

EXPLORING  
PSYCHOLOGY AND  
CHRISTIAN FAITH

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*An Introductory Guide*

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# Preface

There are many good books that integrate psychology and Christian faith—so why add one more? Many recent and very valuable books on this topic focus on important specialized topics, but most are not accessible to introductory students. We hope this book will become a useful companion to introductory psychology textbooks for students who are interested in the intersection of Christian faith and psychology.

Scientific psychology and religious faith differ in how they explain the nature of humans and their goals in doing so. However, they both carry assumptions about human nature. These assumptions, which are sometimes implicit and sometimes explicit, serve as the common threads that are woven throughout the chapters of this book. The questions raised about human nature in this book are not unique to Christians, since people from very diverse perspectives have sought to understand our basic nature. And while the principles provided to answer these questions are drawn from Christian theology, people from differing backgrounds will likely find agreement with at least some of these principles.

In chapter 1 of this book, we develop five themes about persons that we believe are evident throughout the pages of Scripture and that should resonate with many diverse Christian groups. While many of these themes appear to be compatible with a variety of approaches in psychology, conflicts also exist. Although there are no simple answers to the real or apparent conflicts between biblical assumptions and psychological theories, we attempt to help students critically analyze various theories from a biblical perspective. Through the remainder of this book we relate these themes to the many subfields in psychology in a structure similar to that of college-level introductory psychology

textbooks. We have designed this book so that, after reading the introduction and chapter 1, the remaining chapters could be read in any order, allowing flexibility in studying topics as they come up in an introductory psychology course.

This thematic approach is perhaps another unique feature of this book. By relating many disparate findings within psychological science to common themes, we hope to develop a more cohesive Christian approach to the field. We are certainly not proposing any profound or completely new interpretations to the field of psychology, since many ideas presented in this book have been discussed in other writings. However, our hope is that by distilling many themes and findings into a more cohesive approach, we will provide a fresh way of examining past, present, and future ideas within psychology.

Readers who are familiar with faith and psychology integration issues will quickly notice that we have not included an extended discussion of the various models of integration outlined in other books and articles. While we value these ideas and have gained a great deal from these discussions, our experience as instructors of introductory psychology courses is that it can be difficult to appreciate the distinctions in these approaches when first encountering the discipline in its entirety. So we encourage instructors or individual students to engage the many excellent additional readings on integration models.<sup>1</sup> As for us, we find that we do not easily identify exclusively with one particular model. We can say that we do hold scientific methods in high regard and believe that Christians have an obligation to identify truth regardless of the source. We also hold steadfastly to the Truth of Scripture and the power of the Word to convict us of our need for, and way to, salvation. We also believe that Christians should, as Nicholas Wolterstorff has suggested, “develop theories in psychology which do comport with, or are consistent with, the belief-content of our authentic commitment. Only when the belief-content of the Christian scholar’s authentic Christian commitment enters into his or her devising and weighing of psychological theories in this way can it be said that he or she is fully serious both as scholar and as Christian.”<sup>2</sup>

1. Johnson (*Psychology and Christianity: Five Views*) provides an excellent overview of major models of integration.

2. Wolterstorff, *Reason within the Bounds of Religion*, 77.

# Introduction

## *Why Did I Do That?*

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**Chapter Summary:** We all have questions about our own actions. This chapter introduces the basic questions that psychologists, persons of faith, and all of us ask about our everyday behavior. It also addresses the fundamental ideas that we have about human nature that influence how we answer questions about our own behavior.

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I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For I do not do the good I want to do.

Romans 7:18b–19a

Psychology keeps trying to vindicate human nature. History keeps undermining the effort.

Mason Cooley, *City Aphorisms*

I also would not know how I am supposed to feel about many stories if not for the fact that the TV news personalities make sad faces for sad stories and happy faces for happy stories.

Humorist Dave Barry, *Miami Herald*

Jasmine had no fear of flying, and she thought people who did were completely irrational. Then two events changed her attitude. The first involved flying

through a terrible storm in a twenty-passenger jet. The storm was so violent that, even with her seat belt buckled, Jasmine hit her head on the ceiling several times. The second event was when Jasmine flew out of an airport where there had been a plane crash just a few weeks earlier. The national news had repeatedly shown horrific scenes of a DC-10 crashing in a ball of fire on this same runway. The wreckage of that aircraft was still visible to Jasmine as the plane ascended. She felt very anxious and uneasy the rest of that flight, and afterward she grew increasingly anxious about flying. At one point she considered taking a train on one of her trips to avoid flying. Even though she could identify the events that had changed her thoughts, she still wondered exactly why she couldn't just overcome these feelings. After all, she still felt that it was irrational to have a fear of flying. She was also a Christian and wondered why her faith had not sustained her more through these events—wasn't her trust in God enough to overcome these feelings?

Likely you have had similar questions about something you have done or felt, asking questions such as, Why did I do that? or Why do I keep doing that? You may recognize that the questions we ask about our own behavior or the behavior of others often have both psychological and religious overtones. That is because both psychology and religion have a lot to say about why we do what we do and about our basic human nature.

As Christian psychologists, our purpose for this book is to approach questions about human behavior from a biblical point of view and then apply the answers to issues addressed by contemporary psychology. Some people believe that this mixing of psychology with Christian faith or any other religion is not very useful or even possible. Their approach has religion and psychology operating in “parallel,” with religion answering questions about the next life and morality, and psychology addressing scientific questions about everyday behavior.<sup>1</sup> Others feel that religion is of far greater importance in asking basic questions about human beings and feel that psychological science is of little value.<sup>2</sup> Still others value psychological explanations and feel that religious faith has little to say about our behavior.<sup>3</sup>

While difficult issues can arise when we try to relate a faith perspective to psychological science, we believe that a Christian worldview or faith perspective can and should inform our understanding of psychology. This approach is not simply about overruling psychological science with religious ideas whenever research findings appear to contradict religious teachings. Rather, we will

1. Carter and Narramore, *Integration of Psychology and Theology*, 91–101.

2. See Farber, *Unholy Madness*.

3. See Pinker, *Blank Slate*.

examine basic beliefs or assumptions about human nature and show how these beliefs can influence a deeper understanding of research and practice in psychology. Most psychologists rarely raise deep questions about human nature in their research or practice, but they typically have unspoken assumptions about our “essence” and how this influences the way we act. In fact, psychologist Noel Smith suggested that “psychology may be the sorriest of all disciplines from the point of view of hidden biases”<sup>4</sup> because psychologists rarely state or even acknowledge their presuppositions. So religion and psychology address different aspects of life and operate at different levels of analysis, but both come with insights about the basic human condition that sometimes contradict and other times show considerable agreement. For example, religion and psychology include spoken and unspoken ideas about whether we are basically good or evil, whether or not we can make free choices and act responsibly, and how we relate to God (or some “cosmic” idea), to one another, and to the natural world.<sup>5</sup>

To see how these basic assumptions might influence our explanations for human behavior, consider this story. Ethan was a bright kid in elementary school (e.g., creative, good in math) but he often ran out of time or lost interest in his work. By fourth grade, his grades started to go down. Ethan brought his work home but often forgot to take it out, and when he did get assignments completed, they were often wrong because he didn’t follow directions. His ability to tell funny but “inappropriate” jokes helped his popularity with other students but also made him a regular in the principal’s office. His pediatrician diagnosed him as having ADHD (attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder) and prescribed medication to help with his attention. The school psychologist set up a plan where the teacher gave specific rewards for positive actions like finishing assignments on time and remaining in his seat at school, and mild punishments (e.g., time-out) for misbehaviors like interrupting others when speaking. Ethan also received tutoring in reading, math, and homework completion. The medication, the behavior-improvement plan, and the tutoring all helped, but he still struggled with social behavior and academic issues. After more testing by the school psychologist, Ethan was diagnosed as having a learning disability in addition to ADHD. The school social worker interviewed his parents and discovered that Ethan’s dad probably had some of the same academic and emotional problems as a child.

