



RESEARCH ARTICLE

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

## Can Psychology Improve Lives and Solve the World's Challenges Without Grounding in the Humanities?

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### ABSTRACT

Can psychology fulfill its aspiration to improve lives and solve the world's challenges without a grounding in the humanities? Drawing on the American Psychological Association's 2024 call for social impact and the multi-year *Cura Psychologia* Project across six Jesuit universities, this article argues that psychology's ethical, civic, and clinical vitality depends upon sustained engagement with philosophy, theology, literature, and history. Written collaboratively by a philosopher, a psychologist, and a theologian—each also a practicing psychotherapist—we examine how *cura personalis* and discernment within Jesuit higher education re-situate psychology within moral discourse and the common good. Through the example of Seattle University's existential-phenomenological MA in psychology, we illustrate how humanities-informed training cultivates moral deliberation, spiritual competency, and resistance to reductive scientism. Reclaiming psychology's historical concern with the "soul," we contend that integration with the humanities strengthens clinicians' capacity to address suffering, foster meaning-making, and promote human dignity in an era of cultural fragmentation.

### Keywords:

psychology; humanities; Jesuit education; *cura personalis*; psychotherapy

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DOI: 10.51238/jeq.WsZL002

Received: 30 June 2025 | Accepted: 15 August 2025

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## Introduction

Modeled on the Jesuit ideal of educating the whole person (*cura personalis*), the Cura Psychologia Project aimed to reintegrate scholarship and traditions from the humanities into psychology programs and, in doing so, deepen the moral, intellectual, and civic character of students and professionals in psychology. The project involved faculty ambassadors from six Jesuit universities (Boston College, College of the Holy Cross, Fordham University, Georgetown University, Loyola Marymount University, and Seattle University), who engaged in three years of dialogue toward this end.<sup>1</sup>

This article is a collaborative effort between a philosopher (JV), a psychologist (KMP), and a theologian (JR) who participated in the Cura's biannual convenings. Interestingly, all three of us are also psychotherapists practicing from different theoretical orientations but all tasked with accompanying the suffering other. The call to improve lives and solve the world's challenges was a focus of the American Psychological Association's 2024 convention. We examine that aspiration as it manifests in Jesuit higher education programs in psychology. In addition, we explore how our different disciplines manifest in one graduate program in psychology in a Jesuit University and offer an example for other universities beyond the Pacific Northwest.

## The Humanities

Within academia, there is disagreement about what the humanities means and entails.<sup>2</sup> For the sake of this article, we define the humanities as scholarly disciplines that study human expression, thought, belief, and culture, including interpretation, critical evaluation, and meaning-making.<sup>3</sup> The humanities reflect the rich terrain of human experience and provide psychology with the foundation for its exploration of meaning and purpose in human experience. In particular, the humanities are essential to psychological theory and the healing work of psychotherapy, as they study human society and culture, the lived context of psychological phenomena. Further, the shared endeavors of scholars from each of the Cura's identified

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1 David Goodman, *Cura Psychologia: Cultivating a More Virtuous Psychological Science*, accessed January 6, 2025, <https://www.bc.edu/content/bc-web/academics/sites/Psychological-Humanities-Ethics/faith/Cura-Psychologia.html>.

2 Deborah Pike, "The Humanities: What Future?," *Humanities* 12, no. 4 (2023): 85, accessed March 16, 2026, <https://doi.org/10.3390/h12040085>; Simon During, "What Were the Humanities, Anyway?," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, August 31, 2020, accessed June 6, 2025, <https://www.chronicle.com/article/what-were-thehumanities-anyway>; Helen Small, *The Value of the Humanities* (Oxford University Press, 2013).

3 Pike, "The Humanities: What Future?" 85.

disciplines represent a tangible practice toward the Cura's goal of infusing psychology with the wisdom of the humanities. Integration of different disciplines happens when their scholars and thinkers find a common starting point or place of inquiry that they then explore together—recognizing that each discipline has its own methodologies and questions. This becomes the catalyst for change that the Cura seeks in departments of psychology.

The Cura Psychologia's intention to reinfuse the study and practice of psychology with the humanities is not without precedent. The intense scientism of contemporary psychology is a distinctly North American phenomenon of the twentieth century. Disciplines such as philosophy and theology were rejected from the study of psychology to align it with medicine and science.<sup>4</sup> Even so, psychology has been transformed as psychologists integrated the scholarship of other disciplines to further understand and attend to the suffering other. Ignacio Martin-Baro, a priest and psychologist, redirected theological knowledge and psychological research to serving the people of El Salvador in their pursuit of freedom.<sup>5</sup> Feminist psychologists drew upon scholarship in feminist theory and gender studies to create a theoretical foundation for feminist therapy, and to critically examine oppressive practices that have been taken for granted in psychology.<sup>6</sup> Phenomenology has been crucial to post-World War II psychology and psychotherapeutic practice, with its hermeneutic variant posing an alternative both to scientism and to the individualistic humanism of third-wave psychology.<sup>7</sup> What we are proposing has a secure scholarly lineage despite the dearth of humanities scholarship in most contemporary psychology training programs.

