2022-05-18

The Christian Approach to Psychology

Preston Keller
prestonkeller98@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/studentpub

Part of the Psychology Commons

BYU ScholarsArchive Citation

The Christian Approach to Psychology:

A Proposal for a Psychological Perspective Rooted in the Gospel of Jesus Christ

Preston Keller

Brigham Young University

PSYCH 353: Latter-day Saint Perspectives

Dr. Edwin Gantt

April 20, 2022

The Christian Approach to Psychology

According to the most recent census data, almost one-third of the world's population identifies as Christian. In the United States alone, 71% of residents consider themselves to be of the Christian faith (Fieldstadt, 2017; Hackett & McClendon, 2017). With Christianity accounting for such an enormous percentage of the general population's worldviews, there should exist an approach to psychology that is not only accommodating of but also rooted in the theistic assumptions that drive so much of human thought and behavior. Contemporary psychology claims to deliver an approach to understanding human behavior that is bias-neutral or bias-minimized (Gantt & Thayne, 2017; Slife et al., 2012; Slife & Reber, 2005). However, further investigation will shed light on the fact that such a claim is neither true nor realistic. All methodologies have their own assumptions and implications whether we recognize them or not. As a result, contemporary psychology attempts to define and treat mental disorders through a naturalistic lens while Christian clientele do their best to cling to their core theistic beliefs in the process (Jackson & Fischer, 2005). The results of this process can often cause an uncomfortable dichotomy in psychotherapy for Christian therapist and client alike.

Although the current discipline of psychology often does its best to ignore the opinions of the many past approaches to the study of human behavior, many psychologists today have drawn attention to the heavy influence that these past approaches have had on the way we explain and understand psychology in the present (Williams, 1998; Williams & Gantt, 2020). Even more influential are the underlying assumptions and implications that contemporary psychology brings with it. Today, the principles of naturalism, upon which contemporary psychology is based, are hardly challenged or even noticed (Williams, 1998). These naturalistic assumptions are drawn from the empirical and rationalist approaches to science that were heavily debated during the

Enlightenment, and that have roots going as far back as the ancient Greek philosophers (Gantt & Thayne, 2019; Slife & Williams, 1995; Williams, 2016). Although the naturalistic approach seems quite appealing to a discipline that has desperately struggled to be considered a "natural science," the assumptions and implications that naturalism brings with it often go unnoticed. (Slife et al., 2012). For those of the Christian faith, the danger of a naturalistic approach to human behavior is that the underlying implications and assumptions of naturalism are completely contradictory to those of Christianity, and we must be careful not to ignore the opposing worldview that hides within the naturalistic approach.

My proposed solution to this problem is to develop a formal Christian approach to psychology, one with a clear philosophy of human behavior that would heavily influence the way that human flourishing, psychopathology, and psychotherapy are understood within the discipline. In this essay I will first explain the importance of developing a Christian approach to psychology, which will be followed by an analysis of Greek Naturalism and Hebrew Theism as two contrasting worldviews. I will then demonstrate the implications that each of these worldviews has on psychology in terms of their grounding assumptions of human behavior and implications for practice. The purpose of this analysis will be to demonstrate that a Christian approach to psychology will allow Christian therapists and clients to better recognize their core values and understand how to navigate the implications of those values in therapy.

The Importance of a Christian Approach

The Christian approach to human behavior is rooted in a theistic worldview that lies in direct opposition to a naturalistic worldview. The theistic assumptions of Christianity perceive Jesus Christ as the embodiment of truth, ethics, and the primary agent of change in the lives of all those who choose to follow Him. The doctrines of Christianity are doctrines of human

salvation through the merits of a Messiah, and, as such, opposes the deterministic and nihilistic implications of the naturalistic philosophy (Slife et al., 2012). That is not to say that the intentions and products of the contemporary psychological discipline are evil or even ineffective; there have been several highly beneficial and applicable discoveries through the empirical methods of modern psychological research. However, it is important to understand the underlying implications of such an approach and consider the effects that these implications have on those individuals who receive psychotherapeutic treatment through a lens that does not support their core theistic beliefs. My proposal is that as Christian therapists and clients gain a greater understanding of the grounding assumptions of both naturalism and theism, the implications of such assumptions would greatly enhance the nature of therapeutic practice. A psychological discipline that is open to the foundational assumptions of theism would allow for a space in which Christian therapists and clients can develop a therapeutic relationship that is grounded in their personal values, rather than the values of an opposing worldview (Slife & Reber, 2005).

Contrasting Worldviews

Any approach to psychology must be founded in philosophical assumptions, whether those assumptions are recognized or not (Slife et al., 2012). This will be demonstrated as an analysis of the current philosophy of contemporary psychology is provided. To understand what the philosophical implications of psychology are today and how we got here, an understanding of the core differences between Greek naturalism and Hebrew theism is required.

Greek Naturalism and its History within Psychology

Naturalism is the philosophical view that there is no divine being(s) or supernatural reality independent of the natural world, and, thus, all of reality can be explained through

existence and operation of natural laws, forces, processes, and events. Slife et al. (2012) identify the two main features of naturalism as lawfulness and godlessness. Naturalism affirms that all occurrences are caused by natural laws, and that an understanding of these natural laws is enhanced through empirical observation and study. Many of the naturalistic principles of today originate with the ideas of ancient Greek philosophers that heavily influence our culture's method of thinking (Slife & Williams, 1995). The ancient Greeks were fascinated by that which is static and universal. The search for truth in ancient Greek philosophy was centered on the discovery of abstract universal truths that are unchanging (Gantt & Thayne, 2019).

Plato, for example, proposed that all material entities are merely physical representations of an abstract ideal. To Plato, all chairs can vary in shape, size, and color, but they all share the likeness of the ideal essence of a chair, which is what ultimately makes them all chairs despite their physical differences. Plato's valuation of abstract ideals as truth demonstrates the importance of stasis and unchangeability to Greek philosophy (Gantt & Thayne, 2019). The Pythagorean theorem also demonstrates this importance by valuing an abstract and unchangeable mathematical law as truth. Though all right triangles may be unique, the theorem that denotes the legs' relationship to the hypotenuse holds true for all of them (Gantt & Thayne, 2019). The idea that unchanging natural laws govern all of existence is the very foundation of Greek philosophy, and perhaps because of all the technological advances naturalism has produced since that time, we continue to build upon that same foundation today (Williams, 2016).

