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Lifelines: Psychological Theory

Three significant recent trends in the psychological sciences have important implications for pastoral care. These relate to the study of mood (especially the nature of depression), personal identity, and unconscious motivation. In each area new developments or ways of thinking are sending ripples through Christian culture.

First, there has been a shift in the way people think about depression. Previously reticent individuals now talk of their low mood and its treatment; others who would never have considered themselves afflicted are ready to consider it. I shall discuss two recent books on the subject. One seeks to explain why we are still miserable, despite being better off materially than ever before. The other reminds us of the sovereign importance of having an emotional life and of not messing around with it unnecessarily.

Second, our fascination with understanding the meaning of persons and individual identity has taken a further turn in the direction of integration and wholeness. As we shall see, a deeply thoughtful and yet oddly frozen watchfulness runs unacknowledged through the work of two authors whose aim is the search for the meaning of persons by combining theology, science and psychology.

Thirdly, a previously forbidden land is being explored gently, and rare trophies are being returned for cautious perusal by thinking Christians and psychotherapists. Christian spirituality in what ever sense it is taken, from the beautiful pedantry of Orthodox liturgy to the Toronto Blessing, will always attract the quizzical and occasionally supercilious frowns of those who seek to psychoanalyse inner motivation. Similarly, the products of such endeavours have been routinely sneered at by those Christians who feel threatened. Offerings by two psychoanalysts, one an evangelical insider and the other a diffident academic, provide useful preliminary charts of the *terra incognita* which is the science of the unconscious as it relates to pastoral awareness.

Strange music

In the last few years it has become less of a stigma to be depressed. Of course depression assumes many different forms and the word itself has become so abused as to be almost meaningless. Grinding hopelessness, low mood, lack of energy, poor concentration, loss of libido and suicidal fantasies are the stuff of true clinical depression at one end of the scale; a vague sense of personal pointlessness is at the other.

A new breed of anti-depressant drugs which inhibit the re-uptake into nerve cells (and therefore increase available concentrations) of the transmitter substance serotonin have taken the place of Valium as the most common prescription after the pill and antibiotics. Prozac is the most celebrated and so it might be supposed that this class of drugs marks a major advance in the treatment of depression. Not so. There is very little good evidence that the serotonin re-uptake inhibitors are any more effective than the older type of anti-depressants for true clinical depression.

How then do we account for the massive use of this class of drug? Oliver James, in *Britain on the Couch*, thinks he knows the answer: we are less happy than we were forty years ago.¹ This is related to low levels of serotonin and these low levels are environmentally triggered and maintained. James labels the society that results the 'Low-Serotonin Society'. Citing the study of a population of captive monkeys, James describes how high-status primates had high levels of blood serotonin as compared with those of low-status individuals. Further, and crucially, when the environment was manipulated and these high-status individuals were frustrated or demoted, their serotonin levels dropped. Those individuals artificially promoted showed a corresponding rise. With appropriate ethological caveats, the author makes the leap to human kind. Could it be, he wonders, that low-status people and those who, for whatever reason, have their self-esteem undermined relentlessly, also have a low serotonin level?

At the heart of James' assertion that we are a Low-Serotonin Society are two premises (that there is a higher incidence of unhappiness in low-status individuals, and that unhappiness, i.e. aggression, obsessive compulsive disorder and depression, is linked to low serotonin); and a conclusion (that low status is responsible for low serotonin levels). While there may be some truth in each of the three elements there is no compelling evidence presented which links them properly. There is probably just as much aggression, obsessive compulsive disorder and depression amongst those of higher status as low. It is, perhaps, just better socialized. Serotonin blood levels in the body (from where samples are always taken) are not a reliable indicator of brain serotonin levels – otherwise psychiatric researchers and clinicians would use them and they do not. In any case, there is little understanding of how well the concentration of unattached molecules of serotonin in the blood relates to activity on the membrane of the serotonin-sensitive nerve cell. Although there may be a correlation between notional social status in primates and serotonin levels, the concept of self-worth and value in the human species is, of all things probably least analogous to that of our evolutionary cousins, along with ethics, faith and morality.

