Journal of Moral Theology, Vol. 9, No. 1 (2020): 203-221

Psyche, Soul, and Salvation: The Science of the Human and Its Place in Theology[1]

Christopher McMahon

In her inaugural presidential address at the Society for Christian Psychology several years ago, Ellen Charry claims that Christian theologians "have simply forgotten their own psychology" and goes on to present an incisive account of the intersections, tensions, and hopes for the renewal of Christian psychology as she reflects on the contributions of Augustine to the development of the discipline.[2] She reminds Christian theologians and psychologists alike that "Christian theology, quite apart from modern secular psychology, is and always has been a psychological enterprise."[3] Although Charry rightly extolls the insights of Augustine as pastor, theologian, and prototypical psychotherapist, and even allows for some harmony between Augustine and modern psychology, she also contends that there are at least three key tensions between Augustine and modern psychology, tensions that she wishes to resolve in favor of Augustine. First, Augustine grounds the dignity of the human person in the *imago Dei*, not in the autonomous self. Second, Augustine emphasizes the necessity of grace and not the power of the individual. Third, Augustine stresses the connection between ethics and therapeutics, while modern psychology refrains from making ethical demands on patients or imposing values on them. Any resolution of these tensions must also be significantly mitigated by Augustine's overwhelming limitations as a "psychologist," when he is read in the light of modern psychological science.

As Charry's address makes clear, the culture wars around the rise of modernity have often clouded the Christian commitment to a full appreciation of modern psychological science. Yet Charry also asserts that there is ample room for a rapprochement and collaboration between Christian theology and contemporary psychology. In fact, the contemporary scene has chastened those who would see any science

[1] Catherine Petrany (Saint Vincent College) and Debra Faszer-McMahon (Seton Hill University) greatly improved earlier drafts of this essay with their insightful comments. Julia Snyder (Saint Vincent College) expertly proofread the essay.
[2] Ellen T. Charry, "Augustine of Hippo: Father of Christian Psychology," *Anglican Theological Review* 88, no. 4 (2006): 575-589.
[3] Charry, "Augustine of Hippo," 576.

or field of knowledge as utterly autonomous. There has been a renewed emphasis on the insights and limitations of psychological science as well as classical approaches to psychology in Christian theology. This essay, while largely stipulating and even at times amplifying the caveats and tensions identified in Charry's insightful presentation, will explore the intersections between contemporary (and classical) Christian theology and psychological science—intersections that the present volume celebrates and advances. This exploration will orbit around three focal points. First, the scriptural witness uses poetic language to offer a complex account of the embodied dimensions of the human condition, and this account witness has many points of convergence with contemporary psychology. Second, the emergence of a true 'science of the human' in the work of Aquinas, when rightly appreciated, fruitfully plays into the development of the psychological sciences today and allows the insights of those sciences to be sublated within a higher systematic account of meaning and value.[4] Lastly, the principled autonomy of the psychological sciences has not threatened the enduring value of theology; rather, recent years have witnessed the emergence of many avenues of collaboration and mutual benefit that do not compromise the integrity of either discipline even as greater attention is paid to the therapeutic dimensions of spiritual values and the role of the psyche in the life of faith.

SCRIPTURE AND THE HUMAN CONDITION

The common tendency to pit the modern self against the classical soul fails to do justice to the complexities and insights of the biblical account of the human experience. The popular contrast offers an account of the self, characterized as the autonomous monad absorbed with its own staggering doubts and anxieties as it searches for fulfillment and self-actualization.[5] The soul, on the other hand, is characterized in almost mystical terms as that which orients the human person to ultimate transcendence and union with the divine.[6] To be sure, the

---

[4] The expression "science of the human" is found many places. For its place and limitations in theology, see Karl Rahner, *Christian at the Crossroads*, trans. V. Green (New York: Seabury, 1975), 11.

[5] John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, is most often credited with this understanding of the self. For a fuller and nuanced discussion of this development, see Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge/New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 159-176. Interestingly, in his defense of a thoroughly Christian psychology, C. S. Evans argues for humans beings as "responsible agents, selves," as essential to both the interpersonal dimensions of human existence and to Christian faith; see C. Stephen Evans, "The Concept of the Self as the Key to Integration," *Journal of Psychology and Christianity* 3, no. 2 (1984): 4-11, 11.

[6] Augustine is commonly taken as the classic architect of this approach to the human person; see Ellen Charry's essay cited above.

sense of the self that emerged in conjunction with the European Enlightenment represents a distinct and often problematic development in the history of western culture—one in which the human person begins to stand in a different relationship to the social structures and norms of which it is a constitutive element—but one ought to be cautious about characterizing this development as an abrupt break with the past, or as a complete repudiation of the biblical or even the classical tradition. As Charles Taylor has demonstrated, the modern self, with its preoccupations with individuality and autonomy, actually has its roots in Plato, finds amplification in Augustine, and reaches its full modern articulation in thinkers such as Descartes and Locke.[7] Moreover, characterizations of the Hebrew Old Testament (or the New Testament for that matter) as envisioning the human person as *fully* circumscribed by a sense of social identity to the exclusion of any sense of individual identity, of individual decision making, are now viewed as overly simplistic and even inaccurate.[8] Needless to say, the complexities of a "biblical" or a "Christian" psychology are beset by the difficulties and ambiguities of the biblical data. A brief overview of some data might help to attenuate oversimplifications. At the same time, such an overview might provide some markers for considering the relationship of modern psychological science and the account of the human person in Christian theology.

