

IS A CATHOLIC PSYCHOLOGY POSSIBLE?

IN view of the manifold interests of contemporary psychology and of the searching criticism in regard to the meaning and foundations of psychology to which we called attention in a previous contribution,¹ the question of the possibility of a Catholic psychology arises with a certain amount of urgency.

The Catholic student, whether of psychology in general or other subjects in which psychology may enter, as well as the educated layman interested in such subjects, sometimes asks whether there is any Catholic book on Psychology to which he may turn for guidance. One has had to admit regretfully that, outside the manuals of philosophy written primarily for the use of ecclesiastical students, there do not appear to be any which quite meet the needs of the lay student. It is true that books dealing with various aspects of modern psychology have from time to time been written by Catholic professors of the science. We may mention, for instance, one by Prof. T. V. Moore, O.S.B., of the Catholic University of Washington, D.C., *Dynamic Psychology*, and another by Prof. John Lindworsky, S.J., of the University of Prague, *Experimental Psychology*. There are others by continental writers not translated into English, but all of these works deal with scientific psychology, and do not touch upon philosophical problems. When therefore we speak of Catholic psychology we have to ask in what sense the expression is to be understood, and what precisely is to be sought from a Catholic book on Psychology as distinct from any other.

The words "Catholic psychology" may, of course, be interpreted as meaning a scientific psychology which, as far as hypotheses are concerned, would not be in conflict with the general trend of Catholic thought and culture; but which at the same time would incorporate all that is really sound and sufficiently verified of the empirically determined facts of present-day investigation. The two books already mentioned fulfil this condition, but it would be incorrect to con-

¹ *Blackfriars*, July 1936.

sider them as specifically representing Catholic psychology. For such a psychology it would seem that we must find one which treats of the nature of man, and in particular of the human soul, its origin, nature, relation to the body, powers, means of acquiring and storing knowledge, and so forth. Whilst this psychology rests, it is true, upon a general empirical foundation of observed facts, and was formerly assigned a place in natural philosophy, the mediæval equivalent of the natural science of to-day, it forms a special part of the general philosophy of "being" or metaphysics.

It is not to underestimate the intrinsic value of this study of the human soul, which may well be called Real Psychology, to recognize that its chief aim and ultimate purpose is mainly theological. But even apart from this it is fundamental for any theory purporting to interpret the nature of man. The modern psychologist for the most part ignores its very existence, or else refers to it slightly as merely another form of "faculty" psychology, and passes on. We must point out, however, that another issue is raised here, namely that of the relations between science and philosophy. The scientist, preoccupied with facts, tends to see in the "fact" and its explanation the totality of the real, and may further be prejudiced by a background of philosophy entirely positivist. Hence when confronted by such concepts as "soul" or "mind," which he realizes in a vague way marks off the province of psychology from other sciences, he is inclined to dismiss the subject with the plea of agnosticism.

At the same time psychologists of distinction, such as William James and W. McDougall, were seriously preoccupied with the problem of soul but unable to accept the traditional doctrines of philosophy. McDougall especially made a great effort to rehabilitate the soul in psychology in his book *Body and Mind* (1912). It is therefore facile to gibe at the modern psychologist for his ignorance of such fundamental notions, but it should be recognized that there is a legitimate science of psychological phenomena, of mental life and activity, which stands in much the same relation to metaphysics as, let us say, the modern physical sciences.

As we have elsewhere pointed out, modern psychology has

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its own particular tasks and problems, as well as its own particular methods, and can therefore be pursued quite apart from and largely independent of any particular metaphysical theory. Why then trouble about a metaphysical psychology at all? In so far as psychology is concerned with the experimental study of mental life, or of personality and character, and the applications of such knowledge to the practical concerns of daily life, a specifically "Catholic" psychology is not called for any more than a Catholic science of physics, biology or any other branch of natural science.

Again, modern psychology is not concerned with theories of knowledge as such, however much it may be interested in all questions of a psychological order bearing upon learning, remembering, or the conscious mental processes which may be observed introspectively in the act of judgment, reasoning, voluntary deliberation and choice, and so forth. Psychology takes for granted, as a fundamental postulate, the reality of the facts it studies and of man's innate capacity for knowledge, but is not concerned with the validity of such postulates.

Thus the horizon of psychology has become wider and wider, till to-day it embraces every department of human life "from the womb to the tomb." However much it may be regretted, it is inevitable that such an expansion of the subject, frequently beyond the limits of a strictly conceived science, should be attended by a vast amount of popular pseudo-psychology which the layman easily accepts as genuine science. The power of the written word has "magical" effects.

The objection will nevertheless be raised, and with some justification it must be granted, that there is a great deal in modern scientific psychology—not to speak, of course, of "pseudo-psychology"—which appears to be dangerous to faith and piety, the implied reference being generally to psycho-analysis and all such kinds of psychology as purport to treat of the inner motivations of human conduct. Such psychology is only too frequently thought of by an indiscriminating public as synonymous with psychology as a whole. To counteract it, so it is often said, what is needed is

a sound Catholic psychology. However true this may be, yet those who say it do not seem to have such a psychology at hand to meet the difficulty.

