

PSYCHOLOGY: A DISCIPLINE OR A PHILOSOPHY?

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INTRODUCTION

Among Fundamental Christianity there is a long enduring conflict concerning the issue of psychology and the place that it has within the church. Some believers are convinced the instructions and findings within psychology yields great benefits in resolving issues they believe the church can benefit. Others are persuaded psychology can be useful in specific situations (such as those who need objective medical care), but it produces nothing useful in terms of spiritual matters for the believer or humanity at large. It is also observed there are others who argue that psychology, and the teachings found in psychology, have no place in the body of Christ concerning human beings, the interactions among human beings, and that the Bible gives us all we need in addressing all the ailments of mankind. These various positions that each group asserts depends on what each group believes what psychology is, and the purpose of psychology. The first group of believers who see psychology as beneficial may observe psychology as something to study and exploit the information it produces. The second group may observe psychology as something to be practiced in a specific context (e.g., the medical community), but in terms of spiritual truth one is instructed to be highly skeptical. The third group may see psychology as a set of teachings that are antithetical to the teachings that are found in Scripture and should be avoided. These various positions may cause one outside these groups to become ambivalent on what psychology is and its overall purpose. This inquiry will investigate a formal definition and explanation of psychology and philosophy, compare and contrast the implications of each explanation of psychology and philosophy. Then various Scriptures in light of the various explanations concerning the comparisons and contrast concerning psychology and philosophy will be observed. Lastly, a model of psychology, in light of the various Scriptures will be surveyed.

PSYCHOLOGY: A FORMAL DEFINITION

An etymological examination of the word *psychology* emphasizes the purpose behind this subject. The term psychology comes from the Latin word *psyche* (which derives from the Greek

word *psuche*) meaning “breath, spirit, mind, or soul.” The suffix of the word is *logia* is a word structuring component that is described as a study or a discourse of a particular subject. Concerning this particular word itself, psychology is the discourse or study of the mind or an individual. There are various explanations of this word that carry with it these specific ideas. Noah Webster gave his explanation on what psychology is when he commented that psychology is, “A discourse or treatise on the human soul; or the doctrine of the nature and properties of the soul.”¹ Gregg Henriques gives a practical explanation of psychology when he expresses that psychology “is the science of mental behavior and the human mind, and the professional application of such knowledge toward the greater good.”² Carole Wade and Carol Tavis offer a formal description of the word *psychology*, “as the discipline concerning with behavior, mental processes and how they are affected by an organisms physical state, mental state, and external environment.”³

Psychology, from the descriptions given underscores that it is a study and analysis of the human being, specifically the human mind and soul for the purpose of improving, or strengthening one’s life behaviorally, personally and relationally. In addition, *psychology*, is also closely associated with the branch of *science*, which is described as, “the pursuit and application of knowledge and understanding of the natural and social world following a systematic methodology based on evidence.”⁴ According to the details of psychology observing the process of science is vital in understanding the patterns of human beings and human behavior. In short, psychology, concerning mankind and the aspects of mankind is “substance driven.”

PHILOSOPHY: A FORMAL DEFINITION

The word *philosophy* derives from two Greek words: *philo*, meaning “love” and *sophia* meaning “wisdom.” Philosophy, in short, means a “love of wisdom” and this love is driven by the quest for knowledge for the purpose of understanding existence. One such institution highlights these points of philosophy in this manner

In a broad sense, philosophy is an activity people undertake when they seek to understand fundamental truths about themselves, the world in which they live, and their relationships to the world and to each other. As an academic discipline philosophy is much the same. Those who study philosophy are perpetually engaged in asking, answering, and arguing for their answers to life’s most basic questions.⁵

¹ (Webster 1828)

² (Henriques 2011)

³ 2 (Tavis 2008)

⁴ (The Science Council n.d.)

⁵ (Florida State University n.d.)