A Low-Serotonin Society is an easy idea to grasp and easy to interlock, as James does, with an analysis of the ills of capitalism. Inevitably, it gathers its own momentum regardless of merit. Oddly, the author fails to spell out clearly one of the most compelling pieces of indirect evidence for his thesis that there is a low-grade deficiency of serotonin in our society: the possible link between the popularity of Prozac and the mood enhancing effects upon those who aren't clinically depressed but find their sense of well-being improved by it.

1 For details of this book, and the others mentioned in this lifeline, see the list at the end.

A valuable companion read is *A Mood Apart – A Thinker's Guide to Emotion and its Disorder*, by Peter Whybrow. Whybrow is a British psychiatrist and now Director of the Neuropsychiatric Institute at the University of California. In a moving and appropriate style Whybrow shares with us his emotional response in the aftermath of his father's death. We get to measure up our own low moods, melancholia or frank depression against his. The effect, no doubt deliberate, is to soften up the reader so that he or she cannot easily pretend that the rest of the book is about someone else.

Exquisitely observed case studies follow. One person is stuck in the deep grinding emotional desert of clinical depression while the other has a kind of mania. By skilfully blending anecdote and professional explanation, the author avoids sentimentality or intellectualization, and so illuminates the nuts and bolts of mood disorder with simple candour.

Next we learn about the development of the emotional self, the art of diagnosis through the science of phenomenology, something of the physical building blocks of the brain as they pertain to emotion, and the effect of environmental factors, such as the seasons, on mood. This middle section alone is worth the price of the book, especially for its painstaking evocation of the complex mixed emotions experienced in the many mental illnesses. It is clear, relevant, accurate and entertaining.

Whybrow attempts, largely successfully, to bring all that he has covered together into some sort of useful synthesis. The evaluation and control of emotion is discussed first, using memorable and practical staging posts: stress, the benefits of personal vulnerability, and the unicorn that is the feeling of control. Second, importantly and with an easy clarity, Whybrow delves into the topical and contentious realm of brain chemistry and the use of medication for altering mood. It is at this point that he engages usefully, if briefly, with Oliver James and then moves on to consider our capacity for self-management and regulation. Whybrow succeeds here where Oliver James fails, because he recognizes and responds to the fact that everyone has different capacities for personal insight, reflection, and emotional housekeeping. In this context he celebrates the contribution that all mood brings to our lives. Extensive notes for each of the chapters are to be found laid out with user-friendliness and further references for the curious. This is followed by exhaustive double indexing for both subject and persons mentioned.

Shadow behind the pillar

A new twist in the evolution of our sense of self and consciousness has recently emerged. In *Being a Person* by John Habgood and *In Search of Personality* by Peter Morea, the authors, one a former archbishop, the other a psychologist, set out to reveal the compatible aspects of scientific psychology and Christianity and then integrate them to create a new perspective on the notion of personality. Of course there's nothing new about combining psychology and religion, but of particular interest are the emergent properties of the combination in the wildly different hands of these two writers. As I implied earlier, the importance of these books, and any others that might emerge on the same theme, is that they speak to a kind of anxious

rootlessness which many think pervades society and to which the church is struggling to face up.

In *Being a Person*, John Habgood's intent is to draw on material from a variety of disciplines and then make some useful connections from a Christian standpoint. His thesis is that theology has a role in holding these different insights and perspectives together. Two ethical cairns in the mire that is modern medical ethics recur as reference points throughout the discussion. These are abortion and persistent vegetative state (PVS).

