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Yin and Yang in Psychological Research and Christian Belief

When Christian psychologists link their profession with their faith they typically do one of three things: they analyze religious phenomena, such as conversion or prayer, through a psychological microscope; they correlate the speculations of personality theorists with the presumptions of theologians; or they propose a distinctly Christian approach to counselling or to psychological inquiry. My own interests in linking psychology and faith are rather different and for the most part arise from my involvement in the mainstream of psychological research and my vocation as a teacher of psychology. Thus my occupation—indeed my preoccupation—is to ponder two questions: What are the major insights and ideas regarding human nature that college and university students should encounter in their courses in introductory and social psychology? And how does the human image emerging from contemporary psychology connect with Christian assumptions about human nature?

In any academic field the results of tens of thousands of studies, the conclusions of thousands of investigators, the insights of hundreds of theorists, can usually be boiled down to a few overriding ideas. Biology offers us principles such as natural selection and adaptation. Sociology builds upon concepts such as social structure and social process. Music develops our ideas of rhythm, melody, and harmony.

It occurred to me when contemplating this address that many of the major insights and ideas of psychology—especially of social and cognitive psychology—could be distilled down to five pairs of complementary principles. Remarkably, these five pairs of complementary principles are paralleled in Christian thought by five pairs of theological principles.

Each psychological and theological principle represents a partial truth—an important aspect of a total system. As Pascal reminded us, no single truth is ever sufficient, because the world is not simple. Any truth separated from its complementary truth is a half-truth. It is in the

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union of complementary opposites—of what the Chinese called yin and yang—that one glimpses the whole reality.

Consider, first, five great principles of contemporary psychology that unite with five complementary principles, like the five fingers of the left hand clasping the five fingers of the right, to form a more complete grasp of the human system. As we move along through these five pairs of psychological principles you will, perhaps, be able to anticipate some of the Christian ideas that parallel this yin and yang of psychological research.

The yin and yang of psychological research

Brain and Mind

The explosion of recent research on genetic influences on behaviour, on the influence of neurotransmitters on thought and emotion, and on the intricate links between brain structures and language, perception and memory, confirms more surely than ever that *mind emerges from brain.* My colleague Malcolm Jeeves, a cognitive neuroscientist, is unhesitating: 'Every new advance in the flourishing field of neuropsychology tightens the apparent links between the brain and mind.'[1]

Although much mystery remains, we now understand better than ever the specific brain malfunctions that cause disorders of speaking, reading, writing, or understanding language. We have glimpsed how precise surgical or chemical manipulations of the brain can manipulate thoughts, moods, and motives. We are beginning to understand the awesome process by which our sensory systems and brains decompose sensory experiences into formless neural impulses and then reassemble them into their component features and, finally, into conscious perceptions. We are being offered new clues to the extent and the mechanisms of genetic influences upon countless traits, from emotionality to intelligence, from criminal tendencies to altruism, from gender differences to schizophrenia.

Neuroscientist David Hubel has said that 'Fundamental changes in our view of the human brain cannot but have profound effects on our view of ourselves and the world.'[2] The dualistic view that mind and body are distinct entities—that we are, as Descartes believed, lodged in our bodies as pilots in their vessels—seems more and more implausible. Thus psychologist Donald Hebb concludes that however implausible it may be to say that consciousness consists of brain

1. In Myers, D. G., & Jeeves, M. A. (not yet titled book). San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987.
2. Hubel, David H. 'The brain.' *Scientific American* 1979, 45–53.

activity, 'it nevertheless begins to look very much as though the proposition is true.'[3] Mind emerges from brain.

This apparent truth is, however, complemented by another truth: *mind controls brain.* In many ways our brains function mindlessly, by automatically, effortlessly, and usually infallibly managing a myriad of routine functions. This frees our consciousness to focus, rather like the chief executive of a great country or corporation does, on the most important problems at hand. In doing so, our conscious experience directs the brain to control bodily functions in ways once thought impossible. In the burgeoning field of health psychology, for example, we are discovering the bodily consequences of stresses. We are learning more about the effects of emotions such as anger on a person's vulnerability to heart disease and to disorders of the immune system. We are exploring psychological techniques of pain control and stress management and gaining clues to the control of ailments such as tension headaches and hypertension. We are glimpsing how social support or even a sense of humour helps buffer the effects of stress. These examples of 'mind over body' are extensions of phenomena we frequently experience. Embarrassed, we blush, frightened, we feel our heart pounding, our skin perspiring. Thus our first pair of complementary principles: mind emerges from brain, and mind controls brain.

