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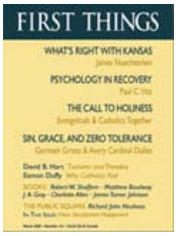
Psychology in Recovery

Paul C. Vitz



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

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

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

Tests and measurements. This branch is perhaps the least glamorous of the three, but it has a creditable pedigree and has proved its usefulness. Tests and measurements began in the early twentieth century. It focused first on measuring intelligence but soon expanded into other testing areas, such as occupational aptitudes. Techniques developed in this branch help us to identify different mental pathologies: for example, the MMPI-2 measures depression, anxiety, schizophrenia, and personality characteristics; and the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual allows psychologists to assign to each client a diagnostic category of

mental disorder. (The DSM, despite many biases and other difficulties, has proven to be extremely useful as a standard reference.) Also developed in this field are useful measurements of general well-being related to such social variables as marital status, family structure, drug use, social class, and so forth.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

In order to understand positive psychology, we must first provide a short description of its opposite—negative psychology. For Seligman, and now many others, negative psychology refers to the psychology of the last hundred years, begun by Freud. Such psychology focused on traumas and pathologies. It is natural enough, according to Seligman, that psychology would first focus on illness. Seligman himself, in his early career, made a contribution to this negative psychology: he is famous for identifying learned helplessness in animals and in humans as an important source of depression. But it has become clear to him and others that after a hundred years of trying to understand human problems it is time to study human strengths or positive characteristics. In addition, for many psychologists it is clear that in the relatively standard therapeutic session there is not much more to learn.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Another important development, and in some ways another humbling experience for psychology, has been psychology's own success and growth. In the early days of psychotherapy, patients were mostly drawn from the highly educated class and social elites, especially the most secular among them. For example, Sigmund Freud never published a case history of a patient who was seriously religious; it is not clear that he ever had such a patient. Nor, apparently, did he have

associates who were seriously religious. Over time, however, with the growth of university psychology programs and the production of large numbers of trained psychotherapists, the clientele for psychotherapy naturally expanded to include more of the public at large. In the United States, the great majority of people are religious; it is even possible that involvement in religion has been increasing in recent years. In order to treat such people, psychotherapists have had to address religious issues and to take them seriously—at the very least they had to treat their religious clients with respect. I have also observed that many clinical psychologists today are themselves religious, and it is worth noting that today the clergy is one of the most important referral networks for clients.

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

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

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

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

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

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

of “integralism”: a model of social science involving transcendent and religious factors.

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

Paul C. Vitz*is Senior Scholar and Professor of Psychology (Emeritus) at the Institute for Psychological Studies. His most recent book is* Faith of the Fatherless: The Psychology of Atheism *(Spence).*

Hot Spell

O sun, old alchemist, you've set us wrong.
Heat grips the land; the ditch-cut where the stand
of alders sipped is dry. Your brassy gong
has summoned dust from Africa and dancing
decks have sprung beyond the town so nights
bring shadows through the fields to trysts in lanes.
Kitchens are like samovars at noon
and hens stroll in our open door, incline
their heads and pause, alert, mid-stride until
my youngest aunt scatters them with a broom.

Singing, bruised with love again, she browns
her legs with Miner's Liquid Stocking Tan.
Her dreams, she says, are tangled up in sounds
of courtyard fountains and a bullfight band;
our roads are dusty and the air so sweet
the church-bells might be Carcassonne or