Although these interventions helped Ethan improve in school, by the time he was in high school he began to have more social difficulties. His circle of

4. Smith, *Current Systems in Psychology*, xiv.

5. See Jeeves, *Human Nature at the Millennium*, 156–57.



friends started to shrink, and he spent most of his free time playing video games. He seemed to lose interest in a variety of common activities. For example, he rarely went with his parents to their church, even though he said that he still believed basically the same things. His parents began having marital problems, and Ethan struggled emotionally following their divorce. A private counselor helped Ethan cope with his personal and social issues, but by the time he got out of high school, he continued to struggle with mild depression and eventually started abusing alcohol. Now in his late twenties, Ethan has become a relatively responsible person, with his alcohol-abuse problem under control and working at a full-time job. However, many aspects of his life continue to be a struggle for him. Looking forward, he wonders if the rest of his life will be such a struggle and if there might be something more for him than just holding down a job.

Many of you may find Ethan's circumstances familiar, either because you know someone like Ethan or you yourself have experienced some of these difficulties. You probably have your own ideas about why Ethan has problems, but let's consider some common explanations that friends, family, and professionals may suggest (key thoughts are emphasized). You may find yourself agreeing with at least some of these explanations.

1. Shawna, a friend of Ethan's family, feels that Ethan did not need medication or therapy. She believes Ethan was a spoiled only child and that his parents should have disciplined him more. He is just *making bad choices* and it is time to grow up and *take on adult responsibility*. Shawna also feels that this is a good example of "*the apple not falling far from the tree*" since Ethan's dad had similar issues. Finally, and most importantly, Shawna feels that the main issue in anyone's life is the *condition of their heart and soul*. If Ethan's family had more faithfully given their problems over to Jesus through prayer, working on their spiritual lives instead of spending a lot of time and money on counselors and doctors, they would have all been a lot better off.
2. Ethan's counselor feels that Ethan's problems are the result of him having *low self-esteem*. He never learned to *accept himself* because other people set expectations that were impossible to meet. Deep down *he is a good person* just waiting to come out—all he needs is more love and acceptance. Ethan has also struggled to find some greater meaning for his life, so he lacks direction and drifts from one problem to another. While the main cause lies with how other people treated him, only he can *freely choose* to be the person he would like to be in the future.
3. The school psychologist believes Ethan is *neither good nor bad* (deep down); his *brain just works differently* than other people. This problem

was likely *passed on genetically* from his dad. His *environment* is also part of the problem because he has received a lot of “rewards” from others for misbehaving (e.g., attention for his inappropriate jokes), which leads to more misbehavior in the future. He needs to *take his medication*; receive better “*feedback*” (e.g., rewards and punishments) from family, friends, and professionals; and practice better (e.g., more logical) *thinking patterns*.

4. The social worker believes the problems result from a *bad social environment and damaged relationships*. Ethan *can't be blamed entirely for his problems*; his problems are the result of the way the whole *social “system”* works (or doesn't work). It's obvious from his parents' divorce and his lack of friends that *his relationships had become “toxic.”* In other words, each person in the situation was fine individually, but the relationships themselves had become distorted.
5. Ethan's friend Ryan (who recently took two psychology classes) thinks that Ethan is *unconsciously driven to satisfy his instinctive motives that we all inherit*. This is not an immoral tendency, but it does mean that Ethan *ultimately cares more about himself than about others*. However, because social and moral rules conflict with these motivations, he has become anxious and “*conflicted.*” This conflict just “*comes to the surface*” without his awareness and results in troubled behavior. He needs to dig deep inside himself to find all the inner demons and release them by just letting it all out and cleansing himself from all these unconscious influences *that determine his actions*.

Take a minute to ask yourself how you would explain Ethan's problems. Do you think that one of these five responses, some combination of them, or something completely different accounts for Ethan's difficulties?

If you are familiar with the field of psychology, you may recognize that some of these ideas match various psychological theories. Your choice for the best theories or explanations of human behavior may depend on research evidence, but it is also likely to be influenced by the way you view human nature. Most of us, including most psychologists, don't talk very often about the essence of human nature, but these ideas often operate at an implicit level. In other words, we have beliefs that we act on, but we often don't realize that we have the belief in the first place (i.e., the beliefs are unconscious). In other cases we “*sort of know*” that we believe something, but we rarely give it much thought, and we are not sure why we believe this. Sometimes we may actually hold two beliefs that are exact opposites, but we don't notice that we use both beliefs—at different times of course. For example, Shawna believes that Ethan is very much responsible for his actions,

yet she also attributes his problems to his dad (i.e., “the apple doesn’t fall far from the tree”).

Let’s examine the explanations given about Ethan’s behavior to get a better idea of what this looks like. If you focus on the italicized phrases in the explanations given above, you may notice a set of themes, dilemmas, or questions that arise. While we present these as opposing views, keep in mind that they represent a continuum of beliefs for most people, where their beliefs fall on neither one extreme nor the other. We believe the dilemmas can be summarized this way:

**Dilemma 1:** Are we complete as individuals, or are we dependent on others? This may be one of the least common questions that we ponder, but it still influences how we think about people. The individualistic view stresses that each person is a unique personality and that each person is individually accountable and responsible for his or her actions. On the other side of the coin, being dependent on others suggests that we are not simply individuals acting in the world but that we are defined relationally, as part of a social “system,” and are embedded in community or cultures.

**Dilemma 2:** Are we good or bad? We all have implicit ideas about whether people are basically good (i.e., deep down they desire to do the right thing—whatever that is), basically bad (i.e., mostly interested in themselves and not really caring too much about others), or essentially neutral (i.e., not really self-centered or caring—just trying to get by).

**Dilemma 3:** Are we simply part of the natural world, or are we something more? The vast majority of people in the world believe that our mind—and perhaps a related thing, our soul—is what makes us a human beings. Most often this mind or soul is thought of as a separate “thing” from the physical body—and that it is the thing that ultimately controls our behavior. Others believe that human beings are nothing but highly “intelligent animals,” shaped by their physical and social experiences.<sup>6</sup>

**Dilemma 4:** Do we have free will (and responsibility) or are we determined? Determinism suggests that many different forces could act on us to create who we are and what we do.<sup>7</sup> Some combination of genetics, brain function, evolution, the social environment, the physical environment, and/or our unconscious minds could all destine us to think or behave in certain ways. The “free will” idea suggests that we can freely choose

6. Crick, *Astonishing Hypothesis*, 4.

7. Farnsworth, *Whole-Hearted Integration*, 86–88.

our own destiny and set our own path in spite of the internal or external forces that act on us.

