.

### **Beyond Psychology**

Forgiveness and repentance are not part of any standard psychological theory. From Sigmund Freud to Carl Jung to Carl Rogers to cognitive and behavioral therapy, these concepts receive no emphasis. And yet, the healing power of forgiveness-of being reconciled with those who have hurt you and of repenting and being reconciled with God has been known for thousands of years. Another way of putting this is to say that psychological problems, however real, often do not have psychological answers; they have moral, spiritual, and theological answers.

A little reflection should make the truth of this important point clear. Our major psychological problems are set up by the absence of love and the presence of hatred and cruelty in our earliest years. From physical, sexual, and psychological abuse to the accidents of abandonment, separation, and death to permissive, negligent parents who failed to set limits and discipline, we are wounded as children. Psychotherapy can help us discover how and when and where all of this took place. We may overcome our repressions and our denials and discover, buried in our past, the traumatic events that hurt us and leave us still aching. But this discovery cannot make up for the hurts or take away the pain. Indeed, as noted, too much preoccupation with the past can exacerbate the suffering or bring new pathologies with it. We may even invent our memories of past abuses.

In any case, it is a simple fact that if your parents failed to love you, and even hurt you, there is nothing that psychology can do to make up for it. No psychotherapist can make up for the lost love of childhood. A fifty-minute hour once a week, years after the events, is ridiculous as an answer. Likewise, group sessions when you are thirty years old cannot make up for family failures when you were seven. If your mother did not love you, the best – the only – resolution to this problem is to forgive her, with all that entails, and repent of your own sins, with all that entails. If we can do this, we can let go of the past, close those painful chapters of our lives, and turn and face the future. We can begin to think about a new life, about new goals, about the next and much more positive and exciting chapter to life's story.

Looking back over the three parts of psychology, we are in a better position to see modern psychology for what it is and avoid any idolatrous reliance on it. We can see the search for self-esteem as a well-meaning but misguided fad. We can recognize that psychotherapy has a definite but limited usefulness. We can acknowledge that people with addictions and other problems can often

benefit from recovery groups. But psychology cannot heal our deepest hurts or answer our strongest yearnings, and it is certainly not a pool in which to gaze perpetually at our own reflection. At its best, psychology is a stepping stone; we should use it to move on. If we can understand psychology in this way, then we can finally respond to the truth in the saying: "Life is not a problem to be solved, it is a story to be lived." And in fording our new story we need look no further than to the greatest story ever told.

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## Psychology in Recovery

by Paul C. Vitz

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Modern psychology, like Caesar's Gaul, has classically been divided into three parts: there is experimental psychology, test-and-measurement psychology, and therapeutic psychology. All three branches have been in steady operation since the late nineteenth century, and in all three of them one may observe, over that time, striking transformations that I think bode well for the future. As some readers may know, I was a public and rather harsh critic of much popular psychology in my first publications in the 1970s and '80s. I stand by those views. But much has changed, and changed (to my surprise) for the better. Particularly in the therapeutic discipline, and specifically in the past generation, a new and salutary understanding of what psychotherapy is and is not has been developed. It is to these advances in psychotherapy that I will pay closest attention below. But I will begin by sketching the changes in psychology's other two branches.

*Experimental psychology.* This branch of psychology began in the mid-nineteenth century and had a strongly physical emphasis, studying sensation, perception, and behavior; it originally included animal experimentation and has come increasingly to focus on brain function. By the late 1960s the term "experimental psychology" was falling out of use and the field was dividing into two distinct pursuits: cognitive psychology and physiological psychology. In the past thirty years or so, these two fields have again transformed themselves, with physiological psychology turning decisively back to its biological origins and becoming what is now called neuroscience. Meanwhile, cognitive psychology (with its focus on human memory, schematizing, learning, problem-solving, sensation, perception, and the like) has been going through a similar metamorphosis, giving rise to such fields as cognitive neuroscience (focusing on brain activity) and cognitive science (focusing on artificial intelligence and robotics).

It is important to emphasize that the current progeny of what was originally called experimental psychology have become accepted members of the community of the "hard sciences." The new subdisciplines of neuroscience and cognitive science retain in their names no reference to "psychology," and their practitioners display waning interest in what is still generally understood as psychology. This seems to me to be not a movement away from experimental psychology's origins, but rather a proper development from the discipline's true roots in biological and physical science.

