

Tillich's Theology and Cognitive Science: The Prospects for Theological Anthropology

Introduction

It is well known that Paul Tillich had a high regard for psychology and incorporated it into his theology. He had, for example, a lengthy and active involvement in the New York Psychology Group.¹ It is also well known that he had a special love for depth psychology—the sort represented by Sigmund Freud, Carl Jung and others.

Although it would be unfair to say that depth psychology is today discredited, it is true that it does not enjoy either the public confidence or the professional stature that it had in Tillich's day. It was legitimate for Tillich to make use of depth psychology, for in his day the only serious alternative was the Behaviorist school of psychology, whose interests and presuppositions were alien to Tillich's. However, the situation today differs from Tillich's. The number of basic psychological approaches has multiplied, scientific research into the brain and behavior has made importance advancements, and the theological community has developed increasingly sophisticated ways of relating to extra-theological disciplines.

The question, then, is this: what would a Tillichian approach to psychology look like today? I suggest there are good reasons to suppose that Tillich would be intrigued by evolutionary psychology, cognitive science and other overtly scientific modes of psychological study. In spite of their scientific character and lack of humanistic, therapeutic concerns, I believe that Tillichians today should be interested in incorporating their insights into theology just as Tillich incorporated the insights of depth psychology.

Evolutionary psychology can be characterized in the following ways:

1. It is an attempt to make psychology a rigorous science by bringing the subjects of mind and behavior into theoretical connection with biology and especially with the theory of evolution.
2. It argues that human cognition is an ensemble of many discrete functions of the brain that evolved at the dawn of human history and in our primate ancestors. Such functions include kin recognition, cheater detection, predator detection, food recognition, and so on.
3. It is associated with cognitive science in its view of the mind, which it seems as a set of processes that receive informational inputs from the environment and produce behavioral outputs.

Tillich and Freud

To see why this is so, let us ask what Tillich found attractive in depth psychology. (To keep things simple, I will focus on Tillich's use of Freud, with only minor reference to Jung. Also, I will focus

¹See Allison Stokes, *Ministry after Freud*. New York: The Pilgrim Press, 1985. Chapter 6 (pp. 109-141) discusses the New York Psychology Group. Also: Terry D. Cooper, *Paul Tillich and Psychology: Historic and Contemporary Explorations in Theology, Psychotherapy, and Ethics*, Mercer Tillich Studies. n.p.: Mercer University Press, 2006, chapters 4-5.

on psychoanalytic *theory* and its contribution to theology, omitting any consideration of psychoanalytic *therapy*.) Here are some of the most important points of attraction:

First, Tillich located Freud within a grand narrative of Western intellectual history. Within this history were two impulses: a rationalistic impulse (illustrated by Thomas Aquinas, Erasmus, and Descartes) and an irrationalist (Duns Scotus, Luther, Pascal). The irrationalist tradition culminated, for Tillich, in 19th century existentialists such as Dostoevsky, with their focus on the will, the unconscious, and estrangement.² Tillich shared with this tradition a common vocabulary (alienation, authenticity, and so on) and a common suspicion of the rationalistic tradition.

Tillich believed that Freud had brought the intuitions of this tradition to clear idea and scientific precision: “All the things which [sic] in these men were ontological intuition or theological analysis now through Freud became methodological scientific words. Freud, in his discovery of the unconscious, rediscovered something that was known that was known long since, and had been used for many decades and even centuries to fight the victorious philosophy of consciousness.”³

For Tillich, who regarded the dominance of philosophies of consciousness with alarm, Freud was important because he supported the belief that the most important aspect of human nature is not reason but the unconscious. Why? Whatever his philosophical hesitations, his main concern was theological, for in his opinion, the emphasis on consciousness went hand in hand with an emphasis on moralism in religion.

This brings us to a second point, which is that Tillich located modern Protestantism within this same grand narrative. Unfortunately, it occupied a place of disappointment. Protestantism, he averred, was no longer a religion of redemption, having become a religion of conventional morality. It no longer saw sin as a power and as estrangement but only as individual sins and unconventional behavior.⁴ This was not Tillich’s only critique of Protestantism, but it was the one to which he repeatedly returned. As indebted as he was to the heritage of liberal theology—the theology of Ritschl, Herrmann, Harnack and Troeltsch—his understanding of religion, nourished by Romanticism and existentialism, was inevitably different from their Kantian-inspired connection between religion and moral *Persönlichkeit*.

As Tillich argued, “The first and most fundamental point is the rediscovery of the truth of the doctrine of man’s predicament as professed by Augustine and the Reform // ers.”⁵ Semi-Pelagianism “weakened the valuation both of the hidden power of sin and the unconditional power” of grace (145). “Protestant theology had to rediscover its own tradition about what man is and about what healing powers are through the impact of the psychology of the unconscious.”