One such description not only attempts to describe what philosophy is, but the very purpose of philosophy when one writes the following:

Philosophy is a way of thinking about certain subjects such as ethics, thought, existence, time, meaning and value. That 'way of thinking' involves 4 Rs: responsiveness, reflection, reason and re-evaluation. The aim is to deepen understanding. The hope is that by doing philosophy we learn to think better, to act more wisely, and thereby help to improve the quality of all our lives.⁶

Colin Brown gives his concise definition of philosophy when he writes the following: "Philosophy is an intellectual discipline which is concerned with the nature of reality and the investigation of the general principles of knowledge and existence."⁷ The qualities of philosophy, from the descriptions mentioned, is the pursuit of knowing truth (i.e., reality). Such questions that philosophy seeks to address are the following: What is knowledge? What is reality? Is there a God? What is good and evil? Why are we here? Why do we think? Etc. These questions, and many others philosophy observes, are not answered by merely gazing at the natural world but are resolved by affirming claims about mankind and the connection between mankind and reality logically and reasonably. To sum up, philosophy is concerned about the examination of life itself. Philosophy is "ideologically driven."

PSYCHOLOGY & PHILOSOPHY: WHATS THE DIFFERENCE?

It would appear, at an initial glance, that psychology and philosophy are synonyms. However according to their definitions there are three ways that psychology and philosophy are distinct from one another. These differences are as follows below:

1. Psychology, unlike philosophy, does not make presuppositional claims about mankind and the nature of existence. Psychology as a discipline is interested in observing the physical properties of mankind, the behaviors of mankind, and how those behaviors influence others. Philosophy, however, does make claims about reality and truth as it seeks to pursue the answers to the fundamental questions of what makes up reality and existence.

⁶ (The Philosophy Foundation n.d.)

⁷ (Brown 1968)

2. Psychology views mankind and the behaviors of mankind plainly. For example, when a researcher examines the human brain and how the human brain works in relation to the body this is a natural observation. The researcher may make a hypothesis about its workings, but the researcher does so by exploring the natural phenomena. Philosophy, on the other hand does not make observations from observable data, but rather *informs* the observer on how one is to examine reality and the world around them. For instance, if a researcher who is observing the human brain and its connection with the body, has concluded that over millions or billions of years the process of evolution has fine-tuned the brain/body connection, then this researcher's position on reality (i.e., philosophy) has informed him on *how* to look at the brain in relation to the body.
3. A discipline and philosophy can be recognized by its word forming ending that is associated with the overall word itself. For example, a word that ends with *ology* underscores a discipline (e.g., sociology, psychology, biology).⁸ A philosophy can be recognized by the case ending *ism*, which highlights a particular set of beliefs and truth claims within a particular area (e.g., humanism, feminism, stoicism).

Psychology is a field of study and with it attempts to make sense of the inner workings of mankind and the interactions found within mankind. Philosophy does not observe humanity from a material aspect but does seek to understand knowledge, reality, and the nature of man's existence. Even though philosophy is not equivalent to psychology, one's philosophical position influences when one observes the findings in psychology (or any other field of study).

BIBLICAL PHILOSOPHY OBSERVED IN SCRIPTURE

One's philosophical positions is important in how one views and observes a particular discipline, which is seen in several examples of Scripture. One such example is King David, who in Psalm 19:1 wrote "The heavens are telling of the glory of God; And their expanse is declaring the work of His hands" (NASB). King David was informed of this by his proper instruction of the Torah. Paul, spoke of David before he ascended to the kingship in the nation of Israel that God had said that David was a man after God's own heart (c.f., Acts 13:22). This highlighted that David's philosophy was centered on the revelation of God in that it should govern how he should observe the natural world around him. A similar observation of is made of King David concerning his own conception in the womb, which is described as follows, "For You formed my

⁸ Although this word ending *ology* is common among words in the English language this is not a strict rule. There are other words in that also describe areas of common study that do not have the ending *ology* (e.g., economy, astronomy, physics, etc.).

inward parts; You wove me in my mother's womb. I will give thanks to You, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made; Wonderful are Your works, and my soul knows it very well. My frame was not hidden from You, When I was made in secret, and skillfully wrought in the depths of the earth; Your eyes have seen my unformed substance" (Psalm 139:13-16a). David, observing some of the developmental characteristics of conception (i.e., inward parts, mother's womb, frame) to the personal handiwork of God Himself (i.e., "You formed," "You knit me," "wonderful are your works"). Once more King David's worldview was centered on the reality that God made the heavens and the earth, and this perspective was the lens by which he viewed human conception and growth.