Tackling first the issue of personal identity, Habgood invokes the likes of Dodgson's Alice, Kafka, Bruno Bettelheim and the television programme *Blind Date*. This *mélange* leads eventually into a more detailed and provoking overview of the issues embodied in PVS and abortion. Leaving this to hang in the air, Habgood pulls in historical evidence for each step of his journey towards his main thesis. Two high points are the valid and perceptive use of the poetry of Elizabeth Jennings – sadly underrated in recent years – and an entertaining and timely polemic on the negative legacy of Cartesian dualism. Next, via the rather rickety bridge of postmodernism, we learn how three strands of scientific thought can contribute to the search for a practical sense of personhood. First, the boom-subject of consciousness: what is the difference between mind and brain and where does 'me' live? Second, the central place of language in appreciation of the self (polyglots think differently depending which language they are using). Third, the role of evolution in shaping our basic assumptions. By this point in the book, both author and reader are ready for the theological input. Habgood argues that we cannot know fully what we are as persons without acknowledging the possibilities of self-transcendence and the obvious part that God might have to play in it. There is, of course, a potential *cul-de-sac* here: transcendence is almost certainly ultimately beyond understanding, and therefore so is personhood. The author never quite faces up to this and pushes on to the close with a fly-past over loss, old age, memory deterioration, genetics and morality in the context of being a person.

Much more tightly argued is Morea's *In Search of Personality*. Using the writings of six Christian intellectual giants, Morea creates a conceptual framework in which he is free to corral his arguments and persuade us of his point of view. He calls selectively upon Augustine, Kierkegaard, Thomas Merton, Pascal, Teresa of Avila and Karl Rahner to give evidence.

Augustine is set in the context of his similarities to and differences from Freud on the subject of human free will. Later on, the important consequences for a Christian concept of personality are drawn out by comparing the non-judgemental approach of Freud to free will and the moralizing position adopted by Augustine. Kierkegaard, we learn, had a different angle on choice. He believed that this fundamental determinant of our personality was the means by which we make commitments and therefore define ourselves. Taking this a step further, our sense of alienation is left behind when we choose to commit to God. Influenced by these and other existential teachings, Merton, a Trappist who died in 1968, believed that there is a terrifying void at the centre of the human self. The void can be filled only by God, but that experience is also terrifying. We are therefore caught in a tension as we try to move towards the light but cling to the darkness.

The principal source for Morea's examination of Pascal is the *Pensées* (1670). We learn, among many other things, that the place of intuition in Pascal's sense of things is important and brings in the welcome notion of the value of a modicum of unreason in our lives. At first, the intriguing Teresa of Avila seems to be the joker in the pack but under the author's careful guidance we discover someone who, in many ways, presaged the archetypal imagery of dreams and imagination that Carl Jung described and which many people recognize from their own experience. Bit by bit we see that Teresa's notion of personality is of a journey towards the True Self but one where reason gives way to imagery and meditation as the path to transcendence becomes narrower and less well defined.

The Jesuit Karl Rahner died as recently as 1984 and is the last of Morea's witnesses. He believed that the material world, as it impinges upon us as organism and is projected into our inner sensorium, forms the portal to a true experience of God. The difficulty, says Morea, is recognising it as such.

Having examined these six different Christian views of personality, Morea uses the last part of the book to bring the threads together. It is in this section where the potential disaster lurks, for he has to find a way of integrating the Christian perspective with the humanist view of the likes of Freud, Descartes, Jung, Maslow and others. At this point lesser minds might have resorted to anti-humanist polemic, their hope being, presumably, that they would be able to disguise their bewilderment behind trenchant principle. Not so Morea, and here we see conclusive proof of not only his integrity but also his grasp of his subject. In an open handed and permissive way he encourages us to surrender to the processes behind ways of seeing ourselves other than that of traditional Christian dogma. Morea writes with clarity of expression and authority of argument. This naturally leads one, with the help of the excellent bibliography, to explore further.