The Greek fascination with stasis and universal abstract laws influenced future generations' conception of truth. The search for knowledge and truth that swept the earth during the Enlightenment was heavily influenced by the Greek idea that we approach truth and knowledge as we gain greater understanding of the abstract natural laws that govern our universe

(Slife & Williams, 1995). Great advances in physics through the likes of Sir Isaac Newton, Galileo, Kepler, and others, attempted to define and demonstrate the natural laws of motion. Biologists such as Charles Darwin came up with groundbreaking theories that explain the origin of species through laws of natural selection and evolution. Enlightenment thinkers craved an expansive knowledge of abstract natural laws that might explain why the world is the way it is.

In their attempts to understand these natural laws, scientists in the Enlightenment formulated two revolutionary methods of study: rationalism and empiricism. Advocates of empiricism valued obtaining knowledge through physical observations and precise measurement. In contrast, advocated of rationalist epistemology argued that the physical senses can often be deceived, and, therefore, rational thought ought to be the primary method for obtaining indubitable knowledge or truth. These two methods stood at odds with each other for quite some time, not because they disagreed with the idea that natural laws exist and govern the world, but rather with the epistemological ideals of how to study those natural laws. It is important to recognize that although these approaches reflect rival epistemological approaches, they were both developed with the intent to study the same metaphysical truth: natural laws.

In the end, both epistemologies won out by melding together to create the scientific method, a new epistemological approach that values both empirical observation and rational thought (Williams, 2016). The scientific method was adopted by modern culture and has been the means of unprecedented technological breakthroughs. However, despite the scientific method's effectiveness, we must keep in mind that it was created to broaden our understanding of unchanging natural laws. The method itself carries strong naturalistic implications about the nature of what it intends to study. That is not to say that we should not use the scientific method; it has more than proven its worth, especially in the field of technological advancements. At the

same time, we must remember that the scientific method was created to study and understand unchanging natural laws, and that is exactly what it does.

Enter the field of contemporary psychology. Sigmund Koch observed that as the behavioral sciences developed in the late 19th century, they quickly adopted the scientific method as their epistemological approach due to its popularity among the natural sciences (Slife & Williams, 1995). Koch further observed that unlike the natural sciences, contemporary psychologists settled on their method of study before developing the questions they wanted to answer. Instead of framing their method to fit their questions, psychologists decided to only ask questions that can be answered using the scientific method. Since the scientific method intends to study natural law, any attempt to study human behavior with only the scientific method implies that human behavior is governed by natural laws alone.

As a result, psychologists of today have done their best to understand human behavior through a naturalistic lens. Cognitive behaviorism, for example, posits that natural universal laws cause our minds to spontaneously produce negative thoughts. Cognitive behaviorism also suggests that since our behavior is governed by natural laws, we might be able to manipulate human behavior as we increase our understanding of the natural laws (e.g., punishment and reinforcement) that govern our behavior (Thoma et al., 2015). Other examples such as neuroevolutionary psychology suggest that psychological constructs such as motivation and emotions can be mapped onto certain areas of the brain, implying that they are produced and caused by clusters of neurons (Panksepp et al., 2002). The naturalistic assumptions are that the natural laws of evolution have produced psychological phenomena through biological processes and that our behavior is determined by these natural laws as they manipulate our biology. The implications of this approach are that as we continue to expand our understanding of physical

brain properties, we will one day be able to explain how chemical processes naturally produce consciousness. The history of naturalisms grasp on science continues to permeate the psychological research of today, demonstrating that a new approach to psychology is necessary to lay the foundation for a theistic understanding of human behavior to be taken seriously.

Hebrew Theism and its Approach to Truth

The Greeks' value of stasis and unchangeability is contrasted by the dynamics of Hebrew thought. The Hebrews were as Wilson (1989) describes, an "energetic people." The Hebrews' emphasis on action can even be seen in their sentence structure. In English and other languages that descend from Greek, nouns are placed first, followed by verbs. In the Hebrew language, however, verbs come before the noun, placing emphasis on the action of the sentence rather than the static object. A second dichotomy between Greek and Hebrew is that while Greeks valued abstract ideals, the Hebrews prioritized that which is concrete. For example, the Hebrew language uses physical terminology to express abstract ideas such as emotions and immaterial concepts. To be angry is to "burn in one's nostrils" (Exod. 4:14) and to disclose information is to "unstop someone's ears" (Ruth 4:4; Wilson, 1989).

The Hebrew values of dynamics and concreteness shaped the way they came to understand truth. To the Greeks, truth is represented by laws that are unchangeable and abstract such as Plato's ideal forms or the Pythagorean theorem. In other words, the Greeks believed in a type of truth called idea-truth. Contrastingly, in Hebrew thought, truth is not an idea but a person, namely, God. The Hebrew idea of person-truth allows for the truth to be a concrete individual rather than an abstract principle. The Hebrew God is agentic, allowing Him to give active direction to His beloved children based on context, as opposed to an unchanging natural law that exists outside of context (Gantt & Thayne, 2019). God might command His people "thou shalt

not kill," (Exod. 20:13) but within a given context He might say, "thou shalt utterly destroy them…as the Lord thy God hath commanded thee" (Deut. 20:17). With person-truth at the center of the Hebrew worldview, their religion was not simply a "system of ethics, a code of conduct, an ideology, or a creed" (Wilson, 1989). Instead, it was a way of living their life in harmony with God. In this sense, the Hebrews' religion was defined by their relationship with God, a dynamic process in which their relationship to truth can either progress or regress according to the choices made by each individual. Truth then is not a collection of principles to be known, but a way of life to be lived.

Greek Naturalism vs. Hebrew Theism

As mentioned previously, the philosophy of today's psychology is heavily influenced by a naturalistic worldview. Naturalism is often held to be the ideal worldview when practicing science because most scientists believe that naturalism is bias-neutral, a phenomenon that Slife et al. (2012) refer to as the "myth of neutrality." This myth is quite obvious when the implications and assumptions of naturalism are analyzed. Naturalism denies the possibility of God's activity and intervention by affirming that all occurrences are caused by natural laws, and it is therefore biased against the existence of God.