### Jesuit Character

Founded in 1891 on the traditional homelands of the Lushootseed-speaking Coast Salish peoples, Seattle University is a Jesuit Catholic university located in the heart of Seattle, Washington. As faculty members at Seattle University, our work is grounded in a humanistic tradition that is committed to the flourishing and full development of the human person (*cura*

4 Jason Wirth, personal communication, May 8, 2024.

5 Ignacio Martín-Baró, *Writings for a Liberation Psychology*, ed. Adrian Aron and Shawn Corne (Harvard University Press, 1994).

6 Laura S. Brown, *Subversive Dialogues: Theory in Feminist Therapy* (Basic Books, 1994).

7 Ronald S. Valle and Steen Halling, *Existential-Phenomenological Perspectives in Psychology: Exploring the Breadth of Human Experience* (Plenum Press, 1989); Louis Sass, "Humanism, Hermeneutics, and the Concept of the Human Subject," in *Hermeneutics and Psychological Theory*, ed. Stanley Messer, Louis Sass, and Robert Woolfolk (Rutgers University Press, 1988), 222–71.

*personalis*). The characteristics of a humanistic education are not limited to but include the humanities, especially history, literature, philosophy, theology, and the arts—all disciplines that explore human experience.

While we are committed to the mission of higher education, we recognize that the important element of a humanistic education is not solely the acquisition of knowledge. The growth and formation of our students as people is equally important. As Kolvenbach noted, “the real measure of our Jesuit universities lies in who our students become.”<sup>8</sup> We assist in this formation, hoping to foster in students the skills, values, and ethics necessary to contribute to bodies of knowledge for the benefit of all. This formational posture fuels, directs, and guides our commitment to the care of the whole person—psychologically, spiritually, intellectually, physically, and emotionally.

Central to *cura personalis* is discernment, a practice of reflection on experience, situations, feelings, and interior movements to better articulate desires and purpose. The goal is to free us from falsehood and awaken us to love, life, and dignity for all.<sup>9</sup> Because this Catholic tradition is communal, with an understanding that the self is a relational self, we are concerned for the common good; moving us from a purely individual orientation to caring for the whole of humanity and all of creation.

### Facilitating Growth

There are several entrances to Seattle University (SU), an urban campus located between the hospitals of First Hill and a historically Black neighborhood (the Central District), and just north of Little Saigon in the International/Chinatown District. Turning off 12th Avenue, or East Madison Street, or any other main arterial surrounding campus. Dreamed of and nurtured by several gifted master landscapers over the decades, it is a space of foliage and fecundity. In the 1960s, honored Japanese gardener Fujitaro Kubota, along with Fr. Raymond Nichols, rescued trees marked for demolition from around the Puget Sound area and replanted them on the SU campus. Among them are many of the towering evergreens seen today.

Two decades later, the head of the grounds department, Ciscoe Morris, eliminated pesticide use on campus and created a restorative place for

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8 Peter-Hans Kolvenbach, S.J., “The Service of Faith and the Promotion of Justice in American Jesuit Higher Education,” *Santa Clara Lectures* 23 (2000): 10, [https://scholarcommons.scu.edu/sc\\_lectures/23](https://scholarcommons.scu.edu/sc_lectures/23).

9 Kathleen Fischer, *Women at the Well: Feminist Perspectives on Spiritual Direction* (Paulist Press, 1988).

migrating birds as well as a sustainable, toxin-free environment for all.<sup>10</sup> Walking through the campus is like ambling through a relaxed Pacific Northwest version of a Japanese garden that creates delight in those who behold it.<sup>11</sup> Christian tradition recognizes the importance of the senses and affect to an understanding of what moves the human heart.<sup>12</sup> Sensate experiences are abundant on the SU campus as a source of solace and inspiration.

Like many Jesuit universities, Seattle University was built in a part of the city where most people traditionally had no access to higher education, because of financial constraints or discriminatory housing practices or any of several other exclusions. Also, like most previously neglected urban cores, the campus is beset by gentrification. As Kolvenbach noted in his Santa Clara lecture, “this juxtaposition of mission and microchip is emblematic of all the Jesuit schools. Originally founded to serve the educational and religious needs of poor immigrant populations, they have become highly sophisticated institutions of learning in the midst of global wealth, power, and culture.”<sup>13</sup> Currently there are several boutique cocktail destinations and James Beard Award nominees within a five-minute walk from campus. Yet the looming presence of the juvenile detention center to the south, as well as the many unhoused on sidewalks surrounding campus, pushed out by increasing unaffordability in the neighborhood, remind the university community that all is not well. There is suffering and profound economic inequality surrounding this lush campus. The mission of the university is still essential: “empowering leaders for a just and humane world.”<sup>14</sup>

In his June 1982 commencement address at Santa Clara University, Ignacio Ellacuría, S.J., the systematic theologian, philosopher, rector, and president of Universidad Centroamericana in El Salvador, declared that, as a social force, universities must be concerned with social realities—what Latin American liberation theologians and psychologists termed *la real-*

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10 See Seattle University’s *Climate Action Plan 2010–2035* for the history of the campus, <https://www.seattleu.edu/media/seattle-university/cejs/campus-sustainability/files/Seattle-University’s-Climate-Action-Plan-2010-2035-v1.2.pdf>.