**Dilemma 5:** Are we motivated by survival, or do we seek something higher?

Most people will certainly acknowledge that we are motivated to survive, but is that the only motivation we have? Some psychologists believe that we are products of our genes, our environment, and our learned patterns, so we are simply responding to the conditions that we experience and nothing more.<sup>8</sup> Others believe that we are also motivated to find meaning at a basic level (i.e., to explain why things happen) and at a deeper level (i.e., to find a bigger purpose or deeper meaning).<sup>9</sup>

Most of us tend to be somewhere in between these competing positions, or we alternate at times between various views. However, going back to the various responses to Ethan's problems, if you emphasize our individuality over our relationality and believe that people are more evil than good, you are likely to agree more with Shawna and Ryan, who both stress Ethan's individual responsibility and his tendency to be self-centered. If you emphasize group membership, believe that people are basically good, stress "free will," and feel that we are motivated to find meaning, then you might agree more with the counselor and social worker, who stress these aspects of human nature. If you feel that people are basically neutral (i.e., neither good nor bad), stress our physical existence, and believe that humans are only motivated for survival, then you might agree more with the school psychologist, who believes that Ethan is just responding to his genetic inheritance and his environment.

Of course, it's possible to agree with the school psychologist or any other response without accepting all of the underlying ideas about human nature. You may feel that one approach is good simply because it offers a practical solution, or you only partially agree with some of the basic perspectives. However, the main point is still that our views of human nature push us to favor certain approaches more than others.

So hopefully you can see that everyone has views about human nature, determinism, the mind, individuality, and so on. All introductory psychology textbooks proclaim that psychology is an "empirical" (i.e., observational) science—and indeed it is. But because the subject matter is human behavior, we can also see a lot of philosophies, worldviews, and personal interpretations influencing the larger theory. Sometimes these worldviews are implicit

8. Crick, *Astonishing Hypothesis*, 3–12.

9. Smith, *Current Systems in Psychology*, 113–44.

and well below the surface; other times they are very explicit and promoted strongly. Either way, it's hard to be completely neutral in psychology given that psychologists make statements about human behavior that cut to the core of who we are.

Most major religions and many philosophical movements also address or have ideas about these fundamental questions.<sup>10</sup> This is why we believe that the best starting point to understand how faith relates to something like psychology—or even to everyday life—is to focus on these fundamental questions. Some Christians in psychology focus on interesting applications of faith to practice, but we feel that in order for Christians to start addressing questions of psychology, foundational questions need to be addressed first. For example, over the years Christian therapists have addressed interesting questions related to the Holy Spirit in therapy, therapy as evangelism, the use of prayer in therapy, and so on.<sup>11</sup> These are certainly interesting and important questions, but we feel that we should first answer questions like, To what extent does a faith perspective promote a more individualistic or relational view? or If we use a scientific approach to studying human beings, does that mean that we necessarily accept the notion of determinism? Addressing these questions of human nature first allows us to build a foundation for answering practical issues as we move to applications and practice.

In chapter 1, we articulate basic biblical principles of human nature that address the dilemmas posed in this chapter. These principles do not settle all questions in psychology or explain completely why people do what they do, but they can guide us in grappling with complex theories and research in psychology and life. The remaining chapters in this book expand on these principles and are an attempt to apply them to many of the specialty areas in the study of human behavior.

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## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

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1. If you are familiar with various movements or schools of thought in psychology (i.e., psychoanalytic, behavioristic, humanistic, cognitive), can you match these ideas with the explanations given by: number 2 (counselor), number 3 (school psychologist), and number 5 (friend Ryan)?

10. See discussion in Miller and Delaney, *Judeo-Christian Perspectives on Psychology*.

11. For examples, see McLemore and Brokaw, "Psychotherapy as a Spiritual Enterprise," 178–95.

2. Do you think that psychology can be, or should be, a science?
3. Do you agree that religious faith should be used in understanding questions in psychological science? What are some of the dangers or benefits to psychology of trying to relate these areas? What are some of the dangers or benefits to religion?



# 1

## Who Am I?

### *Themes of Human Nature*

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**Chapter Summary:** This chapter describes major themes that address the basic questions and dilemmas raised in the introduction. We have based these themes on scriptural principles about human nature that are relevant for addressing pressing issues in psychology. In the remaining chapters in this book we seek to apply each of these themes to various areas of study within the field of psychology. Our approach with this chapter is to assume that doing psychology from a Christian perspective requires that we start with a biblical foundation to answer the question, Who am I?

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What is mankind that you are mindful of them,  
human beings that you care for them?  
You have made them a little lower than the angels  
and crowned them with glory and honor.  
You made them rulers over the works of your hands;  
you put everything under their feet.

Psalm 8:4–6

If you're a college student, you are used to being asked, Where do you go to school? or What's your major? These questions are attempts to get a

sense of your identity—who you are and who you want to be.<sup>1</sup> While these are common questions, it’s interesting that the Bible focuses on who *God* thinks you are rather than who *you* or *other people* think you are. Starting with the first words of Scripture, “In the beginning, God created,”<sup>2</sup> we can see that the Bible describes humans as *creatures*, made “in his own image.” Through the early chapters of Genesis, we can also see that humans are called to bear God’s image by acting on his behalf and being his agents in the world he made.

Although the Bible says we are creatures, humans have a unique status in God’s creation and are placed into a unique relationship with him. The quotation from Psalm 8 opening this chapter asks and answers why God cares so much for us. While Psalm 8 makes obvious that we’re not God, nevertheless God “cares for” and is “mindful of” us. We are “crowned” with “glory and honor.” So we are creatures, but creatures with whom God chooses to have a particular relationship. In addition, humans have unique work to do as responsible “rulers” over God’s creation.

The introduction to this book presented many of the dilemmas we face when trying to explain behavior. Various psychological theories, religions, and worldviews provide different answers to these questions, so we believe persons of faith need to start by exploring basic themes about human nature found in Scripture. While even Christians do not agree completely on how to understand these basic themes, there are consistent principles about our nature and our condition that can help us address many of our dilemmas.

Throughout the rest of this book, we will come back to these themes to explore the relationship between Christian faith and psychology’s perspectives on persons, including addressing the basic dilemmas outlined in the introduction. These themes suggest that humans are (1) relational persons; (2) broken, in need of redemption; (3) embodied; (4) responsible limited agents (our free will is limited); and (5) meaning seekers. While not every aspect of human nature is captured by these five themes, they cover many of the key aspects of human nature that are relevant to psychology. Keep in mind that each of these characteristics is distinct, but they are also interrelated, as we will discuss later. The remainder of this chapter is devoted to describing these five characteristics with brief discussions of how each is addressed in psychology. The rest of the book explores in greater depth how these characteristics are addressed in the major topic areas of psychology.

1. Kroger, *Identity Development*, 34.

2. Gen. 1:26.



## ■ Theme 1: Humans Are Relational Persons

While Scripture clearly speaks of our individual nature, uniqueness, and responsibilities, it also makes clear that we cannot be understood apart from our relationships. In the book of Genesis, God says, “Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness. . . . It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him.”<sup>3</sup> The phrase, “Let us make mankind in our image” reveals the relationality within the very nature of God. God’s essence is relational, shown in the interrelatedness of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. That quality has also been imprinted on humans. God extends this relatedness to humans as seen in the Genesis story. God created Eve for Adam because “it is not good for the man to be alone.” In addition, just as God creates things, humans are called to the task of being fruitful and caring for God’s handiwork.<sup>4</sup> Humanity has creative work to do within and as a part of creation. As one theologian puts it, humanity is tasked by God to be his “authorized representatives on earth,”<sup>5</sup> bearing God’s image as a collection of people, not just individually. Humans were given God’s approval to do the work God intended to be done on earth, as the crown of creation. In so doing, humans would have a thoroughly interrelated existence with God and others (Adam with Eve, and all who would follow).