There is a form of naturalism that attempts to accommodate for the existence of God by treating Him as an add-on. This form of naturalism is called deism. Deism refers to the idea that God created all things, set all the natural laws in order, and then stopped intervening (Reber, 2020). This attempt of accommodating for God as an add-on to naturalism is still completely contradictory to the Hebrew worldview because that is not the Hebrew God. The Hebrew God is one who revealed His plan to flood the earth to Noah, one who spoke with Moses at a burning bush, and one who led His chosen people out of Egypt through the parted waters of the Red Sea.

The Hebrew God is one who would come to earth Himself and spend His life doing the will of The Father and performing miracles that violate every natural law currently known to modern day science.

To naturalism, the gods are those who have knowledge of self-existent natural laws and can use them to manipulate their environment accordingly (Garrard, 1989). These gods gain power as they gain greater knowledge of self-existent laws. But to the Hebrew God, there are no self-existent natural laws within which He operates; to suggest this would be to see God as a super-engineer that performs miracles by appealing to pre-existing natural laws in ways that science is not yet familiar with (Garrard, 1989). The Hebrew God, however, is no such engineer, but rather He is the one that decreed these natural laws and, thus, He has the power to manipulate them at His will in circumstances that we often call miracles. The implications of Hebrew theism that God can engage in such drastic interventions, and frequently does, throws quite a wrench in the naturalistic worldview. At the same time, the naturalistic implications of a God who does not engage in such frequent interventions throws just as large a wrench into Hebrew theism, suggesting that the two worldviews are in no way compatible.

The Philosophy of Christian Psychology

Due to the incompatibility of naturalism and theism, I propose that a Christian approach to psychology would need to be grounded in its own theistic philosophical assumptions. Unlike naturalism, the philosophical implications of a Christian approach to psychology need not be hidden or ignored because they would lay the foundational principles of the approach. Any philosophical ideology has three main components including ontology (what is truth?), epistemology (how do we know truth?), and ethics (what actions are considered right/wrong?). I will contrast the ontological, epistemological, and ethical assumptions of naturalism and

Christian theism to show how they are different and demonstrate that a psychology grounded in the Christian worldview is both possible and needed.

Ontology: The Christian Approach to Truth

The first philosophical question we will address is that of ontology. I have already explained that in the naturalistic worldview, abstract natural laws are seen as the nature of truth that governs reality. The theistic worldview of a Christian approach to ontology would view the world much differently. I will outline four primary characteristics of Christian ontology, which are person-truth, relationships, opposition, and agency.

The concept of person-truth (as opposed to idea-truth) was reinforced by Jesus Christ when He declared, "I am the way, the truth, and the light" (John 14:6). The Christian approach to ontology argues that the Hebrew truth "was made flesh, and dwelt among us" (John 1:14). This same truth bore our griefs, carried our sorrows, was wounded for our transgressions and was bruised for our iniquities (Isaiah 53:4-5). He was crucified, resurrected, and continues to live to this day, reaching out and blessing all those who will call upon His name. Truth is Jesus Christ, and we come to know the truth as we come to know Him. Like the Hebrews, to live truthfully is a way of life, to strive to follow the example set by the Truth Himself. The Christian approach to ontology would argue that there is an inherent bias in the question "what is truth?" because it implies that truth is an abstraction. Instead, Christianity provides an answer to the Hebrew question of ontology: "who is truth?"

The second characteristic of Christian ontology is relationships. This ontological characteristic aims to answer the question, "what constitutes the nature of reality?" Throughout centuries, philosophers have aimed to answer this question through the lens of the mind-body problem, which suggests that humans are either fundamentally physical beings or fundamentally

mental beings. Much of contemporary psychology mixes a physical ontology with a mental ontology by using physical ontology to describe pathology and mental ontology as the foundation for their theory of treatment (Jackson, 2005). Jackson (2005) proposes a totally different view on the nature of reality which he calls a relational ontology. A relational ontology posits that the ultimate reality is defined by our relationships. All humans, for example, are children of God, an existence which is based on our relationship to Truth.

Existence can be further understood through relationships of opposition. To illustrate this idea, I would suggest considering the following excerpt from an ancient prophet (around 600 B.C.) named Lehi whose teachings were recorded in The Book of Mormon:

> For it must needs be, that there is an opposition in all things. If not so…righteousness could not be brought to pass, neither wickedness, neither holiness nor misery, neither good nor bad…And if ye shall say there is no law, ye shall also say there is no sin. If ye shall say there is no sin, ye shall also say there is no righteousness. And if there be no righteousness there be no happiness. And if there be no righteousness nor happiness there be no punishment nor misery. And if these things are not there is no God. And if there is no God we are not, neither the earth; for there could have been no creation of things (2 Nephi 2:11; 13).

The argument is that all things can only exist because they are opposite to or distinct from some other thing(s). The nature of oppositions denotes a relationship between the two things. Light relates to darkness in that it is the opposite, and light and dark exist because they are in a relationship of opposition to each other.

Opposition is heavily present in Genesis' record of the creation of the world. Light is divided form darkness, the waters from the dry land, and the man from the woman. Even from an observational perspective, we know that an object exists because of its distinction from other objects. For example, we know a bookshelf exists because of the distinction between the bookshelf and the air surrounding it. Lehi takes this argument further into the nature of things such as sin existing as an opposition to God's law and righteousness existing as an opposition to

sin. In psychology, for example, a depressive state would only exist because it stands in opposition to the non-depressive state of others. If all people experienced the symptoms of depression at all times, the phenomenon would hypothetically cease to exist.