11 We suspect it creates delight even in those who are not consciously noticing, since the smell of pine, the pop of pink from the late-winter hellebores, or the feel of a floating sedge on an arm as one runs to class is a gentle invitation to be noticed.

12 Georgina Zubiria, “Mi Corazon Me Dice Que te Busque (Sal 26),” in *Diabonia Servicio De La Fe Y Promocion De La Justicia*, trans. Jeanette Rodriguez (Centro Ignaciano de Centroamerica, 2001), 61–65.

13 Peter-Hans Kolvenbach, 2000.

14 Seattle University, “Mission, Vision & Values,” accessed March 10, 2025, <https://www.seattleu.edu/who-we-are/mission-vision-values/>.

*idad*. Further, Ellacuría asserted that awareness of that reality must lead to efforts to transform systems of oppression and lessen suffering. This involves analyzing the causes of suffering and using imagination, creativity, and community to find remedies and solutions to social problems. In doing so, universities must educate and form people with an ethic and a conscience to see suffering and enact transformation that inspires freedom, agency, and self-determination. It is not enough to be professionally capable or intellectually and academically proficient. Educators, researchers, clinicians, and students must also be ethically oriented.<sup>15</sup>

### History and the Common Good

The critical psychologist Philip Cushman said that psychotherapy is historically situated: its ideals, standards, concepts, and practices are not timeless. They are instead under ongoing scrutiny, development, and reinterpretation. While we are used to thinking of a science or practice undergoing change as the field progresses, it is easy to forget that the very framings of that science or practice—its modalities, ethical procedures, and method itself—fall into this process as well. According to Cushman,

The contention that objective scientism not only is not foolproof and is sometimes unhelpful but also is part of the problem presents psychologists with a dilemma many are intellectually and professionally unprepared to deal with. How can the profession proceed ethically if it cannot depend on objective, procedural method to safeguard patients and determine the best care? One way to proceed is to undo the prohibition against engaging in moral discourse. Not only does moral authority not have to be ceded to disengaged procedure, in fact it cannot be: moral discourse does not get bracketed off, it just gets disguised.<sup>16</sup>

It's crucial to grasp that this is not a civic role that Cushman is admonishing psychologists to take on in addition to their clinical roles. His point is rather that psychologists are already involved in moral discourse—not only as observers, describers, commentators, and partners but as shapers. Our practices contribute, even if only by way of adherence and complicity, to discourses about values, integrity, and what constitutes human fulfillment. The moral issue facing us, therefore, isn't whether we should join a moral discourse and decide to influence culture; we do already. Cushman's

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15 Ignacio Ellacuría, S.J., Commencement Address of Santa Clara University, June 1982, accessed February 1, 2025, <https://www.scu.edu/ic/programs/ignatian-worldview/ellacuria/>.

16 Philip Cushman and Peter Gilford, "Will Managed Care Change Our Way of Being?," *American Psychologist* 55, no. 9 (2000): 992, <https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.55.9.985>.

challenge, as I (JV) hear it, is to make that involvement overt and take responsibility for an impact we already have. To be historically situated, according to Heidegger, is to be a “thrown projection.” In order to decide where we might go, we need to know where we are, which includes where we’ve been. The danger is not engaging in this reflection.

The difficulties in naming and engaging in the self-disguising moral atmosphere of contemporary psychotherapy are many, not least of which is the lack of a shared arena or discourse. No set of laws or universal ethics requirement can cultivate and sustain this conversation, and very few institutions (scholarly or professional) train their students to take this broad context into account. Only a conversation grounded in the humanities—in disciplines that jointly recognize and articulate our historical situatedness as an ongoing moral deliberation—achieves this, speaking not only for requiring more humanities exposure in social science programs but for demanding ongoing humanities-based discourse at the professional level as well. Early twentieth-century psychoanalysts were concerned with cultural and societal oppressions and the ways in which structures could create harm and negatively impact psychological well-being. This concern has been carried forward into contemporary theories and practices of multicultural, critical, and hermeneutic psychology.<sup>17</sup> The deep inner aspects of the individual are not the sole or exclusive domain of psychology; rather, psychology is a way to understand complex and sometimes contradictory human experience and to respond to societal forces of any era that are life-limiting.

As a scholarly discipline and professional practice, psychology is embedded in value-shaping and is thereby co-responsible for the good. These are concerns not solely of social psychology or multicultural psychology but also of the entire broader discipline. The need for moral discourse about the common good, healing societal as well as personal harms, and resisting oppression thus calls for a scholarly discipline and a practice informed by history, theology, literature, philosophy and the arts—the humanities.