Being made in God’s image has traditionally implied that we are made for at least three kinds of relationships.<sup>6</sup> These relationships are described by Christian psychologists David Myers and Malcolm Jeeves, who write, “The biblical account is a God-centered view and is preoccupied with relationships—first and foremost the relationship of God to humanity, but also of person to person, and of humankind to the created order, of which it is both a part and a steward.”<sup>7</sup> Let’s explore the implications of each of these three relationships.

First, we are made to be in relationship with God, not as equals but dependent on God as his treasured creation. God made us for himself, out of his love and for his glory, to be in fellowship with him.<sup>8</sup> Our very existence depends on God’s ongoing activity.<sup>9</sup> As theologian Philip Hefner states, “God does not

3. Gen. 1:26; 2:18.

4. Gen. 1:28.

5. Middleton, *Liberating Image*, 289.

6. Hoekema, *Created in God’s Image*, 81; Roberts, “Christian Psychology,” 77.

7. Myers and Jeeves, *Psychology through the Eyes of Faith*, 33.

8. Isa. 43:7.

9. See Heb. 1:3. This is a notion strongly held in Christian theologies, including the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, part 1, sec. 2, chap. 1, art. 1, par. 4.5.302 ([http://www.vatican.va/archive/ccc\\_css/archive/catechism/p1s2c1p4.htm](http://www.vatican.va/archive/ccc_css/archive/catechism/p1s2c1p4.htm)) and by Protestants, such as the Lutheran Philip Hefner (see his “Imago Dei”).

deal with us only impersonally through deterministic processes, or treat us as things, but rather carriers on a history with us.”<sup>10</sup>

Second, rather than focusing on individual differences between persons, the Bible strongly emphasizes that humans are part of something much larger—the human family<sup>11</sup>—and, for Christians, the body of Christ, which is the church.<sup>12</sup> This church is much bigger than an individual congregation, as it includes all Christians, both now and throughout all history—the “holy catholic” (“universal”) church.<sup>13</sup>

The apostle Paul uses the analogy of a body to describe how Christians are to live and work within creation: “Just as a body, though one, has many parts, but all its many parts form one body, so it is with Christ.”<sup>14</sup> He goes on to say that one part of the body cannot live without the other parts. Being just a head or just a foot is useless. Paul implies that our fundamental relationality leaves us unable to go it alone. Those parts need to work together, and when they do, the body of Christ (the church) can function as it was meant to do. Being in relationship with each other as well as with God is fundamental to being a full person—what theologians and Christian psychologists call *personhood*.<sup>15</sup> The Christian position is that fully being what God intended for each human to be only comes in the context of the body of Christ where we collectively bear God’s image and fully love each other in each other’s personal uniqueness.<sup>16</sup>

The Bible, chronicling the interactions between God and his people, also shows that God’s relationship with humans is both personal and communal. There are times in Scripture when God blesses families, tribes, or nations. For example, God establishes a promise or covenant with Abraham *and* all of his descendants, to make them a “great nation.”<sup>17</sup> God says of that group, which later becomes known as Israel, “all peoples on earth will be blessed through

10. Hefner, “Imago Dei,” 86.

11. Gen. 5:1.

12. By “the church” here, we are not referring to just the nearest one down the street or even particular denominations or branches such as Protestant, Catholic, or Eastern Orthodox.

13. Note that “catholic” is not capitalized as it refers to being universal. This notion goes back to ancient statements of faith such as the Apostles’ Creed written in the first centuries of Christianity (and can be found here: <http://www.ccel.org/creeds/apostles.creed.html>). There is a very similar line in the Nicene Creed, which is used by Catholics, Protestants, Anglicans, and Eastern Orthodox churches (and can be found here: <http://www.ccel.org/creeds/nicene.creed.html>). Given the conflicts that happen among Christians, it may seem impossible that this is a “group,” but through God’s Holy Spirit, the church is a fellowship that extends through time and across the diversity of races and countries.

14. 1 Cor. 12:12.

15. Hefner, “Imago Dei,” 71.

16. Yannaras, *Freedom of Morality*, 23.

17. Gen. 12:2.

you.”<sup>18</sup> There are also times when people are condemned as groups or nations. In the case of Israel once again, the prophet Ezekiel proclaims, “Now this was the sin of your sister Sodom: She and her daughters were arrogant, overfed and unconcerned; they did not help the poor and needy.”<sup>19</sup> Although the city of Sodom may be most associated with its sexual sins,<sup>20</sup> it is the collective indifference to the poor and needy that is condemned here. Likewise in the New Testament, members of the early church are treated as a unified body. Even though the apostle Paul names specific persons when writing to the churches,<sup>21</sup> his letters are addressed to groups of Christians: he praises the Philippians as a group (e.g., “I thank my God every time I remember you”)<sup>22</sup> and condemns the Corinthian church as a group (e.g., “Brothers and sisters, I could not address you as people who live by the Spirit”).<sup>23</sup> God calls out particular persons to fill specific roles, but God’s interactions with humans emphasize the fundamental interrelatedness of humanity.

The third core relationship implies that just as God created and sustains the creation, people are also to be creative and care for creation.<sup>24</sup> Humans are created creatures with a particular role to rule over creation as creative caretakers, which includes each person as well as the environment. This care-taking includes our development of science and social institutions that allow us to better care for each other and the world. To sum up, being made in God’s image “represents God as commanding us to love him with all our heart, our neighbor as ourselves, and to be faithful stewards of the creation.”<sup>25</sup>

### *Relationality and Psychology*

Relationality is also a central topic of psychology. Ethan from the introduction to this book is in a series of relationships with others, including friends and family, and all of these relationships doubtless influence him as he has influenced them. Many areas of psychology explore how we interact with, influence, and are influenced by our environment (people as well as things). The way we learn from others, the ways our brain recognizes another person’s face, why we laugh, and why individuals suffering from anxiety may fear others all reveal an interest in relationships. The biblical emphasis on relationships is

18. Gen. 12:3.

19. Ezek. 16:49.

20. Sodom is the basis of the word sodomy.

21. Paul pleads with Euodia and Syntyche to agree with each other in the Lord in Phil. 4:2.

22. Phil. 1:3.

23. 1 Cor. 3:1.

24. Gen. 1:28.

25. Roberts, “Christian Psychology,” 77.

very compatible with many ideas and research findings in psychology. There are, however, at least two emphases of relationality that differ between psychology and the Bible. First, by allowing only natural explanations of behavior (supernatural explanations are not allowed in science), psychology does not directly study how God relates to people. Psychologists sometimes study religious behaviors and thoughts of people, but they do not explore the behaviors and thoughts of God toward us. Second, psychology places a great deal of emphasis on a type of relationality barely mentioned in the Bible: relationship to oneself. The fact that the Bible says little about how we relate to ourselves may surprise you—it surprised us when we were doing our research for this book. Terms like *self-concept* and *self-esteem* are common in psychology, and therapy emphasizes self-awareness and self-fulfillment. The Bible seems far less concerned about these notions than is psychology, and although some think the phrase “know thyself” is found in the Bible, it’s not.<sup>26</sup>

Despite an increased emphasis on relationality in recent years, research has shown that psychological science that has come out of Western cultures has tended to emphasize individuality over relationality.<sup>27</sup> The Bible, however, encourages us to recognize that people cannot be understood outside of the context of their relationships. As one theologian remarked, “If an individual has no relationships, then he also has no characteristics and no name. He is unrecognizable, and does not even know himself.”<sup>28</sup> Does this Christian emphasis on interrelatedness have any impact on how one approaches psychology? Knowing that we hold a unique place within creation as collective image bearers of God might influence how we study group behavior, worker motivation, gender differences, and how to conduct therapy—to name just a few.

