



A Morally Anaemic Psychology

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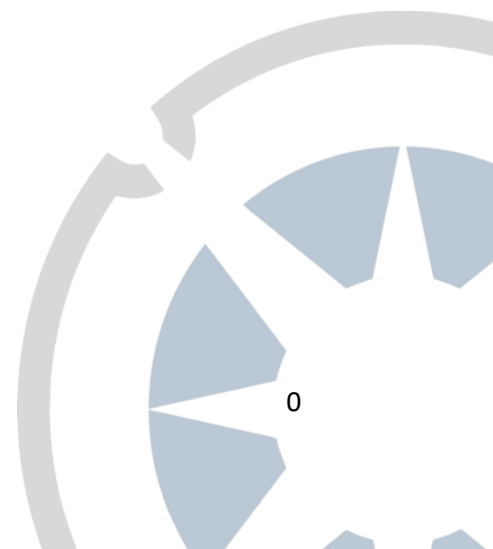
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A Morally Anemic Psychology David M. Goodman & Matthew Clemente 11 th Annual Jubilee Centre Conference (Oriental College, Oxford – January 2023) An Over-Functioning, Morally Impoverished Discipline Psychology is one of the most prominent and influential fields in the modern university. Not only does it represent a path by which students can pursue fulfilling and desirable careers, it is the discipline we turn to when seeking insight, wisdom, and a better means by which to understand ourselves. Indeed, the cultural significance of psychology is perhaps nowhere more evident than in the exalted role the psychologist has taken in the cultural imagination, a role once reserved for moral and religious leaders. Much has been written on the advent of psychologists as “secular priests” and the movement of psychology into the space previously occupied by religious and theological traditions (Dueck, 1995; Dueck & Reimer, 2009; Rieff, 1987). One need only consider the success of New York Times bestselling authors such as Bessel van der Kolk (*The Body Keeps the Score*, 2014) and Brené Brown (*The Gifts of Imperfection*, 2010; *Daring Greatly*, 2012; *Dare to Lead*, 2018; etc.) to see where contemporary readers go for moral and philosophical wisdom. The import of psychology on the North American mind is clear. An estimated 1.2-1.6 million American undergraduates take introductory classes in psychology each year (Clay, 2017). Introduction to Psychology is the second most popular college course in the United States (Gurung et al., 2016), psychology the fourth most popular major (Clay, 2017), and the number of American high schoolers taking Advanced Placement (AP) courses in psychology in preparation for college has risen from 3,916 in 1992 to 303,000 in 2017 (Clay, 2017). At the graduate level, there was a 54% increase in the number of master’s degrees taken in psychology between 2004 and 2013 and a 32% increase in doctoral degrees over the same period (Clay, 2017). What is more, suffering persons now seek help from mental health clinicians at a rate that far outpaces any other means of intervention or support. Psychotherapeutic care has become the dominant approach to making sense of and managing one’s experience and identity. Americans spend some \$238.4 billion a year on mental health services, nearly eight times more than the \$31.8 billion they spent in 1986 (Statista, 2021). Even with this increase, however, there are desperate calls for more clinicians due to a shortage in mental health