### **Psychology and the Soul**

The study of psychology has always been connected to an understanding of the soul. In the Homeric epics, Psyche was considered “the breath of

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17 For further descriptions of sociopolitical context and psychology, see Philip Cushman, *Constructing the Self, Constructing America: A Cultural History of Psychotherapy* (Addison-Wesley, 1995); and Daniel J. Gaztambide, *A People’s History of Psychoanalysis: From Freud to Liberation Psychology* (Lexington Books, 2019).

life” because it left the body upon death.<sup>18</sup> According to *Merriam-Webster Online*, “in English, *psyche* often sounds less spiritual than *soul*, less intellectual than *mind*, and more private than *personality*.”<sup>19</sup> Early uses of “psychology” can be credited to a poet and two philosophers: the Croatian poet and humanist Marko Marulić (ca. 1520), the German philosopher and Calvinist Johann Thomas Freig (1575), and the German Lutheran philosopher Rudolph Goclenius (1590). Though their focus varied, and they did not define the term, these thinkers were concerned with the *soul* and the various ways in which it was understood.<sup>20</sup>

Psychoanalytic scholars have pointed out the loss of the spiritual and cultural context of early psychoanalytic theories. Bruno Bettelheim,<sup>21</sup> the Austrian-born psychologist and Freudian scholar, noted in his book *Freud and Man's Soul* how often Freud's writings and statements had been misinterpreted, and therefore misunderstood, when translated into English. Specifically, Freud's reference to the “soul” was lost to the “analysis” and scientific emphasis on psychoanalysis. Contemporary decolonial scholar and psychoanalyst Daniel J. Gaztambide believed that a more direct translation of Freud's writings would lead us not to “psychoanalysis” but to “soul analysis,” in an attempt to bring peace to our conflictual selves.<sup>22</sup> Otto Rank conceptualized the soul as “an evolving form, with a constant purpose that represents core beliefs of, or a force within, an individual or society toward life and aliveness.”<sup>23</sup>

While early psychological thought was deeply entwined with notions of the soul and later critiques highlighted the loss of its spiritual roots, contemporary voices continue to reclaim the connection between human experience and the divine.<sup>24</sup> In her article, “My Heart Tells Me to Look for

18 “The Evolution of Psyche through the Ages,” accessed March 2, 2025, <https://www.greekmyths-greekmythology.com/evolution-psyche-ages/>.

19 *Merriam-Webster Online*, “psyche,” accessed March 2, 2025, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/psyche>.

20 Sven Hroar Klempe, “The Origin of Psychology in the Humanities,” *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Psychology* (2020), accessed January 8, 2025, <https://oxfordre.com/psychology/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190236557.001.0001/acrefore-9780190236557-e-473>.

21 Bruno Bettelheim, *Freud and Man's Soul* (Knopf, 1984), 6–7.

22 Gaztambide, *A People's History*, 43.

23 Otto Rank, *Psychology and the Soul: A Study of the Origin, Conceptual Revolution, and Nature of the Soul*, trans. Gregory C. Richter and E. James Lieberman (Johns Hopkins University Press, [1930] 1998), xi.

24 For the historical intertwining of psychology and spiritual thought, see Henri F. Ellenberger, *The Discovery of the Unconscious: The History and Evolution of Dynamic Psychiatry* (Basic Books, 1970). For a critique of psychology's loss of soul, see James Hillman, *Re-Visioning Psychology* (Harper & Row, 1975). Contempo-

You,” Georgina Zubiria, R.S.C.J., writes that to speak about God is difficult. She notes that we always run the risk of reducing the experience of the divine into finite words and ideas that ultimately place God in a box.<sup>25</sup> Yet she argues that our very senses and feelings mediate this experience, and she contends that “our experience of God is born, grows, and is nourished through our humanity, through words and gestures, symbols and rites, human experience and conviction.”<sup>26</sup> These understandings (of the presence of a creative God in all) represent a pervasive form of spiritual life, mediating an innate human capacity to transcend our limitations through ideas, values, symbols, rituals. The recognition of God in life elevates us to discover, rediscover, retrieve, or uncover a hidden meaning or truth connecting us to the Divine. A review of the manifestation of spirituality shows a delicate balance between intuitive, logical, receptive, and active modes of consciousness.

According to Michael Yaconelli, “spirituality is not about perfection; it is about connection. The way of the spiritual life begins where we are now in the mess of our lives.”<sup>27</sup> Psychology must also include what may be called spiritual for the life of the individual but also for the common good if it is to avoid being a self-absorbed, disconnected practice. The spiritual journey is about movement beyond the self—especially toward greater unity with the life source—but this process takes place within the overall context of reality’s interdependence. In its broadest sense, spirituality centers on our awareness and experience of relationality.<sup>28</sup>

Experts tell us that more than 70% of US adults consider religion to be important in their lives and most clients want the chance to discuss religion or spirituality during therapy.<sup>29</sup> The literature also tells us that 80% of practicing psychologists believe that they received little or no training in

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rary reclaiming efforts are evident in works like David G. Benner, *Spirituality and the Awakening Self* (Brazos Press, 2012); and Thomas Moore, *Care of the Soul* (HarperPerennial, 1992).

