

## APPLIED PSYCHOLOGY AND VIRTUE

IN a recent publication<sup>1</sup> a German Jesuit Father has set down some useful suggestions for the ascetic which are culled from the authoritative findings of modern experimental psychology. He shows, among other things, how psycho-analytical research can, and does, contribute much of importance in educating a stable, virtuous life; and one of the basic spiritual problems dealt with is a faulty disposition of will—a disposition with such urgent consequences as to compel immediate attention of both spiritual teacher and psychologist.

As many of the modern exponents of psychological knowledge and motive-analysis in general have called down upon themselves the condemnation of not a few moralists, Catholics have been inclined to ignore the subject as something not safely assimilable. This appears to be in response to certain authorities who opposed the Christian pursuit of virtue<sup>2</sup>—maintaining it to be an oppression of man's primitive urges, which of course is not quite the case; for it is a position of one instinct being subordinate to another, and ultimately to the Divine law. But probing as it does the inflammable part of man, experimental psychology should receive constant observation by Catholic teachers in view of the help and enlightenment it affords in self-formation.

A most important subject which has undergone research is the education of will-disposition. There is a certain kind of deep and unemotional determination which has been called "cold willing": it consists in a will-disposition which is prepared always to make the right adjustment to any physical or mental trial, and to profit by it. Such genuine volition the medical and psychological practitioner aims to establish in his patients since it assures mental security and, *a fortiori*, is conducive to bodily health. Moreover, it can be relied

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<sup>1</sup> *The Psychology of Asceticism*, Johannes Lindworsky, S.J. (reviewed, BLACKFRIARS, 1936, p. 716.)

<sup>2</sup> E.g. Kretschmer inclines to this opinion (*Psychology of Men of Genius*, pp. 32-6.)

upon to relax mind and body, and bring about that calm receptivity which is essential for exercising suggestion. This sort of volition is identical also with the disposition required of the Christian ascetic; and in this respect—as in many others—psycho-analytical discovery corroborates the teaching of the best of Catholic ascetics. Even up to the present it has much to offer of use in the problems of struggles which inevitably arise in the spiritual life. Such, for example, as are presented by the scrupulous, whether traceable to a particular pathological complex, temperament, or emotional volition. Whilst difficulties met with in prayer can often be resolved into misguidance or ignorance of the limits of the human mind.

Although psychology approaches the frontiers of the life of grace, it differs widely from the mystical science as embodied in the text-books of the schools. Its conclusions, however, ought to be posed to the moral law on account of the superiority of revealed principles. "The moral philosopher," says St. Thomas, "judges an act according as it conforms to reason; the theologian, in so far as it is subject to God's law." And as the judgments of theologian and philosopher cannot be contradictory one of the other and remain true, neither can the findings of experimental psychology oppose the authoritative principles of spiritual science without error.

Since many practical psychologists lack the desirable background of a Christian philosophy, certain discrepancies arise in applying such conclusions as the free expression of instincts; and it depends on the moral standard of the individual specialist how far in practice this is advocated. For as instincts are emotional forces they require guidance by a mean; and the latter is supplied for the Christian by the rules of asceticism with which experimental science ought to harmonize. The best findings of psychology, however, throw much light on the "*scientia sanctorum*," hitherto misunderstood, and offers many steady suggestions of a special field of knowledge; an important one being a method of will cultivation. It is to be hoped that further psychological research into the lives of saints and mystics may

succeed in dismantling the spiritual life of the mist in which it is unfairly shrouded.

One of the greatest achievements of character psychology and psycho-analysis is the proven conclusion that the bloom of psychic health cannot be maintained in the absence of humility—the humility of the Christian ideal. For it implies in the individual a recognition of his dependance on a Supreme power and on society. This is all the more important in an age deficient in faith, when a victory of science is still regarded by some as a defeat for Religion—as if the two were opposed; for the masses who would disregard such truths as propounded by the Church's ascetical writers, readily assimilate the same principles as presented by leaders of science.

Applied psychology proposes to assist man to perfect the spiritual part of his nature—his mind; and *a fortiori* to help him in the acquisition of virtue by utilizing the findings of experimental psychology, and showing how certain defects of character can be remedied, and virtuous mental attitude established. Thus empirical character psychology traces the so-called inferiority complex and other mental maladjustments to an inordinate esteem of one's own excellence, which takes refuge in pretending humility in shyness; for there is pride behind the emotional content of being thought stupid or incompetent. Further, it is shown how by means of the process of ratiocination (usually unconscious) the will-to-power may find pseudo-satisfaction in obstinacy. Like Christian ascetics, applied psychology holds self-knowledge to be a preliminary to the eradication of faults of character. But it does something more: it offers valuable advice, the fruit of a new field of research, in self-formation—advice which serves to abolish unnecessary mental conflict, from the treatment for aberrant functioning of glands to complete change of diet.