This philosophical position can also be observed from King David's son, King Solomon, in the same attitude and character as his father (c.f., 1 Kings 3:3), and acknowledged the supremacy of God when Solomon asks for wisdom to guide the nation of Israel (c.f. 1 Kings 3:6-15). This wisdom is expressed in several books that Solomon penned in the Old Testament. In the Book of Ecclesiastes Solomon, in a "research study," observed some of the other philosophies under heaven by which one could believe and conduct themselves. He concluded, based upon these philosophies, and the wisdom they yielded that all of them he examined were vain and gave no satisfactory answers to life "under the sun." At the end of this book he concluded his "research study" with the following words, "The conclusion, when all has been heard, is fear God and keep His commandments, because this applies to every person." (Ecc. 12:13 NASB). This same viewpoint can also be observed in the Book of Proverbs where Solomon wrote the following statement, "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, And the knowledge of the Holy One is understanding." (c.f., Prov. 9:7 NASB). Within this book Solomon observed, and wrote the wisdom of how to make wise choices when living and conducting oneself in the world. The book of Proverbs addresses many subjects including proper marital relationships (c.f., Prov. 12:4;19:13), proper friendships (c.f., Prov. 17:17; 27:6; 27:9), proper attitude regarding labor (c.f., Prov. 13:11; 14:23), how to be a great leader (c.f., Prov. 20:28; 29:4), how a child is to respond to their parents (c.f., Pro. 20:20; 23:25; 28:24). All of these couplets of wisdom Solomon provided are governed over the philosophy of Special Revelation (i.e., "the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom").⁹

This philosophy is also underscored in the New Testament. We see the biblical philosophy highlighted when Paul lists his credentials as he was trained in the Tanakh (c.f., Phil. 3:4-6). Paul when writing to the saints in Rome stated the following:

⁹ It is interesting to note that "the fear of the Lord" that Solomon wrote that is the beginning of wisdom is directly connected to God's word. King David in Psalm 19:9 when describing the word of God mentions it as "the fear of the Lord." This is significant in that in order to observe creation, life, and have a proper conduct throughout life it is imperative to have a philosophy that is centered on "the fear of the Lord."

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who suppress the truth in unrighteousness, because that which is known about God is evident within them; for God made it evident to them. For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse (Rom. 1:18-19). Paul wrote to the saints in Rome concerning the pagans that due to their not acknowledging God's attributes in creation they were suppressing the truth. Paul further explained that what is known about God is plain (or obvious) to them because God has created nature with the sole purpose of expressing His character and attributes, mainly His eternity, omnipotence, and transcendence. Paul further explained that when this is observed plainly, one can see that all that one sees before them further emphasized that all of nature has a Creator. When Paul wrote this argument, he wrote this in light of his Scriptural philosophy. Amazingly, in these very verses, Paul also made the case that those who reject a Biblical philosophy also actively deny what is plain to observe.

Paul continued to expand on this main point when he addressed the saints in Colossae. In his letter he penned the following words, "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 the world, rather than according to Christ" (Col. 2:8). Paul after making a case for the preeminence and supremacy of Christ then instructed the believers that in Christ (and the doctrines of Christ that are being taught during the apostles at this time), are all hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge (c.f., Col. 2:3). Paul further warned the believers not be taken captive through "the philosophy." Paul then went into detail of what philosophy the saints in Colossae were to avoid: 1) the man-made rules that others make where they could evaluate their righteousness before God, and 2) the philosophical perspective that was promoted by the Greek Stoics at this time.¹⁰ All of these perspectives, Paul explained, were