In a theological context in which liberal optimism and moralism seemed triumphant, Tillich felt that

²Tillich, “Psychoanalysis, Existentialism, and Theology,” 133.

³Tillich, “Psychoanalysis, Existentialism, and Theology,” 134.

⁴“Psychoanalysis, Existentialism, and Theology,” 138.

⁵“The Impact of Pastoral Psychology on Theological Thought,” 144.

Freud's elevation of the unconsciousness rendered Protestant moralism untenable:

But with the empirical rediscovery of the old philosophical concept of the unconscious, he broke through his own moralism. . . . The rediscovery of the unconscious was the confirmation of the inability of autonomous morals to lead man to his fulfillment. . . . Freud showed the ambiguity of goodness as well as of evil, and in doing so, he helped to undercut Protestant moralism. This perhaps was the most important existentialist contribution of psychoanalysis to the doctrine of man. Man is not what he believes himself to be in his conscious decisions.⁶

For Tillich, Freud's concept of the unconscious not only connected him to the irrationalist tradition, but called into question the liberal picture of human beings as autonomous moral agents, possessing freedom. Freud's psychology, in alliance with existentialist philosophy, set forth a view of human nature both less flattering than the liberal picture and more in tune with historic Protestant convictions about sin:

Both existentialism and depth psychology are interested in the description of man's existential predicament . . . in contrast to man's essential nature. . . . The focus in both . . . is man's estranged existence. . . . The term 'therapeutic psychology' shows clearly that here something that contradicts the norm, that must be healed, is expressed.⁷

Accordingly, Tillich criticized Jung and others who, he believed, had lost Freud's sense of existential estrangement and "went more to an essentialist and optimistic view of man" (136). They "have described the human situation as correctible and amendable, as a weakness only. . . . In all these representatives of contemporary depth psychology I miss the feeling for the irrational element that we have in Freud" (137).

At the same time, Tillich was not an uncritical reader of Freud. His basic criticism of Freud was that

He was not able and willing to distinguish between man's essential and his existential nature. . . . He is very consistent in his negative judgments about man as existentially distorted. If you see man only from the point of view of existence and not from the points of view of essence, only from the point of view of estrangement and not from the point of view of essential goodness, then this consequence is unavoidable.⁸

Freud, in other words, had performed an important and necessary service to theology by supporting a robust idea of sin and laying a psychological basis for rejecting moralism, rationalism, and free will. He had, that is, given a scientific analysis of humankind's existential condition. However, Freud (like Existentialists generally) mistook an account of our existential situation for an account of human nature as such. He had overlooked the essential elements of human nature. That is why, beyond psychotherapy, divine salvation is required:

⁶"Existentialism and Psychotherapy," 158-159.

⁷"Psychoanalysis, Existentialism, and Theology," 134.

⁸"Psychoanalysis, Existentialism, and Theology," 135.

Neither Freudianism nor any purely existentialist consideration can heal these fundamental presuppositions [i.e., the existential presuppositions of every disease]. . . . The existential structures cannot be healed by the most refined techniques. They are objects of salvation. The analyst can be an instrument of salvation. . . . But as analyst he cannot bring salvation by means of his medical methods.⁹

Besides this criticism, Tillich resisted reductionistic approaches. Writing about psychotherapy, he noted that “it makes two answers impossible: the neo-orthodox one and the humanistic one.” If the humanistic answer were true, the divine would simply be the religious function of the human spirit and “healing would be self-healing. But only something healthy can heal what is sick. . . . [What is sick] can only receive healing powers from beyond itself.”¹⁰

In summary, Tillich forged an alliance with depth psychology for several reasons, including 1) the fact that he felt an affinity to the larger existentialist tradition of which it was a part; 2) Freud’s emphasis on the unconscious, which supported Tillich’s revolt against the Protestantism of his day; and 3) the fact that Tillich found Freud’s psychology to be a fundamentally correct analysis of humanity’s existential condition.

Tillichian Theology and Evolutionary Psychology

What, then, might Tillich find attractive about evolutionary psychology and related disciplines? Why should Tillichians pay attention to it? For several reasons.

Its Scientific Character

First, because of its scientific character. One of the things that distinguished Tillich was his willingness to dialog with disciplines outside theology. Naturally, there were limits to this willingness—Tillich was more interested in some fields than in others—but to practice theology in the Tillichian spirit is to seek out dialog partners. In our situation today, this inevitably means a dialog with the sciences, at least in so far as the science contribute to an analysis of humankind’s existential situation.¹¹

⁹“Psychoanalysis, Existentialism, and Theology,” 137. Elsewhere (“Existentialism and Psychotherapy,” 160-162) Tillich discussed the difference between neurotic anxiety, which is amendable to psychotherapy, and existential anxiety, which is not.