But the question which often arises is: Can the average Catholic rely upon the dictates of practical psychology? Obviously, since much depends upon the individual school or psychological practitioner, this question cannot be met with a direct reply. For apart from quack psychic literature on

the market, and disagreement among modern schools, the application of the fruits of research presupposes some grounding in the speculative branch of the science, and a sound knowledge of the Church's spiritual teaching on ethical matters. Nevertheless, we may take it that the normal Catholic conscience would detect a misapplied principle or falsely drawn conclusion; and generally speaking the practical psychologies are mostly on the lines of a solid Christian basis—a sign that the Spirit of God moves over the waters.

Let us take as an example the important virtue of humility enunciated by psychologists and place it alongside St. Thomas's teaching. For a normal state of mind a certain standard of humility is necessary; and the most reliable authorities hold that it is absolutely essential to psychic health for a man to have right ideas, with adjustment to the different aspects of his condition; and also to be amenable to a higher authority. Now the practitioner all but re-echoes St. Thomas when he says to the psychopathic that he must adapt himself to his place in society, be content with reasonable success, and educate a well-adjusted outlook on circumstances beyond his control (such as sickness). And, moreover, bids him recognize a Supreme Good to Which he is subject.

“It belongs properly to humility,” says St. Thomas, “that a man restrain himself from being borne towards that which is above him. For this purpose he must know his disproportion to that which surpasses his capacity . . . humility, strictly speaking, moderates the movement of the appetite” (IIa IIae, q. 161). But that the “will-to-power” ought not to be unduly frustrated by those who are responsible for the training of character, he also directly implies. He says, for instance: “Magnanimity urges the mind to great things in accord with right reason (*ratio recta*)”

Whilst the application of these principles belongs properly to traditional ascetics, the latter may reasonably adopt, and refine where expedient, the empirical results and certain well-tried practical exercises and solutions without detriment to its pristine nobility; for it is the office of the Church, as the divinely appointed guardian of men's souls, to adopt all

new knowledge and sift all fresh forms of science, discarding whatever is futile or noxious. And just as gestures form part of the Liturgy, so breathing exercises and deliberate methods of "suggestion" can be successfully employed in the acquisition of virtue. Thus a man subject to anger may weaken the impulse considerably by drawing several deep breaths at its onset; but this does not imply that he should disregard the more spiritual advice of mystical writers; on the contrary, he can, and ought to, follow both to attain best results. Again, the practice of deliberate "suggestion"—propounded and popularized by Emile Coué—might be safely exercised in the fight against self-love for Christian perfection; and although suggestion occupies an important place in our unconscious life, as a deliberate and regulated conscious exercise it has a more potent effect.

With regard to Charity, the "queen of virtues," the interpretation of reliable psychologists is essentially the Christian teaching of unselfish heroism: love is held up once more as "the fulfilling of the law" and is set as the goal of the "will-to-community." Not, indeed, in the sense of the Buddhists for whom love of one's neighbour is an instrument for the acquisition of merit, but the Christian Charity which is to love one's neighbour for his own and for God's sake. It was remarked by a psychological practitioner that his treatment for scrupulous neurotics consisted in urging them to be kind; "for," he said, "their scruples are never about charity." Here, again, we have confirmation by science of the intrinsic weight of the best ascetical writers; and to those outside the fold of the Catholic Church a *præambulum fidei*, by which science prepares the ground for the reception of deeper values. In the scale of excellence St. Thomas teaches that love of God comes first, but in practice it is charity for one's neighbour which takes the first place, since it is the ordinary preliminary to love of God. For in this life that which is natural to us comes first, "and afterwards that which is spiritual," as St. Paul says. Nor is the gift at the altar acceptable from one unreconciled to his brother by charity. Nevertheless love of God is not of necessity preceded by love of one's neighbour; and the trend of modern

pioneers of psychology is in the direction of the religious ideal as being most conducive to individual happiness even in this present life. The reality of pain is not denied—as it is in the “Christian Science” theory and practice of suggestion; on the other hand, the psychologist maintains that adjustment to pain is as essential to psychic health as love for the common good.