## ■ Theme 2: Humans Are Broken, in Need of Redemption

God designed us to thrive in the three core relationships we just described.<sup>29</sup> God calls his people to (1) love him, (2) love their neighbors as themselves,<sup>30</sup> and (3) lovingly care for creation.<sup>31</sup> Those are the right plans to most successfully live out the image of God. What would it look like if humans lived out God’s image in God-intended relationships (as described above), living the

26. One place it appears is in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*.

27. Nisbett et al. “Culture and Systems of Thought,” 307.

28. Jürgen Moltmann, cited in Brown, “Conclusion,” 225.

29. James 4:7.

30. Lev. 19:18.

31. Gen. 1:28.

Eden of Genesis 1 and 2? Every day would involve a guilt-free, harmonious relationship with God and people, tending God's flawless creation, totally at peace with each other, creation, and God. Our situation would still merit the designation given at the end of the Genesis 1 creation narrative: "God saw all that he had made, and it was very good."<sup>32</sup>

Of course, that's not our situation. We live in a world of war, selfishness, and disease. Why? Christian theology and the Bible teach that rather than trusting God's plan, humans chose instead to trust their own. Putting *our* will and *our* plans before God's is the essence of *sin*. God created us, but we rebelled against our "creaturehood" and our Creator, declaring ourselves the "creators" of our own lives, choosing self-determination instead of living in creaturely obedience as God's representatives on earth. This rebellion is known as the fall—humanity going from its state of goodness and obedience to one of disobedience. God called humanity to be in relationship (communion) with him. In the fall, rather than embracing personhood (creatures fully in relationship with God and others), we chose an individuality that creates a gulf between God and each person. As one Greek Orthodox Christian writer puts it, "From the moment when the human person rejects this call and this communion in which he himself is grounded . . . he becomes alienated from himself."<sup>33</sup> Theologian Miroslav Volf writes that humans "affirm themselves in contrast to others (other human beings, other creatures, and God), necessarily creating distance between themselves and all others."<sup>34</sup> As a result of this fallenness, "The natural needs of the individual being, such as nourishment, self-perpetuation and self-preservation, become an end in themselves."<sup>35</sup> We lose the deep, relational interconnections of "God, humans, and all creation in justice, fulfillment, and delight"<sup>36</sup> mentioned by theologian Cornelius Plantinga and instead focus on ourselves and fulfilling our immediate needs. In our sinfulness we try to go it alone, and we are not up to the task. Because of sin, "we live anxiously, restlessly, always trying to secure and extend ourselves with finite goods that can't take the weight we put on them."<sup>37</sup>

The pervasiveness of sin is absolute: everyone sins—everyone gives priority to someone or something other than God. "If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves," says 1 John 1:8. Even really "good" people do some bad

32. Gen. 1:31.

33. Yannaras, *Freedom of Morality*, 30.

34. Volf, *After Our Likeness*, 81.

35. Yannaras, *Freedom of Morality*, 31.

36. Plantinga, *Not the Way*, 10.

37. *Ibid.*, 61.

things.<sup>38</sup> Sinfulness shows up in external behavior but also in internal thoughts; while one may not steal, one may envy. The Bible states that the only sinless person—the only one not totally self-centered—was Jesus Christ.

Sin's cumulative consequences, however, are even larger than the fallout of individual choices and attitudes. Sin not only affects each person's life but also the lives of others and the lives of people in the future,<sup>39</sup> so that sin leaves us in a creation that is "not the way it's supposed to be," as Plantinga writes in his book of the same title.<sup>40</sup> Plantinga writes that sin is "a polluted river that keeps branching and rebranching into tributaries," a parasite that keeps tapping its host (humans and all of creation) for survival, and "breaks down great institutions and whole societies."<sup>41</sup> Roman Catholic theology similarly concludes that the fruit of sins in social structures and relationships can affect people,<sup>42</sup> as "every sin has repercussions on . . . the whole human family."<sup>43</sup>

The outcome of this tendency has been nothing short of disastrous. The self-focus of people in the past, whether for personal gain, emotional power, or a host of other desires, has damaged relationships. The child of a convicted felon suffers from the parent's crime by being without that parent. But the troubles are deeper: society's inequalities impact becoming a criminal. But the troubles are also wider: greed brings wars fought for money and prestige, with countries pillaged of goods and natural resources, leaving lasting animosities that pave the way for future wars. In a sin-free world, desires to follow God would be pure; in a sinful world, things get pretty messed up. The result of being in a sinful world—even if we ourselves could live righteous lives—is to distort our relationships and thereby distort how we think (more on this later). Each of us has suffered the consequences of being in a world with sin.

Although we are damaged by sin and live in a broken, fallen world, the relational core of the image of God is still there. The good news of the *gospel* is that the story does not end with our sin. God has provided a way out of this mess through the death and resurrection of God's Son, Jesus Christ.

38. Some examples: David, God's chosen king of Israel killed out of lust in 2 Sam.; Moses, God's chosen leader to free the Israelites from Egyptian slavery, did not reach the Promised Land due to his own disobedience as described in Num. 20; the apostle Paul when talking about sinners described himself as "the worst" in 1 Tim. 1:15.

39. Sins can affect future generations. In Exod. 20:5 (part of the Ten Commandments), worshiping other gods in place of God is unfaithfulness toward God, and this results in breaking the covenant with God. If a father rejects God's promises and takes his family into sin, the children will suffer the consequences.

40. Plantinga, *Not the Way*.

41. *Ibid.*, 55.

42. Catholic Church, *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 103.

43. Catholic Church, *Reconciliation and Penance*, 52.

Although our current condition is one of brokenness in sin, it is not one of hopelessness. Romans 3:23–24 clearly indicates that “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.” As C. Stephen Evans wrote, it is God who “created us in his image, who sorrowfully allowed us to reject him and break fellowship, and who sacrificially became one of us and suffered the effects of our rebellion so as to bring about a triumphant reconciliation.”<sup>44</sup> The relationship with God is made right for people who accept Christ’s death on their behalf. This is *salvation*, and the Bible says that everyone is in need of it. All of creation is also damaged and in need of renewal.

Despite this gracious reconciliation, sin’s consequences remain in creation—it is still “not the way it’s supposed to be.” On a personal level, old habits die hard and better ones are not always easily acquired. On a community level, structural sin infects all of the institutions and groups of which people are a part. God desires better of us and for us than continuing to sin; he wants us to lead more Christlike lives. For the Christian, becoming Christlike is a lifelong process—a process typically called *sanctification*. As Paul writes, a “good work” was begun in believers by God, and that will be carried on “to completion until the day of Christ Jesus”<sup>45</sup>—that is, when Christ returns. Writing to Christians, the writer of Hebrews encouraged fellow believers to “run with perseverance the race marked out for us”<sup>46</sup> and to battle against sinful desires, making “every effort to live in peace with everyone and to be holy.”<sup>47</sup>

God calls his people back to the task of transforming all of his creation by being God’s representatives. Christians begin this by taking on Christian virtues and behaviors,<sup>48</sup> as part of the body of believers (the church). We are not alone in this: God has given believers the guidance and help of the Holy Spirit.<sup>49</sup> The earthly life of the Christian is one of long-term transformation by God, not instantaneous change. The task does not end with personal transformation, nor does it stop with individual action, but continues with collective efforts to restore justice, love mercy, and transform a broken society.