Attitudes and behaviour

Among social psychology's best known principles are those that describe the reciprocal relations between attitudes and behaviour. During the 1960s, dozens of research studies challenged the assumption that people's attitudes guide their actions. But studies since 1970 have revealed conditions under which our attitudes *do* influence our actions. This is especially true when we are keenly aware of our attitudes and when other influences on our behaviour, such as social pressures, are minimized. If our attitudes toward cheating, or church-going, or racial minorities are brought to mind in a pertinent situation—if something causes us to stop and remember who we are before we act—then we may indeed stand up for what we believe. In such situations, *attitudes influence behaviour.*

But if social psychology has taught us anything during the last three decades it is that the reverse is also true: we are as likely to act ourselves into a way of thinking as to think ourselves into action; we are as likely to believe in what we have stood up for as to stand up for

3. Hebb, D. O. *Essay on Mind.* Hillsdale, N.J.: Erlbaum, 1980.

what we believe. Simply put, *attitudes follow behaviour.* Consider a few examples of the wide-ranging evidence:

* In the laboratory, and in everyday situations, evil acts shape the self. People induced to harm an innocent victim typically come to disparage the victim. Those induced to speak or write statements about which they have misgivings will often come to accept their little lies. Saying becomes believing.
* Positive actions—resisting temptation, giving help to someone, behaving amicably in desegregrated situations—also shape the self. As social psychologists predicted would happen, changes in racial behaviour resulting from desegregation rulings and civil rights legislation have been followed by positive changes in racial attitudes. Evil actions corrupt, but repentant actions renew.
* Many of today's therapy techniques make a constructive use of the self-persuasive effects of behaviour. Behaviour therapy, assertiveness training, and rational-emotive therapy all coax their clients to rehearse and then practice more productive ways of talking and acting, trusting that by so doing the person's inner disposition will gradually follow along.

This principle, like that of its complement, is especially valid under certain conditions—notably when people feel some choice and responsibility for their behaviour rather than attributing it entirely to coercion. But most behaviour, even the enforced Nazi greeting, 'Heil Hitler,' does involve some element of choice. Thus there often occur feelings of discomfort when one's behaviour is out of alignment with one's attitudes. For example, historian Richard Grunberger reports that when 'prevented from saying what they believed,' many Germans 'tried to establish their psychic equilibrium by consciously making themselves believe what they said.'[4]

To repeat, two fundamental principles of social psychology are that attitudes influence behaviour, and attitudes follow behaviour. Behaviour and attitude, like chicken and egg, generate one another in an endless spiral.

Self-serving bias and self-esteem

It is widely believed that most of us suffer the 'I'm not OK—you're OK' problem of low self-esteem, the problem that comedian Groucho Marx had in mind when he declared that 'I'd never join any club that would accept a person like me.' As we will see, there is evidence supporting today's conventional wisdom about the benefits of high

4. Grunberger, R. *The 12-Year Reich: A Social History of Nazi Germany 1933–1945,* 27, New York: Holt, Reinhart & Winston, 1971.

self-esteem and positive thinking. But we moderns seem less aware of the powerful phenomenon called 'self-serving bias' that has been revealed by a dozen lines of research. Consider:

* People readily accept responsibility for their successes and good deeds, but are prone to attribute failure or bad deeds to factors beyond their control. Self-serving attributions have been observed not only in countless laboratry situations, but also with athletes (after victory or defeat), with students (after high or low exam grades), with drivers (after accidents), and with married people as they explain their conflicts. Researcher Anthony Greenwald sums up countless findings: 'People experience life through a self-centred filter.'[5]
* In virtually any area that is both subjective and socially desirable, most people see themselves as relatively superior. Most business people see themselves as more ethical than the average business person. Most community residents see themselves as less prejudiced than their neighbours. Most people see themselves as more intelligent and as healthier than most other people. In 'ability to get along with others' virtually all American high school seniors (in one survey of nearly a million of them) rated themselves above average and 60 percent put themselves among the top 10 percent. As Elizabeth Barrett Browning might have summarized, 'How do I love me? Let me count the ways.'