Writing in the *Magazine of Practical Psychology*, Dr. G. Plessington says: “Once a person has realized that whatever he wants out of life is only to be got by overcoming difficulties, he is likely to have but little trouble from emotional maladjustment.” Thus a happy correspondence exists between the conclusions of the modern science and the daily Cross of the Christian life, which the ascetic is trained to embrace.

In the analysis of human nature in general and of self in particular, much has already been contributed by the research work of mind-therapy, and laboratory psychology; and certain findings such as origins of behaviour oddities, and mental states which reveal the limitations of the human mind, might be usefully applied in resolving difficulties which arise in prayer. Further, considerable light is thrown on secret or “unconscious” motives traceable to faulty environment of childhood, or to glandular disturbance; and with this knowledge a more efficient remedy may be given to the individual for arresting emotional disturbances, which, if allowed full scope, would ultimately be destructive of character and virtue. However, all conclusions drawn by individual psychiatrists cannot be accepted indiscriminately; and sharp criticism is called for by those who contend that restrictions prevent the “free development of the personality.” For an unrestrained free development of personality is contradictory, since the conflicts that would inevitably arise from the inherent knowledge of good and evil would result in a mental chaos. Unless the primitive urge of the “will-to-power” is conditioned, the community would be endangered by mutiny.

In the ascetical life when our primitive urges (otherwise passions) seek a gratification contra-posed to higher and

spiritual aims we can reject the false notion engendered by exposing it to the searchlight of the intellect (the *ratio recta* of St. Thomas) and comparing their respective ends. By such rejections the urge in time becomes "conditioned," or in other language a habit is formed. To the process whereby a particular movement of instinct is rejected by the mind, psychologists give the name "suppression," which they maintain is a normal act. Thus a man who is moved to thieve in order to reap a financial benefit finds this conflicts with strong moral ideas and complexes of loyalty, by which his power urge has been trained; and by consideration of respective consequences rejects the idea. But he may "repress" the considerations which ought to lead him to oppose the movement of this urge, and proceed to thieve. In the technique of practical psychiatrists, "repression," unlike "suppression," is abnormal; and is an emotional act (usually unconscious) by which difficulties and disharmonies are pushed from the conscious mind *without solution*. Such is the psychology of temptation; and the question that immediately calls for solution is this: How can modern research in the sphere of psychology be of use to the ascetic who already possesses his maxims and counsels of perfection? The reply is that psychology of the processes of unconscious mental life (differentiated from the ordinary science of conscious mental states) affords a clarity in applying Christian counsels; it offers a new method and may be regarded as an adjunct to *scientia sanctorum*. But like philosophy, its parent (*philosophia practica*) in respect of theology,<sup>3</sup> it will thus reap that protection from error, by being guided by traditional moral philosophy in its conclusions in directing the individual character. In unravelling mental conflicts a new light is thrown on the approach to virtue, and helpful suggestions evolved therefrom. The process known as "rationalization" serves to show the complexity and influence of an emotional bias which gains power through unconscious operations (even during sleep). It is a sort of fictitious reasoning which seeks to justify an unjust action—a term with dishonour; and to get at the truth, the emotional

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<sup>3</sup> *Sum. Theol.*, I, q. 1, art. 1. *Sum. Cont. Gent.*, I, 4.

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bias must first be discovered and then distracted. For it is no easy matter to convince a man that he does not know why he thinks or acts in a given way; and that he invents a fictitious reasoning to explain a cause of his line of action—the real motive of which is unknown to him.

The fact remains that applied psychology, despite its optimism and reassurance, does not much flatter our goodwill by taking it for granted. On the contrary, it says we sometimes do not want a solution to a problem or otherwise mental conflict, since a genuine solution might make things somewhat uncomfortable for self-love. To face up to such a position is perhaps humiliating, but not discouraging; for the specialist points to that state of unemotional volition we referred to above, and such is a sound basis of true Christian virtue since it implies a disposition of will in the individual which harmonizes with the Will of God. It is of interest—and also encouraging—to know that in the best findings of psychology a man is working towards this volition in regularly confessing his faults in accordance with the requirements of the Sacrament of Penance.

Unhappily, pathological mental states—especially aberration in the “sadistic” element resulting in persecution manias—are less uncommon in the spiritual life than might be expected; and this is precisely where modern psychology can help. Here the specialist proposes to give the assistance of his science in the acquisition of virtue; and we are convinced that, so long as he remembers he touches the frontiers of data which transcend human science, applied psychology may prove a valuable companion in the path of perfection.

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