care across the United States. Yet, as with most things “modern,” the discipline of psychology is often taken out of context. In a manner reminiscent of Alasdair MacIntyre’s opening pages of *After Virtue* (1984), one might wonder how scholars and scientists in 2223 will understand the psychological sciences of 2023. Future generations will have the benefit of hindsight to illuminate the unique situation that gave birth to and shaped the evolution of the field of psychology. For one, they will likely consider how modern psychology’s inception follows closely from the periods of the Renaissance and Enlightenment which were fueled by the belief that human beings could finally transcend the strictures of traditional perspectives toward purer, more universal forms of reasoning (Taylor, 1989; Toulmin, 1990). The rapid exchange of ideas, spurred on by advances in technology and transportation, seemed to confirm this assumption and elevated the scientific worldview, along with its positivistic approach to human understanding, to the stature it enjoys today. Scientific methodology soon became the epistemological source for understanding human identity and interhuman relations, and the discipline of psychological science was born. With the tools of quantification and measurement allowing psychology to be considered an exact science, the discipline was able to distinguish itself from philosophy, spiritualism, and theology (Danziger, 1990). In the process of “deconversion” (Rieff, 1987, p. 2) and disenchantment of the material world (Weber, 1994), the sanctity and status of the church was, at the same time, giving way to secular enterprises (Cushman & Gilford, 2000, p. 993). Psychology, adopting the methodology of the natural sciences, sought an observable, replicable, and explicable order for the foundation of its definitions of identity. The formation of its common discourse for understanding the human self lent legitimacy and prestige to psychology’s claims as it appeared to promise the same reliability and verifiability as the other sciences. Thus, as a young discipline, psychology had much placed upon its shoulders. Barely an adolescent in its development—methodologically, theoretically, and institutionally—psychology was viewed simultaneously as a method for understanding and intervention (Cushman, 1995), both descriptive and prescriptive, a theoretical and humanistic science, the discipline that a secularizing society would entrust with the task of defining the human person. In recent years, the

empirical and naturalistic side of psychology has risen in prominence and has yielded major advances. Unfortunately, it has often done so by undervaluing and thus neglecting the humanistic and ethical dimensions of psychology (Freeman, 2014; Gantt & Williams, 2002; Goodman & Severson, 2016; Orange, 2009). While the benefits of the scientific approach cannot be denied, the prioritizing of a particular version of science to the exclusion of other ways of knowing has left psychology impoverished, unable to speak adequately to the moral and communal dimensions of our lives. This failure to think outside of narrowly scientific lenses has robbed scholars and clinicians of the ability to conceive of a psychological discourse that allows for ethical considerations about the development of character, virtue, and civic life. As a shaper of language and identity, psychology has thus contributed to a society of persons whose understanding of their relationship to themselves, their virtues, and one another is morally anemic. Consequently, as psychology assists in the shaping of our self-understanding and the metaphors we live by (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980), it also contributes to the moral privation of persons in society and culture at large. And, while Positive Psychology has shined a light upon these disciplinary blindspots, it has not moved the field toward a deeper, more morally complex understanding of itself. Psychologists may now have recourse to the language of “virtue” and “human flourishing,” but the consequential ethical considerations of personhood remain outside of the field’s purview. Leaving aside this critique of Positive Psychology which we will expand upon in the pages to come, the broader issue of the dominance of a supposedly “amoral” psychological science is due in part to the fact that, as an emerging discipline, psychology was asked to overfunction in a way typical of a parentified child. Forced to carry far more than its maturity might have healthfully allowed, it developed the blindspots and over identifications that are on display for those looking critically and closely. This is because, as is the case with most parentified and overfunctioning persons, the discipline’s identity was forced to become rigid and clear. Authority had to be established for survival’s sake—decisiveness, ownership, and certainty are necessary traits. In order to manage beyond its capacities, psychology was forced to overreach and double down. And, as has been persuasively argued, psychology’s identification with and