Unthought knows

Temperamentally and ideologically, Christians are seldom prepared to embrace the implications of the existence of an unconscious inner world, motivating and driving us in ways of which they are rarely aware. This is perhaps most true of that section of our faith which draws comfort from dogmatic certainty. However, little by little, the value and importance of psychoanalytic explanation and models of inner-world functioning are being recognised by the pastorally aware. The notion that analysis offers awareness, and that awareness leads to new and nourishing choices, is gaining a toehold.

Neville Symington is not a well-known writer outside the dusty libraries of psychoanalysis. This is not a good thing, for he writes with common sense and lucidity on a subject routinely rendered opaque and arcane by those with less wit and integrity. In *Emotion and Spirit* he accepts that psychoanalysis, starting with Freud, has aggressively denied the validity of religious belief and experience. He makes the case that both traditional religion – and this clearly encompasses Christianity – and psychoanalysis are failing because they exist apart and do not attempt to incorporate enough of each other's insights and values. Symington argues that religion needs psychoanalysis so that it can become more relevant to people's emotional lives and their intimate relationships. Further, psychoanalysis needs religion so that it can contain those core spiritual values which give life

meaning. Perhaps surprisingly, this book is all the better for the fact that the author is personally more attracted to Zen than Christianity. There is no pervading sense of off-stage dogmatists whom he must keep happy. Indeed, he argues that for a fertile relationship both need to relinquish some dogma and rituals and to reveal deeper values which both want to express. There is plenty to take issue with as Symington works his way from Socrates to super-ego giving refreshing insights into the likes of narcissism, conscience and prayer.

In my own book, *The Pastoral Encounter*, I have tried to examine what exactly goes on when someone approaches a pastor for help. Like Symington, though for different reasons, I believe that a working sense of the validity and influence of the unconscious will equip the hard-pressed pastor with a fresh set of antennae and allow them a certain level of constructive self-preservatory paranoia when dealing with tricky, stuck or needy situations. I have drawn freely upon my experience, my knowledge and from those texts that have, as the bibliography will reveal, informed my thinking from before the age of ten to the present day. By taking this approach I hope that I have not only reflected the spontaneous nature of the unconscious world, which abides by few rules, but also produced a book that readers of this series will find absorbing and stimulating. My aim is to invigorate readers and, by taking them to places they may not have knowingly been in the human psyche, to encourage them to explore the emotional world between themselves and their clients with increased sensibility. The book is in three sections. In the first section I tackle ground over which there is much disagreement amongst Christians: the concept of the individual. In the second section I explore some of the hazardous waters encountered in the hidden depths of pastors themselves such as their unmet needs and the development of a pastoral heart. Lastly, in section three, I look at some more of the practical implications thrown up by acknowledging the existence of unconscious forces in pastoral work and its implications for, amongst other things, spontaneity and dependency.

In conclusion it is perhaps worth noting that any worthwhile observation in the arcane world of mood, identity and the unconscious involves the capacity of the individual quietly to attend. To be both knowing and at the same time available to the new or unexpected thought or event takes courage. It is my opinion that the greatest courage in a pastoral setting is shown by the individual who can nurture quietness when others demand explanation and direction.

Dr Brice Avery is a psychiatrist, psychoanalytic psychotherapist and writer, based in Edinburgh.

Recommended reading

(Books listed in the order in which I have discussed them).

Oliver James, *Britain on the Couch*, Random House, London 1997, £16.99, 402pp.

Peter C. Whybrow, *A Mood Apart*, Picador, London 1997, £17.99, 363pp.

John Habgood, *Being a Person*, Hodder & Stoughton, London 1998, £8.99, 307pp.

Peter Morea, *In Search of Personality*, SCM Press, London 1997, £14.95, 234pp.

Neville Symington, *Emotion & Spirit*, Cassell, London 1996, £12.95, 186pp.

Brice Avery, *The Pastoral Encounter*, HarperCollins, London 1996, £8.99, 189pp.