The final characteristic of Christian ontology I will discuss is agency (opposition in decision-making). Agency aims to answer the question, "what drives human behavior?" Many philosophers throughout history have debated this question through the dichotomy of determinism and indeterminism. Determinism suggests that all events are determined and caused by natural forces and that there is no possibility for events to have occurred otherwise. The problem with this approach is that it is void of meaning because possibility is necessary for meaning to exist. For example, if a man tells his wife he loves her it would have no meaning if this expression of love was dictated by outside forces and there was no possibility for him to do otherwise. On the other hand, indeterminism suggests that events occur due to randomness and there are no causes or reasons behind events. The problem with indeterminism is that it equally lacks meaning because the reasoning behind events is another characteristic that is necessary for meaning. Looking back to the man who tells his wife he loves her, an indeterministic perspective would suggest that this expression of love is just part of a string of completely random events with no reasons as to why he did so. Despite the infinite possibilities of indeterminism, this lack of reasoning suggests that an indeterministic worldview is just as void of meaning as a deterministic worldview. Hansen (2017) discusses a third alternative to explain human behavior that she refers to as moral agency.

Agency refers to the concept that we as humans are agents that can make their own autonomous decisions. Hansen explains that agency is an active principle, while determinism and indeterminism view human behavior as passively subject to natural laws of either pure causation

or pure randomness. Agency is both free and determined because we can be influenced by factors such as biology, social context, and past experiences, but our actions are not determined by them. We get to make the ultimate decision. An agentic worldview allows for a world in which there are infinite possibilities in decision-making, and we have the ability to assign reasoning and purpose to each decision that we make. The availability of possibility and reasoning allows us the freedom to create meaning, and within our unique contexts, we have the freedom to affirm meaning any way we wish. Our freedom, however, is also heavily influenced by our past decisions, seeing that we can autonomously elect to give up our freedom if we so desire (e.g., I put handcuffs on myself and then throw away the key).

Hansen further explains that within the Christian worldview, we, as agents, operate within a moral context. Christianity recognizes that we can choose to live truthfully (live like Christ) or falsely (reject Christ). The idea of moral agency (as opposed to just agency) suggests that agency is not the ability to choose what we *want* to do but the ability to choose what we *ought* to do (i.e., to live truthfully). For Christians, the reality of moral agency in a relational ontology recognizes that our "relational context is a classroom for learning how to love like God. We cannot avoid paying attention to our moral indebtedness to each other if we are to maximize the happiness that we can find and not shy away in the false safety of self-focus" (Hansen, 2017). Moral agency recognizes that the way we choose to affirm meaning to our relationships has consequences, and that there is a truthful and a false way of finding meaning and acting within our relationships with God and others.

Epistemology: The Christian Approach to Method

We live in a culture and time period that practically worships epistemology. Our culture's fascination with and value of method is especially present within contemporary psychology. The

social sciences almost completely attribute the validity and reliability of any study to the methods that were used (e.g., Forbes et al., 2021). As mentioned previously, the scientific method was created to study phenomena that are assumed to be naturalistic, and this method is still held as the golden standard within psychology today. A problem with primarily using the scientific method in psychology is that if human behavior is not determined by natural laws, the method will consistently overlook important qualitative factors that would greatly enhance our understanding of human behavior.

In her TED talk titled, "The Human Insights Missing from Big Data," Tricia Wang (2016) tells the story of how she gathered ethnographic data in 2009 which strongly suggested that even the poorest people in China would want to save up to purchase a smartphone. She took her data to Nokia, but they would not listen because it was not big data. They responded that they had millions of data points to suggest that smartphones were just a fad and would quickly die out. It was not too long after this that Nokia's business completely "fell off a cliff." Wang attributes this kind of oversight to the quantification bias, which suggests that we have an unconscious tendency to believe that the measurable is more valuable than the immeasurable. Wang believes that we need to be cautious of our own quantification biases because the immeasurable often provides valuable insight that can greatly affect how we interpret quantifiable data.

Christian epistemology agrees with Wang, suggesting that the immeasurable (e.g., the existence of God) often provides important context to what we can physically observe and measure. The Christian approach to epistemology is open to what Hathaway (2004) refers to as an externalist epistemology. The externalist perspective suggests that some of the justifying factors for knowledge might be external to the subject's cognitive perspective. This claim comes

from the idea that knowledge only exists as the relationship between reality and the beliefs formed through our perceptions of reality (Hathaway, 2004). In other words, it is impossible to remove human interpretation out of the equation of knowledge because anything that is known must become known through the lens of human intellect, reasoning, and/or observation.

The 1999 film *The Matrix* is a perfect example of how knowledge cannot be separated from our perceptions (Wachowski & Wachowski, 1999). All the people in the film unknowingly lived within a world that was completely fabricated, suggesting that all the knowledge they had about the world and their relationships with others would have been false no matter how sophisticated their methods because their knowledge was limited to human observations and reasonings. They could not transcend the methodological resources available to them and neither can we. There is no way to prove that our methods can truly transcend human perception and reach reality, but since any such claim that we live within a Matrix is unfalsifiable, scientists *assume* that this is not the case. All of science is based on the *assumption* that the methods used can generate truth. The underlying yet unspoken condition of *assuming* is a notion of *trust*. Science trusts in its method to do the job. This trust is not blind, for the scientific method has led to numerous technological advances, but it is trust nonetheless. Trust that our physical senses are not deceiving us, or trust that sampling error did not occur even when there is a less than 5% chance that it did. All epistemology, whether scientific or otherwise, is rooted in a trust that the methods have a way of transcending human bias and perceptions to the realm of reality.

In contrast to the scientific method, the Christian epistemology not only relies on this trust but fully embraces it. Christians refer to this trust as faith, and it is the foundation of Christian epistemology. Because Christian ontology argues that Christ is truth and that to live truthfully is to follow Christ's example, the only method to know and live truth is to put one's

faith and trust in Him. As we put our faith in Christ by choosing to follow His example, we begin to experience the blessings of a more truthful lifestyle, reinforcing the faith we have in Him. Just like the scientific method, this faith is not blind because faith in Jesus Christ has led so many individuals to change their very nature and to begin to live a more truthful life. According to many accounts, this faith in Christ has even led to miracles that far surpass anything that the science can comprehend such as walking on water, curing the blind and the deaf, resurrection from the dead, and redemption from sin (Matthew 14:25; Luke 7:22; John 8:10-11).