Some classic biblical texts that anchor a Christian psychology (according to Charry) include the following: Genesis 1:28-29; Genesis 3; Deuteronomy 6:5; Romans 7.[9] Each of these texts, in turn, offers an insight that grounds the Christian tradition and its account of the human person. In Genesis 1:28-29, the human person is created with a dignity and power that reflects God's own identity; the human person is the *imago Dei.* In Genesis 3, the mythic images of Eden and the tree of knowledge symbolically communicate the fracturing of human identity, human relationships (including the relationship with the natural world), and the human orientation to God. In the context of the Sinaitic covenant, Deuteronomy 6:5 commands (and empowers) Israelites to love God "with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might" (RSV). Finally, Romans 7:5 ("I do not understand my

---

[7] Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 111-126.

[8] See Robert A. Di Vito, "Old Testament Anthropology and the Construction of Personal Identity," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 61 (1999): 217-238. On the development of the inner voice and agency of characters in Old Testament narratives, see M. Niehoff, "Do Biblical Characters Talk to Themselves? Narrative Modes of Representing Inner Speech in Early Biblical Fiction," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 111, no. 4 (1992): 577-95; and Shimon Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art in the Bible* (London: T&T Clark, 2004), 53-64.

[9] Charry does not consider Deuteronomy in her list of foundational texts, but the importance of the passage in late Second Temple Judaism and its place in the Jesus tradition invites consideration as another important text for a "Christian psychology."

own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate" [RSV]) bears witness to a common biblical theme: the notion of the divided self and the interior struggle with self-destructive impulses. These texts, along with many others, affirm that the human person is made in the *imago Dei*. The tension between the human desire for Truth, Goodness, and God and the alienation of that desire speaks to a feature of the human that has been noted across time and cultures. These texts are complemented by biblical accounts of what can rightly be called the human person's "interior life." Such texts make use of key terms that suggest a complex relationship and concern for understanding the depths of the human person and the thoroughly embodied experience of a drive towards self-transcendence, the experience of a wide range of desires, and the experience of alienation at a variety of levels.

At the outset, it might be helpful to remember that, generally speaking, the Hebrew Old Testament tends to view the human person as deeply embedded in a social identity, as responsive to external forces and obligations rather than interior drives. Moreover, the prevailing position is that the Hebrew sense of embodiment precludes the immaterial or dualist accounts of a human "soul" apart or distinct from the embodied person.[10] But these general affirmations should not be permitted to exert a determinative role in the overall characterization of the biblical data, which is more nuanced and complex than the present overview can capture.

The biblical data might be helpfully surveyed through a brief look at a few terms that anchor Old Testament anthropology, and therefore, what we might anachronistically call psychology. For example, the Hebrew word *nepeš* (נפש), the most important term for exploring the psychology of the Old Testament, has a semantic range that includes the principle by which a body is animated, while also serving as the locus of the intellectual and psychological life of the human person (e.g., Psalm 86:4; 119:28; 139:14). The etymological origins of *nepeš* tie it to the Akkadian word *napšutu,* meaning "throat" or "trachea," and it still has that meaning in the Hebrew Old Testament as well (e.g., Isaiah 5:14). Perhaps precisely because *nepeš* is the locus of breath and speech, it tends to indicate the intra-personal or relational dimensions of the human person, especially one's relationship with God; for example, one is to love YHWH with one's *nepeš* (Deuteronomy 6:5;

---

[10] Note that James Barr sees the vilification of dualism and the characterization of Old Testament Hebrew psychology in terms of a psychosomatic unity in modern scholarship as a projection that does violence to the biblical data. See James Barr, *The Garden of Eden and the Hope for Immortality* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993) and H. Eilberg-Schwartz, *The Savage in Judaism: An Anthropology of Religion and Ancient Judaism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990).

13:3).[11] In this regard, *nepeš* has substantial overlap with the Hebrew words *ruach* (רוח/spirit or breath) and *leb* (לב/heart).[12] The semantic range of *nepeš* tends to span the entire person—the interior life of deliberation/thought as well as, in some sense, the corporeal.

The Hebrew Old Testament often locates aspects of human experience at a level that can only be described as that of interiority, and this interiority often finds expression in and through the physical body, especially through the internal organs. For example, in both Jeremiah and in the Psalms, *kelayot* (כליות/kidneys) are the loci of emotions, virtue, and wisdom.[13] Additionally, *kelayot* are the focal point of examination as God delivers judgment on individuals (e.g., Psalm 26:2). But one might well argue that *leb* (heart) is the most important anthropological term in the Old Testament since it occurs 858 times and is thereby the most frequently used anthropological term.[14] It is often paired with *kelayot.* Several Old Testament texts describe the heart as troubled and crying out to God in lamentation (e.g., Jeremiah 48:36) even as the heart also serves as the locus of joy and delight (e.g., Psalm 84:2). The yearning and even existential loneliness of the prophet resonates strongly with contemporary accounts of anxiety and longing (e.g., Jeremiah 4:19, where both *mêʻay* [bowels/מעי] and *leb* ache and give voice to the prophet's state of mind and body). The contextual clues on the use of *leb* in the Old Testament show that on occasion it refers to the emotional seat of the human person, but more often it

---

[11] James K. Bruckner, "A Theological Description of Human Wholeness in Deuteronomy 6," *Ex Auditu* 21 (2005): 1-19. See also the magisterial discussions in Horst Seebass, "נפש," in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, vol. IX, ed. G. J. Botterweck, H. Ringgren, and H-J. Fabry (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 497-518; and Heinz-Josef Fabry, "לב," in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, vol. VII, ed. G. J. Botterweck, H. Ringgren, and H-J. Fabry (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 399-437.

[12] For a full study of the relationship among these terms, see, e.g., Risto Lauha, *Psychophysischer Sprachgebrauch im Alten Testament: Eine strukturalsemantische Analyse von נפש, לב und רוח*; Annales Academiae Scientiarum Fenicae Dissertationes Humanarum Litterarum 35 (Helsinki: Suomaleinen Tiedeakademia, 1983).

