

Steering Between the Extremes: On Being a Christian Scholar Within Psychology

By David G. Myers

376 "The Devil...always sends errors into the world in pairs—pairs of opposites. And he always encourages us to spend a lot of time thinking which is the worse. You see why, of course? He relies on your extra dislike of the one error to draw you gradually into the opposite one." C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, Book IV, Ch. 6

William Sanderson's advocacy of psychology's empiricism (CSR VIII:1), Mary Stewart Van Leeuwen's provocative critiques of psychology's empiricism (CSR XI:4, and XVII:4), and James D. Foster's perceptive response to Van Leeuwen (CSR XIII:3) have offered CSR readers valuable stimulation in thinking through a Christian approach to the behavioral sciences.¹ Like C. Stephan Evans,² and in parallel with psychology's feminist and Marxist critics, Van Leeuwen sensitizes us to how Christians may unthinkingly buy into a psychology that apprentices a positivistic science of bygone days. Recognizing that knowledge and knower are inseparable, she urges us to build our psychology upon a biblical anthropology and to harness methods that exemplify Christian ethics. Foster defends psychology. He notes that deception and stress do not typify psychological research and he champions the sciences and humanities as independent fields of inquiry, each with their own integrity.

After two decades doing experiments and then digesting research for introductory and social psychology textbooks, I paused to reflect on the points and counterpoints raised by Van Leeuwen, Sanderson, and Foster. My aims, here, are to affirm points scored on both sides of the debate, to illustrate why scientific methods continue to be productive, and to suggest that we Christian psychologists now agree sufficiently to move beyond debating one another.

On the one hand, Van Leeuwen persuades me that we psychologists, and those who consume our writings, are indeed often blind to hidden presuppositions and values. For example, because we in Western culture presuppose the *independent self*, we interpret behavior in terms of personal inner traits and we encourage people to discover and to express their unique sense of self. We do so oblivious to

In this essay David G. Myers addresses the tensions among Christian psychologists between approaches sympathetic to the empiricist "mainstream" in psychology and critiques of empiricism which advocate a "distinctively Christian" approach to psychology. While avoiding both extremes, Myers ends up nearer to the mainstream than to the critics. Mr. Myers teaches psychology at Hope College.

the Asian presupposition of the *interdependent self*, with its interpreting of behavior in social contexts and its encouragement of social sensitivity and cooperative harmony.³ Moreover, our values influence our definitions of mental health and disorder, of self-actualization and fulfillment, of moral and sexual maturity. And values influence our psychological language: whether we call sexually restrained individuals "erotophobic" or sexually conservative, whether we label those who say nice things about themselves on personality tests as "high self-esteem" or "defensive," whether those who respond to social cues should be congratulated for their "social sensitivity" or disparaged for their tractable "conformity."

Moreover, in science, as in everyday thinking, our preconceptions operate like a flashlight, selectively bringing some part of the world into view. Our theory-guided information processing appears in some striking experiments. We humans readily exhibit "confirmation bias" (by searching for information that confirms our preconceptions), "belief perseverance" (by clinging to our rationalized ideas after their initial basis has been discredited), and "overconfidence" (by being more confident than correct in our judgments).

Why are we so error-prone? Because, cognitive psychologists report, our information processing capacities are limited, our attention to the world around us is selective, and our mental constructions of the world—our "schemas"—reflect our needs and propensities. Our schemas helpfully and efficiently represent the world. But for their help in filtering and organizing information we pay a price—a constrained and sometimes biased view of things. In experiments, people shown ambiguous evidence will typically read it as supporting their predisposed views (say, for or against the effectiveness of capital punishment).⁴ Thus the American presidential debates have served mostly to reinforce people's predebate opinions; by nearly a 10 to 1 margin, those who already favored one candidate or the other in the 1960, 1976, and 1980 debates perceived their candidate as having won.⁵

So, Van Leeuwen, and psychology's own research, persuade me: psychological science is not a dispassionate, purely objective, fact-gathering process. Nor should it be atheoretical. Theoretical concepts aid us by distilling and organizing

¹I am indebted to Martin Bolt, John Brink, Thomas Ludwig, Ronald Philipchalk, John Shaughnessy and three anonymous reviewers for their cogent comments on previous drafts of this paper.

