

2221 Theory & Practice 1: Lecture 2

How to critically evaluate psychological theories

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Material given follows that given by Jones and Butman (1991) (J & B) in their *Modern Psychotherapies*, chap. 1 The Integration of Christianity and Psychology.

J & B point out that the emotional and mental pain of our time has provoked many Christians to begin working to alleviate that pain and to use the insights of psychology in that work.

However, some Christians are indifferent and even hostile to psychology and psychotherapy claiming that these are at best delusions and at worst Satanic.

J & B describe their book as an effort to "think Christianly about the modern approaches to psychotherapy" (p. 18). This goal has been understood as the *integration* of psychology and Christianity or of psychology and theology.

1. How does Christianity relate to Psychology?

J & B approach this question with a most important introduction (pp 18-19). Christians typically believe that the faith is related to such things as religious worship, religious belief, religious experience and morality. But, what about art and literature? What about physics? What about politics? Is it possible that there could be distinctive Christian approaches to these areas? Can you have a Christian approach to Mathematics? Others would say, 'but isn't $1 + 1 = 2$ regardless of whether you are a Christian or not?'

However, if we say that such Christian approaches are impossible, we imply that the word of God is not universal and does not impinge on every area of human life. We imply that Christians have to live in two worlds (sacred and secular) rather than in one created world, fallen, but on its way to a complete redemption (Romans 8: 21).

J & B do not emphasise the word "integration" but rather talk about studying reality in the light of the biblical revelation. That is, we can also study *psychotherapy* in the light of the Word of God. What we need to do is look at the thought and practice of psychotherapy through the lens of the scriptures.

We don't need to integrate psychology with theology to make it Christian.¹ We need to realise that Christianity is not a theology, which is the scientific study of Christian faith. Christianity is a way of life that embraces every dimension of human culture, including theology, a way that follows Jesus the Messiah towards God the Father in the power of the Holy Spirit. Talking about God is not, strictly speaking, theology although we often talk as if it is. Christian theology is the scientific or theoretical study of the Christian faith. Remember also that the Word of God in scripture is not equal to theology; however, it would be a poor theology that did not take into account what the Scriptures have to say. But, theology is always the work of fallible, human

minds and is necessarily limited by its scientific, theoretical character. Jones and Butman report that there are:

a) Destructive and Constructive Modes of Integration

A number of opponents such as Adams, Bobgan, Hunt, and Kilpatrick are extremely critical of Christian efforts to use non-Christian insights in their therapies. They argue that because Freud, for example, was wrong in his view of humanity there is nothing positive to be gained from studying or using his work. Their destructive stance reminds us that critique is a necessary part in our assessment and use of non-Christian authors.

However, there is a constructive approach to non-Christian work too. We learn about our physiological side from non-Christian physiologists, or are treated for medical problems by non-Christian doctors using methods developed by non-Christian medical researchers. That being true, why should it be strange to note that we can also learn from non-Christians in the area of psychotherapy? Indeed, it would be very odd if this were not the case! Despite the fact that non-Christians have not received the Christ of God into their lives, they are still made in [or 'as'] God's image and still live in God's world.

b) The Two Stages of Constructive Integration

The two stages given by J & B are:

i) critical evaluation

The aim is "to retain the good and discharge the bad"² (p. 22).

However, they also add that to construct a coherent model we need also to

¹ In fact, all attempts to do this have been spectacularly unsuccessful even after 25 years of work on the project.

²This procedure seems to appeal to Rom 12: 9, "Let love be without hypocrisy. Abhor that which is evil; cleave to that which is good" (ASV).

ii) theory-build

J & B see their book as part of stage 1.

J & B's work has much to offer. Critical evaluation is vital in the area of counselling because we are teaching CTs how to live according to the Way. Many, if not most Christian counsellors are far too uncritical in their use of this or that technique. We are overly pragmatists and tend to grab at anything so long as we are understood to be doing something.

I do not believe counselling practice should be, or even can be, *controlled* by theoretical endeavour. The value of counselling seems to rely on common factors found to some extent in all counselling practices (Frank, 1971). Theory has its place but it cannot dictate the shape of counselling praxis totally. Moreover, it has been observed that highly skilled CRs practising different modes of cng appear to be more *alike* than poor CRs using those different modes. In other words, the more skilled one gets, the more alike other people using different frameworks one becomes! Additionally, many people, like me, find it boring to be tied down to one way of doing things. Your greatest assets are your personal helping qualities, your own personality. Do not lose faith in the Spirit to be able to help others through using those qualities of availability, of confirmation, of engendering hope, faith and love.

c) The Dangers of Integration

J & B state three dangers:

i) many therapies and counselling theories are antagonistic, sometimes overtly often subtly, to the Christian faith. This opposition can affect Christians working in the area;

ii) because counselling deals with core issues re the nature of humanity the likelihood of error is higher than those areas where such issues are not so directly involved;

iii) psychotherapy itself places therapists in powerful positions in relation to their clients. Opportunity for pride is very real and may easily ensnare the immature Christian.

d) Criticisms of the Task of Integration

Four core arguments against integration:

i) Bible is sufficient to meet all human needs (2 Tim 3:16f; 2 Pet 1:4; 3:14-18).