¹⁰“The Impact of Pastoral Psychology on Theological Thought,” 149.

¹¹On Tillich’s overly generous estimation of depth psychology’s scientific character: “Tillich depreciated the importance of conscious activity and overestimated the scientific status of psychoanalysis. . . . The repeated references to scientific discovery imply an empirical foundation. Tillich treats the unconscious as an existent explanatory entity rather than as a descriptive term denoting mental material that is more or less inaccessible,” Orville S. Walters, “Psychodynamics in Tillich's Theology,” *Journal of Religion and Health* 12/4 (1973): 346. This quotation points to Tillich’s validation of scientific criteria, even if he misapplied them in this case.

This observation raises the question of whether evolutionary psychology actually does provide insight into humanity's existential situation. It certainly does seek to describe concrete human phenomena such as thought and behavior. However, it does so without express association with existentialist (or any other) philosophy. For that reason, it will look quite foreign to a Tillichian looking for a contemporary equivalent to depth psychology. Evolutionary psychology cannot, therefore, be for a contemporary Tillichian everything that depth psychology was for Freud. Moreover, with the plurality of approaches in contemporary psychology, there can be no possibility of EP/CS constituting a complete psychological paradigm and theology's sole dialog partner.

At the same time, it is important to remember that Tillich use of depth psychology was both selective and eclectic.¹² There are many aspects of Freud's theories (such as the theory of dreams) that played no role in Tillich's thought. On the contrary, Tillich carefully made use of just those elements of Freud's theory that agreed with Tillich existential commitments. So, although evolutionary psychology seems quite remote from existentialist concerns, it could be that so far no Tillich has arisen to point those concerns out.

Does evolutionary psychology reveal anything about our existential situation? Yes, an much more than does Freud's psychology. What were Freud's contributions to existential analysis? 1) Discovery of the unconscious, which helped undercut Protestant moralistic views of salvation; 2) the rediscovery of sin and its interpretation as estrangement ("Psychoanalysis, Existentialism, and Theology" 138). These are important, but they surely do not provide an exhaustive analysis.

Evolutionary psychology helps us see, to give one example, more concretely than ever the ambiguous nature of human morality, which evolutionary psychology views as the result of evolutionary pressures and which, in many respects is ill-adapted to modern life. To give another example, it connects us to our evolutionary primate ancestors with far greater empirical depth and precision than Freud's conjectures in *Totem and Taboo*, thus making our sense of freedom and transcendence more puzzling than ever.

The contemporary Tillichian, therefore, will gladly engage evolutionary psychology as a dialog partner, not least because of its scientific character.¹³ Although claims that evolutionary psychology will finally give to psychology the scientific character that it has so long sought are, like all such claims, premature, exaggerated, and unnecessary, evolutionary psychology does show promise of providing a firm and extensive empirical basis for understanding human nature. In this it represents a distinct advance on depth psychology.

¹²"Tillich does not consistently follow any one model of personality, but uses terms from both Freud and Jung, although the two systems are incompatible," Orville S. Walters, "Psychodynamics in Tillich's Theology," *Journal of Religion and Health* 12/4 (1973): 343.

¹³Admittedly, Tillich's conception of science was probably more in tune with the Germanic tradition than with the empirical tradition and its conception of science. Moreover, the dialog may well be one-sided, with the theologian learning from the psychologist but with little motivation for the psychologist to listen to the theologian. But was it really much different in Tillich's day? Although Tillich shared the vocabulary of estrangement with Erich Fromm, was Fromm's psychology materially affected by Tillich's theology?

Its Monistic Commitments

However, more is required of evolutionary psychology than its scientific character; accepting the results of a science is not the same as using those results to practice theology. What also recommends evolutionary psychology is the way in which it understands the mind.

The premise of evolutionary psychology is that the mind is an ensemble of evolved functions, and thus the result of evolutionary pressures. The human organism, interacting with a dynamic environment, long ago evolved a set of basic cognitive functions that process information from the environment. It is those functions that condition human thought and behavior today.