²C. Stephan Evans, *Preserving the Person: A Look at the Human Sciences* (InterVarsity Press, 1977) and *Wisdom and Humanness in Psychology: Prospects for a Christian Approach* (Baker Book House, 1989)

³H. Markus and S. Kitayama, "Culture and the Self: Implications for Cognition, Emotion, and Motivation." *Psychological Review*, in press.

⁴C. G. Lord, L. Ross and M. Lepper, "Biased Assimilation and Attitude Polarization: The Effects of Prior Theories on Subsequently Considered Evidence," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 49 (1979): 2098–2109.

⁵D. R. Kinder and D. O. Sears, "Public Opinion and Political Action," in G. Lindzey and E. Aronson (Eds.), *The Handbook of Social Psychology*, 3rd ed. (Random House, 1985).

countless observations into a short list of predictive principles that guide research and application. Viewing human behavior through the eyes of a theory beats viewing it haphazardly. Faithful Christians will therefore struggle to view *Psychology Through the Eyes of Faith*⁶ (to use a book title that reflects Van Leeuwen's influence). Christian teachers, scholars, and writers will want not only to be true to their own values, but to expose hidden values and to view contemporary research through the lens of Christian concepts, such as pride, evil, and finiteness. This much one can do even for a secular audience, thus adding fresh credibility to ancient Christian ideas.

On the other hand, I sense an opposite danger in the anti-science views among Christians in psychology (whose views are accentuated in the anti-psychology sentiments of some Christians outside of psychology). If one peril is failing to allow our theological reflection to stimulate and inform our scientific thinking, the other peril is intellectual hubris—presuming to have a corner on God's truth. If some Christians are too ready to swallow psychology-as-it-is, others seem too eager to impose their own Christian view of things on the natural world.⁷ Being wary of secular presuppositions, they would, for example, have us develop a new Christian psychology that is rooted in biblical presuppositions (much as Marxist psychologists have advocated making "dialectical materialism...the guiding principle for psychological science"⁸).

The idea seems to be that, because science is so ideological—they who seek shall find—we might as well substitute *our* ideology. But isn't this science-is-ideology extreme as naive as the scientists-just-read-nature extreme? True, knowledge cannot be separated from the knower. Yet there is a real world out there, and observing it can move our preconceived ideas toward a closer approximation of truth. Any research psychologist can offer a list of preconceptions shattered by data. Two decades ago, many of us believed that sleepwalkers were acting out their dreams, that hypnosis or brain stimulation could uncover long-buried memories, that newborns had few perceptual competencies, that electroconvulsive therapy was a barbaric and ineffective treatment for prolonged depression. Put to the test, these and other ideas have suffered the fate of Oakland's Highway 880 during the San Francisco Bay earthquake.

An example from this week's reading: One intriguing finding from memory research is that the things we experience in one context (while drunk or sober, in

⁶David G. Myers and Malcolm A. Jeeves, *Psychology through the Eyes of Faith* (Harper and Row, 1987).

⁷An example: If we interpret the Bible as teaching that people *choose* (or do not choose) their sexual orientation, we may discount evidence to the contrary and may judge accordingly those who feel strongly attracted to those of their own sex. But of course the assumptions we bring to Scripture influence the interpretations we make of it, which in turn influence our view of the world. Must we therefore jettison our biblically-based presuppositions? No, but we had best hold to them in that spirit of humility that respects truths revealed both in God's word and God's world.