¹⁰ The Greek word Paul uses to describe the elementary principles is the word στοιχείον (pronounced *stoichion*) which describes the philosophical system that described to be infused into everyday life. One website described the belief as follows: "The Stoics believed that perception is the basis of true knowledge. In logic, their comprehensive presentation of the topic is derived from perception, yielding not only the judgment that knowledge is possible but also that certainty is possible, on the analogy of the incorrigibility of perceptual experience. To them, the world is composed of material things, with some few exceptions (e.g., meaning), and the irreducible element in all things is right reason, which pervades the world as divine fire. Things, such as material, or corporeal, bodies, are governed by this reason or fate, in which virtue is inherent. The world in its awesome entirety is so ruled as to exhibit a grandeur of orderly arrangement that can only serve as a standard for humankind in the regulation and ordering of life. Thus, the goal of humans is to live according to nature, in agreement with the world design." (Encyclopedia Britannica 2020). It is also recognized that Stoicism, as a philosophy was hostile to the teachings of Christ as an author stated when he wrote, "[Stoicisms] chief competitors in antiquity were: (1) Epicureanism, with its doctrine of a life of withdrawal in contemplation and escape from worldly affairs and its belief that pleasure, as the absence of pain, is the goal of humans; (2) Skepticism, which rejected certain knowledge in favour of local beliefs and customs, in the expectation that those guides would provide the quietude and serenity that the dogmatic philosopher (e.g., the Stoic) could not hope to achieve; and

antithetical to the instructions of Christ. Paul in this text gave the saints of Colossae several warnings within this epistle: 1) That the philosophy that governed the age is counter to the teachings of Christ, 2) it is possible as a believer to be persuaded to exchange the instruction that Christ has given, 3) that one's philosophy is extremely important, as it is connected to what one believes and their conduct.

In addition, Paul, similar to David and Solomon, explained this information from the perspective of what God has revealed in His word, and it informed how Paul was to instruct the saints of Colossae. Paul also used his Scriptural perspective to critique and reject all of the other philosophies which did not agree with God's word (Acts 19:22-31).

David, Solomon, and Paul are examples of those who observed creation, life, and purpose all from the lens of God's revealed word. Special revelation was the center of their observations of the many topics they covered. They understood the things within the universe and on earth God has given mankind to observe and research. This also includes the human being and mankind's behavior. Mankind was created on day six when the Lord fashioned heaven and earth (Gen. 1:27-28). The act of God creating mankind included all of the physical, physiological, and cognitive qualities that are found in male and female. Just as the heavens and all of creation on earth speaks of God's handiwork, so does all of the aspects mankind possesses. Additionally, the Scriptures speak of another aspect of man and this is the spiritual reality

HOW THE DOMINANT PHILOSOPHIES WITHIN PSYCHOLOGY IS NOT ENOUGH

There are two dominant philosophies that are found within modern psychology. One such philosophy is known as secular humanism. Secular humanism is defined as, "a nonreligious worldview rooted in science, philosophical naturalism, and humanist ethics. Instead of relying on faith, doctrine, or mysticism, secular humanists use compassion, critical thinking, and human experience to find solutions to human problems."¹¹ The philosophy of secular humanism seeks to understand the substance and purpose of mankind without supernatural explanation, and instead relies heavily on "science, philosophical naturalism, and humanist ethics." This explanation is associated with the second philosophy that is found within psychology, and this is materialistic naturalism. Dallas Roark describes this philosophy in this manner:

In an elementary way, naturalism may be defined as the philosophy that nature is the sum total of reality. There is nothing that is beyond nature with regard to a Supreme Being that is unseen.

(3) Christianity, with its hope of personal salvation provided by an appeal to faith as an immanent aid to human understanding and by the beneficent intervention of a merciful God (Encyclopedia Britannica 2020).