It's clear from this premise that evolutionary psychology views mind in thoroughly monistic terms. Tillichians will find this view attractive (as long as it does not imply a reductionistic view of God). This is because Tillich's anthropology is monistic. Spirit is the actualization of life; it is not a spiritual substance:

Spirit does not stand in contrast to body. Life as spirit transcends the duality of body and mind. . . . Life as spirit is the life of the soul, which includes mind and body, but not as realities alongside the soul. Spirit is not a 'part,' nor is it a special function. It is the all-embracing function in which all elements of the structure of being participate. Life as spirit can be found by man only in man, for only in him is the structure of being completely realized (S.T. 1:250).

Evolutionary psychology is one of the most thoroughgoing scientific expressions of anthropological monism. Through its link with neuroscience and cognitive science, it argues that mind is an ensemble of cognitive functions that have evolved in just the way in which all biological properties have evolved. Moreover, in comparison with traditional materialistic views of mind, evolutionary psychology has a detailed model of the mind that gains empirical content from its link to neuroscience and theoretical robustness from its link with cognitive science. It's not just philosophical materialism with scientific jargon. On the contrary, it has a powerful research agenda, capable of generating empirical data and spinning off fruitful sub-theories.

But can this approach leave room for a Tillichian conception of spirit? Isn't its explanation, in detail, of humanity's evolved functions so reductionistic as to eliminate any consideration of spirit? Although the task is daunting, it is not necessarily more daunting than the task of merging Tillich's concept of spirit with Freud's view of the self. Freud was, in his own way, as monistic and materialistic as are evolutionary psychologists. No one who began with Freud's psychology would end up with Tillich's view of the spirit.

But it's not required that the theologian *derive* the idea of spirit from an empirical science. A Tillichian view of spirit is not a deduction from psychological science, whether Freudian or evolutionary. A Tillichian view of spirit is instead an addition to psychology based on ontological analysis.

Accordingly to John Dourley, Tillich's method consisted in presenting "a cogent ontological description of humanity's experience of the ambivalence of divine life in terms of psychological experience and language, and, in so doing, elevat[ing] the psychological to the domains of the

ontological and religious.¹⁴ As Tillich himself put it, Freud's existential analysis had to be supplemented with a philosophical description of humanity's essential nature.

Tillich understood that theology makes use, not only of empirical disciplines, but also ontology. The use of ontology places the results of psychology in an appropriate framework and mediates them to theology. Tillich found it fairly easy to use depth psychology since it was at home, to some extent, in the existentialist tradition that Tillich loved. It had already received, so to speak, an ontological mediation. Evolutionary psychology seems initially to offer little to the Tillichian because, in its attempt to be scientific and lacking a humanistic background, it has received little philosophical mediation (except in so far as modern science counts as an ontology). Nonetheless, the important thing is not whether a psychology has connections with any particular philosophical tradition, but instead whether it truly discloses elements of humankind's existential situation that can be mediated to theology via ontology.

Evolutionary psychology can be a suitable dialog partner for theological anthropology as long as it can be joined with an ontology of spirit without contradiction. It does not have to imply the idea of spirit but need only be capable of being interpreted within an ontology of spirit.

Why then prefer evolutionary psychology to Freudian psychology? Not only because of its superior scientific (empirical and theoretical) character, but also because it is perhaps the most consistent and empirically informed statement of monism.

Its View of the Unconscious

Tillich valued depth psychology because it had given powerful theoretical and therapeutic content to the idea of the unconscious. It thereby offered a severe critique of rationalistic and moralistic views of human nature.

Well, if this is important to Tillichians, they ought to receive evolutionary psychology with enthusiasm. Evolutionary psychology, in conjunction with neuroscience, posits of view of mind in which rational decisions and ideas appear, not so much the cause of action, as the end result of complex neural events. Conscious thought, in other words, is not the most salient fact in human action and morality. What is most salient are the cognitive capacities, linked to specific regions of the brain, that enable us to perform many everyday moral judgments and calculations unconsciously and almost instantaneously.

What Tillich found most important in Freud's view of the unconscious was two things: first, "confirmation of the inability of autonomous morals to lead man to his fulfillment. . . . Freud showed the ambiguity of goodness as well as of evil, and in doing so, he helped to undercut Protestant moralism. This perhaps was the most important existentialist contribution of psychoanalysis to the doctrine of man. Man is not what he believes himself to be in his conscious

¹⁴John Dourley, "Tillich in Dialogue with Psychology," in *The Cambridge Companion to Paul Tillich*, ed. Russell De Manning (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 241.

decisions.”¹⁵ Second, “To the degree in which the unconscious motivations were discovered, even in our fully conscious acts, the appeal to ‘free will’ became impossible. The question now had to be: How can unconscious motivations be changed? And the answer was: By forces which enter the unconscious even if the entering door is consciousness.”¹⁶

The concept of the unconscious, then, performed two services: 1) it critiqued an ensemble of concepts (free will, conventional morality, rationality, consciousness) that constituted a decadent anthropology; and 2) it identified the ontological location of the divine Spirit’s work on the human person. The view of evolutionary psychology clearly performs the first of these services. Anyone who takes the anthropology implicit in evolutionary psychology seriously must seriously revise the idea of human agency, thought and morality. But can it perform the second function? Can it identify the place of estrangement and sin? This is, perhaps, the most problematic aspect of evolutionary psychology for a Tillichian.