*Tests and measurements.* This branch is perhaps the least glamorous of the three, but it has a creditable pedigree and has proved its usefulness. Tests and measurements began in the early twentieth century. It focused first on measuring intelligence but soon expanded into other testing areas, such as occupational aptitudes. Techniques developed in this branch help us to identify different mental pathologies: for example, the MMPI-2 measures depression, anxiety, schizophrenia, and personality characteristics; and the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual allows psychologists to assign to each client a diagnostic category of mental disorder. (The DSM, despite many biases and other difficulties, has proven to be extremely useful as a standard reference.) Also developed in this field are useful measurements of general well-being related to such social variables as marital status, family structure, drug use, social class, and so forth.

The kind of social science being done in the test-and-measurement field is extremely informative, and I fully expect this discipline (despite the imperfection of some of its tools) to continue to make contributions to psychology as a whole. Again, as we saw above with experimental psychology, the internal logic of this field's development may tend to push it away from understanding itself as a branch of psychology, and in the future its practitioners may become part of a general social science measurement program, or possibly part of the field of statistics.

*Psychotherapy.* This third branch of psychology, focusing on mental health and the human personality, is what is meant by the term "psychology" in common parlance. Most people would associate it, quite correctly, with Sigmund Freud. In the 1890s Freud founded what we know as the psychotherapeutic world, in which the practitioner (whatever his underlying theory may be) focuses on the experience taking place during, and examined in, the therapeutic session. Freud was followed by figures such as Alfred Adler, with his interest in inferiority complexes, the ego, and social interaction, and Carl Jung, with his concern with unconscious archetypes and self-realization. Neo-Freudians in the 1940s and '50s also emphasized the ego, but introduced many other elements: of particular importance to them was a patient's early relationship with the mother-figure.

Today, psychotherapy is a large, complex enterprise, with many diverse approaches and forms of therapy, and most contemporary psychotherapists are trained in a very eclectic fashion. It is worthy of note, however, that one thing no longer included in this eclectic curriculum is much Freudian psychotherapy, which has almost entirely disappeared from American graduate programs. There are many reasons for the decline of Freudian theory in the profession, but the one on which I want to focus here is the profession's improved understanding of itself and its capabilities. Freud claimed that his work was scientific, that psychotherapy was a hard science in its infancy, and that as time went on new research would increasingly validate it. Other early psychologists such as Jung and Adler also apparently believed that their understandings would develop into a genuine natural science. Today it is clear that this scientific concept of psychotherapy is untenable.

As we have seen, the other two branches of modern psychology have correctly grasped their founding inspirations and have gone on to achieve genuinely scientific status. Psychotherapy in the past generation has similarly grasped that its founding inspiration is humanistic, and that its founders made a serious category mistake in declaring it to be a science. The nineteenth century was the heyday of moral and intellectual confidence in science, and it is easy to see why early psychologists might have prematurely applied current concepts of natural science to psychological phenomena. Freud's use of the energy model of the human mind is a clear example of borrowing from the physics of his century. The same is true of the hydraulic and equilibrium notions drawn from other sciences. Beginning in the 1960s and '70s, the computer model of the mind was used as a general metaphor—one that has been found to be quite limiting. More recently, ideas from evolutionary biology have been borrowed in order to explain human psychology. In all of these instances, the borrowed models of the mind have had some modest usefulness as loose metaphors.

In a few cases, of course, psychologists took their models from the humanities. Freud's Oedipus Complex was an early example of using a literary and narrative mode to explain personality. Carl Jung's archetypes were drawn from the humanities and often expressed an explicit mythological or narrative character. The crucial thing to note is that these uses of literature and religion and myth were as much borrowings as were appeals to concepts derived from science. Psychology on its own has never come up with its own discipline-generated basic theory. The frank admission of its inability to do so is certainly an important step on the road to recovering a proper understanding of psychology's capabilities and limitations.