These observations of self-serving attributions of responsibility and self-serving perceptions of superiority are joined by other findings. Many studies indicate that: we tend to justify our past actions; we have an inflated confidence in the accuracy of our beliefs and judgments; we tend to overestimate how desirably we would act in situations in which most people are known to behave less than admirably; we are quicker to believe flattering descriptions of ourselves than unflattering ones; we misremember our own past in self-enhancing ways; we exhibit a Pollyanna-ish optimism about our personal futures; we guess that physically attractive people have personalities more like our own than do unattractive people.

The list goes on, but the point is made. At times we may disparage ourselves, especially when comparing ourselves with those who are even more successful than we are or when our expressions of self-disparagement can trigger reassuring praise from others. Nevertheless, the evidence is overwhelming: the most common error in people's self-images is not unrealistically low self-esteem, but a self-serving bias; not an inferiority complex, but a superiority complex.

The phenomenon is not only pervasive but also at times socially disruptive. For example, people who work on a group task will

5. Quoted by D. Coleman, 'A Bias Puts Self at Center of Everything.' *The New York Times* (June 12, 1984), pp. C1, C4.

typically claim greater-than-average credit when their group does well and less-than-average blame when it does not. When most people in a group believe they are underpaid and underappreciated, given their better-than-average contributions, disharmony and envy surely lurk. Several surveys indicate that 90 percent or more of college faculty think themselves superior to their average colleague. Is it therefore surprising that when merit salary rises are announced and half receive an average rise or less, many will feel an injustice has been done them?

More dangerous yet is self-serving bias in its collective forms. Racism, sexism, nationalism, and all such chauvinisms lead one group of people to see themselves as more moral, deserving, or able than another. The flip-side of taking credit for one's self-perceived achievements is to blame the poor for their poverty and the oppressed for their oppression. Samuel Johnson recognized this two hundred years ago: 'He that overvalues himself will undervalue others, and he that undervalues others will oppress them.'

In recognizing this principle, that *self-serving bias is powerful and perilous,* we must, however, not forget its complement: that *high self-esteem and positive thinking pay dividends.*

People who express high self-esteem—feelings of self-worth—tend to be less depressed, freer of ulcers and insomnia, less prone to drug addiction, more independent of conformity pressures, and more persistent at difficult tasks. In experiments, those whose self-esteem is given a temporary blow (say, by being told they did poorly on a test or were judged harshly by others) tend then to express heightened racial prejudice. Many clinicians believe that underneath much of the despair and psychological disorder with which they deal is an impoverished self-acceptance. For children and adults a high self-esteem can indeed be healthy.

The power of positive thoughts about oneself is evident in the hundreds of studies that testify to the benefits of a strong 'internal locus of control'—a belief in one's ability to control one's destiny. These are reinforced by hundreds more studies on the benefits of 'self-efficacy,' 'intrinsic motivation,' and 'achievement motivation,' and of the costs of 'learned helplessness' and self-defeating thinking patterns. The moral of all these research literatures is that people profit from viewing themselves as free creatures and their futures as hopeful. Believe that things are beyond your control and they probably will be. Believe that you can do it, and maybe you will.

But of course there are limits to the power of positive thinking. Limitless expectations inevitably bring endless frustrations and the

guilt and shame that accompany the failure to achieve what we believed was achievable—A grades, record sales, marital bliss.

So where do these complementary self-image principles leave us? For the individual, self-affirming thinking is often adaptive, by maintaining self-confidence and minimizing depression. But it is also important to remember the reality of self-serving bias and the harm that self-righteousness can wreak upon social relationships. The question is, therefore, how can we encourage a positive self-acceptance, while not encouraging self-serving pretensions?

Situational and personal control

Yet another overarching principle comes to us as the greatest lesson of social psychology, that social influences are enormous. Indeed, it is difficult to overestimate the extent to which our decisions, beliefs, attitudes, and actions are influenced by our social environments. *We are the creatures of our social worlds.* Consider some everyday examples of but four phenomena of social influences:

Suggestibility: Suicides, bomb threats, hijackings, and UFO sightings have a curious tendency to come in waves. One well-publicized incident—the suicide of a famous movie star—can inspire imitation. Copycat perceptions and actions are not restricted to crazy people. Laughter, even canned laughter, is contagious. Bartenders and beggars know to 'seed' their tip or money cups with money supposedly left by others.