⁸C. C. Ching, "Psychology in the People's Republic of China," *American Psychologist* 35 (1980): 1084–1089.

one place or another, at one time of day or another) are best recalled when we are again in the same context. A corollary of this phenomenon is the tendency for depressed or joyful people to recall things previously experienced in that same mood state. Thus depressed people tend to recall depressing events, which helps prolong their depression. In some early laboratory explorations of this phenomenon, Stanford psychologist Gordon Bower found that people who learned lists of words while made to feel happy or sad, best recall these words when again put in the same mood. Now, in further experiments, Bower and his associate John Mayer report that "In six very disappointing studies we were unable to find stable evidence for the [mood-dependent retrieval] effect. . . . The failure to find a mood-context effect in these. . . experiments impacts negatively upon many theories which expect it [including] the first author's earlier theory of mood as a retrieval cue."⁹

Another example: Several of the famous old personality theories, including Freud's, assume that parents' child-rearing styles mold their children's personalities. Assuming this to be true, mental health workers and magazine articles teach parents how to help their children become outgoing, self-confident, even-tempered, successful adults. Thus parents of such children feel pride in their achievement, and parents of shy, unstable, hot-tempered, troubled children are torn with guilt. Although it is still a well-kept secret outside the profession, research psychologists now know this received wisdom to be false. The "most surprising" finding of behavior genetics research is not that these and other traits are genetically influenced, but that they are *not* appreciably influenced by the home environment shared by siblings.¹⁰ Identical twins reared together—with the same parents, same diet, same day or home care environment, same social class, same schools—are hardly more similar than identical twins reared separately. Moreover, adopted siblings have personalities hardly more alike than any two people compared at random.

Given that the demonstrated heritability of these traits is roughly 40 to 50 percent, what else accounts for our individual personality differences? The researchers reason that it must be, assuming some other factor is at work (no one attributes the unexplained variation to free will), *nonshared* experiences—experiences specific to an individual's life. Apparently, what affects each child is not the parents *per se*, but how the individual child interacts with and experiences them, plus all sorts of other individual experiences—with friends, teachers, and so

⁹Gordon H. Bower and John D. Mayer, "In Search of Mood-Dependent Retrieval," *Journal of Social Behavior and Personality* 4 (1989): 121-156.

¹⁰David C. Rowe, "As the Twig is Bent? The Myth of Child-rearing Influences on Personality Development," *Journal of Counseling and Development* 68 (1990): 606-611. Robert Plomin and Denise Daniels, "Why are Children in the Same Family So Different from One Another?" *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 10 (1987): 1-16. Expert critiques following the Plomin-Daniels article all acknowledge that its fundamental point is now incontestable: shared family influences have virtually no discernible effect on personality.

forth. Thus, regardless of who reared them, separated identical twins recall their adoptive parents as showering them with a similar amount of warmth—suggesting that some children's genetically influenced traits elicit warmth from their lucky parents, while other children trigger exasperation.¹¹ Because of such findings, old ideas about how home environments shape personality are undergoing revision. As Agatha Christie's Miss Marple explained, "It wasn't what I expected. But facts are facts, and if one is proved to be wrong, one must just be humble about it and start again."

As these examples illustrate, science involves a tension between two ideals—an openness to new ideas and "the most ruthless skeptical scrutiny of all ideas, old and new."¹² In the ever-reforming spirit of humility, error-prone ideas are put to the test. "One makes provisional theories and waits for time or fuller knowledge to explode them," remarked Sherlock Holmes.¹³ If our observations support our ideas, so much the better for them; if not, so much the worse for them. This is the approach advocated by Moses more than 3000 years ago: "If a prophet speaks in the name of the Lord and what he says does not come true, then it is not the Lord's message."¹⁴

To be sure, theory-guided empiricism can be exaggerated into a naive objectivism that assumes our experience mirrors reality. As we perceive it, so it is. Actually, our perceptions depend on where our attention is drawn and on our expectations. An example: people who form a wrong idea about an image, based on a badly blurred picture, have more than usual difficulty perceiving what it is as the picture comes into focus. Thus our perceptions arise from the interaction between stimulus and perceiver, between what's out there and what goes on in our heads. Amateur astronomers can readily see constellations of stars in what others see as random patterns. At a deeper level, people may see the heavens, which declare the glory of God, yet not see that the heavens are declaring God's glory. "What we learn from experience depends on the kind of philosophy we bring to experience," emphasized C. S. Lewis.¹⁵