Answer: We should realise that the passage in Timothy relates specifically to the OT! In any case, the scriptures are said to be 'useful' for 'doctrine' etc. not sufficient to the extent that no other source can be used. The passages in 2 Peter do not even speak about the scriptures at all. [See J & B's full answer on p 26, 27]

ii) Only two sources of counsel in the world, God and Satan. To base counselling on anything other than the bible (i.e., on psychology) is to base one's counselling on something Satanic.

Answer: This objection almost equates God and the Bible. God's revelation of himself is restricted to the Bible and comes to us in no other way but the Bible. The problem with view is that the Bible itself teaches otherwise. 'The heavens declare the glory of God and firmament [sky] showeth forth His handiwork' (Ps 19). See also Romans 1: 18-20. [See answer on pp 27, 28.]

iii) Psychology is bad science. Even non-Christians affirm that psychology and psychotherapeutic science are misguided. For example, Hans Eysenck [who was a behaviourist!] has argued that non-behaviourist therapy such as psychoanalysis is worse than useless.

Answer: The criticism uses the evaluation of one school of psychology against another! This approach can hardly sustain the argument that psychology itself is useless; only that certain types of psychology are worthless. [See also p. 28f.]

iv) Christian psychology or psychotherapy is joining two religions together and thus is a form of syncretism.

Answer: We must take this criticism seriously as a possible pitfall into which we may fall. I think I have been guilty of marrying together unbiblical elements with Christian understandings. However, I don't think that we should reject the enterprise of developing Christian ways of helping people which cannot be derived directly from the pages of scripture. I don't believe the scriptures were given to us to provide us with all the answers to counselling in the 21st century. [See also p. 29.]

2. Methodology for Christian Appraisal

Critical evaluation of counselling practices and theories can take *two* forms.

First, the evaluation can be of an external nature whereby, as Christians (or Marxists etc.) we argue that this method is not consistent with the Christian faith as we understand it taking into account the Bible, early creeds, tradition, 'sanctified common sense' stemming from general revelation, and experience. This type of evaluation has its place within the Christian community but is more limited outside the community of Christ.

Second, the evaluation may stand on the ground of the advocate and show that if one does this consistently then the advocate is involved with implications that make the viewpoint unworkable.

Francis Schaeffer was a strong proponent of this second type of evaluation³. He mentions how he debated with a young man who was arguing that all parts of creation are of equal value. (I think the young man was some sort of pantheist.) Schaeffer went to the stove where a large pan of water was boiling and held it over the head of man and said, 'Are you really telling me that you are not worth more than

³ He wrote among other books, *Escape from reason* IVP (1968).

ground, on which I could also pour this water?’ This type of pantheism seemed OK until one tried it out in this dramatic way.

[Break into groups, and using these two approaches, develop a short critique of behaviour therapy (BT) evaluating two of its tenets: 1) humans are nothing more than their overt, external behaviours; 2) human behaviour is controlled by external events, either what takes place before the behaviour (antecedents) or what takes place after (rewards or punishments). That is, human behaviour is determined by outside forces.]

Jones and Butman also propose the following 6 elements as a way of providing a framework for a critical evaluation of counselling practices and theories. We will again look at BT and develop more fully a critical evaluation.

a) Philosophical Assumptions

Each therapy we study will tend to have philosophical assumptions about the world, (e.g., Where did it come from? Where is it going?), knowledge, (e.g., How do we know what we know? How is science to be related to non-scientific knowing), people, (e.g., What sort of being is humanity?). Diagram on p. 31 shows some of the philosophical roots of the various therapies.

Both BT and its cognitive cousin (CBT & CT) are based on a *naturalistic worldview*. Naturalism is the belief that nature is all that exists. Nothing exists beyond nature. Such a worldview dominates western society's today challenging the Christian faith, which teaches that God made all creation

(including 'nature') and remains transcendent over it as well as immanent within it.