[13] See D. Kellennann, "כליות," in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament,* vol. VII, ed. G. J. Botterweck, H. Ringgren, and H-J. Fabry (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 175-182. The *kelayot* may also be associated with a general idea of excellence since the internal fat of an animal surrounding the *kelayot* was especially suited for sacrificial burning and therefore especially sacred (see, e.g., Leviticus 7:22-25 and 1 Samuel 2:16, where the sons of Eli abuse their office by taking fatty parts of the people's offerings for themselves). Accordingly, the kidneys and all fat were burned separately in every sacrifice in which the entire animal was not consumed (see, e.g., Leviticus 3:4-15), or with the entire animal in a burnt offering.

[14] See Hans W. Wolff, *Anthropology of the Old Testament*, trans. M. Kohl (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1974), chapter 5.

tends to serve as the locus of human intelligence, acts of the will, consciousness, and character/reputation.[15] The moral and spiritual health of the human person in the Old Testament is rooted in the health of the heart. To have a "hard heart" (Psalm 95:8), to be "fat hearted" (Isaiah 6:10), or to be "two-hearted" (Psalm 12:3), serve as indictments of one's ability to decide, to act rightly, to respond to YHWH's will or live YHWH's instruction. To be divided, to have dual loyalties or intentions that do not align with actions, is to lack a virtue that is decisive for the human person—wholeness or *tāmîm* (תמים/ integrity, blamelessness, or "whole heartedness").[16] A healthy heart is not divided. If intellect and passions are divided, that person is morally sick and not whole.[17] This word *tāmîm* bears witness to the drive to integration that is clearly a moral ideal, but one that is expressed with corporeal dimensions and recalls what Wolf terms "stereometric thinking." In this thought pattern, solid body parts become *pars pro toto* and thereby provide a glimpse of the drive toward the integration of the human person, even as the whole person comes to be expressed or focused in specific and sometimes problematic parts of the body.[18] This makes good sense, since, as noted above, the human person is defined in terms of relationship to "external" forces/realities and thus defined as essentially embodied.

In the Greek of the New Testament authors, there is a more pronounced influence of Greek philosophical thought, and even traces of the dualism introduced by the Stoics and Plato, but one may also find a residue of the Hebrew concepts mentioned above.[19] The Greek word *psychē* (ψυχή) is often used to translate *nepeš* in Septuagint (approximately 680 of the 740 occurrences of *nepeš* are translated with *psychē*). In the New Testament, *psychē* is used over 100 times (mostly in the synoptics) where it appears to identify the biological life of the human person. Yet *psychē* also represents the inner life of the human

---

[15] See James K. Bruckner, "A Theological Description of Human Wholeness in Deuteronomy 6," *Ex Auditu* 21 (2005), p. 6. See also James K. Bruckner, "Health," in *Dictionary of Scripture and Ethics*, ed. J. Green (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2011), 351-353.

[16] See Benjamin Kedar-Kopfstein, "תמם," in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, vol. XV, ed. G. J. Botterweck, H. Ringgren, and H-J. Fabry (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 699-711.

[17] See Bruckner, "A Theological Description of Human Wholeness," 6.

[18] Wolf, *Anthropology of the Old Testament*, 8-11 [the German expression is, "*Stereometrie des Gedankenausdrucks*"]; See also, Bernd Janowski, *Arguing with God: A Theological Anthropology of the Psalms*, trans. A. Siedlecki (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2013), 14-35.

[19] In classical Greek even words like *pneuma* were primarily physical; *pneuma* does not become the immaterial "soul" until fairly late; see E. DeWitt Burton, *Spirit, Soul, and Flesh: The Usage of Πνεῦμα, Ψυχή, and Σάρξ in Greek Writings and Translated Works from the Earliest Period to 225 AD* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1918), 23-24.

person and serves as a locus of intellectual activity as well as deliberation and action. Like *nepeš*, *psychē* indicates the domain of the human person's life in relation to God. The *psychē* will endure beyond death to continue its relationship to God in Christ, most often in conjunction with the glorified body in the resurrection, although the interplay between Platonic accounts of the immortal soul that lives without the body, on the one hand, and a Persian/Semitic focus on the eschatological resurrection, on the other, remains complex in late Second Temple Judaism and early Christian literature.[20] As in the case of the semantic range of *nepeš* in the Old Testament, the semantic range of *psychē* in the New Testament overlaps with *pneuma* (πνεῦμα/spirit and breath or wind)[21] and *kardia* (καρδία/heart) as well as *splagchna* (σπλάγχνα/bowels, understood as signifying tenderness or affection[22]), but there is also significant overlap with *nous* (νοῦς/mind) and its cognates as well as related terms such as *phronēsis* (φρόνησις/practical knowledge) and its cognates.

The Christian tradition, since the time of the Apostle Paul, has been invested in considering how the believer is to "have the mind of Christ" (Philippians 2:5) and not "another mind" (e.g., Romans 8:5; 12:3). It is important to note that the word Paul uses is φρονέω/*phroneō*; the word represents the intersection of the banal and the reflective. It is intensely personal—the place where believers come to imitate and to dwell in Christ but also the place where the basest instincts find articulation in action and lead one away from the *imago Dei*. It is precisely here that Romans 7 finds its place, where the human person's need to learn to desire rightly comes up against the lesser desires that cloud the human mind and cause anxiety and frustration.

The biblical account of the human person undoubtedly places one in direct relationship to God, but at the same time, through lament and praise, it explores the anxieties, fears, and even the somatic dimension of the human experience. For the Hebrew authors, there is no immortal soul, no immaterial self; rather, the embodied dimensions of existence,

---

[20] See, e.g., Casey Deryl Elledge, *Resurrection of the Dead in Early Judaism, 200 BCE-CE 200* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017) and Alan Segal, *Life After Death*: *A History of the Afterlife in the Religions of the West*, ABRL (New York: Doubleday, 2004).