commitment to objectivistic, medical, and natural scientific paradigms provided this young field with a means of sustaining its overfunctioning capacities, albeit at a cost (Slife, Reber, & Richardson, 2005). One dangerous byproduct of our parentified psychological discipline is the loss of fidelity to the full dimensionality of human life. Psychologists today hear little about the development of character and virtue and tend to see such inquiries as more suitable to other disciplines. In seeking legitimacy and stability, psychology has thus become increasingly myopic. Its commitments to particular forms of legitimization have contributed to its affinities for methodologies that ignore or neglect the big questions at the heart of human existence. Kirschner and Martin (2010) capture this well: For despite a promising beginning that followed the founding of disciplinary psychology, constitutive sociocultural theorizing in psychology per se was overcome, for the most part, by the new discipline's longing for scientific credibility, a desire that took the form of powerful methodological commitments to objectivist theories of knowledge (Bernstein, 1983), operational definitions, and quantified measurements. Such ways of framing the subject matter and procedures of psychology left little room for the study of complex social and cultural phenomena and processes that could not easily be molded to fit such methodological penchants, at least as practiced by new generations of self-proclaimed psychological scientists. (p. 4) Among the risks involved with decontextualization and its resultant myopia is that psychology becomes a mere reflection of and means for reinforcing ideologies, socio-political realities, and economic arrangements, with no capacity to be otherwise (Cushman, 1995). Unbeknownst to itself, the psychological discipline becomes an agent in the formation of persons—directed by the values of dominant socio-political and economic forces, rather than from the wellspring of human achievement and capacities. Such rigid scientism has closed psychology off from fruitful conversations occurring in related disciplines, in particular the disciplines that have traditionally dealt with character and virtue, namely theology and philosophy. Rather than recognizing “the place of psychology at the intersection of all disciplines that deal with the human mind and the behavior of living things” (Korn, 1985, p. 192), psychologists, in their aspiration to achieve the status of natural scientists, have too often elected to enclose

themselves within the confines of a reductive scientific discourse. The results have been ruinous. As Wilhelm Wundt, widely considered the founding father of experimental psychology, rightly foresaw, this “divorce” of psychology from its philosophical roots deprives philosophy and theology of much, “but psychology will be damaged the most.” “Hence,” he insisted, “the argument over the question of whether or not psychology is or is not a philosophical science is, for psychology, a struggle for its very existence” (Wundt, 1913, Foreword; see also Lamiell, 2013). Fortunately, in recent years, generative movements have arisen within the psychological discipline which have worked to counter these trends by conceptualizing a science that is restored to its rightful methodological state. There is among psychologists today a burgeoning desire to unburden the field from the linguistic arbitration that was problematically loaded onto the discipline’s identity in its infancy. Teo (2017) writes, “If the discipline is premised on the idea of a comprehensive understanding of human subjectivity, then it is time again to expand these boundaries in the direction of the humanities, a tradition that has been removed from psychology’s identity” (p. 288). Voices in multicultural, critical, feminist, and theoretical psychology circles have grown wary of the homogenizing trends noted above and view these as epistemologically problematic (Teo, 2010). Science was never meant to be a meaning-making enterprise and is poorly used when it is deployed as such. A science restored to its proper parameters is the best science possible (Kirmayer, 2012). Moreover, in recognizing and naming its necessary limitations, space is made available for engaging some of the more complex and enduring questions about virtue, character, suffering, flourishing, and a life well-lived (Freeman, 2000). In short, this unburdened science is the best possible dialogue partner with longer standing and longer living traditions—particularly those traditions still made relevant by philosophers and theologians today (Gadamer, 1996). From Positive Psychology to Psychological Humanities and Ethics The Positive Psychology movement has been a significant force in reformulating identity and experience with the language of virtues, flourishing, gratitude, love, joy, resiliency, and thriving (Lopez & Snyder, 2011; Seligman, 2012). Yet, as Fowers (2008) notes, “Positive psychologists have not developed a substantial concept of what is good, which is essential because virtues are defined