25 Benner, *Spirituality and the Awakening Self*, 60.

26 Zubiria, “My Heart Tells Me,” 61.

27 Mike Yaconelli, *Messy Spirituality: God’s Annoying Love for Imperfect People* (Zondervan, 2007), 13.

28 Katherine Zappone, *The Hope for Wholeness: A Spirituality for Feminists* (Twenty Third Publications), 1991.

29 Gallup.com, “In U.S., 47% Identify as Religious, 33% as Spiritual,” September 22, 2023, accessed March 9, 2025, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/511133/identify-religious-spiritual>; Holly K. Oxhandler, Kenneth I. Pargament, Michelle J. Pearce, Cassandra Vieten, and Kelsey M. Moffatt, “Current Mental Health Clients’ Attitudes Regarding Religion and Spirituality in Treatment: A National Survey,” *Religions* 12, no. 6 (2021): 371, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel12060371>.

addressing spiritual or religious issues.<sup>30</sup> My own (JR) experience here in the Northwest is that some therapists refuse to work with anyone specifically in the Christian tradition with institutional religious conflicts. There is some evidence that religious and/or spiritual involvement can improve mental health. There's also evidence that religion has harmed and can cause harm to clients (e.g., LGBTQ, divorced Catholics, colonized communities). However, it is our vocation as clinicians to create conceptual spaces for clients to be able to explore not only their relationships, their work, their family, and the like, but also their opportunities to answer deeper questions about life—the “What’s it all about, Alfie?” questions. For centuries, philosophers and theologians have wrestled with the question of what it means to be human, recognizing that we’re more than just biological, social and/or psychological creatures; that there’s something in us wired to connect with something bigger than ourselves. This experience can be through a belief in God; maybe it’s feeling connected to the universe during a walk through Mount Rainier National Park or in exploring the depths of quantum physics; perhaps it’s in giving birth or in the moment of freedom and healing experienced through authentic reconciliation with another. These are all what theologians call sacramental moments. That is, they provide an opportunity for transcendence and a sense of expansion that can be articulated in both secular and religious language. The point is how we ethically and effectively make space for spirituality and avoid microaggression for people who come from a posture of belief. One way of responding is to take on a posture of curiosity, asking about religion and spirituality during initial sessions with a client.

In the Pacific Northwest, people say that they are spiritual but not religious; maybe they are curious about what that means. In 2023 Thelma Bryant, past APA president, stated in an interview: “If a large part of the way that people see themselves, make meaning, and understand and approach their challenges is connected to their faith, traditions, and beliefs, it is against our ethical guidelines to ignore that.”<sup>31</sup> Here are some questions we might ask as a way of exploring someone’s spirituality and/or processing it to discover meaning: what do they hold sacred or where do they find

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30 Cassandra Vieten, Shelley Scammel, Alan Pierce, Ron Pilato, Ingrid Ammondson, Kenneth I. Pargament, and David Lukoff, “Competencies for Psychologists in the Domains of Religion and Spirituality,” *Spirituality in Clinical Practice* 3, no. 2 (2016): 92–114.

31 Thelma Bryant, quoted in Zara Abrams, “Can Religion and Spirituality Have a Place in Therapy? Experts Say Yes,” *Monitor on Psychology* 54, no. 8 (2023): 67, accessed March 16, 2026, <https://www.apa.org/monitor/2023/11/incorporating-religion-spirituality-therapy>.

meaning in their life? Such questions already set the tone, showing that it's okay to talk about these things in therapy if that would be helpful to them. Other questions might be where are they most alive, what it means to be whole, and what they trust with every cell of their body.

As psychotherapists, we know that in working with trauma survivors, for example, it is important to pay attention to how religious and spiritual beliefs might relate to shame, blame, self-forgiveness, resilience, and the possibility of change.<sup>32</sup> I (JR) know that in my own clinical work there have been times when I've invited a spiritual guide or leader from the client's tradition to a session as a way of healing or resolving issues that the client has experienced. We want to have some competency in this area, but it means knowing when to, and be willing to, refer to, consult, or collaborate with other clinicians, who may have expertise in the intersection of spirituality and psychology.