Can we really do this? Even those who claim Christ and live by the power of the Holy Spirit still struggle with sin, being part of a broken creation. And what of those who don’t claim Christ’s goodness but still do “good” things?

44. Evans, “Concept of the Self,” 4.

45. Phil. 1:6.

46. Heb. 12:1.

47. Heb. 12:14.

48. Col. 3:12–13.

49. Rom. 8.

Humans cannot bring about their own salvation, despite actions that they do that may be very helpful to others. As we said above, salvation is a gift from God that cannot be earned by human efforts.

### *Human Brokenness and Psychology*

What does all of this talk of sin and salvation have to do with psychology? Biblical truths about sin profoundly influence how Christians think about a host of issues such as how predictable we are; how we perceive, learn, and think; how our personalities are formed; how we relate to others around us; and even how we conduct therapy. Human brokenness brings in some tricky questions about human behavior. For example, when children misbehave at age three and then gradually learn to be more obedient, is this sin followed by sanctification, or is it normal learning? Does Ethan—as described in the introduction—simply need to pray more and be more devout, as family friend Shawna suggests, or are his problems the result of genetics and environment? Pressing the issue even deeper, is sin an “extra ingredient” added to the source of his problems, or is sin woven into the fabric of his relationships, his mental processes, or even his physical being?

To be perfectly honest, as Christian psychologists we have struggled to understand how our sinful tendencies are to be understood in the context of psychological theories, and so we do not have simple answers for these complex questions. However, we are fairly certain that those psychological approaches that strongly emphasize ultimate human goodness or complete neutrality of human nature are going to fall short when trying to provide a comprehensive explanation of human behavior. We will provide specific examples of these shortcomings in many of the chapters that follow.

## ■ Theme 3: Humans Are Embodied

If you were an alien visiting Earth for the first time, perhaps the most obvious thing to notice about humans (perhaps more obvious than our relationality or sinfulness) is that we have physical substance that we use to interact with other physical substances. We are *embodied*. Scripture uses many words and ideas to describe body, mind, soul, and spirit—but how do we put all this together as “me”? Whatever the meaning of these terms, the Bible clearly confirms that our physical being is a central characteristic of who we are—and perhaps much more important than contemporary Christians have generally assumed. Genesis says that God breathed life into dust, and Adam became a living, physical



being.<sup>50</sup> All of our relationships have a physical dimension. Like Jesus, we live in a physical world and interact with it physically: we touch, change our gaze to look someone in the eye, or even throw things when we're angry.<sup>51</sup> People physically interact with God—kneeling to pray or audibly speaking praise, just as Christ did.<sup>52</sup> Physical existence impacts our way of interacting, making our relationality shaped by being embodied. A comforting touch is pleasing, while a harsh look hurts. We are made in God's image and have a unique relationship with him, so we occupy a special place in his creation, yet we are made from the “dust of the earth”<sup>53</sup> and have much in common with the rest of creation (e.g., hunger, pain, emotions, etc.). God created us to be physical in order to care for a physical creation—to tend the garden.

The Bible teaches that some physical activities may bring people closer to God (e.g., prayer, giving food to the hungry), while other activities may widen the gulf between people and God (e.g., withholding care for others, failing to offer God what is his).<sup>54</sup> In the Lord's Supper (or Eucharist or Communion, depending on church tradition), believers physically eat and drink as Christ commanded his disciples,<sup>55</sup> and Christ said that by doing so, one “remains in me, and I in them.”<sup>56</sup> There appear to be important spiritual consequences of physical behavior, in addition to the more obvious physical outcomes. Many of Jesus's interactions were with people who were born with physical disabilities like blindness<sup>57</sup> or who had contracted diseases like leprosy.<sup>58</sup> And of course people in the Bible became old, suffered illness, and died—just as we do.

### *Human Embodiment and Psychology*

Psychology has increasingly emphasized the physical, including how our physiology changes in response to the environment and what our brain does when we experience thought. A growing body of research examines our most

50. Gen. 2:7.

51. Just a few examples: Jesus touched to heal people (e.g., Matt. 8), he looked at his disciples to address them (e.g., Mark 10), and he threw over the tables of money changers in the temple (e.g., Matt. 21).

52. Jesus fell to the ground in prayer, for example, in Mark 14; he spoke thanks to God, for example, in John 6.

53. Gen. 2:7.

54. James 2:15–17 shows the interrelationship between physical behavior and faith: “Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to them ‘Go in peace; keep warm and well fed,’ but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it? In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.”

55. John 6.

56. John 6:56.

57. E.g., John 9:1.

58. E.g., Mark 1:40.

intimate thoughts within the working brain and explores how hormones and other bodily functions influence our everyday behaviors. Obviously, embodiment raises some interesting questions about how humans function.

For example, can we overcome our physical existence or mental problems by using some nonphysical part of us? Is it even possible or necessary to talk about body, mind, and soul given that research shows that our thoughts are tied to brain function? Can God actually work through physical mechanisms by altering brain activity when we relate to him?

These deep questions will be addressed in chapters 3 and 4, but what we can say at this point is that Christians need to affirm that our “earthly” and “creaturely” nature appears to be both scriptural and very consistent with contemporary understanding of human beings. Christians can also be a prophetic voice in the field of psychology by stressing that, despite our physical nature, we are more than the sum of our physical parts.

#### ■ Theme 4: Humans Are Responsible Limited Agents

While theology is sometimes as conflicted as psychology on the issue of agency, people of faith generally understand that while we are limited by our physical nature, our social environment, and even God’s sovereign plans, Scripture is clear that we are endowed with the ability to make choices and to act responsibly. Adam and Eve chose to rebel against God, and they were held accountable for that choice. The Bible clearly teaches that humans have choice, but our choices are far more limited than most of us like to admit. We have *agency*, meaning the ability to act as agents in the world, which involves the ability to choose, but it is *limited*.

Responsibility implies that a person has some degree of choice in their behavior, so responsibility and agency are intertwined. The ability to choose, however, does not always imply responsibility. Being *responsible* means being accountable relative to someone else. Responsibility outside of the context of a relationship makes no sense. A mother will feel more responsible for her children than for the children of a stranger. If you betray a friend’s trust, you feel responsible for rectifying that situation with that person but not with someone else. In the biblical view of persons, humans are in relationship with all others as well as God and creation.<sup>59</sup>

59. Many passages in the Old Testament tell God’s people how to care for foreigners (non-believers in God) who are among them (e.g., Exod. 22:21, “Do not mistreat or oppress a foreigner, for you were foreigners in Egypt”). Jesus in Matt. 25 calls people to care for people who are sick, thirsty, in prison, or without clothes.

Having agency implies not only that we make choices but also that we can change ourselves in some way. The Bible has countless stories of people changing. Change can be a gradual, lifelong process, as in the disciple Peter's life in the New Testament. Sometimes changes occur due to God's sudden and direct intervention (like the apostle Paul's experience); other times, changes happen through deliberate choices people make ("choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve. . . . As for me and my household, we will serve the LORD"<sup>60</sup>).