Psychologists in the therapy world today have recognized that their understanding of the human person has not become more scientific. Furthermore, they no longer believe that to label their discipline a science is either possible in practice or desirable in theory. Instead, psychologists have grasped that psychotherapy best understands itself and best serves its clients by locating itself in the humanities and making use of concepts and approaches traditionally found there. For example, recent theorists such as Roy Shafer, Donald Spence, Jerome Bruner, and Dan McAdams have emphasized a narrative understanding of personality, as well as storytelling aspects of knowledge in general and of the therapeutic session in particular. Others have placed psychology in the broad field of hermeneutics, in which it becomes part of interpretive frameworks more closely related to theology, philosophy, and ethics than to traditional science. The result is that psychotherapy has begun to return to its roots in the premodern era, when psychology was understood to be a subdiscipline of philosophy.

There is still a certain amount of genuinely scientific observation and a modest proportion of important experimental research present in today's field of psychotherapy—for example, research that shows some of the early experiences that contribute to mental pathologies. In the future we are likely to see major contributions from research on experiences that build strength of character and virtue (about which I say more below). But once psychology leaves its modest scientific and objective base, it begins to use concepts and broad interpretive frameworks that are intrinsically nonscientific—and, indeed, philosophical in nature. The result is that psychology is becoming an applied philosophy of life.

Substantial evidence of this new understanding in contemporary psychotherapy is supplied by a major new development known as "positive psychology." It is clear that various psychologists anticipated this recent development, in particular Alfred Adler and Abraham Maslow (with his "third way" psychology and its positive emphases). Adler and Maslow, however, were primarily theorists. It has been the role of Martin Seligman, a former president of the American Psychological Association and a professor of psychology at the University of Pennsylvania, to act as a catalyst for positive psychology and to promote its development as a research-based field in academic psychology.

In order to understand positive psychology, we must first provide a short description of its opposite—negative psychology. For Seligman, and now many others, negative psychology refers to the psychology of the last hundred years, begun by Freud. Such psychology focused on traumas and pathologies. It is natural enough, according to Seligman, that psychology would first focus on illness. Seligman himself, in his early career, made a contribution to this negative psychology: he is famous for identifying learned helplessness in animals and in humans as an important source of depression. But it has become clear to him and others that after a hundred years of trying to understand

human problems it is time to study human strengths or positive characteristics. In addition, for many psychologists it is clear that in the relatively standard therapeutic session there is not much more to learn.

The almost exclusive emphasis on negative psychology has had undesirable consequences as well. For one thing, it has contributed to the widespread victim mentality characteristic of today's American society. Psychotherapy has been one of the most influential of the modern disciplines: directly or indirectly, it has changed the way most of us think about ourselves. The general perspective provided by negative psychology is that we are all victims of past traumas, abuse, and neglect caused by other people. This victim mentality has been widely noted and criticized, quite legitimately, as having become extreme. Many of us can see ourselves as victims—that is, as sinned against—but fewer of us recognize ourselves as victimizers: as sinners. In many ways this victim mentality is a consequence of the very structure of traditional psychotherapy, which can only identify *your* hurts and problems and their possible sources. Therapists report that it is uncommon for anyone to present to the therapist a problem that he or she has caused for another.

A further disturbing consequence of this mentality is the widespread belief that we are not responsible for our bad actions, since they are caused by what others have done to us. Obviously, in many instances, even criminal cases, there are extenuating circumstances, but I think that most thoughtful Americans believe that we have gone too far in providing people with excuses.

It is not that Seligman or most psychologists believe that negative psychology is wrong or useless. The problem is that it is quite one-sided. What is needed to balance our understanding of the person is a recognition of positive human characteristics that can both heal many of our pathologies and help to prevent psychological problems in one's future life. Positive psychology therefore emphasizes traits that promote happiness and well-being, as well as character strengths such as optimism, kindness, resilience, persistence, and gratitude. These positive characteristics, sometimes called "character strengths" or even "ego strengths" by psychologists, will be recognized by members of all major religions and by most philosophers as names for what used to be called "the virtues."

In their book *Character Strengths and Virtues: A Handbook and Classification*, Christopher Peterson and Martin Seligman propose that psychology should "reclaim the study of character and virtue as legitimate topics of psychological inquiry and informed societal discourse. By providing ways of talking about character strengths and measuring them across the life span, this classification [of character and virtue] will start to make possible a science of human strengths that goes beyond armchair philosophy and political rhetoric. We believe that good character can be cultivated, but to do so, we need conceptual and empirical tools to craft and evaluate interventions."