[21] The Apostle Paul does contrast *pnuema* and *psychē* in 1 Corinthians. But as Dale Martin notes, Paul does not see these two as opposites of "immaterial" versus "material." Rather, he claims that for Paul these terms are to be viewed within a hierarchy of materiality with *pneuma* standing at a higher level in the hierarchy than *psychē*. See Dale B. Martin, *The Corinthian Body* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 127-138.

[22] Although *splagchna* is used rarely in LXX (e.g., Prov 12:10), the Hebrew equivalent, רחמים (*rachamim*/ intestines or womb; LXX *oiktirmos*/οἰκτιρμός) appears regularly with *chesed* (חסד /loving mercy) in many places in the Hebrew Old Testament (e.g., Ps 25:6; 40:11; 51:1; 69:16).

alienation, frustration, and love all have their rooting in and orientation to concrete finitude—a finitude with YHWH, but finitude nonetheless. That this finitude was irreducible also appears certain. It is this irreducibility (or transcendence) that plays into the development of afterlife and a sense of the self that feeds into the expansive and more ontological account of the human person and the human soul that is more evident in the writings of the New Testament. It is from this sense of human transcendence that the more consistent and ontological account of the immaterial soul and the "inner" self will find a home in the writings of Augustine. But it is the corporeal, embodied, complexity of the human person that remains of enduring significance in the biblical witness, and it is this aspect of the tradition that Aquinas will work to incorporate, albeit somewhat peripherally, in his emerging science of the human person—a science that is integrative and holistic.

Classical Christian Psychology and Contemporary Psychological Science

The biblical account of the human person stands in line with much of what developed in the work of Augustine and Aquinas, even though both of these thinkers often appear more beholden to their respective philosophical mentors rather than to the biblical record. The work of Thomas Aquinas, and his appropriation of Aristotle, signals a significant advance in the understanding of the human person and the psyche, but significant lacunae and distortions remain when that work is examined in light of contemporary psychological science. The major challenge for contemporary theology is the necessity of balancing the ongoing value of Aquinas's thought (and that of Augustine) with its substantial limitations. The misguided attempt to defer in a wholesale manner to classical Christian accounts of the soul fails to do justice both to the truth of the matter and also to the limits of the great masters of the Christian tradition.

Aquinas as Psychologist

Augustine's often introspective and autobiographically informed theology amplified the psychological insights of the biblical authors and began to systematize, at a very basic level, the operations of the soul.[23] This systematization brought into focus the healing vector of grace within the interior life of the human person while also providing an analog to more fully explore the intelligibility of the nature of God

[23] On introspection in Augustine and western Christianity, see the seminal essay from Krister Stendahl, "The Apostle Paul and the Introspective Conscience of the West," *Harvard Theological Review* 56, no. 3 (1963): 199-215; and Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 127-142. On Augustine's psychology, see e.g., Gerard O'Daly, *Augustine's Philosophy of Mind* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1987).

as triune through the exploration of the isomorphic faculties of the human psyche as *imago Dei*. The major problem with Augustine's thought rests not in his autobiographical theology nor the Neoplatonism that informed his thought *per se*; rather, it is the manner in which his interpreters and successors allowed those dimensions of his work to become quasi-normative for the tradition. Happily, with Aquinas and his development of Aristotle's insights on the soul, a more systematized science of the human began to emerge. To be sure, so much of what the Angelic Doctor developed rested on the shoulders of Augustine, but the contributions of Aquinas anchor a trajectory through which Christian theology began to discern an authentic 'science of the human person'—one that began to move away from some of the problematic aspects of Augustine without losing sight of his genius and the biblical witness that nourished it.

Unlike Augustine, whose approach to the soul was thoroughly theological, Aquinas used Aristotle as the vehicle for the construction of a science of the human person—one that was fundamentally oriented to God but which nevertheless also had a range of natural functions and therefore corresponding natural limitations.[24] Although like Augustine, Aquinas asserted that the soul (*psychē* or *anima*) was immaterial and that it endured beyond death, Aquinas asserted that it did so in a diminished state.[25] This is so because of his commitment to Aristotle's hylomorphism, which provides an important corrective to the dualism of Platonic tradition and may be viewed as an open door to the modern psychological sciences.[26] The hylomorphic unity of soul and body does not, however, allow for the simple identification of the human person with the body. Rather, in the work of Aquinas, hylomorphism involves an understanding of the human body is derivative of the soul as the soul serves as the principle of vital activity and substantial unity of the human person. Moreover, the differentiated unity of soul and body defended by Aquinas implies the view that the body contributes in a positive manner to the soul and its operations, and this

---

[24] Of course, the *locus classicus* for Thomas's treatment of the soul is ST I q. 75-76; one might also include ST I-II q. 1-5.

[25] ST I q. 118, a. 3.

[26] See Isabelle Bochet, "Le Corps: Un Poids pour l'Âme; L'Exégèse Augustinienne de Sagesse 9,15," *Revue de Sciences Philosophiques et Théologiques* 100 (2016): 27-34. Bochet argues that Augustine's recurring quotation of Wisdom 9:15 ("for a perishable body weighs down the soul, and this earthy tent burdens the thoughtful mind" / *corpus enim quod corrumpitur aggravate animam, et terrena inhabitatio deprimit sensum multa cogitantem*) indicates he sees the body as an obstacle to the contemplation of truth in his early works. In his later works, Augustine focuses not on the body as a prison but rather on its corruptibility as a result of sin that has made it a burden.

contribution is crucial to such an extent that he can affirm that the intellectual soul is united to the body "for the sake of the soul."[27] Aquinas therefore allows for the role of the body on the activities of the soul, and he may even leave room for the role of the brain on the soul.[28]

The limitations of Aristotle and Aquinas rest, largely, with the fact that for both of them, metaphysics represented the primary science. Their approaches to psychology had to be what is often termed a "faculty psychology," i.e., an approach to psychology centered on the powers or faculties of the soul. The basic terms for its development and articulation were supplied by metaphysics. The acts of the soul needed to be related to the acts of consciousness and to efficient and final causality (intellection and will; potency-act; habits). For both Aristotle and Aquinas, speculative intellect controls the analysis of the human psyche. Even though there is space in the thought of Thomas for modern neuroscience and an appreciation of what might be called psychosomatic dysfunctions (e.g., eating disorders, anxiety, other disorders[29]), the soul itself remains distant from any illness.