as the enduring personal qualities necessary for pursuing particular goods” (p. 629). Said differently, virtues presuppose a moral framework. One’s “idea of the good”—that is, one’s moral worldview—grounds both which virtues one prioritizes and works to habituate, and which particular aims one decides to direct one’s virtues toward. Consider a virtue that appears neither in the Nicomachean Ethics nor among the emotional virtues listed in the Rhetoric, but which Cicero famously called the parent of every other virtue: Gratitude (see, Gulliford, Morgan, & Kristjánsson, 2013). Before cultivating a grateful disposition, one must first ask “whether gratitude is unambiguously positive and why and how gratitude is morally valuable” (p. 293). What is more, “gratitude interventions should promote [an] understanding of what gratitude means and when it is appropriate” (Gulliford & Kristjánsson, 2018, p. 197). To address these issues, however, one must step beyond the realm of psychology and into the world of moral philosophy. This is a fundamental and necessary move, one which transcends the limits of Positive Psychology’s approach. Because one’s understanding of morality orients the cultivation and application of one’s virtues, it is imperative that one not simply assume or adopt moral principles without critical examination. On the contrary, it is only with the aid of deep philosophical and theological reflection that one can begin to assess whether the virtues being promoted lead to moral flourishing or whether “the positive psychological tendency to instrumentalize them as means of effecting emotional regulation” has diminished one’s capacity to align one’s virtues with a robust conception of the good (Gulliford & Kristjánsson, 2018, p. 195). To be clear, we view the introduction of virtue-based paradigms into the psychological discourse as a welcome attempt to offer a corrective to the morally stultifying trends outlined above. However, cultivating virtues is not the same as restoring psychology to its deeper moral root systems. Indeed, psychology alone cannot bring about such a restoration. It is simply not equipped to. And while “Positive psychology purports to draw upon an array of historical and philosophical sources” (p. 195), Gulliford and Kristjánsson (2018) have persuasively challenged its fidelity to the thinkers and theories it claims to take up. Such critiques are effective, in part, because they unearth a faulty assumption that underlies so many of the problems with the discipline of psychology today: the ill-

begotten belief that it offers a complete system, capable of identifying and addressing its own shortcomings and utilizing its own tools and methodologies to answer life's most pressing questions. But, to riff on the oft-quoted line from John Donne, no discipline is an island – a point that Socrates makes when, in Plato's Republic (2016), he reflects on why human beings form communities in the first place: "a city, as I believe, comes into being because each of us isn't self-sufficient but is in need of much" (369b). Of course, Socrates' solution to the inadequacy of any one person (or discipline) to provide for its own needs is to engage in dialogue with others, to listen and question and be willing to learn. Taking up this Socratic model, the Cura Psychologia project—which we will introduce and expound upon momentarily—attempts to address the gap between psychological theory and practice by redefining disciplinary lines between psychology, theology, and philosophy such that the curriculum and scholarly frameworks within the contemporary field of psychology change. The emerging field of psychological humanities, kindred in many ways to Positive Psychology, is the primary vehicle for this work. The psychological humanities serve as a corrective to the narrowing of language for human character, identity, and potential that so plagues the discipline today. A positive byproduct of a resituated psychological discipline is the opportunity for cross-fertilization of conversations between the natural sciences, social sciences, and the humanities: "The term psychological humanities embodies traditions inside and outside of the discipline and the transdisciplinary idea that psychology needs to draw on the knowledge and practices of the humanities to access extensive content and material as well as a long tradition of research on the processes and products of human mental life" (Teo, 2017, p.281, see also Sugarman & Martin, 2020). Valuing scientific methods of investigation, the psychological humanities, nonetheless, seek a more capacious version of science that has greater fidelity to human experience (Freeman, 2014). This burgeoning sensibility resets and realigns disciplinary territories with a conception of psychology as a convening discipline, deploying findings and analyses from applicable fields of study to formulate more dimensional understandings of mental life, agency, and subjectivity. This necessitates cross-disciplinary engagement, expanding horizons, and introducing pluralistic avenues for inquiry. In this

