



EDITORIAL

Special Section: Cura Psychologia: Jesuit Education and the Work between Theology, Philosophy, and Psychology

The Psychological Humanities and Jesuit Higher Education

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The field of psychology has undeniably come to exert an outsized influence upon moral formation in contemporary society. As the discipline that supplies us with much of the language we use to articulate our suffering, our identity, and even the *telos* of our lives, psychology's cultural impact is enormous, and its reach is only growing. Americans today seek psychological services at a staggering rate. The demand for such interventions is increasing, with the number one use of GenAI being psychological care. Psychology is perennially listed as one of the most popular majors in American universities. The number of mental health professionals entering the field has quadrupled since the mid-1990s. Indeed, that figure has increased by 8 percent in the last two years alone. Psychology's interpretations of human development and wellbeing are embedded in our educational systems, our religious institutions, and the ways we train professionals in every sector. After more than a century of growth, psychology has become ubiquitous, its concepts and techniques acting as the water in which the modern self swims.

Yet in spite of the dramatic increase of access to psychotherapeutic resources and care, the general population's mental health outcomes continue to worsen. Hospitals and clinics are overrun with patients bearing the physical alignments that accompany psychological distress. Educators are being asked to double as counselors and offer therapeutic interventions within

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their classrooms. Social commentators highlight the significant upticks in loneliness, anxiety, loss of meaning, and deaths of despair. And all of us feel the toll of the mental health crisis on our families, our communities, our schools, and our professional lives. What accounts for this disconnect? How can it be that, at a time when psychological wellbeing receives so much cultural attention, psychological suffering continues to rise?

Within the field itself, a large number of practitioners and theorists have begun to recognize the need to reground psychological discourse in moral sources and reorient psychotherapeutic care by adopting a conception of personhood attentive to questions of responsibility, character, virtue, and flourishing. Psychology as it is currently constituted assumes a shallow, reductive anthropology, one ill-equipped to help practitioners care for patients struggling with questions of meaning, purpose, and the ethical problems of human life. What is needed, many therapists contend, is to return psychology to its first principles with the help of the disciplines that birthed it: philosophy and theology. Yet, at a time when those within the field are expressing a desire for a more mature, capacious discipline, a number of barriers, both practical and ideological, stand between the entrenched status quo and the realization of a more virtuous psychological science.

In order to help catalyze the work that needs to be done to meet this growing demand for a more humanistic approach to psychology, Boston College's Center for Psychological Humanities and Ethics recently undertook a three-year project, generously funded by the John Templeton Foundation, which sought to introduce psychologists and psychotherapists to the rich resources made uniquely available by Jesuit Catholic universities. The goal of the project—called the “Cura Psychologia Project” in order to acknowledge the influence of the Jesuit emphasis on *cura personalis*—was to address the barriers outlined above and expand psychology's capacity to speak about character virtue development by reformulating the way psychological science is practiced at six Jesuit Catholic Universities: Boston College, the College of the Holy Cross, Fordham University, Georgetown University, Loyola Marymount University, and Seattle University. Creating an interdisciplinary community of eighteen faculty ambassadors from these six institutions, the project sought to equip scholars and students with the tools needed to better approach the moral and religious questions at the heart of human existence.

What did that look like and how was the work undertaken? As advisors on the project, perhaps we can share an example to help illustrate the work. The idea behind Cura Psychologia was simple enough: the disciplines of psychology, philosophy, and theology share a fundamental concern of understanding what it means to be human, and yet the methodologies they

employ and the languages they use are radically different. What would it look like for scholars from each of these fields to come together and learn from one another? One thing we recognized early on was that it is far easier for scholars and practitioners from diverse intellectual backgrounds to engage with one another when they are discussing something outside of their area of expertise, something they can appreciate and enjoy whether they have a deep theoretical knowledge of it or not.

In anticipation of the first convening, therefore, we asked participants to read Tolstoy's slim masterpiece *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, a work of singular genius that deserves to be read by anyone who wants to understand suffering and know how to better care for those in need. The conversation that arose around that text was astonishing. There, in a room full of highly accomplished academics, we had colleagues share stories of their first encounters with death, of the helplessness they have felt having to sit by and watch loved ones suffer, of their own fear of mortality and the various ways it shapes their lives. It was a stirring, powerful discussion occasioned by our shared appreciation of a beautiful work of art.

That art and literature and the great religions and ideas, which have inspired awe and wonder throughout all of human history, can help us to better understand ourselves and one another ought not to surprise us. Indeed, at some level, we already know this, which is why we refer to films and song lyrics and lines of poetry when we want to express that which we find most inarticulable. And yet for various reasons—some historical, some political, some merely accidental—we deprive ourselves of access to these rich resources of insight and meaning when it comes time to think deeply and scientifically about the human condition. It is just this problem that the psychological humanities seeks to address, and Jesuit institutions are ideally situated to help psychology to do so.

As a discipline that takes seriously the contributions of psychological science, and yet holds vigorously that science becomes a better version of itself when it is put into dialogue with philosophy, theology, history, and literature, the psychological humanities works to broaden the discourse and practice of psychology such that it can entertain questions of meaning, value, and ethical responsibility. These are the questions that stand at the foundation of Jesuit spirituality and education. And in the articles collected in this special section, readers will be introduced to some of the cross-disciplinary work produced by the philosophers, theologians, and psychologists associated with the Cura Psychologia Project.

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