BT and the behaviouristic tradition have a view of knowledge, which is a challenge to the Christian faith. Knowledge was first understood as that which could be ascertained through inductive, empirical (what one can experience directly by the senses and measured) means and then moved on to *logical positivism*. The latter embodied a principle that said that if the phenomena could be empirically verifiable or falsifiable then it would count as authentic area for science to explore. (Bear in mind, that science is understood as the primary if not only avenue to authentic knowledge.) But, God cannot be perceived with the senses; therefore, God could not be a legitimate area of study. However, someone finally worked out that the emperor had no clothes on because the principle itself could not be empirically verifiable or falsifiable! However, embarrassing as this discovery was, the principle continued to be used in a so-called 'weak' form.

Another principle that BT embodies is the notion of *reductionism*. We can see this expressed in the program of 'micro-skills' training, which exerts such a strong hold over tertiary counsellor education and even over Christian Counselling Association registration requirements! This principle is based on the understanding that the counselling process is too big to teach trainees; so, what we must do, is to break that process down into smaller steps that are easier to learn as discrete skills.

b) Model of Personality

A major aspect of any therapy is the model of human personality which informs it. Scripture does not give us a theory of humanness but by looking at human personhood through a lens that has been polished by scripture and using Christian

written resources, we can attempt to formulate ideas for appropriate models. We need to do justice to the many-sidedness of humanness (social, religious, intellectual, cultural, sexual, economic, emotional, instinctual etc), to the centeredness of humanness (heart, soul, spirit), to the sinfulness of humanity, to the image of God and of Christ in humanity. [See Olthuis, J. (1994) in library for you to photocopy.]

BT accepts the notion that only what can be understood in behavioural terms is legitimate for the study of humankind. However, one can understand I hope that BT is not expansive about 'personality' as such. What is important for BT is behaviour; overt, external, measurable behaviour.

c) Model of Abnormality

Answers questions about how humans became disordered and implies how that disorder can be righted. How compatible are these answers with the Christian faith? [Note: often they will be compatible as long as we do not accept that the explanations given are a full explanation. That is, they may be partially correct.]

BT's explanation of what has gone wrong is that a client has maladaptive behaviours that are cued by their antecedents and reinforced by their consequences. CT has too few adaptive behaviours that might help them overcome these maladaptive behaviours.

d) Model of Health

Every therapy seems to have some vision of human wholeness alongside its view of human disorder.

BT suggests that 'wholeness' is achieved when we behave in adaptive rather than maladaptive ways.

e) Model of Psychotherapy

Many techniques are suggested for healing. Most believe their distinctive techniques bring healing. Is this a biblical way of belief? (Only one therapy, existential therapy, does not advocate techniques as such.) Furthermore, many therapies advocate a one-factor cause for emotional distress.

Contrary to popular opinion, BT is not concerned to try to change behaviour *directly* but *indirectly*. BT does not focus on behaviour directly but focuses specifically on what comes before 'target' behaviour occurs (antecedents) and what comes after a target behaviour occurs (consequences). Efforts are made to alter these antecedents and consequences so that more adaptive behaviours are increased and maladaptive behaviours are reduced.

f) Demonstrated Effectiveness

Some therapies have subjected their approaches to scientific evaluation more than others have. We need to consider such research while realising that therapies can work without scientific confirmation. Also, be aware, that science cannot tell us if this therapy will work with this specific person, I have before me. It may be able to say that this type of therapy appears to be more effective than another therapy when we compare two matched groups of people. Hence, science also speaks in terms of generalities, not in terms of specifics.

BT claims to be scientifically validated with many hundreds of studies that demonstrate that various problems can be alleviated by use of its techniques. However, others would claim that to treat CTs using BT is to treat them like machines. Moreover, even a one-person study (and many BT

studies are single-subject studies), cannot predict whether this technique will work with another person.

Some of the points you may have identified were that from a Christian point of view, the Scriptures and our common lives testify to the fact that we are more than our behaviours. We all have an inner life that is joined to our outer existence but each of these has a real existence. We also encounter others, who like us, have intentions, beliefs, convictions, thoughts, feelings, and sensations, none of which may be registered in overt behaviour.

If we were to try to live in a world where we only took account of behaviour, what might happen to us and to those around us?

We would certainly be viewed as lacking insight or as somewhat dim-witted in terms of human relationships. We would not be able to take the point of view of someone with regard to his or her feelings about a matter. When that question was asked of us, 'Well, how do you think she felt about that action you took?' we could only look at a loss.

References

Jones, S. L., & Butman, R. E. (1991). *Modern psychotherapies: A comprehensive Christian appraisal*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.

**SIX ELEMENTS OF CRITICAL
EVALUATION OF COUNSELLING
THEORIES & PRACTICE**

from Jones & Butman (1991)

a) Philosophical Assumptions

b) Model of Personality

c) Model of Abnormality

d) Model of Health

e) Model of Psychotherapy

f) Demonstrated Effectiveness