manner, discourse is elevated and interventions are refined that are more responsive, more attuned to the dimensionality of the intricacies and entanglements of human experience. Indeed, these are questions and projects that cannot be exhausted by one field alone. Working with methods from the sciences and humanities—philosophy and theology in particular—psychological humanities preserves a commitment to the unitive nature of truth by cultivating holistic, critical, and careful investigation and the expansion of research methodologies. For our purposes, we see in this movement an opportunity to call the field of psychology to a deeper vision of virtue, character, and ethical life, broadening its capacity for theorizing about and promoting character development. It is our conviction that scholars and practitioners interested in placing moral discourse at the heart of the psychological discipline would be better able to attend to these complexities if they had access to relevant theological and philosophical frameworks (Cushman, 1995; Fowers, 2005; Gantt & Williams, 2002; Richardson, et. al., 1999; Slife, Reber, & Richardson, 2005; Gulliford & Kristjánsson, 2018). After all, psychological theories and practices, whether formulated fully or not, carry with them beliefs about what contributes to the diminution of life, what makes for a better life, and how one might move toward a life more fully lived (Goodman, 2012, 2014). All practices are laced with moral assumptions (Cushman 1995; Taylor, 1989). Even when couched in words like symptoms, cognition, behavior, adaptation, and so forth, there are fundamental assumptions about “the good” that are moral and ethical in nature. “[B]ehind the façade of an objective theory of ‘mental health’ or neutral science of human behavior, each of these systems promotes a view of the good life, a value system, or a ‘culture’” (Richardson, Fowers, & Guignon, 1999, p. 8). This understanding of psychology as replete with moral discourse opens the space for significant positive and fertile potentialities (MacIntyre, 1985). At first blush, it represents an opportunity for ethics to be more complexly and richly taken up and to draw from clearer and more substantial value-based resources. Charles Taylor (1989) bemoans the impact of modern epistemological trends. He exclaims that we have “read so many goods out of our official story . . . we have buried their power so deep beneath layers of philosophical rationale, that they are in danger of stifling” (p. 520). What would it mean to

“read goods” back into “our official story”? That is the question that orients the project we have recently undertaken. Cultivating a More Virtuous Psychological Science In order to harness the growing enthusiasm for the field of psychological humanities and orient it toward ethical and virtue-based considerations, we intend to return psychology to its first principles with the help of philosophy and theology. Such an effort, it must be said, cannot succeed without substantial investment and support from institutions predisposed to this integrative and humanistic approach. It is for this reason that we have chosen to anchor the Cura Psychologia Project in the rich resources made uniquely available by Jesuit Catholic universities. Believing that God can be found in all things and that every field of human knowledge is capable of drawing us deeper into the mystery of who and what we were created to be, the Jesuit intellectual tradition is built upon fundamental questions of character, purpose, potential, development, and virtue. Possessing a deep appreciation for the unity of truth and an abiding commitment to the flourishing of individuals, Jesuit colleges and universities are the ideal institutions with which to partner on a project that aims to broaden the psychological discipline toward philosophical, theological, and ethical engagement. Situated in the newly formed Center for Psychological Humanities and Ethics in Boston College’s Lynch School of Education and Human Development and funded by the generous investment of the John Templeton Foundation, the Cura Psychologia Project aims to create a vibrant and productive interdisciplinary and cross-departmental community of 18 faculty ambassadors from six Jesuit Catholic Universities—Boston College, the College of the Holy Cross, Fordham University, Georgetown University, Loyola Marymount University, and Seattle University. The development of this learning community, along with the research, scholarship, and public-facing offerings its members produce, seeks to act as a catalyst for change in the psychology departments at the six institutions represented by this project. The core focus of this project is the development and cultivation of a community of faculty ambassadors made up of 18 professors, three from each of the six partnering institutions—one from each school’s psychology department, one from each school’s philosophy department, and one from each school’s theology department. The cross-departmental “faculty trio” from each partnering

