

EVALUATING PSYCHOLOGICAL THEORY FROM A CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE

This module is concerned with how the theories underlying psychological therapy and research fit in with the Christian worldview. Are they compatible with Christianity or do they have vastly different ways of looking at the world? Should we be careful how much we “buy into” them? Should we avoid some of them completely? This is intended to give a *broad framework* within which to view psychological theories as a Christian (inevitably there will be some overlap with other modules).

For want of time we will concentrate initially on the theories underlying *therapy* rather than research (though there is much overlap). It is hoped that the research side (e.g. evaluating evolutionary models of man) will be developed further once the therapy side has been piloted.

The main schools of psychological therapy

Within each school are various approaches to therapy. Many of the approaches have actually developed across several worldviews but for our purposes we will restrict them to single categories.

school	examples of therapy	originated from...
Psychoanalytic (the “first force” of psychology)	psychoanalysis	scientific materialism
Behavioural (the “second force”)	behavioural	scientific materialism
Organic/medical/neurological	psychiatric	scientific materialism
Humanistic (the “third force”)	person-centred, Gestalt, existential, transactional analysis	humanism and existentialism
Cognitive	CBT, RET	humanism and existentialism
Socio-cultural	family systems, personal construct, narrative	various, currently most influenced by social constructionism
Transpersonal (the “fourth force”?)	New age therapies	Eastern philosophy

Each of the above schools relies on theories about the world and humanity that try to explain things like how people work and why they go wrong. Each theory is coming from a different perspective, relying on different ways of knowing what is true (such as observation and rationality) and having different underlying assumptions. Christians have an additional way of knowing – biblical revelation. Some of the assumptions made by these schools of psychotherapy are shared by Christians, while others appear to be in conflict with biblical revelation. We therefore need to examine each theory in turn to see to what extent it can be reconciled with – or contribute to – a Christian understanding of the world.

Assumptions, goals, and methods

Assumptions

Every theory of anything starts by *assuming* that certain things are true - it builds itself on certain presuppositions that it just accepts and cannot itself prove (Polanyi, 1958). The assumptions of psychological theories are made up of fundamental beliefs about mankind and the world, and these usually come directly out of the prevailing “worldview” of the time:

- (a) Assumptions about mankind (e.g., human nature, the nature of “illness”, the place of man in the universe, whether we’re determined or free, the importance of moral responsibility, and so on)
- (b) Assumptions about the world and knowledge (e.g., was the world created or random, the nature of truth, the existence of moral absolutes, the existence of ultimate meaning, God’s existence, the afterlife, and so on)

EXERCISE: See if you can work out the main assumptions behind each of the seven schools of psychology, and try to determine how compatible they are with a biblical worldview. You may need first to see if you can agree on what a biblical worldview actually says about mankind and the world!

Goals

Each of the above schools has an ultimate goal in mind for the client which therapy is working towards (e.g., for Transpersonal this may be that the client will “realise his divinity”). These goals are all compatible to a different degree with a biblical worldview.

EXERCISE: See if you can identify the goals of each of the seven schools of psychology, and try to determine how compatible they are with a biblical worldview. It may first be worth establishing what the bible presents as the “goals” for mankind.

Methods

Each approach within each school employs various therapeutic techniques to achieve its goals. Again, these techniques are all compatible to a different degree with a biblical approach to life.

EXERCISE: See if you can identify the main techniques employed within the seven schools of psychology, and try to determine how compatible they are with a biblical worldview.

Concluding questions

1. To what extent can we, as Christians, work with each of these schools of psychological therapy?
2. Is it okay to adopt a “mix and match” approach (picking different bits from different schools) or are there dangers to this?
3. Is there a good case for trying to build a strictly "bible only" school of therapy of our own?

References and resources

References

Polanyi, M. (1958). *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy*. University of Chicago Press.

Vital Book

Jones, S. & Butman, R. (1991). *Modern Psychotherapies: A Comprehensive Christian Appraisal*. IVP (USA). £25. An excellent outline and Christian critique of behavioural, dynamic, humanistic, and systemic therapies, with final chapters presenting possible Christian integrationist approaches. The most up to date book of its kind, but still doesn't cover Narrative Approach, etc.

Useful Books

Cosgrove, M. (1979). *Psychology Gone Awry*. IVP/Zondervan. Demonstrates weaknesses of naturalistic, humanistic, and transpersonal world-views in psychology. Proposes Christian theism as only world-view that provides a suitable framework for the study of man. Especially good for students.

Hurding, R. (1986). *Roots and Shoots: A Guide to Counselling and Psychotherapy*. Hodder (UK). £13. Classic guide to and Christian critique of the major schools of secular psychology (especially behaviourism, psychoanalysis, transpersonalism). Also looks at various approaches to Christian psychology. Author is a GP and psychotherapist. Doesn't have all the latest therapies.

Jeeves, M. (ed.) (1984). *Behavioural Sciences: A Christian Perspective*. IVP (UK). Out of print? How do we relate the findings of behavioural scientists (e.g., psychologists) to Christian beliefs about man and his nature? Includes brain science (Donald Mackay), genes and morals (R.J. Berry), social psychology (David Myers), homosexuality, behaviour modification, pastoral care. Contributions are from some of the top writers in the field, many from the UK!

Myers, D. & Jeeves, M. (1987). *Psychology Through the Eyes of Faith*. Harper Row (UK). Very broad and simple introduction to a huge range of topics regarding the interface between psychology and Christianity, including levels of explanation, human nature, mind-brain connection, human development, faith, determinism, prayer, happiness, values in therapy, etc. A must for students.

Paloutzian, R. (1996). *Invitation to the Psychology of Religion* 2nd ed. Allyn & Bacon (USA). £34 (Amazon UK). 304pp. Paperback. Comprehensive and readable introduction to all areas of psychology of religion. Includes sections on psychological approaches to religion, historical and theoretical developments, research, religious development in children, conversion, religion and experience, religious orientation, well-being and health, and so on. Very good at showing the philosophical assumptions underlying psychological approaches.

Van Leeuwen, M. S. (1985). *The Person in Psychology: A Contemporary Christian Appraisal*. Eerdmans/IVP (USA and UK?). Addresses the way the "person" is seen in behaviourism, cognitivism, social psychology, personality theory, research methodology, etc. Presents the need for a major paradigm shift in how we understand "scientific" psychology - one that provides a more humane, realistic, and valid understanding of the person.

Tapes

A number of tapes from L'Abri Fellowship in Hampshire examine specific therapies from a Christian perspective, showing where they are compatible/incompatible with a biblical worldview. There are lectures on Freud, Jung, Adler, Humanistic Therapy, Transpersonal Therapies, psychiatry, and more. A particular good starting point is Richard Winter's lecture on "The Challenge of Psychology". These can all be purchased/borrowed from L'Abri Fellowship, The Manor House, Greatham, Hants GU33 6HF. Tel: 01420 538436. Email: england@labri.org