But there are also limitations on how much we are able to change since we exist in a particular time and place. For the Israelites, as much as they might have wished to be free of Roman rule at the time of Christ, there wasn't much they could do about it. When the apostle Paul and his gospel coworker Silas were in prison for preaching in Acts 16, their choices were definitely limited.

Our embodiment limits us, but our limitations are not just in terms of external forces like physical space and time. In Romans 6, Paul emphasizes that we live life as slaves—not a slavery involving physical chains but a slavery of the mind and behavior. As philosopher Robert C. Roberts<sup>61</sup> has noted, Paul emphasizes that we can be slaves of sin or slaves of righteousness. What did Paul mean by being a "slave"? Slavery is the polar opposite of freedom. If someone were a slave of righteousness, for example, some "choices" may not even come to mind or might be so offensive that one never pursues them. A fundamental idea of Christianity is that God is at work in people who put their faith in him, conforming them more fully to himself—becoming more and more like Christ. Conversely, slavery to sin means that righteousness is not our default behavior. One's moral character, often developed through habits, further limits thoughts and behavior. Our past choices set us in directions that dictate present and future consequences. This means not that we have no free choice but that when we make choices we are set on a path. This new path then necessarily limits other alternatives, as life is only lived once. So either righteousness or sinfulness limits our freedom because we are fundamentally limited by our earlier choices.

In addition to our embodiment and past choices, we are limited by our social groups. Of course individual accountability is still important. In criminal cases in the United States, even when multiple people are involved in a crime, defendants are judged separately to determine the amount of blame each person deserves. In the Bible, personal responsibility is also apparent; the lies of Ananias and Sapphira in Acts 5 about the money they were giving to the church resulted in each of them dying in turn after telling their lie.

60. Josh. 24:15.

61. Roberts, "Christian Psychology," 82.

But we are relational persons, and to focus on individual responsibility alone would be to miss the Bible's bigger-picture view of what it means to be human. As described earlier, groups in the Old and New Testaments were praised or condemned for their collective responsibilities. This also means that the response to sin is both personal and corporate, just like the consequences of sin. Myers puts it very clearly: "Because evil is collective as well as personal, responding to it takes a communal religious life."<sup>62</sup> Humans, together, have choices to make, and humans, together, are responsible for those choices. Although Western—and perhaps increasingly non-Western—culture's focus is on individual behavior and individual responsibility, the Bible has a broader scope of responsibility that extends beyond individual persons to include groups and nations.

In sum, the biblical view of responsibility is that it occurs both at the individual and at the group level. People can rise and fall on their own, but the fate of the individual is always bound up within a group because humans are interconnected. This characteristic of human nature therefore implies that how we live out our lives is shaped by being persons *and* by the groups with which we align ourselves—our families, religious groups, and countries of origin, to name a few—and for Christians, the body of Christ, which is the church. It also implies that persons have responsibility to others, whether it is just one person or a nation. God's desire is for humans to have personal and corporate relationality that is harmonious and mutually uplifting.

### *Human Responsible Limited Agency and Psychology*

Questions of responsibility and agency come up all the time in psychology. Obviously, if a psychologist concludes that someone has no ability to choose, the notion of responsibility is irrelevant. It is impossible to be responsible without real choice. The ability to choose, however, does not necessarily result in responsibility.

Psychologists disagree about our ability to choose,<sup>63</sup> and thus it naturally follows that they would also disagree about the degree to which people are responsible for their behavior. Some psychologists (e.g., B. F. Skinner) assume that we have no ability to choose, which impacts the kind of research questions they ask. Rather than looking at situations in which people make choices, these psychologists study how changes in the environment change behavior. Other psychologists (e.g., Carl Rogers) assume almost unlimited agency for

62. Myers, "A Levels-of-Explanation View," 61.

63. Just one of a number of books that debate this question is Baer, Kaufman, and Baumeister, *Are We Free?*

humans, so these theorists might design studies that help determine what choices people make or to understand the impact of choices.

Psychological research shows that a variety of factors influence the degree to which people exercise the limited agency they have and take responsibility for their behavior. A variety of experiments, for example, indicate that some conditions and situations make it easier to follow moral codes, while other conditions and situations make that more difficult. Worthington<sup>64</sup> cites classic research by Stanley Milgram on obedience and Solomon Asch on conformity showing that there are particular situations under which people are much more likely to follow the ideals and desires of others rather than their own principles. In addition, differences in brain development and the consequences of brain injury imply that people differ in their ability to consider choices and to even understand the consequences of their own behavior. Research on addictions shows that how the brain responds to substances is altered by the use of those drugs, so that physical and psychological dependence results.<sup>65</sup> Stopping drug use is difficult because the brain has been changed. Psychological science, when it acknowledges the agency of persons and their potential for responsible behavior, gives insights into how to be responsible and how responsible we can be. We'll explore these issues more in the chapters on brain function (embodiment), social psychology, and therapy—among others. Agency and responsibility vary with a number of factors, but the Bible is clear that to the extent there is agency, persons are responsible for their behavior.

Looking ahead to later chapters of the book, we will see that debates over the extent of personal agency are pervasive in psychology. Recall Ethan from the introduction: to what degree are his behaviors the products of his choice and to what degree are they determined by factors in his environment, like his home life and school situation?

## ■ Theme 5: Humans Are Meaning Seekers

The previous four themes provide a basis for describing who and what we are, but as psychologists we also want to explore *why* we do anything. We may be relational, broken, embodied, and responsible limited agents, but if we have the capability to make choices, why do we choose certain paths over others? Are we driven forward “mindlessly” by our past and present relationships, sin, bodies, and limited minds, or can we direct our thoughts and actions with

64. Worthington, *Coming to Peace with Psychology*, 242–44.

65. Hyman and Malenka, “Addiction and the Brain,” 695–703.

something more? We propose a fifth characteristic of human nature: we are *meaning seekers*, seeking to make sense of our surroundings, our experience, and our purpose.

We believe that there are at least three aspects of meaning seeking that are fundamental to human nature. First, at a most basic level, we are able to perceive patterns. We can sense and take in our world in ways that are virtually automatic but that are absolutely necessary if we are to understand what events in the environment mean and be able to respond to them. We do not merely see or hear things, however; we make sense of them. In order to care for creation, we need to be able to navigate our environment, understand how things work, and plan what to do next. Basic visual abilities like being able to perceive patterns and recognize others are also included here.

Second, we seek meaning through understanding of experiences. This aspect has a creative component because we often work at making sense of our experiences. In the Bible, people are described as understanding (and often misunderstanding) Jesus's words. For example, when miraculous events occur, the disciples discuss their meaning.<sup>66</sup> They, like us, want to figure things out. For the disciples, as is the case for us, fuller understanding comes through God revealing his truth to us, particularly when trying to understand God.<sup>67</sup> Nevertheless, as Evans<sup>68</sup> has stated, part of our nature is to be thinkers. This leads us to seek meaning.

Finally, there is a third dimension to meaning seeking: the human desire for a deity. Part of what makes us a unique creation is the ability to contemplate our own existence and seek its meaning. Christians believe that because we are made by God and meant to be in relationship with him, ultimate meaning comes from God who created and redeems his people. Romans 1 states that we have the ability to contemplate God.

For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse. For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like a mortal human being and birds and animals and reptiles.<sup>69</sup>

66. E.g., Mark 9:10.

67. Examples in Matt. 16:12; 17:13.

68. Evans, "Concept of the Self," 5.

69. Rom. 1:20–23.

Under Theme 2, we talked about the effects of sin separating us from God, trying to make ourselves individual gods. Attempts at individual self-fulfillment dominate people, but those individual desires can never fill the gulf that has been created between God and each person.

