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11-6-2015

God, Human Nature, and Psychology

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Recommended Citation

Christians, M. (2015). God, Human Nature, and Psychology. Retrieved from https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/faculty_work/378

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God, Human Nature, and Psychology

Abstract

"God created humans to think, act, and feel and to be in relationship with other humans."

Posting about exploring the many realms of human expression from *In All Things* - an online hub committed to the claim that the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ has implications for the entire world.

<http://inallthings.org/god-human-nature-and-psychology/>

Keywords

In All Things, human beings, image of God, mental health

Disciplines

Biology | Christianity | Psychiatry and Psychology | Sociology

Comments

In All Things is a publication of the [Andreas Center for Reformed Scholarship and Service at Dordt College](#).

God, Human Nature, and Psychology

 [all in allthings.org/god-human-nature-and-psychology/](https://allinallthings.org/god-human-nature-and-psychology/)

Mark Christians

Modern psychology has a relatively short history, yet it is rooted in the longer history of philosophy, theology, and the natural sciences. Human nature has been described and defined by psychologists since the late 19th century, beginning with a focus on sensory perception; moving toward a view that saw all behavior resulting from external stimuli; then into a more mental or cognitive view of behaving and learning; and more recently an emphasis on the humanistic view of humankind. Each of these paradigms is based on a distinct view of human nature that often excludes God and his sovereignty.

The primary object of the science of psychology is human nature and how it is expressed in thoughts, actions, and feelings. God created humans to think, act, and feel and to be in relationship with other humans. Adam and Eve forfeited God's perfect human creation by giving in to Satan's temptations. Therefore, all humanity has been marred and flawed by this sinful nature. Even though modern psychology often does not and will not acknowledge our sinful state, psychology has been busy studying human nature through the lens of positivism and naturalism.

To be active in psychology means that we are active agents in God's kingdom, as His [image-bearers](#). Some of the areas of inquiry in psychology and human nature that would reflect this kingdom work lie in the biological, psychological, and social realms. What does this look like in psychology today?

In the biological realm of human nature, psychology can and does explore brain activity and specifically neurotransmitters that affect mood, memory, learning, sleep, and many other human functions. As God's image-bearers who carry the burden of sin, humans also respond to stressful life events with predictable thoughts and behaviors. Our perception of the stressor as being a threat or a challenge begins the process. Then we determine if we have the resources (past experience or current knowledge) to cope with the stressor. And finally, we make a decision to positively respond to the stressor or choose to avoid the stressor. This "[fight or flight response](#)" was first described by physiologist Walter Cannon in the 1920s. Another example of a biological inquiry would be dementia and its direct impact on the person with dementia as well as the impact on family members and caregivers. The issue of dementia cuts across the biological, psychological, and social realms.

In the psychological realm of human nature, we can explore and research the various mental disorders that impact millions around the world. As Christians, we need to know how to diagnose and treat these disorders to restore the person to physical, psychological, and spiritual health. Persons who are depressed often feel distant from God or even feel judged by God for their depressive symptoms. God's true essence of love and grace doesn't change, but our feelings can lead us to a distorted perception of God and his presence in our lives.

Other psychological areas to explore could be the emotional response to trauma and loss. Loss is a common theme and experience in human development and living before the face of God. Death is inevitable, and when and how death enters into our experience largely determines the emotional impact. For example, losing your 3-year-old child to leukemia is a much different experience than having your 85-year-old grandma die of cancer. In this realm as well is psychology, which can also explore the positive impact of physical exercise on mood or the impact of bullying on the lives of young children and adolescents.

In the social realm of human nature, we can study and examine the effects of our cultural background and how this is reflected in our actions, traditions, families. In my Dutch heritage, a common means of expressing love and appreciation is shown through preparing and sharing food with family and friends. Saying the words “I love you” may have been less likely or frequent than showing “I love you” through cooking and other acts of kindness.

Another area that gets much attention in psychology is racial diversity and awareness. Sin has a grip on all areas of creation and humanity, especially in the way in which we view our own ethnicity as well as how we think about and treat those of a different race. Psychology can inform us in regards to how prejudice can be influenced by in-group bias, out-group bias, family socialization, and many other social and cognitive factors. Despite the seemingly positive progression in racial awareness, citizens of our culture and many other cultures around the world continue to exhibit prejudice in their attitudes and behaviors, which lead to greater separation, rather than reconciliation, among races.

Psychology continues to explore the complexity of human nature. As Christians, we can enter into this exploration with an eye toward discovering the wonder and awe of God’s created order. Eric Johnson gives a helpful reminder about our work as Christians when he says, “Psychology, then, in the Christian framework, is not an independent activity that operates apart from God; it is dependent upon God’s mercy to illuminate human understanding and reveal things about human nature through human reflection, research, and creative insight.”¹ May our reflection, research, and insight lead us to a greater knowledge of God.

Footnotes

1. Johnson, E. L. (2007). *Christ, the Lord of psychology*. In *Psychology and Christianity Integration: Seminal Works that Shaped the Movement*. (Batavia, IL: Christian Association for Psychological Studies, 2007) 45. ↩