The truthfulness of Jesus Christ hinges completely on the reality of certain events such as His resurrection from death. Either Christ rose from the dead, or He did not, implying that He is the truth, our Redeemer, and our risen Lord, or He is not (Williams, 2000). The truthfulness of events is established through witnesses. The apostle Paul explained that "in the mouth of two or three witnesses shall every word be established" (2 Corinthians 13:1). The witnesses of Christ's miracles and His divinity are evidence that He is the truth and that trusting in Him and following Him brings salvation. This logic reinforces the importance of the Christian epistemology of faith and trust. We must trust in Christ, but also in His many witnesses in order to know the reality of the events that manifest Him as the truth. Faith is the way to know the truth in Christianity, but we must not forget that this same faith is required to know the truth in any discipline due to the fact that all epistemologies (including the scientific method) require trusting in the method's ability to reveal truth.

Ethics: The Christian Approach to Morality

Although objectivity and bias-free research and practice is highly valued in our current society, the possibility for a formal understanding of human behavior that is completely free of bias and values remains out of reach. Even the American Psychological Association (APA)

recognizes this, and they have embraced the necessity for ethics. The APA defines ethics as "the

professional values foundational to the profession," and they have developed their own ethical

code of conduct which "includes sections on clinical practice, education, research and

publication" (American Psychological Association, n.d.). While the APA's efforts to embrace

beneficence, fidelity, integrity, justice, and human rights are quite noble, they are not sufficient

to define morality according to the Christian perspective. Even within this overarching ethical

code of conduct for researchers and practitioners, there are many moral questions that remain

unanswered, especially when it comes to the lives of the clients themselves.

Some psychological approaches such as humanism have suggested that people are

innately good, and therefore therapeutic practice should focus on trusting the self to achieve self-

actualization (Gantt & Thayne, 2017). The problem with such approaches, however, is that it

adheres to the principles of moral relativism, resulting in an approach that is in complete

opposition to the whole of Christianity. Quinton R. De Young, a minister and psychologist,

exclaimed:

> As a humanist, I am vexed by the amorality and immorality of some of the modern
> Messiahs. Moral neutrality and nihilism are hardly possible for a "curator of souls" and
> even less desirable. Hedonistic self-indulgence, which is what "doing your own thing"
> boils down to, *is* a moral position, however immoral or amoral it may appear to some in
> practice. I believe psychotherapy and related efforts have profound moral implications.
> There is no way to escape the fact that every such system teaches not only what one is but
> also what one is to become, and what one ought to live for. Having been exposed to, and
> acquainted with, a number of these secular priests and prophets, I am not at all confident
> that they are either equipped or qualified to function as moral leaders, even if they were
> so disposed (De Young, 1976).

As stated by De Young, moral relativism *is* a moral position, and I would argue that if the main

movements of psychology (e.g., humanism) are allowed to take their own moral position,

Christianity should be free to develop a psychological discipline with its own approach to

morality as well. As long as the Christian approach to morality does not violate any of the tenets

of the APA's code of ethics, the Christian approach to morality should be allowed to exist within its own discipline and would be just as legitimate.

In Christianity, morality is strictly determined and established by the will of God. Throughout the Bible, God gives commandments and laws for His people to follow, but these laws can change across times and situations. Peter, for example, was commanded in a dream to eat animals that were considered unclean. When Peter refused, God responded, "what God hath cleansed, that call not thou common" (Acts 10:9-15) Peter later discovered that the dream was meant as a demonstration that he should do whatever the Lord commanded Him to do (such as preach the gospel to both Jews and Gentiles), even if it is contrary to his previous understanding. The coming of Jesus Christ not only fulfilled the law of Moses, but during the Sermon on the Mount He challenged His followers to live an even higher law, which was a law to love one another. Christ declared that the first great commandment is to "love the Lord thy God with all they heart, and with all they soul, and with all thy mind," and the second is to "love they neighbour as thyself" (Matthew 22:37; 39).

Christians understand that in our efforts to love God and our fellow people, we should keep the commandments He has given us through His prophets, but like Peter we need to always be ready to follow any additional instructions from God. Christ was our exemplar because He sought to do the will of the Father instead of His own will (John 5:30). Christian ethics is, quite simply, to follow the example of Christ by always doing God's will because we trust that He loves us perfectly and that He knows better than us. The Christian implications for psychotherapy would suggest that therapists should not only encourage clients to live the commandments of God, but to encourage clients to discern for themselves what God's will is for them, and to trust God by doing what they feel inspired to do.

Human Flourishing

Although the relationship between ethics and human flourishing is often misunderstood in our modern culture, the two concepts go hand in hand. A Greek state of human flourishing which is known as "eudaimonia" was the primary focus of Aristotelian ethics, and it refers to living the highest human good as an end in itself, rather than for the sake of something else (Duignan, n.d.). This idea of human flourishing suggests that the good life extends far beyond a consistent positive emotional state. Instead, it suggests that a person should live their life to fulfill their intended purpose within the provided ethical conditions.

Contemporary psychology has studied human flourishing and the good life through a relatively new discipline called positive psychology. This newer discipline arose from the idea that mental health should be defined as more than just the absence of mental illness, and it intends to provide a scientific understanding of positive experiences and positive individual traits (Duckworth et al., 2005). What many people fail to see is that even within the goals of positive psychology, there is the bias that human flourishing entails a consistent positive emotional state we call happiness. In doing so, positive psychology makes the claim that the good life should be a hedonistic pursuit of our own subjective well-being. Hasselberger (2021) argues that the operationalization of happiness in positive psychology oversimplifies human flourishing as the presence of positive experience, the absence of negative experience, and the subjective judgement that one is happy with their life. For example, a recent publication within positive psychology suggested that the four dimensions of well-being are awareness, connection, insight, and purpose, and that "these dimensions are central to the subjective experience of well-being and can be strengthened through training" (Dahl et al., 2020). All the evidence provided by Dahl et al. suggests that these four dimensions constitute well-being because collectively they promote

positive physical states, positive psychological states, and perceived life satisfaction. This study

demonstrates that in positive psychology the good life is simply happiness, suggesting that our

purpose as human beings is to seek happiness for ourselves. The implications of this worldview

adhere to the ethical assumptions of an individualistic worldview.