university will contribute to the larger group of 18 scholars and will work to further the integration of the community's ideas at their home institutions. Doing so will help to realize the goal of broadening the discipline of psychology as practiced in psychology departments at Jesuit universities such that scholars and students are better able to approach questions of character virtue formation, ethical reasoning, and moral discernment. To repeat, if psychology, which constitutes one of the largest areas of study in the modern university, is to reach its full potential as a means of not only informing our understanding of the human condition but also aiding in the development of virtues which lead to the formation of strong moral, intellectual, and civic dimensions of character, then the disciplines of theology and philosophy must become essential aspects of psychological education and training. Yet, at a time when many psychologists are expressing the desire for a more mature, capacious discipline, a number of barriers—both practical and ideological—stand between the entrenched status quo and the realization of a more virtuous psychological science. The Cura Psychologia Project aims to begin the work of addressing these barriers. In order to succeed, however, it is of paramount importance that the participants in the Project not only learn to think more deeply about morality, but actually embody the virtues they seek to understand, thus knowing them from within. A virtue that is not practiced is not understood. A virtue that is not habituated is not known. As members of a community of learners who have each agreed to contribute to shared initiatives and collaborate with scholars from distinct disciplines, the participants in the project will be given ample opportunity to exercise the relational and intellectual virtues that develop the habits of good character. They will be asked time and again to practice generosity by giving their attention and energy to each other's work. They will be asked to be intellectually curious, willing to learn from others and to humbly admit their own limitations. And they will be expected to be civil, fair, honest, and just, developing the social and relational virtues that make of us good citizens and better friends. But, lest we exclude ourselves from this call to deeper moral discernment and ethical engagement, it is imperative that we be continually reminded of our own need to listen, learn, and dialogue with others. To that end, we would like to conclude by expressing our desire for your

honest feedback and guidance as we venture down this new path. What are the potential benefits and pitfalls that you see on the road ahead? And how can we make this work as rich, meaningful, and intellectually rigorous as possible? References Bloom, A. (Trans.) (2016). *The republic of Plato* (Paperback third edition). Basic Books. Brown, B. (2010). *The gifts of imperfection: Let go of who you think you're supposed to be and embrace who you are*. Hazelden Publishing. Brown, B. (2012). *Daring greatly: How the courage to be vulnerable transforms the way we live, love, parent, and lead*. Penguin. Brown, B. (2018). *Dare to Lead: Brave work, tough conversations, whole hearts*. Random House. Clay, R. A. (2017, November). Trend report: Psychology is more popular than ever. *Monitor on Psychology*, 48(10). Cushman, P. (1995). *Constructing the self, constructing America: A cultural history of psychotherapy*. Garden City, NY: DaCapo Press. Cushman, P., & Gilford, P. (2000). Will managed care change our way of being? *American Psychologist*, 55, 985-996. Danziger, K. (1990). *Constructing the subject: Historical origins of psychological research*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press. Dueck, A. (1995). *Between Jerusalem and Athens: Ethical perspectives on culture, religion, and psychotherapy*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books. Dueck, A., & Reimer, K. (2009). *A Peaceable Psychology: Christian therapy in a world of many cultures*. Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press. Fowers, B. J. (2005). *Virtue and psychology: Pursuing excellence in ordinary practices*. American Psychological Association. Fowers, B.J. (2008). From Continenence to Virtue. *Theory & Psychology*, 18(5), 629–653. Fowers, B.J. (2012). “Placing Virtue and the Human Good in Psychology,” *Journal of Theoretical and Philosophical Psychology*, 32(1), 1-9. Fowers, B. J., Richardson, F. C., & Slife, B. D. (2017). Suffering. In B. J. Fowers, F. C. Richardson, & B. D. Slife, *Frailty, suffering, and vice: Flourishing in the face of human limitations* (pp. 153–178). American Psychological Association. Freeman, M. (2000). “Theory beyond theory,” *Theory & Psychology*, 10(1), 71-77. Freeman, M. (2014). “A theory for our time, size medium,” *Theory & Psychology*, 24(5), 728-730. Freeman, M. (2014). *The priority of the other: Thinking and living beyond the self*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press. Gadamer, H. G. (1996). *Truth and Method*, (J. Weinsheimer and D. Marshall, Trans.). New York: Continuum. Gantt, E. E., & Williams, R. N. (2002). *Psychology for the*

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