¹¹ (Center for Inquiry 2020)

To adapt a phrase, what you see is what you get. But the definition above is too simple. Naturalism includes diverse modes of thought that range from materialism (the idea that matter only exists) to humanism (the view that man is the model of explaining reality).¹²

The main theorists within the discipline of psychology have work from a philosophical position that “God is not,” and as a result they have made some inaccurate observations in regard to the human being. One such psychologist is Abraham Maslow, who is known as the “Father of Humanistic Psychology” and developed what has become known as the “Hierarchy of Needs.” His core worldview rejected the reality that a God exists and instead considered Christianity (and other religions) to be nothing more as part of the temporal human experience when he said the following,

Religious quests, the religious yearnings, the religious needs themselves - are perfectly respectable scientifically . . . they are rooted deep in human nature . . . they can be studied, described, examined in a scientific way . . . the churches were trying to answer perfectly sound human questions. . . The questions themselves were and are perfectly acceptable, and perfectly legitimate. . .¹³

Consequently, because he had a philosophy that rejected the reality of God, he observed mankind as just a temporal creature and that one’s enjoyment and purpose in life comes from one acquiring knowledge. This is highlighted in his statement below,

All the goals of objectivity, repeatability, and preplanned experimentation are things we have to move toward. The more reliable you make knowledge, the better it is. If the salvation of man comes out of the advancement of knowledge--taken in the best sense--then these goals are part of the strategy of knowledge.¹⁴

Furthermore, because of his work the origin of the evil of mankind as something that comes from ignorance of knowledge as he noted,

Most people are nice people. Evil is caused by ignorance, thoughtlessness, fear, or even the desire for popularity with one's gang. We can cure many such causes of evil. Science is progressing, and I feel hope that psychology can solve many of these problems. I think that a good part of evil behavior bears on the behavior of the normal.

Abraham’s Maslow’s “God is not” philosophy influenced his theoretical orientation within the discipline of psychology. Abraham Maslow, in his most famous theory titled *the Hierarchy of*

¹² (Roark 1982)

¹³ (Abraham Maslow on Religion, Values, Self-Actualizers and Peak Experiences 2007)

¹⁴ (Hoffman 1992)

Needs attempted to detail what motivated mankind to conduct themselves in certain ways. These needs of mankind he outlined in sequential fashion: Physiological, safety, love and belonging, esteem, and self-actualization. Abraham Maslow was convinced that if a person was unsatisfied in his basic lower needs, he would not be able to address the higher needs as he described when he wrote the following, "At once other (and "higher") needs emerge and these, rather than physiological hunger, dominate the organism. And when these, in turn, are satisfied, again new (and still "higher") needs emerge and so on. This is what we mean by saying that the basic human needs are organized into a hierarchy of relative prepotency."¹⁵

Due to his plain observation of human behavior Abraham Maslow understood that mankind does have certain physical, physiological, and cognitive needs. However due to his worldview the solution for Abraham Maslow concerning the perils and purpose of man was found in fulfilling these physical needs. When one fulfills each of these physical needs eventually, according to Maslow, they will come to see themselves as significant and purposeful in the world.¹⁶

Abraham Maslow observed the objective physical needs and interactions of people and used his "God is not" philosophy to inform him on what mankind is, and mankind's overall purpose. However, the Biblical perspective revealed a holistic answer to who and what mankind is. The biblical philosophy acknowledged some of the natural observations of Maslow concerning mankind. For instance, when it comes to examining male and female and how they relate to one another these interactions highlight the invisible attributes of God (Rom. 1:17-18). When it comes to physiological and biological needs God provided for mankind giving them sustenance (Gen. 1:29; for meat c.f., Gen. 9:3). God provided the wisdom of how one should view themselves in light of creation (c.f., Gen. 1:26-28; 9:7). God, through the biblical philosophy informed the individual of his overall purpose in life (c.f., 1 Cor. 10:31). Furthermore, God, through His word, underscored not just the material aspect of mankind, but also the spiritual quality of humanity (c.f., Gen. 2:7; John 3:1-7), a quality of man that Abraham Maslow denied