So, observing the world through the eyes of faith *can* affect what we see; and empirical testing *can* modify our thinking. Belief guides perception. Yet when prior beliefs collide with observation, beliefs do sometimes change. Knowing that no one is immune to error and bias, we are therefore wary of absolutizing human interpretations of either natural or biblical data. If our values and ideologies guide, but also sometimes cloud, our view of reality, we must strive to clean our spectacles through rigorous scientific and biblical scholarship. (Objectivity, like

¹¹Robert Plomin, G. E. McClearn, Nancy L. Pedersen, John R. Nesselroade, and C. S. Bergeman, "Genetic Influence on Childhood Family Environment Perceived Retrospectively from the Last Half of the Life Span," *Developmental Psychology* 24 (1988): 738–745.

¹²Carl Sagan, "The Fine Art of Baloney Detection," *Parade* (1987, February 1).

¹³In Arthur Conan Doyle's "The Adventure of the Sussex Vampire."

¹⁴Deuteronomy 18:22, TEV.

¹⁵C. S. Lewis, *Miracles* (New York: Macmillan, 1947), p. 11.

righteousness, may be an unattainable ideal, noted Donald MacKay,¹⁶ but that is no grounds for dismissing it.) And believing that both natural and biblical data reveal God's truth, we seek to integrate them and to allow our scientific and theological understandings to challenge and inform each other.

Surely, those of us who have participated in these debates can therefore agree on this much: that we should steer between the two extremes of being co-opted by a value-laden psychology that pretends to be value-neutral, and being seduced by an unrestrained subjectivism that dismisses evidence as nothing but collected biases. Perceiving only one of these concerns as valid, we are vulnerable to becoming like the drunkard described by Martin Luther who, having fallen off his horse on the right, would then proceed to fall off it on the left. To complete C. S. Lewis's observation, above, "We have to keep our eyes on the goal and go straight through between both errors."

Although my appreciation for psychology's Christian critics is genuine—I pay more than lipservice to their reminders that hidden presuppositions and values should be exposed—my personal sympathies admittedly lean toward the empiricists. Comparing Christian critiques of psychology to the psychology that I read triggers three further observations in defense of empiricism:

First, *contrary to several Christian critiques of psychology, the science of behavior and mental processes remains vibrant*. Some critics have reported that psychology's empirical research has given us only a) sterile little facts that are irrelevant to the everyday lives of warm-blooded human beings and b) a wrangle of disagreements over the important issues, thus opening the door for a growing post-empirical humanistic movement. One can find psychologists who say these things, much as one can find biologists who dispute evolution, but they do not speak for the discipline.

True, Skinnerian behaviorism has waned—no need to whip that dead horse any more. (In today's world of cognitive science, minding is our business.) And not many hands will rise among research psychologists asked to identify themselves as good old-fashioned positivists. Today's researchers may not be as self-consciously aware of their social ideology and values as Van Leeuwen and others would advocate. But with the demise of radical behaviorism, it's hard to find a psychologist who won't acknowledge that objectivity gets compromised and that many important questions cannot be framed empirically.¹⁷ The critics have a valid point, but they needn't continue slaying the horse that nobody is riding. In academic circles, the influence of Freudian and humanistic psychology, too, is waning—their heroes mostly dead and gone, their hopes for a new psychology mostly unfulfilled. What remains are a) some empirical methods for wrestling with nature, b) enough unanswered questions to drive our curiosity and renew our sense of mystery about "things too wonderful" for us understand—about

¹⁶Donald M. MacKay, "Objectivity in Christian Perspective," *Journal of the American Scientific Affiliation* 36 (1984), p. 235.