Role playing: A group of decent young men volunteered to spend time in a simulated prison devised by psychologist Philip Zimbardo. Some were randomly designated as guards. They were given uniforms, billy clubs, and whistles, and were instructed to enforce certain rules. The remainder became prisoners, locked in barren cells and forced to wear humiliating outfits. After a day or two of 'playing' their roles, the young men became caught up in the situation. The guards devised cruel and degrading routines, and one by one the prisoners either broke down, rebelled, or became passively resigned. Meanwhile, outside the laboratory, another group of men was being trained by the military junta then in power in Greece to become torturers. The men's indoctrination into cruelty occurred in small steps. First, the trainee would stand guard outside the interrogation and torture cells. Then he would stand guard inside. Only then—having absorbed the role—was he ready to become actively involved in the questioning and cruelty.

Persuasion: In late October of 1980, U.S. presidential candidate

Ronald Reagan trailed incumbent Jimmy Carter by 8 percentage points in the Gallup Poll. On November 4, after a 2-week media blitz and a presidential debate, Reagan, 'the great persuader,' emerged victorious by a stunning 10 percentage points. The Reagan landslide made many people wonder what qualities made Ronald Reagan so persuasive? And his audience so persuadable?

Group influence: One of the first major decisions President John F. Kennedy and his bright and loyal advisers had to make was whether to approve a Central Intelligence Agency plan to invade Cuba. The group's high morale seemed to foster a sense that the plan couldn't help but succeed. No one spoke sharply against the idea, so everyone assumed there was consensus support for the plan, which was then implemented. When the small band of U.S.-trained and -supplied Cuban refugee invaders was easily captured and soon linked to the American government, Kennedy wondered aloud, 'How could we have been so stupid?'

Each of these phenomena of social influence has been 'bottled up' in countless laboratory experiments that isolate their important features and compress them into a brief time period, enabling us to see just how they affect people. A few of the best known of these experiments have put well-intentioned people in an evil situation to see whether good or evil prevails. To a dismaying extent, evil pressures overwhelm good intentions, inducing people to conform to falsehoods or capitulate to cruelty. Faced with a powerful situation, nice people often don't behave so nicely.

In affirming the power of social influence, we must not overlook the complementary truth about our power as individuals: *We are the creators of our social worlds.* Social control (the power of the situation) and personal control (the power of the person) co-exist, for at any moment we are both the creatures and the creators of our environment. We may well be the products of past biological and social influences, but it is also true that the future is coming, and it is our job to decide where it is going. Our choices today determine our environment tomorrow, and as we noted earlier those who most believe in their power to influence their destinies tend most successfully to do so.

The reciprocal influences between situations and persons occurs partly because individuals often choose their situations. When choosing which college to attend or which campus groups to join, a student is also choosing a particular set of social influences. Ardent political liberals are unlikely to settle in Orange County, California, join the Chamber of Commerce, or read *U.S. New and World Report.*

They are more likely to live in San Francisco, join Common Cause, and read the *New Republic.*

Also, our expectations and behaviour will modify our situations. As many recent experiments demonstrate, if we expect someone to be extraverted, hostile, feminine, or sexy, our actions toward the person may induce the very behaviour we expect. The social environment is not like the weather—something that just happens to us. It is more like our homes—something we have made for ourselves and in which we now live.

Again, the reciprocal influences between situations and persons allow us to see people as either reacting to or acting upon their social environment. Each perspective is correct, for we are both the products and the architects of our social worlds.

Rationality and irrationality

The debate over the extent of human wisdom versus the magnitude of human foolishness is longstanding. Are we, as Shakespeare's Hamlet rhapsodized, 'noble in reason! . . . infinite in faculties! . . . in apprehension how like a God!'? Or are we, as T. S. Eliot suggested, 'hollow men . . . Headpiece filled with straw'?

Research psychologists of late have produced considerable ammunition for both sides of the debate. Some of their findings lead us to marvel at our capabilities, others to be startled by our capacity for illusion and self-deception. Let's consider some of this new thinking about thinking, looking first at findings which suggest that *our cognitive capacities are awesome.*

We have been amazed by capabilities that are enabled by the human brain—a mere three pounds of tissue that contains circuitry more complex than all the telephone networks on the planet. We have been surprised at the competence even of newborn infants—at their skill in interacting with their caregivers, their ability to discriminate the sound and smell of their mothers, their abilities to imitate simple gestures. We have marvelled at the seemingly limitless capacity of human memory and the ease with which we simultaneously process varied information, both consciously and unconsciously, effortfully and automatically, with each hemisphere of the brain carrying out special functions. We have wondered at our abilities to form concepts, solve problems, and to make quick, efficient judgments using rule-of-thumb strategies called heuristics. Little wonder that our species has had the genius to invent the camera, the car, and the computer; to unlock the atom and crack the genetic code; to travel into space and probe the depths of the oceans.

We have also been awestruck by the ease with which children acquire language. Before children can add 2 plus 2 they are creating their own grammatically intelligible sentences and comprehending the even more complex sentences spoken to them. Before being able to tie their shoes, preschoolers are soaking up several new words a day and grasping complex grammatical rules with a facility that humbles computer scientists as they struggle to simulate natural language. Or consider your own dimly-understood capacity for language—how, in your most recent conversation, you managed *all at once* to monitor your muscles, order your syntax, watch out for semantic catastrophes that would result from a slight change in word order, continuously adjust your tone of voice and expressive gestures, and say something meaningful when it would have been so easy to speak gibberish. Indeed, it is this human capacity to do so many complex things all at once—to sense the environment, to encode information about the place, timing and frequency of experienced events, to interpret word meanings, to use common sense, to experience emotion, and even to consciously wonder how we do it—that causes us to echo Hamlet: how 'infinite in faculties! . . . how like a God!' We are indeed *Homo sapiens,* the wise species.

But the complementary truth is that our capacity for illusory thinking is equally astonishing. *To err is human.* I know from experience that one can fill a book describing our human tendencies to self-deception and false belief. Thanks to countless experiments since 1970 in the burgeoning subdiscipline of 'cognitive social psychology' we have gained insight into many of the intuitive thinking patterns that, as the price we pay for their efficiency, can lead us astray. Among these reasons for unreason are the following:

First, we often do not know why we do what we do. In experiments, people whose attitudes have been changed will often deny that they have been influenced; they will insist that how they feel now is how they have always felt. When powerful influences upon our behaviour are not so conspicuous that any observer could spot them, we too can be oblivious to what has affected us.

Second, our preconceptions help govern our interpretations and memories. In experiments, people's prejudgments have striking effects upon how they perceive and interpret information. Other experiments have planted judgments or false ideas in people's minds after they have been given information. These experiments reveal that just as before-the-fact judgments bias our perceptions and interpretations, so do after-the-fact judgments bias our recall.

Third, we tend to overestimate the accuracy of our judgments. This 'overconfidence phenomenon' seems partly due to the much greater

ease with which we can imagine why we might be right than why we might be wrong. Moreover, people are more likely to search for information that can confirm their beliefs than information that can deny them.

Fourth, vivid ancedotes and testimonies can be powerfully persuasive, often more so than factual data drawn from a much broader sample of people. This is apparently due to the attention-getting power of vivid information, and to the ease with which we later recall it.

Fifth, we are often swayed by illusions of correlation, causation, and personal control. It is tempting to perceive correlations where none exist ('illusory correlation'), to perceive causal connections among events which are merely correlated (the 'correlation-causation' fallacy), and to think we can control events which are really beyond our control (the 'illusion of control').

Finally, erroneous beliefs may generate their own reality. Studies of experimenter-bias and teacher-expectations indicate that at least sometimes an erroneous belief that certain people are unusually capable (or incapable) can lead one to give special treatment to those people. This may elicit superior (or inferior) performance, and therefore seem to confirm an assumption that is actually false. Similarly, in everyday social affairs we often get what we expect.

It is important to remember that these illusory thinking processes are by-products of thinking strategies that usually serve us well, much as visual illusions are a by-product of perceptual mechanisms that help us organize sensory information. But they are errors nonetheless, errors that can warp our perceptions of reality and prejudice our judgments of persons, leading us at times to act like headpieces filled with straw. By becoming aware of such tendencies we may, perhaps, also become a bit more humble about our intuitive judgments, more aware of our need for disciplined training of the mind, and more open to careful analysis and critique of our judgments. It is true that our cognitive capacities are awesome, but it also is true that to err is the most human of tendencies.