The intrusion of individualism into contemporary psychology is not surprising when we

consider the strong individualistic culture of our nation, but this does not mean we should ignore

the dangerous implications that individualism brings with it when it is used as the primary ethical

code. Wilkens and Sanford (2009) acknowledge that individualism carries some value such as

personal responsibility, but they also point out that the fundamental ethical assumptions of

individualism completely contradict Christian ethics. Wilkens and Sanford remind us that:

> When I claim to be the primary reality in the universe, this requires that I see others either
> as a tool for maintaining my status or as a competitor for my place at the center. Others
> have only utilitarian value (they are valuable to the extent that they help me) or they are
> obstacles to my personal projects and goals. However, in the Christian story, God invites
> all to join and enjoy his kingdom. This is the secret to our social nature. God creates us to
> be in community, not just with him, but with all that he values. That changes everything.
> Others are no longer mere tools or hostile competitors, but fellow human beings assigned
> great value by the universe's true Creator. As a result, one non-negotiable in becoming a
> part of God's kingdom is recognizing that God's purposes are not primarily about *me*, but
> about *us*. This understanding of community puts Christianity on a collision path with
> individualism.

Due to the unifying nature of God's kingdom, human flourishing in the Christian worldview

cannot be understood at an individualistic level. Instead, human flourishing in Christianity must

be understood as communal (human race) flourishing rather than individual (human being)

flourishing. This level of human flourishing becomes much more intuitive when we consider it

within the context of a relational ontology. Since our existence results from our relationships

with others, communal flourishing would be much more valuable than individual flourishing.

The apostle Paul emphasized this principle in his many epistles to the early Christian church. He explained that "for just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others" (Romans 12:4-5, NIV). Paul goes on to say that, "Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ" (Ephesians 4:11-13, NIV). Paul wanted these early Christians to understand that the fulness of Christ is attained through building unity amongst the many different functions of each individual member, just as the many functions of each body part work together to make up the whole of the body. With Christ as our head, human flourishing in Christianity involves working to do the will of God, but not on our own. We must work together as Christians under the direction of Jesus to do His will as a collective body. Only through Christ can we reach our full potential and fulfill our purpose. We may not know exactly what our full potential is and perhaps that is because it is so unique to each relationship, but if we have faith in Christ that He loves us perfectly and knows us perfectly, then even if we don't have the final picture right now, we can know that following Him will lead us to our best selves.

Psychopathology

Psychopathology refers to the study of disturbances and illness in the human psyche. Although it is intuitive that the characteristics of most mental disorders are unpleasant and should therefore be avoided, the concept of psychopathology must fit within the context of an established philosophy of human flourishing in order for it to have any meaning. The very idea of mental disorders suggests that they are disturbances from a desired mental and emotional

state. The underlying implication of a desired mental state is that a good life exists which either produces such a mental state or is fulfilled by the achieving of the mental state. A radical example might be that if a society believed that human flourishing was defined by constantly experiencing major depressive episodes, this society would use the "Major Depressive Episode" section of the DSM-5 as their religious text, and they would see any individual who does not experience major depressive episodes as needing treatment in order to achieve the good life that is depression.

As mentioned previously, contemporary psychology understands the good life to be a constant state of subjective well-being. Naturally, the mental disorders classified in the DSM-5 are focused on any kind of mental or emotional state that disrupts the subjective well-being of an individual. This theme is noticeable in a phrase that is used in the diagnostical definition of many of the primary disorders (e.g., MDD, GAD, OCD, Gender Dysphoria, etc.). The diagnostic requirement is that "the symptoms cause clinically significant distress or impairment in social, occupational, or other important areas of functioning" (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). This common prerequisite for diagnosis supports the idea that the contents of the DSM-5 are considered disorders because they interfere with our subjective well-being.

Psychopathology according to the Christian perspective would take a slightly different approach because it would be rooted in a relational ontology and the Christian approach to human flourishing. In Christianity, psychopathology would refer to any mental or emotional condition that interferes with our relationship with Jesus Christ, and our ability to follow His example and work with others to do His will. Many of the disorders in the DSM-5 would certainly still qualify within this context, but the reasons behind why it is a disorder would be completely different. The reasons behind why a mental condition is a disorder are extremely

important because our understanding of the disorder greatly impacts methods of treatment (Hwang et al., 2008). In order to convey these reasons, a Christian diagnostic manual for mental disorders might even contain a reoccurring phrase that sounds something like the following: *the symptoms cause spiritually significant impairment in one's relationship to Christ, feeling His love, or emulating that love in their relationships with others.*

The reasons behind disorders within a Christian approach would open the possibility for new mental disorders based on phenomena that might not be considered relevant within the realm of contemporary psychology. An example of this can be found in an article by C. Terry Warner (1986) in which he discusses the concept of self-deception. Warner describes how our desire to seek after our own self-image often creates a distorted view of our relationships with others. We begin to see ourselves as more important and more deserving than those around us, causing us to see and treat others as mere objects in our environment rather than an equally valued person with needs and wants that are quite similar to our own. The "symptoms" of this mental state might include feelings of self-righteousness, including the feeling that we suffer so much to do things for others and almost never receive the same treatment in return. In these situations, we begin to feel that we are a victim to the negligence of others. This experience is a form of self-deception because we begin to see ourselves as more important than others, and we justify this belief through our good deeds. An individual who frequently finds themselves in this mental state might be at risk of "major self-deception disorder" due to the fact that their egoistic attitude distorts their understanding of Christlike altruism and impairs their ability to demonstrate pure love in their relationships with others.

In terms of etiology, contemporary psychology appeals to a strong naturalistic understanding of the causes of mental disorders. In their research on the causes of major

depression, Su et al. (2022) studied and discussed the effects of lifetime stressors and events on depression while controlling for genetic factors. The focus of this study demonstrates the assumption in contemporary psychology that mental disorders are caused by both genetic (nature) factors and environmental (nurture) factors. The implications of such an approach are deterministic: genes and the environment work together in a fashion that is completely outside of the control of the individual to cause a mental disorder to develop. The development of these disorders is seen as primarily biological because it is believed that "stressors can interact with a genetic vulnerability to modify brain chemistry and impact mental health" (Su et al., 2022). This take on mental health suggests that there are natural laws of biology that govern the development of brain chemistry in such a way that the interactions between genes and their environment can cause negative developments in the brain to form which causes mental disorders.