¹⁷M. J. Mahoney, "Scientific Psychology and Radical Behaviorism: Important Distinctions Based in Scientism and Objectivism," *American Psychologist*, 44 (1989): 1372-1377.

how, say, a material brain organizes formless impulses into colorful sights and conscious ideas—and c) some hard won insights into brain and mind, depression and joy, learning and memory. Is any thinking person not intrigued by recent findings concerning

- *the functions of our two brain hemispheres,
- *genetic influences on various traits, from handedness to schizophrenia,
- *the remarkable competence of human infants in relating to their caregivers,
- *the stages through which a child's mind matures,
- *the effects of experience on the brain's neural networks,
- *the nature of intellectual changes with aging,
- *biological constraints on the basic mechanisms of learning,
- *influences upon adolescents' use of psychoactive drugs,
- *how eyewitnesses construct, and then reconstruct, memories,
- *those simple, efficient, but fallible thinking strategies that we call "heuristics,"
- *things that make us forget, and help us remember,
- *the components of intelligence,
- *the interplay of biological and psychological factors in hunger and obesity,
- *the effects of stress on our body's immune system,
- *cognitive mechanisms linked with depression,
- *the attitudinal and behavioral effects of viewing different forms of pornography,
- *influences upon prejudice and attraction, hurting and helping,
- *the roots and fruits of a sense of personal freedom, control, and self-efficacy, and
- *the ways in which our concept of self guides our information processing.

(Those concerned that psychology is reductionistic and unappreciative of the self as a reflexive agent may be reassured to know that in 1988 the word "self" appeared in more than 5500 book and article summaries in *Psychological Abstracts*—almost triple the number fifteen years earlier.)

Are these advances suspect because they are empirically rather than biblically derived? John Calvin reflected that we cannot read the best minds of our time "without great admiration. We marvel at them because we are compelled to recognize how preeminent they are. But shall we count anything praiseworthy or noble without recognizing at the same time that it comes from God?"¹⁸ As Agnes Clerke declared in her century-old *A Popular History of Astronomy* (1893), we know that

What has been done is little—scarcely a beginning; yet it is much in comparison with the total blank of a century past. And our knowledge will, we are easily persuaded, appear in turn the merest ignorance to those who come after us. Yet it is not to be despised, since by it we reach up groping to touch the hem of the garment of the Most High.

Second, the "integration" debate regarding psychology and religion typically addresses big themes (values, empiricism, freedom and determinism), but not the meat and

¹⁸John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, II, II, 15–16 (John T. McNeill, ed., Ford L. Battles, trans.; Westminster, 1975, p. 274).

potatoes questions that psychologists spend their days working on. I, for one, would welcome being sensitized to Christian ideas and values pertinent to research such as has come across my desk within the last two days—concerning the effects of aerobic exercise on depression and anxiety, the long-term consequences of teen drug use, trends in gender and racial prejudice, new developments in artificial intelligence, people's misperceiving normal "streaks" in random sequences of basketball shots and stock market fluctuations, and influences on eyewitness accuracy in line-up identifications. But such nitty-gritty analysis seldom happens. (Christians' reflections upon moral development, self-esteem, and sexual orientation are notable exceptions.) With the battle against positivism and scientism essentially won, it's time to address more specific ways in which faith can inform psychological science.

This leads to the third observation: *in psychology, we need more Christian scholars not in the stands but down on the playing field.* We benefit from having some people in the stands, surveying and reflecting upon the whole game below. Let us be thankful for the perceptiveness of such critics and the reminders they give us to remember who we are. But let there also be Christians who, by getting into the game, provide their witness to the larger intellectual community. If we are to be the "leaven in the loaf" we must get in the loaf. As C. S. Lewis once declared, "We do not need more Christian books; we need more books by Christians about everything with Christian values built in."

If this is our Father's world, if "in everything we deal with God," if God is indeed the author of all truth, then it becomes not just our right to investigate and seek truth, but our religious duty. Our charge is to worship God with our minds, by whatever methods seem appropriate to the subject at hand. Philosopher Nicholas Wolterstorff said it well several years ago in urging the Christian psychologist to occupy the academy

as a Christian who sees the world in the light of the gospel, but occupy it also as a psychologist, not as one who surveys the scene from outside and now and then makes some clucking noises, but as one who participates in the nitty-gritty of actual psychological explorations. Do not just be a critic. Be a creative initiator, faithful in your thinking as in your doing the gospel of Jesus Christ.¹⁹

¹⁹Nicholas Wolterstorff, "Integration of Faith and Science—The Very Idea," *Journal of Psychology and Christianity* 3 (1984), pp. 12-19.