

Biblical Solutions for Life Issues
Topic 10 – A History of Psychology
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Introduction

In a recent article¹ titled “The Difficult Task of Reading the Brain”, Melissa Hogenboom made several insightful observations in regards to how much we can currently understand about the human brain and how it functions. First, one doctor was quoted saying “There’s a misconception that’s still rather common that you can look at someone’s brain imaging data and be able to read off what they’re thinking and feeling. This is certainly not the case.” In light of this comment and some others, Hogenboom went on to say, “. . .the brain is like an enormous processing machine with billions of neurons. Each cubic millimetre on a scan is believed to contain about one million neurons. And as of yet it’s impossible to analyse individual neurons in living humans.” Given the amount of technology we possess today to conduct highly-sophisticated brain scans, these statements are incredibly enlightening. In Hogenboom’s concluding statement she stated, “While it’s now possible to see carefully controlled patterns of thought from brain scans, reading specific and detailed thoughts and emotions from scans alone remains in the realm of fiction.”

Thankfully the word of God gives us enough insight to understand what we need in order to renew our mind and live in such a way that honors the One who created our brains. What a wonderful maker we serve!

Psychologists and mankind in general have sought to understand the human brain with the desire to be able to treat mental disorders and disturbing behaviors. Unfortunately the foundation and presuppositions of modern psychology prevent mankind from offering true, lasting help. Psychology is, most optimistically, man’s best efforts to solve man’s problems. Thankfully we as Christians have the totally sufficient word of God and the indwelling Spirit of God to help us discern through life’s issues. As we live in a world that has been and will continue to be heavily influenced by psychology, discernment is the most critical element of our spiritual lives because it is the means by which we can sift through the truth and error that is brought before us on a daily basis (Phi. 1:9-10; Heb. 5:14).

Definitions

The word *psychology* comes from the Greek word for soul or spirit, *psyche*. Hence, psychology is the study of the human soul or spirit of man.

“The science of behavior and mental processes.”²

“The science of mind and behavior; the study of mind and behavior in relation to a particular field of knowledge or activity”³

“Psychology is the study of the mind and behavior. The discipline embraces all aspects of the human experience — from the functions of the brain to the actions of nations, from child development to

¹ Melissa Hogenboom, “The difficult task of reading the brain”, BBC News, (May 4, 2014).

² “Intro to Psychology”, *Crash Course Psychology*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vo4pMVb0R6M> (accessed 5/4/2014).

³ “Psychology.” Merriam-Webster.com. <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/psychology> (accessed 5/7/2014).

care for the aged. In every conceivable setting from scientific research centers to mental healthcare services, "the understanding of behavior" is the enterprise of psychologists."⁴

Ancient Psychology

"Socrates and Plato thought that the psyche existed before and after the body, and it was that part of the person that was endowed with character, reason, and knowledge of the transcendent realm."⁵

Psychology curriculums from colleges and universities all over the US typically begin their syllabi with a statement that goes something like this: "The ancient world is full of philosophers and thinkers beginning with Aristotle in the 4th century BC who recorded their thoughts about what they considered the immaterial part of a man to be." However, the bible is full of statements about how Israel was to worship YHWH with their inner man, with their heart and soul. Possibly the most recognizable example is from the *shema* in Deuteronomy 6:4-9.

"Hear, O Israel! The LORD is our God, the LORD is one! "You shall love the LORD your God with all your **heart** and with all your **soul** and with all your might. "These words, which I am commanding you today, shall be on your **heart**. (Deut. 6:4-6)

The words for "heart" and "soul" here are used to describe the inner part of the Israelites.

"heart" – לֵבָב – *lebab* – "inner man, mind, will, heart, soul, understanding"

"soul" – נֶפֶשׁ – *nephesh* – "soul, self, life, creature, person, appetite, mind, living being, desire, emotion, passion"

A valid clarifying statement for the claim that psychology began with Aristotle in the 4th century BC is that his work marked the beginning of the systematic study of behavior and the mind.

Modern Psychology

Structuralism

In 1879, Wilhelm Wundt (1832-1920) established the first laboratory for his studies and practice in psychology. This is considered to be the beginning of modern laboratory psychology. He believed psychology to be an offshoot of neurological studies. However, after trying at first to understand the unconscious processes of the brain and higher level mental functions, he concentrated on the more simple conscious processes of the brain. This led him to practice what he called experimental self-observation. According to this method, his patients recorded their thoughts and feelings after exposure to simple, controlled, and repeatable experiences. The focus was to understand the immediate responses to these experiences without the tainting of previous conditioning.

Wundt concluded that people's minds and mental processes are made up of basic sensations, images, and feelings. The creative driving force behind all of this is apperceptions. These apperceptions combined these sensations, images, and feelings to form our perceptions. To

⁴ "How does the APA define Psychology?" American Psychological Association.
<https://www.apa.org/support/about/apa/psychology.aspx#answer> (accessed 5/7/2014).

⁵ Dr. Lionel Corbett, Lecture Notes: "A History of Psychology",
http://cdn.preterhuman.net/texts/science_and_technology/psychology/Corbett%20L.%20-%20A%20History%20of%20Psychology.pdf (accessed 4/30/2014).

simplify, thoughts can be broken down into smaller parts and then can be explained and understood more clearly. This school of thought has been labeled *structuralism*.

Wundt's ideas were challenged and the result was a rejection of the whole introspective approach since it was too tainted by preconceived ideas, and therefore too subjective. For example if a psychologist tried to study how people respond to sinking their feet into warm sand at the beach, he or she would get very different answers and observations based on each individual.

Instead, people began to wonder how the mind helps humans evolve and adapt to their environment. This movement was heavily influenced by Darwinian theories of evolution. In the end, Wundt's most lasting legacy was the idea that psychology was a science and that people's minds could undergo experiments. While this caught on in the USA, most of Wundt's contemporaries rejected that psychology could be an applied science.⁶

Whereas Wundt and his followers sought to understand *how* the human brain works, another school sought to understand *why* the human brain functions the way it does. This school of thought is called functionalism.

Functionalism

William James's (1842-1910) book *The Principles of Psychology* (1890) defined psychology as the science of mental life. His work directed the path of American psychology for decades to come. According to James, the human experience of consciousness is a stream of subjective events, constantly flowing.⁷ This was in opposition to experience being broken down into bits of previous experiences. He care not as much about what the brain thinks about, rather how it thinks about those things. Here is where Darwinian Theory greatly influenced James's ideas. He believed the main function of the brain was to choose, which enables us to adapt to our environment. The brain and consciousness help us change so that we can adapt to our environment.

James also came to conclude that emotions are not a result of brain-conscious decisions. Rather, emotions are the state of the body's reaction to particular circumstances. He believed emotion is simply the mind becoming aware of the state of the body caused by something in the person's environment (e.g., seeing a bear and feeling fear). Later, he rejected this dichotomy between the brain's physical functions controlling our conscious processing of it, and returned to the idea that our consciousness is what controls how we respond to various circumstances.

Further, he claimed that there was no real difference between mind and body in regard to our experiences. They are two different aspects of the same experience. In a paper titled "Does 'Consciousness' Exist?" in 1904, James argued that consciousness is a function of our experiences and not a thing we possess. Also, one cannot separate consciousness from human experience. This debate created two views of consciousness that supported the rising *Behaviorism* school of thought. Psychology in America continued moving towards behaviorism in the wake of James' ideas.

⁶ Wundt's student Titchener started the American school of psychological thought called Structural Psychology or Content Psychology since they study mental structures.

⁷ James's work was heavily influenced by his rejection of his Protestant upbringing and some very devastating family tragedies. These events led him to believe very strongly in Darwinian Theory and free will. It was how he decided he would cope with his trying circumstances that regularly plunged him into depression. He believed he had the free will to choose not to be depressed.

Josef Breuer experimented with “free association” wherein his patient, Bertha Pappenheim (pseudonym: “Anna O.”), talked about her symptoms and as she did so, her symptoms gradually decreased. This breakthrough greatly influenced Sigmund Freud and opened up a new school of psychology called psychoanalysis. Interestingly, when Breuer and Freud published their treatment of Pappenheim, they failed to mention that her condition did not improve and she was institutionalized. Her case study became foundational for treatment by catharsis (or “free association”) even though it was not actually effective!

Breuer and Freud worked together for some years, but eventually disagreed on how to “split the mind.” While both men believed in free association, Breuer believed the splitting of the mind occurred most effectively through hypnosis. Freud rejected this and said that the mind could repress ideas and hypnosis was unnecessary.⁸

Psychoanalysis

In 1903, Sigmund Freud published *The Interpretation of Dreams*, in which he introduced his school of thought. He believed that dreams were the path to the unconscious, and one of his most revolutionary concepts was that people’s thoughts and actions are driven by unconscious motives. The use of dreams, projections, and free association were used to uncover repressed feelings and further understand oneself. Practically, these ideas were to be used to cure mental illness through talk therapy and self-discovery.