The Christian etiology of psychopathology takes a different perspective. If we assume that all individuals have moral agency, we would recognize that some of the causes of mental disorders are a result of the choices that people make. Similar to the way a person develops a substance use disorder as a result of their habitual choices to overindulge in an addictive substance, other mental disorders might develop as a result of the way that an individual habitually chooses to organize and affirm meaning in their relationship with God and their relationships with others. A mental disorder might also develop primarily as a result of the choices of those around them, a factor that would be considered environmental. Additionally, an individual might have a genetic or emotional susceptibility to developing a disorder as a result of the fact that we live in a fallen world. God explained to Adam and Eve that the ground would produce thorns and thistles and that they would have to work hard to nourish themselves (Genesis 3:17-19). In a similar manner, we might assume that the thorns and thistles of this fallen

world are not limited to agriculture, but they might also be symbolic of the many difficulties and challenges that we all face in this life such as genetic disorders and susceptibilities. These genetic susceptibilities might heavily influence the development of a mental disorder, but they would not be the sole cause. A Christian perspective on the etiology of mental disorders might recognize an interaction between the fallen state of our mortal conditions (nature), the agency of others (nurture), and the agency of the individual.

Psychotherapy

The APA's website outlines three primary objectives of psychotherapy in contemporary psychology: to help individuals (1) find relief from emotional distress, as in becoming less anxious, fearful or depressed, (2) seek solutions to problems in their lives, such as dealing with disappointment, grief, family issues, and job or career dissatisfaction, and (3) Modify ways of thinking and acting that are preventing them from working productively and enjoying personal relationships (American Psychological Association, 2017). All of these goals are noble causes, but their emphasis on relieving the suffering of the individual demonstrates that contemporary psychology's view of human flourishing and psychopathology is individualistic. Due to the relational nature of the Christian approach to philosophy, human flourishing, and psychopathology, the Christian approach to psychology would heavily influence the goals and practice of psychotherapy. This new approach would focus on drastically changing the individual through Christ rather than just reducing symptoms to improve daily function.

The apostle Paul taught that the kind of change that is available through Christ is the opportunity to become a completely "new creature" (2 Corinthians 5:17). The Christian perspective recognizes Jesus Christ as the primary agent of change in human behavior, and that this change occurs when a person chooses to put their faith in Him. Clients come to therapy with

the expectation that the effort, time, and money that they invest will bring about a wanted change in their life. Christ offers this change by altering the individual, who then has the power to change their life themselves. Christ explains that He will give rest to those that are heavy laden if they come unto Him, for His yoke is easy and His burden is light (Matthew 11:28-30). In this context, the goal of therapy for those of the Christian faith should be to help the individual build their faith in Christ (i.e., strengthen their relationship with Him) so they choose to come unto Him and experience the healing and transformation that He has to offer.

The benefit of this approach to therapeutic practice is that the process of change is rooted in the doctrines of salvation through Christ. Therapists would most likely continue to use many of the current accredited therapeutic practices, but these techniques would need to be coupled with the Christian perspectives of philosophy, human flourishing, and psychopathology in order to be most effective for Christian clients. As both therapists and clients begin to understand the therapeutic process through a Christian lens, the relationships that therapists and clients form together will create an environment that invites Christ into the process of emotional healing while allowing Him to change the client rather than expecting the client to change themselves on their own.

Conclusion

The philosophical implications of a Christian perspective to human behavior are drastically different from the naturalistic and deterministic views of contemporary psychology's perspective on human behavior. Within a reality grounded in relationships and as moral agents, the ontological assumption that Jesus Christ is truth and that we come to know Him as we choose to put our faith and trust in Him assumes that we are ethically obligated to work collectively to do His will and emulate His love. This ethical obligation not only suggests that Christ's will is

morally right, but that due to His infinite love He will guide us to our full potential if we let Him, and we can achieve a state of human flourishing as we collectively strive to follow Him. This view of human flourishing would suggest that psychopathology should be understood as any mental or emotional condition that interferes with our relationship with Christ or our ability to follow Him. Although many of the current mental disorders would still classify, additional disorders might also be considered within this framework. This broader understanding of psychopathology would suggest that therapists who treat Christian clients should operate under the assumption that true healing comes as clients work to deepen their relationship with Christ and eliminate that which impedes them from feeling His love and following His example.

The above summary of my essay's argument demonstrates that a Christian approach to psychology is not only possible, but necessary for the best therapeutic outcomes. Christian therapists and clients alike will be able to navigate clients' emotional and mental challenges within a theistic framework that is accepting of the therapists' and clients' existing values. I call upon Christian therapists everywhere to work with our fellow scientists to open the door for professionals to practice therapy within the Christian approach to psychology.

References

American Psychiatric Association. (2013). *Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders* (5th ed.).

https://doi.org/10.1176/appi.books.9780890425596

American Psychological Association. (2017, July 31). *What is psychotherapy?*

https://www.apa.org/ptsd-guideline/patients-and-families/psychotherapy

American Psychological Association. (n.d.). *Ethics*.

https://www.apa.org/topics/ethics#:~:text=Ethics%20express%20the%20professional%20values,%2C%20education%2C%20research%20and%20publication.

Dahl, C. J., Wilson-Mendenhall, C. D., & Davidson, R. J. (2020). The plasticity of well-being: A training-based framework for the cultivation of human flourishing. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, *117*(51), 32197-32206.

https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2014859117

De Young, Q. R. (1976). An unknown god made known (the religion of psychology). *Journal of Psychology and Theology*, *4*(2), 87-93.

https://doi.org/10.1177%2F009164717600400201

Duckworth, A. L., Steen, T. A., & Seligman, M. E. (2005). Positive psychology in clinical practice. *Annu. Rev. Clin. Psychol.*, *1*, 629-651.

https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.clinpsy.1.102803.144154

Duignan, B. (n.d.). *Eudaimonia*. Britannica.

https://www.britannica.com/topic/eudaimonia

Fieldstadt, E. (2017). *The most heavily Christian countries on Earth*. CBS News.

https://www.cbsnews.com/pictures/the-most-heavily-christian-countries-on-earth/

Forbes, M. K., Greene, A. L., Levin-Aspenson, H. F., Watts, A. L., Hallquist, M., Lahey, B. B., ... & Krueger, R. F. (2021). Three recommendations based on a comparison of the reliability and validity of the predominant models used in research on the empirical structure of psychopathology. *Journal of Abnormal Psychology*, *130*(3), 297. https://doi.org/10.1037/abn0000533

Gantt, E. E., & Thayne, J. L. (2017). Humanistic psychology, same-sex attraction, and safe spaces: A Latter-day Saint inquiry into the meaning of love. *Issues in Religion and Psychotherapy*, *38*(1), 3-21.