¹⁵ (Maslow 2000)

¹⁶ There are two critiques that place the Abraham Maslow's theory *Hierarchy of Needs* more in the philosophical category rather than the psychological category: 1) According to researchers who observed the theory they stated there is no empirical support for this theory when they wrote " Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs theory is frequently uncritically cited in texts, even though most evidence has failed to support its validity. Science requires that theory be supported by empirical facts. Maslow's theory is briefly summarized, along with a review of the related literature. Reasons are given and empirically supported for the continued popularity of Maslow's theory in marketing despite lack of scientific support." (Rosenthal 1995). 2) The one research study that was conducted concerning this theory was correct in terms of its observations concerning the objective needs of mankind. However, the researchers also concluded that "[the] happiest people were those who reported feeling fulfilled in most of those areas. But, contrary to Maslow, the sequence in which their "higher" and "lower" needs were met did not influence their sense of satisfaction or joy...[and that] a person can report having good social relationships and self-actualization even if their basic needs and safety needs are not completely fulfilled." (GoodTherapy.org 2011). This once more observes that Abraham Maslow was asserting a truth claim about man's purpose and existence in the world from his physical observations.

because of his worldview. God through the Scripture also informed man of the origin of evil and the effect evil has had on the world (c.f., Gen. 3:17-18), and how evil has corrupted the essence and faculties of mankind and their experiences (Rom. 3:9-18; Eph. 2:1-2). The word of God observed mankind as not only a temporal being but exists beyond the physical body (c.f., Lk. 16:19-31; 2 Cor. 5:6-7). Thus, it is the Biblical worldview that not only gives a comprehensive outlook on how one should view observable data of the natural world, but it also gives the philosophy as how one should view the complete substance of man and his purpose and destiny. Furthermore, the Scriptures informs the individual not just the physical properties of man, but revealed mankind also has a spirit. In short, if psychology, properly defined is “the study, discourse, or treatise of the human soul.” Then to have the biblical worldview *is* the true psychology.

The biblical worldview is in stark contrast to the anti-theistic philosophy found in some of the theorists and researchers within the discipline of psychology. The current mainline philosophy found in the discipline of psychology is centered on the idea that “God is not.” Because of this perspective the observations that Abraham Maslow, and others who share this specific philosophy, may have insightful observations concerning some of the *physical* interactions of mankind and their ills. However due to the fact they lack the biblical worldview (i.e., “God is”) they may come to insufficient conclusions about the origin and substance of human beings, the ultimate purpose of relationships, the origin of malevolent activity, a proper motive regarding conduct, a subjective perspective about identity, and the overall destiny of mankind. Thus, if psychology is defined by observing the human soul and all of mankind attributes, then the mainline philosophy found within psychology (and by extension the practice of counseling) is incomplete.

CONCLUSION

Psychology plainly understood is a discipline, not a philosophy or worldview. A discipline is a field of study that notices phenomenon in its natural state (such as biology, sociology, geology, etc.), using such means as the scientific method to make plain observations about the natural world. A philosophy, or worldview, is a system of comprehensive beliefs that inform us about reality. Philosophy is not a synonym for the discipline of psychology, but philosophy is over psychology in how it is to view the natural observations found within it. In addition, psychologists and researchers under an explanation provided by a “God is not” philosophy is insufficient. Psychologist and researchers may make perceptive observations as it concerns human behavior and conduct. However, they may come to wrong conclusions about the purpose of man and the nature of humanity’s existence because of the philosophy they are informed by, not the discipline of study they are participating in. It is the biblical worldview that

expresses a true psychology, as it is defined, because it is the only perspective that observes the natural world (which includes mankind), and the spiritual property of humanity that the “God is not” worldview rejects. In light of these details, the discipline of psychology (and by extension counseling) is a subject that those who have a biblical worldview should not avoid or reject wholesale. It is a discipline that, when properly understood reveals the attributes of God. It is a discipline, when examined in light of the truth of God, belongs to God, and should be studied by the people of God, for the glory of God. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!