### Psychology and the "None Zone"

The role of the humanities in forming ethically oriented students and professionals with a concern for the common good is of historical importance considering shifting social, religious, and cultural factors. As faculty at Seattle University as well as practicing psychotherapists, we (KMP and JR) are cognizant of the evolving landscape of religion, morality, virtues, and ethics in the Pacific Northwest (Washington, Oregon, and Alaska). This area is referred to by religious scholars as the "none zone," where currently and historically the number of inhabitants who have a religious affiliation is less than in any other region of the United States. In other words, "None" is the most often marked religious identification. Interestingly, more than any other region in the United States, the largest segment of the population identifies as having a religious *tradition* but as unaffiliated with any religious *community*.<sup>33</sup> "Unchurched" is the colloquial term.

In many ways, what's happening in the Pacific Northwest is a foreshadowing of the challenges as well as the promise that Jesuit Catholic universities across the country will confront. With little institutional pressure, the opportunities to experiment and innovate in identity, relationships, and values are numerous. The difficulty is in how to encourage reflection, ethical action, and personal responsibility in the larger community when one of the traditional sources of such encouragement, religious practice and affiliation, is absent from contemporary life.

32 Abrams, "Can Religion and Spirituality Have a Place," 67.

33 Killen O'Connell and M. Silk, *Religion & Public Life in the Pacific Northwest: The None Zone* (Altamira Press, 2004), 9.

### Moral Deliberation and Literature

Near the end of my (KMP) first year in the SU master's in psychology program, a beloved professor admonished me: "If you want to learn about human experience, don't study psychology. Instead, read great literature and study history."<sup>34</sup> This was a disconcerting comment to hear having spent several thousand dollars and hundreds of hours on a graduate program in psychology, supposedly to learn about human experience. However, with each advancing year in the profession, those words have increasingly resonated. Psychological theory has vitally informed my clinical and research practice, but when I encounter complex and enigmatic aspects of human experience, I often find, if not guidance, at least resonance in literature.

The author George Saunders, in his delightful exploration of nineteenth-century Russian short fiction, highlighted the way stories guide questions about virtue, morals, and existence. He encouraged us "to confine our expectations for fiction to this: reading fiction changes the state of our minds for a short time afterwards." He described how our minds might be changed in particular ways:

I am reminded that my mind is not the only mind.

I feel an increased confidence in my ability to imagine the experiences of other people and accept these as valid.

I feel I exist on a continuum with other people; what is in them is in me and vice versa.

I feel more aware of the things in the world and more interested in them.<sup>35</sup>

Saunders's description of fiction is like the "creative reformulations of experience" as articulated by psychoanalyst Donnel Stern.<sup>36</sup> Both point to changes in perspective, beliefs, and potential behaviors. Saunders and Stern identify an emergent process, in both literature and psychotherapy, where there is examination, rejection, and creation of meaning that sustains a purposeful life. This stance of openness allows space for growth and healing in our therapeutic encounters.<sup>37</sup>

34 Jan Rowe, personal communication, April 14, 1992.

35 George Saunders, *A Swim in a Pond in the Rain: In Which Four Russians Give a Master Class on Writing, Reading, and Life* (Random House, 2021), 387–88.

36 Donnel B. Stern, "Psychotherapy Is an Emergent Process: In Favor of Acknowledging Hermeneutics and Against the Privileging of Systematic Empirical Research," *Psychoanalytic Dialogues* 23, no. 1 (2013): 102, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10481885.2013.754277>.

37 For a thorough debate about whether psychotherapy and psychoanalysis are emergent or instrumental processes, see Irwin Z. Hoffman, "Doublethinking Our

Stories capture us, often resonating with our own experiences and, in doing so, illuminate aspects of our existence. Our collective narratives engage not only our minds but our emotions. In the format of storytelling—whether historical, religious, or spiritual—we learn, however circuitously, that there can be a before, a during, and an after from which we can draw meaning and purpose to live a moral and virtuous and deeply satisfying existence. The study and practice of psychology is fraught with the realities of being human: that our brains and minds are both remarkable and vulnerable, that personality development can go awry, that sometimes those who are supposed to love a being into existence instead mistreat them horribly. Listening to the suffering other, as psychologists do, might counsel despair. But it also elicits what Judith Herman identified as integrity:

Integrity is the capacity to affirm the value of life in the face of death, to be reconciled with the finite limits of one's own life and the tragic limitations of the human condition, and to accept these realities without despair. Integrity is the foundation upon which trust in relationships is originally formed, and upon which shattered trust may be restored. The interlocking of integrity and trust in caretaking relationships completes the cycle of generations and regenerates the sense of human community which trauma destroys.<sup>38</sup>

The stories we tell each other are stories that affirm the value of this complex human existence and provide meaning. Literature reminds us that being human is difficult but it is also joyful and beautiful, and potentially meaningful. When literature, history, and spirituality hold pain and beauty, and find awe in the mundane, it encourages us to do the same. As Isabel Allende wrote at the end of *The House of the Spirits*, “my grandmother wrote in her notebooks that bore witness to life for fifty years. . . . [She] wrote them so they would help me now to reclaim the past and overcome terrors of my own.”<sup>39</sup> Literature inspires us and provides direction through life's challenges and hope to persevere.