Gantt, E. E., & Thayne, J. L. (2019). Two views of truth AND Greek and Hebrew thought. In E. E. Gantt and J. L. Thayne, *Truth Made Flesh: Latter-day Saint Reflections on Truth and Our Relationship with God* (pp. 7-21).

Garrard, L. E. (1989). God, natural law, and the Doctrine and Covenants. In S. E. Black (Ed.), *Doctrines for Exaltation: The 1989 Sperry Symposium on the Doctrine and Covenants* (pp. 55-76). Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Book.

Hackett, C., & McClendon, D. (2017). *Christians remain world's largest religious group, but they are declining in Europe*. Pew Research Center. https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/04/05/christians-remain-worlds-largest-religious-group-but-they-are-declining-in-europe/

Hansen, K. L. (2017). The relational moral agent and its implications for practice. In A. P. Jackson and L. Fischer (Eds.), *Turning Freud Upside Down 2* (pp. 26-55). Provo, UT: BYU Press.

Hasselberger, W. (2021). Laboratory happiness or human flourishing: The empirical science of wellbeing in phenomenological perspective. *Culture, Medicine, and Psychiatry*, 1-24.

https://doi.org/10.1007/s11013-021-09716-7

Hathaway, W. L. (2004). Expanding horizons for Christians in psychology. *Journal of*

Psychology and Theology, *32*(3), 210-220.

https://doi.org/10.1177%2F009164710403200306

Hwang, W. C., Myers, H. F., Abe-Kim, J., & Ting, J. Y. (2008). A conceptual paradigm for

understanding culture's impact on mental health: The cultural influences on mental health

(CIMH) model. *Clinical Psychology Review*, *28*(2), 211-227.

https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cpr.2007.05.001

Jackson, A. P. (2005). Relationships: Philosophical and spiritual foundations for counseling. In

A. P. Jackson and L. Fischer (Eds.), *Turning Freud Upside Down.* (pp. 200-215). Provo,

UT: BYU Press.

Jackson, A. P., & Fischer, L. (2005). Confronting the interface between the gospel and

psychology. In A. P. Jackson and L. Fischer (Eds.), *Turning Freud Upside Down.* (pp. 2-

7). Provo, UT: BYU Press.

Panksepp, J., Knutson, B., & Burgdorf, J. (2002). The role of brain emotional systems in

addictions: a neuro-evolutionary perspective and new 'self-report'animal

model. *Addiction*, *97*(4), 459-469.

https://doi.org/10.1046/j.1360-0443.2002.00025.x

Reber, J. S. (2020). Naturalism, theism, and the risks of professional values imposition in

psychotherapy with theistic clients. *Issues in Religion and Psychotherapy*, *40*, 49-73.

Slife, B. D. & Reber, J. S. (2005). Comparing the practical implications of secular and Christian

truth in psychotherapy. In Jackson, A. P. and Fischer, L. (Eds.), *Turning Freud Upside*

Down (pp. 160-182). Provo, UT: BYU Press.

Slife, B. D., Reber, J. S., & Lefevor, G. T. (2012). When God truly matters: A theistic approach to psychology. *Research in the Social Scientific Study of Religion, 23*, 213-237.

Slife, B. D., & Williams, R. N. (1995). Science and human behavior. In *What's Behind the Research? Discovering Hidden Assumptions in the Behavioral Sciences* (pp. 167-204). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.

Su, Y. Y., D'Arcy, C., Li, M., O'Donnell, K. J., Caron, J., Meaney, M. J., & Meng, X. (2022). Specific and cumulative lifetime stressors in the aetiology of major depression: A longitudinal community-based population study. *Epidemiology and Psychiatric Sciences*, *31*.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S2045796021000779

Thoma, N., Pilecki, B., & McKay, D. (2015). Contemporary cognitive behavior therapy: A review of theory, history, and evidence. *Psychodynamic Psychiatry*, *43*(3), 423-461.

https://doi.org/10.1521/pdps.2015.43.3.423

Wachowski, L., & Wachowski, L. (1999). *The Matrix*. Warner Bros.

Wang, T. (2016, September). *The human insights missing from big data* [Video]. TEDxCambridge.

https://www.ted.com/talks/tricia_wang_the_human_insights_missing_from_big_data?language=en

Warner, C. T. (1986). What we are. *BYU Studies, 26*(1), 1-25.

Wilkens, S., & Sanford, M. L. (2009). Individualism: I am the center of the universe. *Hidden Worldviews: Eight Cultural Stories That Shape Our Lives* (pp. 27-43). Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.

Williams, R. N. (1998). Restoration and the "turning of things upside down": What is required of an LDS perspective. *Issues in Religion and Psychotherapy*, 23 (1), 1-30.

Williams, R. N. (2000). Faith, reason, knowledge, and truth. *Speeches (Brigham Young University), 1999-2000* (pp. 141-148).

Williams, R. N. (2016). Introduction. In R. N. Williams and D. N. Robinson (Eds.), *Scientism: The New Orthodoxy* (pp. 1-17). New York, NY: Bloomsbury.

Williams, R. N., & Gantt, E. E. (2020). Agency, atonement, and psychological theories of change: A Latter-day Saint Christian perspective. *Issues in Religion and Psychotherapy*. *40*, 25-48.

Wilson, M. R. (1989). The contour of Hebrew thought. In M. R. Wilson, *Our Father Abraham: Jewish Roots of the Christian Faith*, pp. 135-165. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing.