Integration of Psychology and Philosophy

Definition. As the word “to integrate” means “to unify”, the “integration of psychology and philosophy” refers to the project of bringing psychology and philosophy into a closer relationship with each other, typically in a Catholic setting, generally through philosophy’s serving as some kind of foundation of or context for psychology.

There are three main motives for such integration. First, it is felt that psychology, as a specialized branch of knowledge, relies on philosophical presuppositions as much as any other specialized branch: the “integration” of psychology and philosophy, then, will make these presuppositions explicit and evaluate them, so that the most suitable ones may be relied upon. Second, it may be argued, from the very nature of a university, that psychology as much as any other discipline needs to be brought in relation to the rest of knowledge, and that only the disciplines of philosophy and theology, with their general scope and import, can play this integrative role: on this view, then, the integration of all of knowledge implies the integration of each special discipline with philosophy.

Observe that these two motives do not depend on the distinctive object of study of psychology. However, the third motive does: psychology as a theoretical discipline seems to deal with realities which arguably are greatly illuminated by philosophical inquiry, such as reason, the will, the emotions (or “passions”), interpersonal relations and love. (Indeed, “psychology” means literally “the study of the soul”, which philosophy classically regarded as its own task.)

Similarly, psychology as a practical and clinical discipline inevitably deals with philosophical questions, such as how mental illness and health are to be defined; whether some treatments should be ruled out on ethical grounds; and the manner and extent to which responsibility may be compromised by mental pathology. In general, psychology seems to presuppose some view of human nature and the purpose of human life, but these are appropriately studied by philosophy.

History. From its definition, it is clear that the integration of psychology and philosophy (henceforth “integration”) can look like an important project only to those who regard these disciplines as distinct and yet close enough for the union or harmonizing of the two to be fruitful or even necessary. That is why integration began to seem important only in the 20th century and typically among Catholic psychologists and philosophers.

Psychology, for most of its history, was not regarded as distinct from philosophy, just as indeed most scientific disciplines were regarded as areas within “natural philosophy”. The first works in psychology, Plato’s Phaedo, Republic, and Timaeus, and Aristotle’s De Anima, were investigations carried out by philosophers with deeper metaphysical and theological motivations; “faculty” psychology, begun by Aristotle, was developed by medieval philosophers; and antecedents of associationist psychology were
set down by the philosophers Locke and Hume. Psychology broke away from philosophy and established itself as a separate discipline only at the end of the 19th century.

In Europe, this separation was an instance of the scientific community's aversion in general to the then dominant philosophical school of Hegel. In the United States, philosophy had become so "psychologized," so assimilated to psychology in its interests and methods, that it was philosophy, rather, which had to break away from psychology: so, for instance, when philosophers at the time wanted to organize themselves into a professional association, they called it the "American Psychological Association," (founded in 1892) in reaction to which the "American Philosophical Association" was later formed (in 1900).

Philosophy could mark itself out as a separate discipline, of course, only if it could claim either some special area of expertise or a method of arriving at knowledge distinct from the methods of natural science. Indeed, philosophers were highly receptive to the development, at the turn of the century, of new logical techniques by Frege and Russell, and the new phenomenology of Husserl, precisely because these methods held forth the promise of a distinctively "logical" and not "psychological" method in philosophy. But the upshot was that philosophy, so marked out, could not possibly be brought in relation to psychology, as the a priori is entirely distinct from the a posteriori, and as conceptual analysis is distinct from empirical investigation; nor would such philosophers have wanted to do so and risk subverting philosophy. At most one might engage in philosophy of psychology, or the conceptual analysis of psychological concepts ("philosophical psychology"), understood as a contribution to ethics or action theory, not psychology.

At the same time, psychology once separated from philosophy, and wishing to model itself on the physical sciences, was especially prone to embrace, either deliberately or implicitly, various forms of determinism, materialism, and positivism, which would seem to be both philosophical positions and prejudicial to a sound psychology.