A study of the traditional psychology of the Schools would be a help, in so far as it affords a solid philosophical doctrine concerning man's essentially spiritual nature and an intelligible rational account of the soul, but the great difficulty with which one is confronted in the attempt to turn this science of the soul to practical account in dealing with modern psychology lies in the archaic language in which it is formulated, and not even in the English versions is the difficulty quite overcome. Any attempt to revise or adapt the language of the Schoolmen is liable to falsify the meaning of the original.

But apart from this difficulty, the assistance to be derived from scholastic psychology must be incomplete, for the problems of modern psychology—may we be forgiven for repeating it—are of a different order from those contemplated in the Catholic psychology of the Schools. It may therefore be said that what is mostly needed is not so much a Catholic psychology as a grounding in general philosophy, logic, metaphysic, moral philosophy, as well as Scholastic Psychology, so as to provide a Catholic culture which will enable the student to discern what is antagonistic to Catholic faith and practice in modern psychology. A matter which is, however, easier to suggest than to carry out in practice.

But this is not the point really under discussion here, which concerns rather the relation between the present-day scientific psychology to the metaphysical psychology of the Schools considered as a specifically Catholic psychology. The question therefore which arises first is this: Can the modern science of psychology be incorporated in the traditional philosophy, or must we keep them in separate compartments as independent branches of the one science? And secondly, is it possible so to adapt this metaphysical psychology as to meet the requirements of students of modern psychology? In short, can our Catholic psychology be made the foundation of modern empirical psychology, or must they be looked upon as independent sciences with no practical

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contact between them? (The latter case seems to be the actual situation at the present time.) Or alternately, can modern empirical psychology be made the starting point of a metaphysical psychology?

When all is said, modern psychology has not created a different subject-matter peculiar to itself. It is concerned with the mind in all its manifestations, normal and abnormal. The very categories or classes under which it groups the facts it deals with, such as sensation, memory, imagination, feeling, emotions, intellect, appetite, impulse, will, and so forth, are ultimately derived from the old established sources. There is, therefore, at least some common ground.

To come to a concrete example let us take, by way of illustration, the treatment in modern psychology of personality and character. On account of its important practical applications, personality psychology has to-day supplanted in interest the older experimental psychology, for it seems to satisfy more adequately the old injunction "Know thyself."

It is an interesting point to note, looking backwards, how the conception of a psychology of the Self gradually crept into experimental psychology. At first this was influenced by the current introspectionist psychology of the day. Dr. Mary Calkins was one of the earlier psychologists who perceived that "Self" rather than "Mind" should be the principal object of psychological enquiry. But introspection alone could not furnish much information concerning the Self, considered as a "content of consciousness." William James discusses the concepts of an empirical Self or *Ego* as distinct from the transcendental Self or *Ego*.

The modern study of the Self or of Personality is not concerned with enquiries of this nature, which it relegates, not without some scorn, to "academic psychology" or else to metaphysics. It is concerned not with what Personality means in itself but with all the particular habits, dispositions, temperaments, capacities, individual or social, which constitute personality in an empirical and descriptive sense, such as one makes use of in ordinary intercourse. In this sense personality may be taken to mean all that an individual actually possesses in the way of mental and physical

endowment. The scientific study of personality is therefore very comprehensive and includes all the relevant physical characteristics as well as intellectual, affective, and conative dispositions and qualities. For the psychologist, a *person* is a self-conscious being enduring identically the same throughout life, whatsoever alterations may supervene in the course thereof. Though all human individuals possess certain general characteristics in common, yet the individual differences in their development and expression are vast. These differences may to some extent be traced to physical causes, to differences of temperament on the one hand, and to internal psychological causes on the other. Nor must we leave out of consideration the important factors of environment and upbringing, factors however which perhaps concern questions of character rather than for the personality as such.

The technique of objective studies of personality usually takes the form of compiling lists of traits, and assessing a group of individuals in regard to the possession by each member of the group of such traits. Rating scales are also devised to provide a quantitative estimate of the extent or amount of the traits in each subject. The results may then be correlated so as to show which traits are more or less frequently associated in strength or the reverse. Or they may be correlated with one particular trait such as that of General Intelligence—or “G” of the factor school of psychologists.

The traits may be grouped under various headings, such as the following taken from a paper by E. Webb, entitled *Character and Intelligence* (Brit. Monograph Supplement, 1913):

Emotions—general tendency to be cheerful, or angry, etc.

Self-qualities—a desire to excel at performance, work, play; desire to impose one’s will on others, etc.

Sociality—fondness for large social gatherings, or small circle of friends.

Activity—extent of mental work bestowed on usual studies; tendency *not* to abandon tasks in face of obstacles, etc.

Intellect—Quickness of Apprehension. Profoundness of Apprehension. Soundness of Common Sense. Originality of Ideas.

