

Position Paper #2: Fall's Relationship to Psychopathology

Wing Wah Wong

Alliance Graduate School of Counseling, Alliance University

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Dr. Julio A. Orozco

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In the video "Towards a Christian Psychopathology," Eric Johnson discusses the Christian perspective that psychopathology is the study of the disordered soul (FOCLOnline, 2018). He compares and contrasts modern psychopathology based upon the naturalism worldview that disorders are due to only biological and psychosocial factors to a more comprehensive Christian approach to psychopathology that looks at disordered human functioning from four dimensions, including biological, psychosocial, ethical, and spiritual orders (FOCLOnline, 2018). Therefore, he proposes that a holistic model of psychopathology has to consider the biblical concepts of sin, suffering, and weakness, which Johnson views as the three different types of psychopathology (FOCLOnline, 2018). In this paper, this writer will interact with three main ideas Johnson discusses in the video, including his views on Christian psychopathology versus modern psychopathology, original sin and sin, and fault.

A Christian Psychopathology versus Modern Psychopathology

Johnson argues that the Christian view of psychopathology is more comprehensive because it views humans as personal agents created in God's image with ethical and spiritual orders in addition to being biological organisms, as presented in modern psychopathology (FOCLOnline, 2018). This writer agrees that the worldview of naturalism minimizes humans to mere organisms and undermines human autonomy and responsibility, failing to capture the nature of humankind who are created in the image and likeness of God, and therefore being a personal agent and of infinite worth and significance (King & Whitney, 2015). Furthermore, the behaviorism approach and the classification system in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM) both tend to be symptoms-oriented, emphasizing the observable manifestation of

symptoms and disregarding the fundamental etiology (Carter, 1994); these approaches seem to fall under Johnson's view of modern psychopathology which simplifies human as organisms.

However, Carter (1994) proposes different views to Johnson and identifies the etiological convergence of psychological and theological approaches pointing to a similar concept to original sin despite the different terminology used. Carter (1994) discusses how the psychodynamic and humanistic views of psychopathology base their assumptions on a universally defective human condition, similar to the Christian view of the original sin as a universal condition of all humanity.

Carter (1994) points out that psychodynamic theorists focus on innate "omnipotence, narcissism, or striving for superiority" (p. 282) as the innate human motivation reflecting a self-centered expansiveness as part of the universal human condition which exists before and from which all psychopathological symptoms are derived. Carter (1994) proposes that this innate perspective highlighting omnipotence most resembles the Christian concept of original sin.

In addition, Carter (1994) describes the humanistic theories' etiological explanation of pathology as "the result of an acquired imbalance, splitting, or fragmentation" (p. 281); in other words, when an individual identifies with more socially acceptable parts of the person while splitting or denying the contradictory parts, psychopathology may appear. This is similar to the effect of original sin and is also "resident in some deep structural sense" (p. 282) to all humanity.

Furthermore, both psychodynamic and humanistic disciplines suggest that overt symptoms are produced when "this fundamental flaw is exacerbated by abuse, neglect, and abandonment" (Carter, 1994, p.283), which are sinful actions in the Christian view. Carter (1994) has articulated a convergence between the psychological and theological

conceptualization of the etiology of psychopathology and showed that some theoretical approaches in modern psychology view humans as active agents driven by innate motivation.

Original Sin and Sin

Johnson explains that sin, the worst type of psychopathology, concentrates on the upper ethical and spiritual orders; it is intrinsically opposed to God's glory due to human self-centeredness and disobedience to God (FOCLOnline, 2018). Johnson (2018) talks about the nature and development of sin in three intertwined levels (original sin, sinful deeds, and sinful character). First, he describes original sin as humans' inborn tendency to rebel against God's glory and supremacy (FOCLOnline, 2018). Because of the original sin, humans become personal sinners to live a life independent from God, thus resulting in actions and sinful deeds that contradict God's law (FOCLOnline, 2018). Then, when people repeatedly practice sins over time and produce vices that predispose people to irresistible sinful habits. As a result, sinful characters are formed in humans, and the world is characterized by sinfulness (FOCLOnline, 2018).

This inner sinful disposition as a part of our character resembles a chronic illness, and sinful actions, thoughts, or attitudes can be viewed as symptoms of original sin (McMinn, 1996). Moreover, the sinful human condition creates a ripple effect from the splits between God and humanity to rifts in all other relationships, from between and within persons, to between humans and nature (Carter, 1994). Therefore, Johnson's view of sin as a relational disorder is suitable.

Johnson also stresses humans' responsibility for sin as we constantly choose to be free from God and end up being enslaved by this freedom to engage in the cycle of sinful habits (Johnson, 1987). God, as the creator of humankind, spells out in his laws as a manual for us to attain our greatest joy and satisfaction; however, humans choose to disobey the creator's manual and live our own way, using the creation to fill this hole of emptiness in life. Bird (2016) reminds

us that the only way to deal with this sinful nature is to crucify it with Christ so we can rebuild our identity as a new person in Christ-like Paul as in Galatians 2:20 that "I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me." (Holy Bible, NIV, 1973/2011).

Fault – The Combination of Sin and Weakness

Johnson describes fault as a set of human psychopathology experiences involving sin and weakness (FOCLOnline, 2018). Johnson defined weakness as a "passive deformity where we find ourselves less than certain human ideals or even average human norms" (Johnson, 1987, p.220). The concept of fault can be viewed on a spectrum with sin and weakness on the two extreme ends (Johnson, 1987). Though humans may be predisposed to specific weaknesses, as in the example given by Johnson (FOCLOnline, 2018) that a person could be born with a genetic predisposition towards homosexuality, which is regarded as a weakness, however, to engage in homosexual activities are sinful acts; the person is responsible for engaging in activities deviant to God's law. Therefore, homosexuality can be regarded as a fault with both sin and weakness.

In clinical practice, the concept of fault allows therapists to look for the extent to which a person is responsible for the causes of psychopathology and, in the meantime, be able to empathize with the given weakness with compassion. The attributional styles may facilitate the understanding and application of the concept of fault in the clinical setting: an external or predisposing attribution of causes of disorder is analogous to weakness, and an internal attribution may reflect one's personal responsibility. Recognizing that sin is pervasively influencing every human in various ways, McMinn (1996) states that including both internal and external attribution allows for the involvement of both personal sin and weakness resulting from original sin, leaving room for a balance of self-condemnation and guilt versus sympathy and

compassion for the fallen condition of human nature. Hence, understanding fault could help bring about healing. Nevertheless, due care has to be given to distinguish given biological and contextual conditions and active sinfulness, as it could quickly bring about judgment which may hamper the therapeutic alliance. It indeed requires wisdom from the scriptures and the Holy Spirit's help to discern in a particular person where the psychopathology lies on this sin-weakness spectrum.

Conclusion

Overall, Johnson's explication of psychopathology from a Christian approach provides some guidance on the etiology of psychopathology and reveals how human's brokenness and sinfulness are deeply rooted in the human condition, causing human distress and suffering. As no one is exempt from this universal human condition, therapists and clients alike, understanding this human condition promotes therapeutic empathy and a multi-faceted comprehension of psychopathology (McDargh, 1994). In addition, a Christian counselor can help clients become aware of the effects of their personal sin and sinful nature and explore ways to heal stemming from each of these sources. Regardless, that would entail seeking help from Christ because only through his sacrifice and victory over sin can he bring about the hope of healing and renewal for all persons.

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