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Way to ‘Scientific’ Legitimacy: The Desiccation of Human Experience,” *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association* 57 (2009): 1043–69; Jeremy D. Safran, “Doublethinking or Dialectical Thinking: A Critical Appreciation of Hoffman’s ‘Doublethinking’ Critique,” *Psychoanalytic Dialogues* 22 (2009): 710–20; Stern, “Psychotherapy Is an Emergent Process, 102; Philip Cushman, “Because the Rock Will Not Read the Article: A Discussion of Jeremy D. Safran’s Critique of Irwin Z. Hoffman’s ‘Doublethinking Our Way to Scientific Legitimacy,’” *Psychoanalytic Dialogues* 23, no. 2 (2013): 211–24, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10481885.2013.772478>.

38 Judith Herman, *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence—from Domestic Abuse to Political Terror* (Basic Books, 1997), 154.

39 Isabel Allende, *The House of the Spirits* (Washington Square Press, 1982), 481.

## **An Existential-Phenomenological, Humanistic Master of Arts in Psychology**

Seattle University advertises itself as offering “a life-changing education in a world-changing city.”<sup>40</sup> As grandiose as that sounds, it is not untrue. The emphasis on educating the whole person (*cura personalis*) in the heart of a globally innovative city lends credence to its claim.<sup>41</sup> However, life-changing education involves more than cutting-edge technologies. It includes being challenged by complex descriptions and nonreductive ideas nurtured in the humanities. Beyond a narrow technical emphasis that has overtaken psychological research and practice, or maybe even in opposition to that, within Seattle University there is a unique Master of Arts in Psychology (MAP).

Founded in 1981 by graduates of Duquesne University’s existential-phenomenological doctoral program and funded by a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities, the MAP program drew on existential, phenomenological, and hermeneutic philosophical traditions, as well as humanistic and interdisciplinary scholarship. The result has been an intellectually rich and diverse, as well as widely respected, training program for licensed mental health counselors. The MAP program educates and forms psychotherapists who will attend to a broadly diverse populace hungry for meaning, purpose, and connection to themselves and their community. The central founders of the program (George Kunz, Steen Halling, Lane Gerber, Jan Rowe, Kevin Krycka, and Jim Risser) prompted a reframing of human suffering from reductive pathology to the possibility of meaning-making and purpose. One of the program’s founders asserted that integration with the humanities was crucial for therapeutic work because the humanities speak “so powerfully about the human existence, and the tragedies and suffering and resilience of human beings.”<sup>42</sup>

One of the competencies that the MAP program expects of its graduates is tolerating ambiguity and complexity. While the program is not unique in this expectation, the path it takes toward cultivating this competency certainly is. Several courses in the graduate curriculum draw explicitly on the phenomenological tradition to explore ontological ambiguity—for example, the ways in which human situatedness is relationally

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40 Your Story Is Still Being Written: Make It Legendary, accessed May 9, 2025, <https://www.seattleu.edu/>.

41 Richard Quest and Julia Buckley, “The US City That Keeps Changing the World,” CNN, accessed March 11, 2025, <https://www.cnn.com/travel/article/seattle-innovative-quest-world-of-wonder/index.html>.

42 Steen Halling, “Master of Arts in Existential-Phenomenological Psychology: Program Overview with Professor Steen Halling,” Seattle University, accessed May 9, 2025, <https://www.seattleu.edu/academics/all-programs/psychology-ma/>.

complex, historically horizoned, and linguistically mediated. Texts in this tradition are themselves literary and infused with experiential description, yet in the classroom they often find added resonance or concretization in joint discussion of a poem, a passage from a novel. The texture of these encounters encourages students to listen not for information that accords with a theory but for those experiences that exceed our theories and call it into question.

### **Moral Deliberation, Relationship, and Human Dignity**

The Jesuit pedagogical value of *cura personalis* is grounded in the theological concept of human dignity. Jesuit theologian David Hollenbach said that human dignity is not a solitary pursuit but rather an aspect of membership in the human community—with a relational understanding of human rights.<sup>43</sup> Necessary to membership is an understanding of the ways humans make sense of their existence within a larger cosmology, and of the vitality and aliveness of our spiritual and artistic creations. Understanding is often manifest in the humanities, including literature, theology, and philosophy. The study of “the breath of life,” psychology, seems muted, if not outright deadened, when it lacks the study of and appreciation for the complex workings of human existence.

Psychology has a complicated history with larger social institutions. From “an important weapons system”<sup>44</sup> to programs to “benefit society and improve lives,”<sup>45</sup> it continues to respond, for good or ill, to the demands of the time. For this reason, it is imperative that psychologists and psychology programs be grounded in the critical thinking and broad understandings of humans, history, and societal movements that the humanities offer lest they be swept away by the ill, or ill-informed, forces of the day.

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43 David Hollenbach, *Human Rights in a Divided World: Catholicism as a Living Tradition* (Georgetown University Press, 2024), 21.