Peterson and Seligman distinguish three conceptual levels: virtues, at the highest level; character strengths; and situational themes. In their view, the virtues "are the core characteristics valued by moral philosophers and religious thinkers: wisdom, courage, humanity, justice, temperance, and transcendence. These six broad categories of virtue emerge consistently from historical surveys. . . . We argue that these are universal, perhaps grounded in biology through an evolutionary process that selected for these aspects of excellence as means of solving the important tasks necessary for survival of the species. We speculate that all these virtues must be present at above-threshold values for an individual to be deemed of good character."

Character strengths are the basic components that go to make up the virtues. For example, the virtue of humanity involves the character strengths of love (e.g., valuing close relations with others), kindness (e.g., generosity and nurturance), and social intelligence (e.g., emotional intelligence and sensitivity). The authors give a set of ten quite detailed criteria for what constitutes a character strength. Situational themes are specific habits and kinds of behavior that manifest character strengths in given situations. Thus, for example, empathy in the workplace is expressed in terms of anticipating and meeting the needs of others at the behavioral level.

Peterson and Seligman list six core virtues, and it is not hard to provide the familiar Christian or Greco-Roman names for them. Their explanation of wisdom and knowledge is very close to the traditional virtue of prudence; humanity is close to charity; courage, justice, and temperance have not changed their names; and their sixth virtue, transcendence, is not far from hope and faith.

The authors survey the major religious and philosophical traditions in both the East and the West, in defending the universality of their definition of the six "high virtues." In the process, they explicitly acknowledge, among others, Aristotle and Aquinas.

In discovering positive human characteristics that need to be cultivated in order to strengthen a person and to help heal past suffering, psychology has, unknowingly, made a momentous conceptual change. The previous model for negative psychology was based entirely on the traditional scientific worldview of a deterministic past causing the present. In moving to positive psychology, the discipline has moved not only from science to philosophy, but also from the past and its effects to the future and our purposes, from mechanical determinism to teleology.

There are many reasons to believe that positive psychology is not merely a short-term fad. One simple reason is that it offers an innovative way of thinking about psychology and many new and important topics waiting to be systematically explored—and that translates into career opportunities for large numbers of young psychologists. We are seeing at major American universities the founding of—and considerable funding for—new institutes and faculty devoted to positive psychology, and the development of a large group of loosely affiliated scholars and researchers to investigate it. An even more substantive reason for the likely longevity of this new positive psychology is that it connects psychology to a large and powerful realm of thought and discourse about human nature that has been previously untouched by modern systematic theory and experimentation. Significant findings will have an immediate and major effect on child-rearing, education, and quite possibly on psychotherapy itself.

As for the future of psychology, an important aspect of the discipline's transformation over the past generation has been the change in psychology's view of religion. Once considered a negative or immature or pathological phenomenon, religion is no longer scorned, and many psychologists even view it in a positive light. This has happened in part because research has demonstrated that seriously religious people tend to be happier, healthier, and longer-lived. In addition, the popularity of "new age" spirituality in the lives of the governing class has at least made spiritual values something to be taken seriously. It is no longer a given that members of our educated elite will be cultured despisers of spirituality or will sneer at the religious impulse. (Of course, negative attitudes toward traditional, organized religion remain.)

The discipline of psychology, as it has become aware of the virtues and the need to recover them, has begun to develop an important virtue of its own—humility. Psychology has become much more humble over the past thirty years. And this has happened for several reasons. First, psychiatry and the biological sciences have made important new contributions to therapy, so that today people suffering from depression, obsessions, and many other psychological problems take medication, which tends to be more effective, immediate, and cheaper than long-term therapy (despite the complications and side-effects that medications can cause). Second, many of the leading enthusiasts for psychology and psychotherapy in the '60s and '70s soon learned what the majority of psychologists have now recognized: that although psychotherapy is helpful, it rarely provides life-transforming insight or happiness. As a result, many psychologists themselves moved off into spirituality and religious experience as a more successful form of healing (Abraham Maslow was an early example).