Freud came to conclude through dream interpretations and free association that sexual difficulties were the basis for mental illnesses or neuroses. During Freud’s time, children were considered innocent of sexual feelings. Freud challenged this notion after treating so many female patients who had been sexually molested by their fathers. After doubting the truthfulness of these reports, he concluded that they were not actual memories but fantasies.

Freud went on to write and publish dozens of works on similar topics, and committed suicide after fleeing the Nazi occupation of Austria and winding up in England. He had struggled painfully with jaw cancer for so long, that he decided to end his life through morphine overdose.

Typical critiques of Freud’s work are as follows:

1. He was not scientific; Freud did not have a systematic way of collecting data, which mostly consists of what people remembered and told him.
2. He offers his conclusions, but not his way of arriving at them.
3. His variables and constructs are not clear or quantifiable.
4. His work is based on memories of childhood, but he did not treat any children, except for Little Hans. His inferences about childhood all come from the analysis of adults.
5. His theory has little predictive value, and cannot be readily tested or refuted.

Even so, Freud’s theories still shape much of today’s psychological practices, and those schools of thought tracing their origin to Freud come under the label of *psychodynamic theories*. Chief among these groups is the focus on early development of people’s minds and the effect of that development. While Freud was on his way to England, B.F. Skinner published his *Behavior of Organisms*, which ushered in the next big wave of psychology.

⁸ Freud’s frustration with and rejection of hypnosis led him to take an even more lax approach to free association. Instead of asking leading questions to uncover more memories from the patient’s past, Freud just let his patients talk about what they wanted to talk about.

Behaviorism

Ivan Pavlov and B.F. Skinner led this movement as they focused only on observable behavior. Skinner's view of the mind was much more mechanical than Freud's. It was a series of circuits conducting responses to various stimuli. His main contribution to the field of psychology was that of *positive reinforcement* as a form of behavior modification. "The goal of the behavioral therapists is to have clients manipulate their emotional and physical circumstances in such a way as to avoid pain and promote pleasure."⁹ Just as Pavlov was able to get his dogs to salivate at the ring of a bell, so Skinner got his patients to respond in such a way that made them feel better about themselves and their environment. This branch of psychology has worked its way into almost every aspect of child development and formal education. Surely, many Christian parents have utilized these methods in their parenting without realizing the insufficiencies inherent in the system. This is why certain biblical counselors have written books on parenting, in order to correct what they see as a deviation from God-honoring parenting. One such book that directly attacks behavior modification as a parenting style is *Shepherding a Child's Heart* by Tedd Tripp.

Biblical Response to Modern Psychology

Unfortunately the church and Christianity at large did very little to challenge these secular movements. This is probably due to the major "Christian" movements around 1900. As American society had changed dramatically due to the second wave of industrialization and urbanization, the social gospel became very popular. This movement, involving the Salvation Army and Jane Addams' settlement houses among other things, was based on a postmillennial interpretation of eschatological events. It was believed that the world needed to be reformed to such a degree that Christ's Second Coming would be ushered in. To those who believe this, developments in the realm of psychology actually seem like a catalyst to bringing about the return of Christ. The most prominent in this social gospel movement were the Pentecostals who focused on the one-time conversion experience rather than the life-long journey of sanctification that follows that experience. Generally speaking, where Christianity and psychology differ most noticeably in practice is in dealing with the sanctification process or change. Since the Pentecostal Movement did not pay much attention to this part of a believer's life, there is no wondering why Christianity saw no large and unified reaction to the rise of modern psychology. What follows is a brief biblical response to each of the movements of modern psychology discussed above.

Wilhelm Wundt & Structuralism

Finding out how the brain works is currently an impossible task. Wundt's treatment of the human mind explains much about mankind's elevated view of human potential at the turn of the 20th century.

William James & Functionalism

James' Darwinian presupposition that the human mind changes in order to adapt to one's environment for the sake of survival is simplistic and depressing. If the human mind's only purpose is to help humans to survive, then the anatomical and functional evolution of the human brain has completely overdeveloped. God created the mind to do so much more than figure out how to survive. Here are some verses that explain how God says we can use our minds:

Incline your ear and hear the words of the wise, and **apply your mind to my knowledge;**
(Prov. 22:17)

⁹ Richard Ganz, *Psychobabble: the Failure of Modern Psychology and the Biblical Alternative* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1993), 37.