While this essay cannot analyze Augustine and Aquinas in any detail, it is sufficient for our purposes to note that there is a trajectory from the biblical record, through Augustine, and through the work of Aquinas, that stands as testimony to the drive within the Christian theological tradition to explore ever more deeply, and without reserve, the structures, functions, and frustration of the human mind and soul. While the contributions of these classic figures stand in need of significant modification in light of modern science, what is required at the present moment is a robust engagement with modern science that does not lose sight of the theological insights that ground the tradition. From the Christian perspective, not only does theology need psychology but psychology needs theology.[30]

Lonergan and the Modern Appreciation of Aquinas

The Canadian Jesuit Bernard Lonergan is the architect of one of the most fruitful interpretations of Aquinas, and it is, in particular, Lonergan's appreciation for the limitations as well as the enduring value of the Christian theological tradition that makes both Aquinas

---

[27] ST I q. 76, a. 6.

[28] See Jörgen Vijgen, "Soul or Brain: A False Dilemma? The Thomistic Perspective," *Scientia et Fides* 5, no. 2 (2017): 71-86. Vijgen concludes his presentation by stating, "Soul or brain are not and cannot be for Aquinas separate alternatives. Neither the soul nor the body or the brain as part of the body is a complete, fully distinct entity but are metaphysical parts of a complete entity, a human being" (83).

[29] See, e.g., ST II-II q. 148, a. 6, ad 2 and ST II-II q.157, a. 1, ad 3.

[30] For a robust defense of the ongoing value of Aquinas's psychology and the need for contemporary psychology to be complemented by that work, see Richard W. Cross, "Aquinas on Psychology," *Journal of Psychology and Christianity* 17, no. 4 (1998): 306-320.

and Lonergan vital dialogue partners for a fruitful and disciplined engagement of psychology and theology. Lonergan reminds modern theologians that, while Aquinas is perhaps without peer in the history of theology, Aquinas nevertheless inherited and accepted what was essentially a Babylonian/Ptolemaic worldview, with human beings as a stable species (i.e., not a species that has and continues to develop, evolve, or change) sustained by celestial forces, and inhabiting a world that was less than ten thousand years old. The world of the ancients was static, while ours is thoroughly dynamic, a world in process, involving the interplay between classical and statistical laws that produces countless galaxies and species, all of which continue to emerge, grow, and decay. In the move to embrace and even integrate the modern sciences, including the psychological sciences, there is a need to recognize the stark distance between how so-called traditional Christian psychology is articulated in Aquinas (or in Augustine, for that matter), and how it is articulated today.

The contemporary science of the human has clearly taken its marching orders from the natural sciences and from empirical methodology, and the specter of scientism, reductionism, and an anti-religious bias is endemic to the history of the development of the social sciences.[31] However, the emergence of the natural sciences also signals important intellectual development, developments in culture and an understanding of the human mind, that demand to be taken seriously.

The modern sciences are marked out against their ancient predecessors by a thoroughgoing resistance to systematization in favor of hyper-specialization. According to Lonergan, "[s]cience is the clear cut paradigm of specialization. It offers its own distinct apprehension of the cosmos. That apprehension can be reached only through distinctive methods and techniques. It can be communicated only through a specially evolved language. It can be shared only by an ongoing, collaborating group of initiates."[32] Certainly, the emergence of modern science thrives on a perceived need to break down the Aristotelian and medieval synthesis and its logic. This breakdown of systematic thinking helped to secure the primacy of empirical and discrete investigation in the modern sciences and has allowed the modern sciences to move away from the logically rigorous pursuit of absolute truth, a pursuit at the heart of both the Platonic and Aristotelian systems (and their

---

[31] See the provocative contribution from John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*, 2nd edition (Malden: Blackwell, 2006). For a more nuanced appreciation of the social sciences and their role in theology, see Gregory G. Baum, "Remarks of a Theologian in Dialogue with Sociology," in *Theology and the Social Sciences*, Annual Volume of the College Theology Society, 2000, vol. 46, ed. Michael H. Barnes (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2001), 3-11.

[32] Bernard Lonergan, "Aquinas Today," *A Third Collection* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2017), 34-52, 40.

Augustinian and Thomistic counterparts). What emerges in the modern sciences is a pursuit of knowledge that is practically attainable and always open to revision. After all, modern science embraces probability and always seeks to identify factors that impact those probabilities.[33] These developments have contributed to the sardonic observation that modern researchers strive to know more and more about less and less in the course of developing their hyper-specializations. Yet, these specializations are not, of themselves, hostile to systematic meaning, especially when these specializations are understood in conjunction with the emergence of method over logic.

Method focuses on concrete realities and moves away from an emphasis on logic and speculative reason, and Lonergan reminds us that the shift has profound significance. First, method presupposes logic but introduces the non-logical acts of observing, describing, even stumbling, and discovery verification. While logic is necessary for defining terms, formulating hypotheses and working out presuppositions, logic does not control method. Second, sustained development is the result not of logic but of the accumulation of fresh insights, increasingly accurate hypotheses, the development of new theories, a command of data, and an openness to further ideas/questions. Method, unlike logic, constantly opens up scientific investigation to renewal and potential progress.