44 Following criticism from members of the American Psychological Association (APA) of military psychologists’ participation in interrogations, the US Army’s surgeon general, General Kevin Kiley, dressed in full combat uniform, addressed a large audience at the August 2006 APA convention in defense of military psychologists. He declared to those present “Psychology, is an important weapons system.” Alfred W. McCoy, “Science in Dachau’s Shadow: HEBB, Beecher, and the Development of CIA Psychological Torture and Modern Medical Ethics,” *Journal of the History of the Behavioral Sciences* 43, no. 4 (2007): 401, <https://doi.org/10.1002/jhbs.20271>.

45 American Psychological Association, “APA/APASI Response Center: Protecting the Integrity of Psychological Science and Knowledge to Benefit Society and Improve Lives,” accessed March 10, 2025, <https://updates.apaservices.org/>.

For example, acknowledging the realities of our current social and political situations, it would be wise to consider the military coups and authoritarian regimes of Latin America in the mid- and later twentieth century. In response to racial and socioeconomic inequality, these regimes would disallow education and training systems that encouraged a critical consciousness and instead used them to reinforce authoritarian ideas and beliefs.<sup>46</sup>

The humanities “broaden our experience of the world, and they allow us to build enduring resources that may help us remain creatively resilient in times of unforeseen adversity.”<sup>47</sup> Psychology and psychotherapy have been implicated in a turn toward authoritarianism and an inability to oppose the rising tide of hate, misogyny, racism, and xenophobia.<sup>48</sup> Cushman called attention to practitioners who are ill-equipped to discern ethically moral actions or push back against immoral actions by the American Psychological Association (APA) because of a lack of education and training that would have prepared them for difficult problems of practice.

The increased scientizing of APA’s understandings of psychology, and thus its accreditation criteria, in combination with the growing societal trend toward neoliberalism, has excluded from graduate curricula fundamentally important subjects for psychology such as history, philosophy, and relational theory . . . resulting in graduate education practices that ill-prepared graduates for comprehending the difficult ethical issues that inhere in psychological practice, and in making the right ethical choices.<sup>49</sup>

A grounding in the humanities guides scholars, practitioners, and researchers back to just and right actions toward fellow humans. In psychology, and in psychotherapy, the humanities compel a stance of human rights and dignity, and infuse ethical action with moral deliberation and a search for meaning. The humanities reignite the soul of psychology.

## Conclusion

The sixth floor of Lemieux Library on the SU campus houses the John Popko Faculty Lounge. It is here that we as a triad held one of our faculty salons with colleagues from other disciplines to explore the idea of inte-

46 See Gaztambide, *A People’s History*, 133.

47 James Pawelski, “The Positive Humanities: A Focus on Human Flourishing,” *Daedalus* 151, no. 3 (Summer 2022): 214.

48 See Philip Cushman, *Travels with the Self: Interpreting Psychology as Cultural History* (Routledge, 2019); American Psychological Association, *The Independent Review Relating to APA Ethics Guidelines, National Security Interrogations, and Torture (The Hoffman Report)*, <https://www.apa.org/independent-review/>.


49 Cushman, *Travels with the Self*, 311.

grating the humanities with psychology. It is also where one of us (KMP) spent most of her time working on this article. Directly above a favored writing table hangs a piece of art, *The Nine Muses*, from 2010 by Nancy Mee and Dennis Evans. The etched glass panels depict the nine muses of poetry, history, love lyrics, music, tragedy, sacred song, dance, comedy, and astronomy; they are identified at the top of each panel. Each muse's discipline is at the bottom, and words associated with that discipline are on the sides. For Poetry, for example, there are "Rhetoric," "Calliope," and "Alphabet"; Tragedy has "Ritual," "Melpomene," and "Fable."

Each writing session always seemed to involve staring at these glass panels for a period of (seemingly unproductive) time. The etchings are luminous and evocative, and for a while frankly confusing. How "Alphabet" was necessary for poetry seemed obvious, as was the connection between tragedy and ritual. But why these words in particular? The images did not seem to help. (Is that Shiva in the Dance panel?) Eventually, it became clear that the name at the top was the muse for the discipline at the bottom. The words on the sides represented the structures necessary to create the discipline. Muses and discipline and art—are they not our purpose as humans or, if not our purpose, then our delight? Or perhaps they represent ways to understand our destructive nature and to recreate and revitalize our communities toward life and the common good.

If psychology is the study of the breath of life, then what is its source and how do we sustain and fashion it into a melody of existence? On college and university campuses all over, psychology is surrounded by disciplines full of learning, ideas, and curiosity—wrapped in the wisdom of the humanities. Just as while walking between libraries and classrooms, we breathe in what the trees breathe out, all our work is an ongoing exchange. We fail to see that at our peril, and the world's challenges morph and distort unabated. As Jesuit educators, we are committed to a similar endeavor with the humanities and psychology to serve a broader purpose of care for the whole person (*cura personalis*) in response to the demands of our era for peace, wholeness, and the common good.

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