But Daniel **made up his mind that he would not defile himself** with the king's choice food or with the wine which he drank; so he sought permission from the commander of the officials that he might not defile himself. (Dan. 1:8)

And He said to him, " YOU SHALL **LOVE THE LORD YOUR GOD** WITH ALL YOUR HEART, AND WITH ALL YOUR SOUL, AND **WITH ALL YOUR MIND.**" (Matt. 22:37)

But turning around and seeing His disciples, He rebuked Peter and said, "Get behind Me, Satan; for you are not **setting your mind on God's interests**, but man's." (Mark 8:33)

These all with one mind were continually devoting themselves to prayer, along with the women, and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with His brothers. (Acts 1:14)

For the **mind** set on the flesh is death, but the **mind** set on the Spirit is life and peace, (Rom. 8:6)

And do not be conformed to this world, but **be transformed by the renewing of your mind**, so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect. (Rom. 12:2)

Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with **humility of mind** regard one another as more important than yourselves; (Phil. 2:3)

Set your mind on the things above, not on the things that are on earth. (Col. 3:2)

Obviously God calls us to use our minds for much more than simply surviving. We can use our minds to worship him in glorious ways. Additionally, significant problems arise when basing your entire interpretation of a field of study on a theory that has not been proven (i.e., the theory of evolution).

Sigmund Freud & Psychoanalysis

There is an unbiblical removal of patient's responsibility since their actions can be "explained" by uncovering hurtful elements of their past combined with strong emotional urges. While it is true that humans have strong emotions and that trauma can and does occur in people's lives, this does not remove our responsibility before God for our present actions. Sin can never be excused. For example, the rebellion of a teenager who has been neglected by his parents can be understood as a *response* to that parental negligence, but not *caused* by it.

Adam and Eve tried to shift the blame of their sin in the Garden of Eden, and this did not work before God's perfect holiness. The curse still took effect even though they tried to deflect their responsibility and guilt. When pressed about what they had done, this is how Adam and Eve responded (notice, Adam blames Eve and God and Eve blames the serpent):

The man said, "**The woman** whom **You gave** to be with me, she gave me from the tree, and I ate." Then the LORD God said to the woman, "What is this you have done?" And the woman said, "**The serpent** deceived me, and I ate." (Gen. 3:12-13)

It is also clear from God's word that God will never put us in a situation that is too difficult and which would therefore make us sin. He also promises that he will provide a way of escape when we are in those situations of great temptation.

No temptation has overtaken you but such as is common to man; and God is faithful, who will **not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able**, but with the temptation will provide the way of escape also, so that **you will be able to endure it**. (1 Cor. 10:13)

B.F. Skinner & Behaviorism

While some might be tempted to confuse Skinner's positive reinforcement with the biblical concept of encouragement, they are not the same. Probably the most notable difference has to do with the motive for giving each. Behaviorists give positive reinforcement in order to manipulate their patients into acting a certain way. Believers provide encouragement in order to draw other believers closer to their Creator.

Therefore **encourage one another** and build up one another, just as you also are doing. (1Thess. 5:11)

In Hebrews chapter three the author urges his readers to encourage each other every day so that none would fall away from the Lord.

Take care, brethren, that there not be in any one of you an evil, unbelieving heart that falls away from the living God. But **encourage one another day after day**, as long as it is still called "Today," **so that** none of you will be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. (Heb. 3:12-13)

Those who utilize positive reinforcement believe that the change produced in an individual comes from the mental and environmental manipulations they employ. This change is typically temporarily effective, and lasting change is only possible through God's work in a believer's life. The Bible clearly teaches that it is God who causes growth and change in people's lives.

I planted, Apollos watered, but **God was causing the growth**. So then neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but **God who causes the growth**. (1 Cor. 3:6-7)

This kind of external manipulation has worked its way subtly into Christian churches in the form of legalism. External pressure is placed on believers to bring about change in their lives. However, if God does truly cause the growth, we should not be in the business of manipulating people in order to "sanctify" them. Instead, we should present the word of God carefully and accurately, and let that have its effect in God's time.

Conclusion

People have always wanted to understand the human mind and emotions. Usually the aim of this desire has been to improve the lives of humans. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the world saw a dramatic increase in the amount of attention given to this area that has challenged fundamental biblical concepts of change in a believer's life. Though the church failed in some ways to respond firmly and decisively to this movement, God's word is eternal and sufficient for everything the world seeks to find in and through psychology. God's word is also the standard we use to evaluate and discern the information being thrown at us from our heavily psychologized world. It is our anchor.