Health care practice has also forced psychology to confront itself and to revise its self-understanding. Managed health care has made it difficult for patients to have long-term psychotherapy, as insurance companies will only pay for short-term therapy (a maximum of perhaps twelve sessions). Short-term therapy also tends to be a kind of pragmatic cognitive/behavioral therapy, without the grandiose theoretical ambitions of the first psychological systems. Furthermore, as a cost-saving measure, HMOs have begun to support therapy by people with MA degrees, with the result that fewer clients can afford to pay the price of a therapist with a doctoral degree.

Another important development, and in some ways another humbling experience for psychology, has been psychology's own success and growth. In the early days of psychotherapy, patients were mostly drawn from the highly educated class and social elites, especially the most secular among them. For example, Sigmund Freud never published a case history of a patient who was seriously religious; it is not clear that he ever had such a patient. Nor, apparently, did he have associates who were seriously religious. Over time, however, with the growth of university psychology programs and the production of large numbers of trained psychotherapists, the clientele for psychotherapy naturally expanded to include more of the public at large. In the United States, the great majority of people are religious; it is even possible that involvement in religion has been increasing in recent years. In order to treat such people, psychotherapists have had to address religious issues and to take them seriously—at the very least they had to treat their religious clients with respect. I have also observed that many clinical psychologists today are themselves religious, and it is worth noting that today the clergy is one of the most important referral networks for clients.

Finally, a major theoretical reason for the scaling back of psychology's early and unseemly hubris has been the decline of the secular ideal itself. Today we are witnessing startling growth in Christianity in the U.S. and throughout much of the world. Within Judaism, Orthodoxy has grown vigorously both in Israel and in the U.S. All around the world, secularism is withering.

Paradoxically, postmodern theory has contributed to this development. The contradictions within modernity, first made visible in the writings of Nietzsche, are now widely recognized. Whatever the validity of postmodern claims, this change in the intellectual climate has been another factor in psychologists' gradual surrender of the scientific ideal as a goal toward which to direct their efforts.

Postmodernism has also called into question modern psychology's central construct of the "self," with the result that general theories of the person or the self have lost much of their appeal. (Perhaps the two theories that have been most eclipsed by recent developments are Freudianism and behaviorism.) The postmodern view is that each patient deserves his or her own theory. Again, such a view is arguable, but it is clear, at least, that if the self has been deconstructed to the point where, as some postmodern theorists claim, there is no self (at

least no coherent or integrated or authentic self), then psychological theories of self-actualization will find no purchase—and no purchasers.

In short, as we look back at the recent and ongoing transformations in all three branches of the discipline, it is clear that the psychological guild is becoming older and wiser—both more spiritual and more pragmatic—than it was in its overconfident early days.

I close on a guardedly optimistic note. On the horizon I see the potential for a psychology that I call “transmodern.” By this term I mean a new mentality that both transcends and transforms modernity. Thus, it will leave both modern and postmodern psychology behind. It will bring in transcendent understandings that may be idealistic and philosophical (e.g., the virtues), as well as spiritual and religious. It will transform modernity by bringing in an intelligent understanding of much of premodern wisdom. Recently the possibility of religious contributions to a transmodern psychology have become evident. The International Forgiveness Institute has been established under Robert D. Enright at the University of Wisconsin, and an institute devoted to the study of love has been founded by Stephen G. Post at Case Western Reserve. Both institutes have received substantial funding. Also relevant here is the fact that the American Psychological Association actively sought out and then published in 2000 a book on forgiveness in psychotherapy by Enright and Richard Fitzgibbons. The psychologist Everett Worthington has also made major contributions to understanding the process of forgiveness, and his work has received much attention both from the general public and the media.

Moreover, in recent years the Christian theology of personalism has developed a new theoretical framework for understanding the person, including the goals of psychotherapy. This is a special project of another new institute: the Institute for the Psychological Sciences, in northern Virginia. Finally, another piece of evidence for the emergence of a new psychology is the work by Vincent Jeffries, which revives the important but long-neglected contributions of Harvard sociologist Pitirim Sorokin, who more than fifty years ago developed the concept of “integralism”: a model of social science involving transcendent and religious factors.

This new psychology, should it develop, will be a smaller and humbler discipline. But it will also be a much more useful one. In such a transmodern world, psychology would be the handmaid of philosophy and theology, as from the beginning it was meant to be.

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