While people have a sense of the divine that pushes us toward worship, that sense gets misguided as we look for ultimate or even just intermediate levels of meaning in our individuality rather than in God. Note the turnabout that occurs in the last sentences of the passage from Romans 1. Rather than worshiping God, people turn to worship other things—perhaps things more easily understood, tangible, and possibly manipulated by people.

For Israel, it was worship of a homemade golden calf when Moses was away getting the Ten Commandments.<sup>70</sup> For us today, despite self-perceptions of being independent and autonomous, we are actually very willing to be guided, and what we serve easily becomes what we worship. To get an idea of what you serve, as Christian pastor Kyle Idleman has written, think about how you spend your time and your money.<sup>71</sup> What gets the most of your devotion? In what do you get your sense of identity or security? Certainly there is a distinction between spending time doing something (e.g., studying or working) and worshipping something (e.g., seeing your worth as a person rise or fall with your grade point average or financial status). The point is that for humans, it is easy to have something take the place of God.

In the end, meaning seeking is more than just how we think about things; it is what we do, and it ties directly to our propensity to worship. James K. A. Smith emphasizes that our worship takes up our reasoning and emotion, and that a Christian view of persons must emphasize our desires—our fundamental intentions that can occur in largely unconscious and strongly emotional ways.<sup>72</sup> As Smith has stressed, humans cannot be reduced to just our rational characteristics. People have desires, and we direct these toward what is and becomes most important to us. These desires show what we worship—what is our god.

### *Human Meaning Seeking and Psychology*

Psychology also shows that we are meaning seekers. We do not let events go unexplained—we demand explanations for everything from the cause of car accidents (traffic investigations) to why a team won the Super Bowl (the postgame interview and analysis). People try to put the elements of a situation

70. Exod. 32.

71. Idleman's *Gods at War* takes up the notion that what Christians worship (other than God) can become an idol that becomes valued and honored.

72. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 51.

together to make a sensible story. In our desire to “make sense of our world,” as Myers writes, “we are prone to perceive patterns.”<sup>73</sup> This brings together both our simple pattern perception and our creative meaning making. As you go through this book you will see that this sort of meaning making, both accurate and inaccurate, is the basis of human sensory processes and perception, and is fundamental to what we do when thinking and to both forming and recalling memories. The idea that humans are predisposed to make meaning—to figure things out—is increasingly common within many areas of psychology. This is obvious, from cognitive and physiological psychologists studying how patterns of light captured by the back of the eye result in our instantaneously recognizing a friend’s face (imposing meaning on meaningless stimuli) and from counseling psychologists exploring how people work through a strained marriage to improve it.

Looking for gods is uniquely and utterly human. Developmental research in the cognitive science of religion echoes the Bible’s notion that people are born to believe. Researchers, having studied children’s beliefs and citing developmental evidence that “religion is natural,”<sup>74</sup> have proposed that children may be “intuitive theists”<sup>75</sup> or “born believers.”<sup>76</sup> In many ways, however, psychologists have neglected to consider this basic aspect of personhood. Many psychologists have maintained a mechanistic (“person as machine”) view of humans. From that view, humans are driven by more simple, practical goals like survival, avoiding pain, seeking pleasure, and learning. Despite these more mechanistic views, there are also psychologists who believe humans are the only species strongly motivated to understand why we exist and to find a deeper purpose. For example, humanistic psychologists like Carl Rogers<sup>77</sup> and Abraham Maslow<sup>78</sup> proposed that people are moved to attain self-actualization, which includes meaning and purpose. Other, more recent positive psychologists like Martin Seligman<sup>79</sup> likewise propose that the happiest people are those who have a deep sense of meaning in their lives. There may be helpful elements in all these perspectives. We don’t know about you, but we generally try to avoid pain. But we believe that Scripture points to a strong internal tendency in humans not only to seek meaning but also to act based on what we feel is meaningful.

73. Myers, *Psychology*, 20.

74. Bloom, “Religion Is Natural,” 147–51.

75. Keleman, “Are Children ‘Intuitive Theists’?,” 295–301.

76. Barrett, “Cognitive Science of Religion: What Is It and Why Is It?,” 768–86.

77. Rogers, *Way of Being*, 120.

78. Maslow, *Motivation and Personality*.

79. Seligman, *Authentic Happiness*, 14.



Psychologists have a lot to say about how we think and how we seek meaning, and some of their conclusions have implications for what we worship. Psychologists are also interested in what we desire and hold as most important in our lives and why. Some psychologists have shown that in our search for meaning, we show a self-serving bias; that is, we tend to perceive our world in a way that fits beliefs that we already have.<sup>80</sup> Some areas of psychology also make claims about what should be most important to us—what we desire. This is particularly the case in an area known as evolutionary psychology. How the issues of meaning and worship play out in psychology will be addressed further in several chapters.

## ■ A Look Forward

What does psychology tell us about these relationships between God, others, and creation? Psychological science is all about the exploration of our interactions with and understanding of the world—its things and inhabitants, including ourselves—and tries to characterize those scientifically. Christianity asserts that we're made not only for such physical interactions but also for a spiritual relationship with God. There are some things that psychology can tell us about our relationship with God. Psychology can empirically (e.g., using scientific observation) study our attempts to relate to God. It's possible to objectively observe activities like how often one goes to church, gather self-reports of how much one prays, or measure on a scale of 1 to 10 how important one believes God is in life, but this only gives us part of the story. We *cannot* study God's interactions with us in an empirical way. Claiming that God's actions are responsible for what someone does simply is not a scientific explanation—it does not count by science's rules, as we will discuss in the next chapter. So psychology's understanding of our relationship with God and, even more so, God's relationship with us, has a significant limitation. However, psychology's abilities to look at how we relate with humans (who are physical) and the world (also physical) are much more promising. When dealing with objectively measurable causes and consequences, science can operate. So it will be these relationships and the characteristics of humans that are pertinent to them that we will focus on as we proceed with this book.

In this chapter, we began with the significance of being made in God's image. "If humans are created in God's image, we should expect to see certain

80. Worthington, *Coming to Peace with Psychology*, 177.

characteristics appear in psychological studies of humans.”<sup>81</sup> The biblical truths about human nature will not always allow us to accept or reject the multitude of specific theories, research, or practices in psychology, but they can direct us to accept or reject certain presuppositions or views that inform our theories and practices. Each of the major areas within psychology has a particular focus when describing humans. The remainder of this book will look at how major areas of psychology—biological, clinical, cognitive, developmental, social, and others—approach humans and how these approaches fit with the biblical depiction of humans.

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### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

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1. Can psychology add further insight to a biblical view of human nature? If so, how do we take up the findings of psychology yet still be true to the Bible’s view of human nature?
2. Do people differ in their level of agency, depending on their psychological status? Do people with limited intellectual capacity have less agency, and if so, does one also have less responsibility?
3. Is it possible to measure God’s action in this world with physical evidence?
4. How does our drive for meaning influence how we interpret actions in the world? Does our drive to make meaning influence whether we perceive physical events as supernaturally caused?
5. Did our fundamental drive for meaning lead to science?
6. What constraints are on your life? What has held you back if you ever wanted to change yourself—your study habits, your weight, your exercise patterns, perhaps something as seemingly simple as how often you say “um” in a sentence?

81. *Ibid.*, 183.