The unconscious was important ultimately for Tillich because it was the field in which salvation and healing take place:

The basic problem in the relation of religion and health is the ‘intermediate area’ [between body understood as mechanism and soul understood as consciousness], the psychic, including the unconscious, the ‘drives,’—that which is open to magic or psychotherapy. The whole doctrine of man is centered in this problem.¹⁷

For Tillich, existential estrangement is found concretely to the extent that we are not centered selves. In other words, whereas our essential nature is to be centered selves, existentially we are a mass of drives that conflict. Tillich commented on

the idea of disturbance in the ‘whole’ [person] itself. This presupposes that the ‘whole’ is a harmony of contrasting forces. This idea was first expressed in connection with health, bodily and psychic, by the Pythagorean Alkmaion . . . [and was later used by Hippocrates and Galen] who considered disease as a disturbance of the harmonious constitution of the body based on the balance of *dynamis* or juices. . . . This tradition continued in Paracelsus, in the early 19th century psychologists, and in Schelling. . . . The present day dynamic psychology of the unconscious belongs clearly to this line of thought, from which it borrows . . . the basic idea of illness as the disturbance of a dynamic balance by conflicting drives.¹⁸

This view of the self reflects the influence of Friedrich Schelling, for whom being consists of tensed opposites. The self, for Tillich, is essentially “a harmony of contrasting forces.” These forces inhabit (or constitute) the “intermediate area” between body and soul—the unconscious. Illness in

¹⁵Paul Tillich, “Existentialism and Psychotherapy,” 159.

¹⁶Paul Tillich, “The Impact of Pastoral Psychology on Theological Thought,” 145.

¹⁷Paul Tillich, “The Relationship of Religion and Health: Historical Considerations and Theoretical Questions,” 376.

¹⁸Idem, 371-372.

this middle area occurs when, under the conditions of existence, the contrasting forces become conflicting. Salvation is the restoration of balance, the overcoming of conflict. (Of course, salvation shares in the ambiguity of all life and is also only provisional and fragmentary.)

Freud's psychology lent itself to an anthropology based on conflicting forces. Does evolutionary psychology? There is at least one important respect in which evolutionary psychology is analogous to Freud's theory. For Freud, one of the fundamental conflicts within the person is between the demands of the id and those of the super-ego. Each creates its own sort of anxiety. The task of the ego is to find ways of reducing these two sorts of anxiety in healthy ways, such as sublimation. Evolutionary psychologists have no patience for Freud's language, but they are concerned about the central insight of Freud's theory, namely that there is a conflict between our instinctive desires and the demands of morality.

If we abstract from Freud's particular conceptuality of id and super-ego, we can with fairness say that evolutionary psychology likewise locates a conflict between the rather "hard-wired" cognitive and behavioral processes given to us by evolution and the moral demands of human life. On one hand, there are powerful evolutionary incentives to cooperate with and care for those who are genetically closely related to us. On the other hand, most people feel the moral force of injunctions to love the neighbor, regardless of genetic connection. The tendencies of evolutionarily guided sexual behavior likewise conflicts with the moral and legal precepts of most societies.

Perhaps, then, what is called for is a more precise conception of morality that locates the fundamental place of conflict, not in the person, but in the interaction between the evolved brain and our moral sense. Of course, our moral sense is not disembodied; it is a product of the brain. But perhaps the point is that historical communities have the capacity to create moral insight and sensitivity that transcends evolved human nature. If so, then perhaps spirit is a function of human communities interacting with the evolved brain. To speak of spirit, then, would be to speak of a harmony between evolution and morality.

Concluding Questions

- What happens to the idea of the centered self that is so important for Tillich's concept of freedom and spirit?
- Is evolutionary psychology compatible with a Tillichian ontology?
- How would Tillich be critical of evolutionary psychology? Just as psychology can heal neurotic anxiety but not existential anxiety, what are the limits of evolutionary psychology—what can only grace do? Perhaps, like Freud, evolutionary psychology describes only humanity's existential condition; theology is needed to provide the essentialist side and thus the possibility of salvation.
- What is the therapeutic and pastoral contribution of EP/CS/BS? How do they address existential concerns?