'There are trivial truths and great truths,' declared the physicist Niels Bohr. 'The opposite of a trivial truth is plainly false. The opposite of a great truth is also true.'[6] Psychological inquiry illustrates Bohr's contention. Massive bodies of research indicates that mind emerges from brain, and that mind controls brain; that attitudes influence behaviour, and that attitudes follow behaviour; that self-serving bias is

6. Quoted by W. McGuire, 'The Yin and Yang of Progress in Social Psychology: Seven Koan.' *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology,* 1973, *26,* 446–456.

powerful and perilous, and that self-esteem and positive thinking pay dividends; that we are the creatures of our social worlds, and that we are the creators of our social worlds; that our cognitive capacities are awesome, and that to err is human. To propound any of these truths while ignoring its complement is to proclaim a half-truth. It is in the union of complementary opposites, of yin and yang, that we glimpse the human reality.

Ying and Yang in Christian belief

Although I have so far avoided any mention of Christian views of human nature, some of what I have said may have a vaguely familiar ring. And well it should, for these five complementary pairs of psychological principles parallel five pairs of Christian assumptions. Consider:

Body and spirit

The emerging scientific view that we are a unified mind-brain system may pose a threat to those who, in the tradition of Plato and Socrates, believe we are a dualism of two distinct realities, a mortal body and an undying soul. But it is supportive, in its fundamentals if not its details, of the implicit psychology of the Old Testament people—who were said to think with their hearts, feel with their bowels, and whose flesh longed for God. In this Hebrew view one's *nephesh* (soul) therefore terminates at death; we do not have *nephesh* (Plato's immortal soul), we *are nephesh* (living beings).

The New Testament similarly offers us whole persons—'souls' who can eat, drink and be merry. And it offers the hope that after death we, like Christ, will be resurrected as a perfected mind-body unit. For the Christian, death is a real enemy, not merely a 'passing away' of the immortal soul as it was for Socrates drinking the hemlock. But we are promised that God will take the initiative by giving us in a new world what we do not inherently possess—eternal life.

Our minds are nothing apart from our bodies, suggests the scientific image. *We are, now and in eternity, bodies alive,* suggests the Bible. Fundamentally, both views assume—in contradiction to occult and spiritualist claims of reincarnation, astral projection, and seances with the living dead—that without our bodies we are nobodies.

Having said this, we must also add the complementary truth—that in both the scientific and Christian views something special and mysterious emerges from the unimaginably complex activity of the body. So far as neuroscientists can tell, mind is not an extra entity that

occupies the brain. Yet there it is—our memories, our wishes, our creative ideas, our moment-to-moment awareness—somehow arising from the co-ordinated activity of billions of nerve cells, each of which communicates with hundreds or thousands of other nerve cells. From the material brain, there emerges the mystery of consciousness.

A scientific analogy may help us to see how the properties of a whole system, such as the brain-mind system, may emerge from, yet not reducible to, its physical parts. Physically, an ant colony is but a collection of solitary ants, each of which has a relatively few neurons strung together—a witless, thoughtless creature if ever there was one. Yet the interactions of a dense mass of thousands of ants produces a wondrous phenomenon—a collective intelligence, a social organism that 'knows' how to grow, how to move, how to build. There is nothing extra plugged into the ants to create this intelligence. Yet to look no further than the individual ants would be to miss the miracle of the living colony. Likewise, to stop with the story of the brain cells would be to miss the miracle of consciousness.

Similarly, while the Bible teaches that we are bodily creatures, made from dust, it also teaches that we have the potential for something special and mysterious: *we are created for spiritual relationships.* To Paul and other biblical writers, our spirituality has not to do with an invisible essence that is plugged into a bodily compartment, like a pilot in a small plane, but with the whole person in relationship with God and other persons. Theologian Bruce Reichenbach suggests that to recapture this sense of spirituality we ought to drop the term 'soul' from our religious vocabulary: 'Such an approach, far from destroying faith in the spiritual aspect of man, will aid in clarifying precisely wherein the spiritual lies, i.e., that it lies not in the possession of an entity, but in the style of life one leads insofar as it manifests a relation to God and to one's fellow man.'[7]

Faith and action

The social psychologist's contention that attitudes and behaviour grow from each other parallels and reinforces the biblical understanding of action and faith. Depending on where we break into the spiralling faith-action chain, we will see faith as a source of action or as a consequence. Faith and action, like attitude and action, feed one another.