The subjects who were estimated by independent observers,

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it may be mentioned, were school-boys and university students.

Since this paper was published much further work has been done on more or less similar lines, the essential features of which consist in the drawing up of suitable lists of traits, evaluating these traits with a "rating scale," and finally working out correlations in the usual mathematical way. Certain objections have been raised against such "fractioning" techniques, mainly on the ground that they afford scant information about the personality of any given individual as a whole. As Mr. P. E. Vernon, for instance, has recently stated, "The mere enumeration of a person's traits and habits does not give us the person himself, since it omits the essential aspect of organized structure. Each single characteristic has to be considered in relation to the whole; for example, the radicalism of an introverted individual is different from an equal degree of radicalism in an extroverted individual, for each trait is dependent on and modified by the balance of all the other traits. The structure of personality would seem to be hierarchical; in other words, certain general emotional traits, conative drives and values, and the underlying mechanisms studied by the psychopathologist, are fundamental; and these appear to control and guide the more specific characteristics such as simple habits of behaviour." (In *Character and Personality*, September, 1935.)

The writer criticizes the fractioning methods mainly on the ground that they arose from the application of unsuitable methods to psychological material, methods which have been taken over directly from the physical sciences. While there is no doubt some justification for this criticism, nevertheless the other method mentioned provides results which cannot be otherwise obtained. This, however, is a domestic issue which need not detain us further.

By whatever method the study of personality be approached, there is no direct conflict involved in the philosophical conception of human personality to be found in our Catholic psychology. It might, on the other hand, be worth while to consider the definitions or descriptions of the traits

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thus experimentally studied and compare them, and if advisable correct them, with such assistance as Catholic psychology might afford. Though what precisely the advantage would be it is not so easy to discern, for metaphysics aims at stating what *is*, whilst science, content with a general description, say, of emotion, attempts to gauge its degree or quality in a given individual or selected group of individuals. Thus the empirical study of personality from a psychological standpoint stands on another plane, a lower one, if you like, from that on which a philosophical psychology stands.

One last problem remains to be briefly considered. We have to-day a psychology of the Unconscious—in other words, “psycho-analysis,” considered not as a therapeutic technique but as a “metapsychology” to use the term introduced by Sig. Freud. There are also various forms of motivation psychologies directed to the discovery of the inner drives and motives of human conduct. All these constitute not merely a distinct branch of empirical psychology such as we have been considering, but a radically different psychology based on intuition, interpretation, and speculation, rather than on any strictly scientific method. Defenders of the strictly scientific tradition in psychology tend, therefore, quite naturally to look upon such “psychology” with grave suspicion as unscientific. Others, again, hold similar views for other reasons or motives which cannot be adequately formulated.

The question is not how psycho-analytic psychology or other analogous theories of motivation may be applied, or made use of, for the good or bad use does not affect the values of the theories themselves; an otherwise sound theory or technique may be put to bad or imprudent uses—a fact which affects other branches of science as well. But it is often the misuse which draws down condemnation of the theories involved, a procedure which is not exactly either scientific or philosophical. To take only one, and perhaps the most important instance, namely the Freudian Metapsychology of the Unconscious, of the Instincts—the Theory of the Ego, the Id, and the Super-Ego. Here we are confronted by

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theories which stand by themselves, and cannot be surely criticized from the standpoint of philosophical principles of another order altogether, with which these theories have little or nothing in common.

There is so much in our human experience which turns upon the interplay of appetite, desire, and phantasy, and has a definitely determining influence on the conduct of life, our tastes, attitudes, reactions, likes, dislikes, and so forth, which cannot be reduced to or synthesized in any metaphysical system, yet are nevertheless individual expressions of that human nature, the *universal* character of which is alone considered in the traditional philosophical psychology. One cannot expect from this philosophy explanations of the individual phenomena or modes of behaviour attendant for instance on hypnotism, or on the phantasies, fears, and obsessions of neurotic or psychotic subjects. As long as the empirical analyses and interpretations of such experiences keep to the empirical and avoid surreptitious suggestion of opinions not directly emerging from the evidence of the facts, but conflicting with the religious and moral values of the patient, such empirical interpretations stand or fall by their adequacy and internal consistence. The attempt to introduce metaphysical canons of criticism of theories of an empirical and mainly provisional value only may easily lead one astray.

As far therefore as psychology is and remains true to its strictly empirical and scientific character there is no need to seek for a distinctively Catholic psychology. On the other hand, where it is a question of the numerous psychologies of interpretation, seeking to find the "meanings" of mental phenomena, here we suggest that a knowledge of the principles of the traditional Catholic psychology concerning the soul and its powers would tend to correct some of the more debatable metaphysics which not infrequently creep into a subject where, strictly speaking, they do not belong. There are, however, in this domain many problems which seem to lie outside the framework of the Catholic psychology, though not necessarily in opposition to it, which could with difficulty be brought within it.

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