Protestant clinicians sought a remedy and corrective in the integration of theology with psychology, especially as advocated by the Christian Association for Psychological Studies ("CAPS", founded 1956), and followed later by the American Association of Christian Counsellors (AACS, founded 1986, with its academic division, the Society for Christian Psychology). Fuller Theological Seminary and later the Rosemead School of Psychology at Biola University became the leading academic center of this movement, which now includes dozens of programs and a several journals (such as the Journal of Theology and Psychology, and Edification). Protestant clinicians generally relied on theology, not philosophy, as a standard and judge of psychological science, from a conviction that Scripture plays that role as regards all human endeavors, and presumably as a result, too, of the underdevelopment of philosophical anthropology in Protestant thought.

The Catholic response has been mixed. In the first two decades of the 20th century, the Catholic clinical community took the lead incorporating findings of the psychological sciences into its therapeutic and pastoral ministries, and in amplifying therapy with a spiritual dimension. But the Catholic contribution
to the integration of philosophy and psychology has been limited, as it has been centered mainly in the work of the Institute for the Psychological Sciences (IPS) in Arlington, Virginia, founded in 1999, and its scholars (notably Fr. Benedict Ashley, Christian Brugger, Paul Vitz and Daniel Robinson) and clinicians (especially Gladys Sweeney and William Nordling). This group has now developed a systematic interpretation of integration known as the “IPS Model,” which includes major theological, philosophical and psychological components.

That Catholic initiative of integration has arisen so late relative to their Protestant colleagues may be explained by the importance of Thomism as an intellectual framework for Catholics before the 1960s, since clinicians educated up to that time would typically have received so thorough an education in Thomist philosophy as to find any materialistic and deterministic aspects of psychological theories implausible. On the other hand, the limited extent of the Catholic response in recent years is to be explained largely by the secularization of Catholic universities and the subsequent imperfect implementation of Ex Corde Ecclesiae, which charges Catholic universities, including presumably their psychology departments, with a task that would include integration: “the distinctive and primary responsibility of a Catholic university is ‘to join together existentially, precisely by one’s intellectual effort, two orders of realities which one is very often inclined to set in opposition, as if they were at odds: the progressive search for the truth, and the certitude of already knowing the font of truth’ ” (n. 1). At the same time, the tradition of Aristotelian-Thomism, the more recent flourishing of realist phenomenology among Catholic thinkers, and the Catholic personalist movement (led by Gabriel Marcel and Emmanuél Mounier) supply tremendous resources for integration.

Tasks of Integration. The tasks of integration may be divided into positive, negative, and “bridge”. The positive task is to build up a satisfactory general account of human nature from a philosophical point of view, which gives due place to human freedom, rationality, relationship and embodiedness, and then from this basis to offer specific philosophical treatments of phenomena important to psychology, which can serve as the framework for psychological inquiry. A good example of the execution of this positive task would be Love and Responsibility of Karol Wojtyla, which sets down a personalist anthropology and then, on that basis, offers accounts of romantic love and marriage which have exceptional psychological insight. Again, the philosophical framework of the virtues, developed by Aristotle and St. Thomas, provides the best foundation for the recent school of “positive psychology”.

The negative task is to reveal and then refute erroneous philosophical commitments of psychological theories or research, such as determinism and materialism, and substance dualism. Perhaps the most important such “negative” task is to reveal the pervasive influence on mainstream psychology of substance dualism and of a corresponding Baconian approach to the natural world. The “bridge” task is to develop philosophical accounts which point to, or look to be complemented by, theological accounts—in other words, to deal with psychology in such a way that it is more easily illuminated by theological considerations. A good example of this last task would be how Wojtyla’s use of the “personalist principle” in Love and Responsibility (“love others as beings who have ends, not as mere means”) is illuminated in turn by the “logic of the gift” presented in Christian revelation. That is, Love and Responsibility stands to the theology of the body in the way that, in the Catholic intellectual tradition, the integration of philosophy and psychology stands to the integration of theology and psychology.
Further reading:


