

# Restoring Human Nature: Constructive Theological Anthropologies Engaging the Psychological Sciences

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Over the past decade, a growing number of theologians and philosophers from a variety of sub disciplines have expressed an interest in the possibilities of a “science-engaged theology.” The specific projects that fall under this somewhat broad conceptual umbrella are rather diverse, but at its most basic, science-engaged theology is a form of inquiry that is deeply engaged with one or more of the sciences in the service of articulating, defending, or critiquing existing theological and philosophical frameworks. Some operating in this fertile domain even seek to construct entirely new theological (and occasionally, scientific) categories in light of the generative insights born from a robust interaction between the sciences and theology.

Among the many possible conversation partners that one might identify among the wide swath of projects known as “the sciences,” the psychological sciences have proven to be particularly well suited for cross-disciplinary engagement, especially as it concerns the development of a theological anthropology. Yet, even though the state of psychology-theology interaction bears some reasons for optimism, it is still immature. At the present moment, when theology (philosophical or otherwise) does engage psychology, it is principally oriented toward therapy and counseling, ministerial care, or other areas more closely associated with the helping or professional/clinical end of psychology rather than the psychological sciences per se, which focus more on theory building, hypothesis testing, and the generation of experimental data. Indeed, it remains rare for philosophical theologians or philosophers of religion to engage psychological science to such an extent that they are generating empirically testable psychological claims.

In part to address this imbalance, the papers in this special issue draw upon the psychological sciences in particular in order to explore a central question: “What new insights concerning human nature may be discovered when theology and psychological science are brought together?” The end result is a collection of essays that is not only diverse in terms of religious, theological, and/or atheological perspectives, but also puts forward a constructive anthropology informed by a deep engagement with psychological science.

Serving as perhaps the most empirically grounded essay in the special issue, “The Context of Suffering: Empirical Insights Into the Problem of Evil,” written by Ian Church, Isaac Warchol, and Justin Barrett, examines a long-standing question in contemporary philosophical literature regarding the evidential problem of evil. In doing so, it not only develops a hypothesis focused on William Rowe’s seminal formulation of evil, but also reports findings from an exploratory study designed to test this hypothesis empirically and shed new light on the established philosophical literature on suffering. Similarly, in “The Maturational Naturalness of Original Sin,” Adam Green draws upon current empirical research in the cognitive science of religion to advance a psychologically-informed model of the human condition that provides a more robust accounting of the doctrine of original sin, specifically with respect to the question of how sin might be transmitted.

Recognizing the ways in which the psychological sciences conceptualize the human as an irreducibly social creature, the next two essays approach theological anthropology from the standpoint of psycho-social development. The first, “*Communio Dei* and the Mind of Christ: Relational Christological Anthropology in Psychological Perspective,” written by Drew T. Everhart, suggests that the human capacity for sharing of mental states not only allows individuals to share in a group identity without losing their personal identity, but also provides the necessary psychological resources for understanding how Christians in the body of Christ come to share in the mind of Christ. Similarly, in “Liturgical Anthropology: A Developmental Perspective,” Joshua Cockayne and Gideon Salter critique and expand upon the currently in vogue notion of a “liturgical anthropology,” suggesting that the psychological concept of “joint attention” demands a more holistic perspective of the human that refuses to separate affect from cognition.

Turning toward moral psychology and the psychology of character formation, Deborah Casewell explores the writings of Simone Weil in “A Study of Character: Simone Weil’s Psychological and Ethical Attention.” Drawing connections between Weil’s concept of attention, moral psychology, and notions of human plasticity, Casewell highlights the ways in which moral virtue, when enacted, is more about developing the character of openness than internalizing a set of particular virtues.

In a similar vein, Amy Davis Abdallah's article, "Female Christian Responses to Contexts of Imposed Impostorism," focuses on the life and works of Teresa of Avila and Katharina Zell as representative of the kind of psychological strategies that are deployed in response to gendered hierarchies. It is one thing, suggests Davis Abdallah, for humans to internalize the experience of Imposter Phenomenon. It is quite another, psychologically speaking, for societal systems and structures to impose this experience upon certain individuals because of their gendered bodies.

Shifting toward the psychological literature on trauma and the possibility of post-traumatic flourishing, Preston Hill and Dan Sartor revisit Eleonore Stump's recent work on atonement in "Attachment Theory and the Cry of Dereliction: Toward A Science-Engaged Model of Atonement for Posttraumatic Stains on the Soul." The focus of their contribution is specifically on "post-traumatic stains on the soul," which they suggest represents a lacuna in Stump's account. Similarly, Aaron Brian Davis also interacts with Stump's work in "Making and Mending Our Selves: A Practical Proposal." Davis suggests that, when seen through the lens of Stump's notion of narrative, human flourishing can only emerge when the "self" is conceived not as inherent to the human but as something that is co-created in relationship with God and others.

Finally, in "A Theological Engagement with the Science of Science Skepticism," Josh Reeves turns his attention toward the unique psychological vulnerabilities that affect many Christian communities in an age of misinformation. What often manifests as a deep-seated skepticism toward the sciences can perhaps best be explained, not as a byproduct of underlying cognitive biases, but as a reflection of particular intellectual cultures that encourage the basic human tendency to rely on intellectual shortcuts in the pursuit of truth.

All told, each of these essays represents a courageous foray into largely uncharted, cross-disciplinary territory. As such, their long-term significance will likely be determined not by whether each individual account holds up under further theological, philosophical, or psychological scrutiny, but by the degree to which future scholars and experimentalists are one day able to forge more permanent pathways based upon the trails these intrepid explorers have blazed.