The natural and the human sciences, along with their commitment to scientific method, need not be construed as hostile to theological sciences or to the insights of classical Christian theology. Lonergan and his interpreters have rightly emphasized the notion of "sublation" as integral to overcoming the fragmentation of knowledge and the need to address the interconnectedness of all things. Philosophy and theology potentially provide both the natural and human sciences with a higher viewpoint from which to understand and enact the more discrete areas of knowledge cultivated by these fields. In the sublation of the psychological sciences, philosophy and theology supply higher points of view that do not negate the perspectives and contributions of the psychological sciences; rather, these discipline-specific contribution are rightly ordered within higher syntheses where the performance of the natural sciences is refined and extended in other fields of knowledge.[34] But the psychological sciences, along with other disciplines, rightly challenge and transform the practice of theology so that there emerges a reciprocal and enriching, rather than a hostile or dialectical, relationship among the disciplines. And this appears to be what has started to emerge with some urgency in recent years, as psychology and theology have engaged one another.

---

[33] See, Lonergan, "Aquinas Today," 42-43.

[34] Lonergan, "Aquinas Today," 46.

PSYCHOLOGICAL SCIENCE AND THEOLOGY: EMERGING COMMON GROUND

One does not need to look very hard to discern the hostile trajectories that have run through modern psychology's attitude towards religious belief. The thoroughgoing suspicion and pessimism of Sigmund Freud's *Future of an Illusion* (1927) stands alongside the celebration of natural theology and early psychology offered in William James's *Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902), thus making the story of psychology's relationship to Christian theology more complex than some might admit. Christian pastors and theologians, for their part, have also had an uneven appreciation of modern psychological science over the past century. Seminaries began to introduce clinical pastoral education in the 1920s, especially in flagship institutions like Union Theological Seminary in New York, and it was the exigency of psychological pathologies that demanded critical insight and practical solutions. Several major figures in twentieth-century psychology actually came to the field through their seminary education, most notably, Rollo May and Carl Rogers. Moreover, Carl Jung, his disciples, and his interlocutors have exerted considerable influence in Christian pastoral practice and in theology over the decades.[35] Still, this affirmation of the pastoral value of modern psychology is also only part of a more complex story.[36]

Psychological Science and the Role of Religion

The modern era has seen some unfortunate developments in the relationship between Christian theology and psychology. One of the most noteworthy examples is the "biblical counseling" movement and the emergence of nouthetic counseling. Biblical counseling, prevalent among fundamentalist or evangelical theologies that were suspicious

---

[35] For a recent example, see, Pia Sophia Chaudhari, *Dynamis of Healing: Patristic Theology and the Psyche*, Orthodox Christianity and Contemporary Thought (New York: Fordham University Press, 2019). Additionally, Robert Doran, James Allison, and Sebastian Moore have made extensive use of Jungian insights in conjunction with the theological work of major figures such as Lonergan and Girard to construct accounts of religious conversion that have proven fruitful. See Robert M. Doran, S.J., "Two Ways of Being Conscious: The Notion of Psyche Conversion," *Method: Journal of Lonergan Studies*, n.s. 3, no. 1 (Spring 2012): 1-17.

[36] Warren Kinghorn, a physician and theologian at Duke University, has written extensively on the intersection of mental health, Christian theology, and therapeutic practice. Kinghorn helpfully, and briefly, outlines five major trends in contemporary practice, including: pastoral care and counseling, biblical counseling, integrationism, Christian psychology, and the emergence of the Institute for the Psychological Sciences. See Warren Kinghorn, "American Christian Engagement with Mental Health and Mental Illness," *Psychiatric Services* 67, no. 1 (2016): 107-110.

of the psychological sciences and psychiatry, originated with Jay Adams and his book *Competent to Counsel*.[37] Nouthetic counseling was marked by four distinctive commitments: emphasis on personal responsibility and, correlatively, on personal sin as the core of psychological dysfunctions; strong affirmation that the Bible should be the primary text used in pastoral counseling; marked distrust of psychology and psychiatry; and promotion of pastors, and not mental health clinicians, as preferred counselors. Nouthetic counseling was, and is, directive and sometimes confrontational with frequent and authoritative references to Christian scripture in the context of counseling. In recent years, most biblical counseling programs have moderated their hostility to the psychological sciences, and a more scientific engagement has been integrated into their deeply biblical-centered approaches to therapy. Yet deep suspicions remain regarding modern psychology, even as the contemporary biblical counseling movement grows and develops.[38]

In the middle of the last century, Abraham Maslow, among other leaders in the field of psychology, lamented the discipline's seeming preoccupation with pathologies, distortions, and the darkness in the human psyche.[39] Maslow yearned for a psychology that was at least as focused on the dynamics of joy, wonder, and love, and, while some of the pop psychology of the late twentieth century may have negatively marked out such yearnings, the emergence of positive psychology has served as a research-based response to Maslow's lament. Moreover, positive psychology has demonstrated greater sympathy to religious values, theological insights, and their connection to psychology. Positive psychology seeks to promote human well-being and flourishing. Christopher Peterson and Martin Seligman's *Character Strengths and Virtues*, published by the American Psychological Association (APA), outlines core virtues and character strengths and stands as a modern research-based approach to positive psychology.[40] Their work centers on the exploration of six core virtues as the basis for human flourishing. These virtues sound familiar to readers of the Apostle Paul, whose list of virtues positive psychology almost mirrors: wisdom and knowledge, courage, humanity, justice, temperance, and transcendence. It comes as no surprise that positive psychology's greatest allies

[37] Jay E. Adams, *Competent to Counsel: Introduction to Nouthetic Counseling* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1970).
[38] The so-called "counseling wars" in conservative Christian circles has seen Adams's movement take on new forms and gain new supporters (and enemies). See Heath Lambert, *The Biblical Counseling Movement After Adams* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2011).
[39] See Abraham Maslow, *Motivation and Personality* (New York: Harper, 1954).
[40] Christopher Peterson and Martin Seligman, *Character Strengths and Virtues* (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association/New York: Oxford University Press: 2004).

have been found among those psychologists dedicated to exploring the relationship of psychology and religion.

The formal and institutionalized exploration of the role of religion in psychology emerged following the Second World War when psychologists from major Catholic universities gathered in 1946 to form the American Catholic Psychological Association.[41] As the 1970s dawned, the association began to take on the form of a division of the APA, and, by 1976, it was formally known as Division 36.[42] In the mid 1990s, Ken Pargament became the president of the division, and it was under his leadership that two major issues came to the fore: (1) the role of religious issues in clinical training and (2) the need for more empirical research in the area of religion and psychology. It is actually through the efforts of Pargament, his colleagues in Division 36, and his collaborators (both students and faculty) at Bowling Green State University (OH) that engagement with these two issues has come to the fore. Described as an "empirical theologian" by one writer,[43] Pargament's *The Psychology of Religion and Coping* has been seminal in the field of religion and psychology for the way it promotes an understanding of the valuable roles spirituality and religious faith play in dealing with a range of traumas, stresses, and misfortunes. Pargament's research helps to build bridges between religious symbols and everyday living and, as evident in the following quote, has provided reassurance for pastors as they seek to help heal and sustain their congregants without succumbing to platitudes or canned theology:

> [T]he psychology of religion and coping can weave a respect for the possible together with an appreciation for the futile. It bridges a deep psychological tradition of helping people take control of what they can in times of stress with a rich religious tradition of helping people accept their limitations and look beyond themselves for assistance in troubling times.[44]

---

[41] Mary E. Reuder, "A History of Division 36 (Psychology of Religion)," in *Unification through Division: Histories of the Divisions of the American Psychological Association*, vol. 4, ed. D. A. Dewsbury (American Psychological Association: Washington, DC, 1999), 91-108. Charles A. Curran, a prominent psychologist from Loyola University Chicago, one of the leading figures in initiating this group, actually served as a peritus at the Second Vatican Council (not to be confused with the moral theologian, Charles E. Curran, from The Catholic University of America).

[42] The APA has 54 divisions as part of its structure, and these divisions often host their own panels at the annual APA convention, publish their own journals (e.g., *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality*), and host mid-year conferences. These divisions are interest groups that are initiated and organized by APA members (e.g., trauma studies, social psychology, military psychology, etc.). These divisions may also include non-APA members.

[43] George Fitchett, "Kenneth I. Pargament: Empirical Theologian of Hope," *Chaplaincy Today* 14, no. 2 (1998): 57-62.

[44] Kenneth I. Pargament, *The Psychology of Religion and Coping* (New York: Guilford, 1997), 9.

It is precisely this acknowledgement of the transcendent along with Pargament's willingness to embrace both the contributions of empirical research and the ambiguities of human living and religious faith that have made his contributions to the integration of spirituality and psychotherapy so valuable.[45]

What really differentiates the efforts of Pargament and his colleagues is their focus on empirical research and their commitment to analyze data, while also embracing ambiguity and even openness to the transcendent. They assiduously seek to avoid the reductionism that threatens a fruitful engagement with the religious dimensions of human experience. To that end, they construct bridge categories that facilitate empirical investigations, such as "sanctification." Sanctification is characterized as "a way of perceiving a deeper dimension of life involving the capacity to see life through a sacred lens."[46] It is a "sacred lens" for viewing specific life domains, particular moments, and one's entire life, and this vision of life has significant research and therapeutic implications for the health of minds, bodies, and relationships. In fact, seeing beyond the physical realities of the world to imbue life with a deeper meaning is not only central to our understanding of positive psychology, it is also vital to what might be called the religious dimensions of the human person.[47]

Contemporary Theology, Trauma, and Memoir

Modern psychology has provided many avenues for theological engagement, and one well-worn path of engagement has been provided by the insights of Carl Jung and his interpreters.[48] In fact, Robert Doran among others has devoted a significant portion of his work furthering the project of Bernard Lonergan by exploring the applications of Jung's insights to the integration of intellect and affect in the human

---

[45] See Kenneth I. Pargament, *Spiritually Integrated Psychotherapy: Understanding and Addressing the Sacred* (New York: Guilford Press, 2007). The APA has also made a significant commitment to Pargament's efforts by publishing his collection K. Pargament (ed.), *APA Handbook of Psychology, Religion, and Spirituality*, 2 vols. (Washington DC: American Psychological Association, 2013). This massive work includes contributions from 130 collaborators in the field and treats a range of topics related to research and practical issues in counseling-therapy.

[46] See Julie M. Pomerleau, Kenneth I. Pargament, Annette Mahoney, "Seeing Life Through a Sacred Lens: The Spiritual Dimension of Meaning," in *Clinical Perspectives on Meaning: Positive and Existential Psychotherapy*, ed. P. Russo-Netzer, S. Schulenberg, A. Batthyany (Cham, Switzerland: Springer, 2016), 37-57.

[47] See Kenneth I. Pargament, Doug Oman, Julie M. Pomerleau, and Annette Mahoney, "Some Contributions of a Psychological Approach to the Study of the Sacred," *Religion* 47, no. 4 (2017): 718-744.

[48] See J. Marvin Spiegelman, *Catholicism and Jungian Psychology* (Phoenix: Falcon Press, 1988), and Robert Kugelmann, *Psychology and Catholicism: Contested Boundaries* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 203-260.

psyche.[49] For Doran and many of his collaborators and allies, these Jungian insights have proven invaluable for furthering a positive account of human transformation and flourishing both on an individual level and on the level of societies and cultures. Yet the use of Jungian thought and the construction of broad and foundational accounts of theology is often supplemented by a contemporary approach to theology that places great value of specificity and the experience of particular suffering. For this reason, the primary locus of theology's interaction with psychological science is in the area of trauma and memoir.

Christian theology in the twenty-first century has taken great interest in the world of psychological science and has found therein a rich trove of resources for the exploration of the psychological impact of sin and violence. One area of research that has attracted significant attention in recent years has been that of trauma. The experience of PTSD for survivors of domestic abuse, the traumatic impact of racism, the experience of refugees and veterans, among others, have all helped to amplify the importance of trauma theory for theology. Judith Herman, author of the groundbreaking work, *Trauma and Recovery*, defines a traumatic event as one that "overwhelm[s] the ordinary human adaptations to life," and these events "generally involve threats to life or bodily integrity, or a close personal encounter with violence and death."[50] From a neurological perspective, the brain is unable to process or assimilate the experience and therefore responds by closing down normal response mechanisms such as memory.[51] This neurological shut down is one of the reasons why the process of recovering memory over the course of time, and allowing for memories to be fluid and fractured, has been so important, especially in the literary dimensions of trauma theory. Moreover, the experience of trauma and its aftermath is carried in the bodies of survivors, making the psychological dimensions of the experience also a deeply embodied reality.[52] Shelly Rambo has been at the forefront of theological research centered on trauma and the way it reconfigures our understanding of the

---

[49] See Robert M. Doran, S.J., *Psychic Conversion and Theological Foundations*, Marquette Studies in Theology (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2006).

[50] Judith Herman, *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence—from Domestic Abuse to Political Terror* (New York: Basic Books, 1997), 33. See also the pioneering work of Cathy Caruth in her edited collection of essays on trauma and literary theory, *Trauma: Exploration in Memory* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995) and Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Memory, and History* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996). For a bibliographic outline of the origins of trauma theory in a variety of disciplines, see Geoffrey Hartman, "On Traumatic Knowledge and Literary Studies," *New Literary History* 26 (1995): 537-563, at 555-557.

[51] See Susan Rubin Suleiman, "Judith Herman and Contemporary Trauma Theory," *Women's Studies Quarterly* 36, no. 1 (2008): 276-281.

[52] See Bessel van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma* (New York: Penguin, 2015).

relationship between life and death. She has reread the resurrection account in the Fourth Gospel in light of trauma theory as a means to explore the personal and communal meaning of the resurrection event in new and complex ways—ways that leave life and death in a complex redemptive configuration rather than in a clean and disjointed binary.[53]

The literary genres of autobiography and memoir have also reemerged as legitimate and even privileged vehicles of theological discourse among the latest wave of theologians dealing with the psychological and theological dimensions of trauma and suffering. It is worth noting that although Augustine's theology was so thoroughly informed by his own life story, his efforts (or should I say, the efforts of his interpreters) to systematize, depersonalize, and to make absolute his theological insights have generally given way in the current theological moment to a focus on the power of autobiography and memoir. These forms offer a highly specific, but nevertheless essential tool in the development of a contemporary theology of the human person and psychology—one that deliberately resists tendencies to depersonalize and absolutize. Of special note in this area is Monica Coleman's *Bipolar Faith*, in which she addresses a history of mental illness in her family of origin and her own journey as a black theologian through those experiences.[54] Although her story is both unique and all too familiar for many readers, what is perhaps equally important from the perspective of the intersection of psychology and theology is the way she makes what is old new again: Augustine's *confessio* has become Coleman's memoir. The autobiographical theology of Augustine's introspection has now found a voice in the reflections of a black female seminary student, pastor, and academic who is to be regarded as the expression of an experience of grace, sin, and saintliness every bit as valuable as the reflections of Augustine, an African man struggling with the legacy of his parents and standing at the precipice of his nation's collapse. The specificity of Augustine's reflections, his speculation about the human soul and its distortions and yearning for God, find an echo in Coleman's work. Her willingness to let her story speak without imposing itself as a normative account of the soul, allows readers to find toothing-stones for their own narratives, and that is enough to further the theological exploration of the human soul, an exploration whose telos remains an asymptotic goal this side of the beatific vision.

---

[53] See Shelly Rambo, *Spirit and Trauma: A Theology of Remaining* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2010) and *Resurrecting Wounds: Living in the Afterlife of Trauma* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2017).

[54] Monica Coleman, *Bipolar Faith: A Black Woman's Journey with Depression and Faith* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2016).

CONCLUSION

Ellen Charry's cautions about some aspects of modern psychology are well worth noting, but her strong and wise amplification of the Christian tradition's longstanding and deep investment in psychology as a theological imperative is more noteworthy. The biblical material, in its own profound way, gives voice to the embodied struggles and consolations of human existence. The hylomorphism and systematization of the Thomistic effort to construct a thorough science of the human has bestowed on subsequent generations of theologians and psychologist a rich framework within which to extend the work of Aquinas without imposing an antiquated and distorting worldview. Ongoing tensions between scientism and a theologically informed vision of the world are still in vogue in many arenas; in fact, these tensions may flare up from time to time precisely because they play into the culture wars and identity politics of any given moment. In recent years the skepticism that dominated the early relationship between the psychological sciences and Christian theology has increasingly given way to new areas of collaboration. These areas of collaboration can only be furthered through humility and authentic desire for knowledge and human flourishing. Only when the biblical record, the record of the great masters of the Christian tradition, and contemporary voices within the psychological sciences are allowed to speak in all of their particularity can their insights and their limitations be fully appreciated.[55] From the theological side of the table, there is much to be gained from an attentive listening to the psychological sciences, and from the side of the psychological sciences, there appears to be a positive role for spirituality and religious value in the study of psychology as well as in therapeutics and counseling. M

Christopher McMahon is Professor of Theology and Department Chair at Saint Vincent College in Latrobe, PA.

---

[55] For a succinct statement on the autonomy of scientific and theological disciplines in the context of collaboration and mutual enrichment, see Pope John Paul II, "Letter to Reverend George V. Coyne, S. J., Director of the Vatican Observatory," June 1, 1988, https://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/letters/1988/documents/hf_jp-ii_let_ 9880601_padre-coyne.html.