Much as conventional wisdom has insisted that our attitudes determine our behaviour, so has Christian thinking traditionally

7. Reichenbach, B. 'Life After Death: Possible or Impossible?' *Christian Scholar's Review,* 1974, *3,* 232–244.

emphasized that *faith is a source of action.* Faith, we believe, is the beginning rather than the end of religious development. For example, the experience of being 'called' demonstrates how faith can precede action in the lives of the faithful. Elijah is overwhelmed by the Holy as he huddles in a cave. Paul is touched by the Almighty on the Damascus Road. Ezekiel, Isaiah, Jeremiah and Amos are likewise invaded by the Word, which then explodes in their active response to the call. In each case, an encounter with God provoked a new state of consciousness which was then acted upon.

The dynamic potential of faith is, however, complemented by the not-so-widely appreciated principle that *faith is a consequence of action.* Throughout the Old and New Testaments we are told that full knowledge of God comes through actively 'doing' the Word. Faith is nurtured by obedient action. For example, in the Old Testament the Hebrew word for *know* is generally used as a verb, as something one does. To know love, we must not only know about love but we must act lovingly. And to *hear* the word of God means not only to listen but also to obey.

Likewise, we read in the New Testament that by loving action a person knows God, for 'he who does what is true comes to the light.' Jesus declared that whoever would do the will of God would know God, that he would come and dwell within those who heed what he said, and that we would find ourselves by actively losing ourselves as we take up the cross. The wise man, the one who built his house on rock, differed from the foolish man in that he acted on God's Word. Over and again, the Bible teaches that the gospel power can only be known by living it.

Our theological understanding of faith is informed by this biblical view of knowledge. Faith grows as we act on what little faith we have. Just as experimental subjects become more deeply committed to something for which they have suffered and witnessed, so also do we grown in faith as we act it out. Faith 'is born of obedience,' said John Calvin.[8] 'The proof of Christianity really consists in "following" ' declared Soren Kierkegaard.[9] Karl Barth agreed: 'Only the doer of the Word is its real hearer.'[10] Pascal is even more plainspoken: To attain faith, 'follow the way by which [the committed] began; by acting as if they believed, taking the holy water, having masses said, etc.

8. Calvin, J. *Institutes of the Christian Religion,* I, VI, 2, 72, (J. T. McNeil, Ed., F. L. Battles, trans.). Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1975.

9. Kierkegaard, S. *For Self-Examination and Judge for Yourselves,* 88, (W. Lowrie, trans.). Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1944.

10. Quoted by J. H. Westerhoff III, *Values for Tomorrow's Children,* 44, Philadelphia: Pilgrim Press, 1971.

Even this will naturally make you believe . . .'[11] C. S. Lewis echoed Pascal's sentiments:

> Believe in God and you will have to face hours when it seems *obvious* that this material world is the only reality: disbelieve in Him and you must face hours when this material world seems to shout at you that it is *not* all. No conviction, religious or irreligious, will, of itself, end once and for all [these doubts] in the soul. Only the practice of Faith resulting in the habit of Faith will gradually do that.[12]

The practical implication of this faith-follows-action principle is that in church management, in worship, and in Christian nurture we need to create opportunities for people to enact their convictions, thereby confirming and strengthening their Christian identity. Biblical and psychological perspectives link arms in reminding us that faith is like love. If we hoard it, it will shrivel. If we use it, exercise it, and express it, we will have it more abundantly. In his *Cost of Discipleship,* Dietrich Bonhoeffer summarized this faith-action spiral: *'Only he who believes is obedient, and only he who is obedient believes.'*

Human pride and divine grace

The new research on self-serving bias is aptly summarized in a W. C. Fields quip: 'Hubris is back in town.' The abundant evidence that human reason is adaptable to self-interest and that our self-perceptions tend to be self-justifying echoes a very old Christian idea: that *pride is the fundamental sin,* the original sin, the deadliest of the seven deadly sins.

Unpacking this doctrine of pride we find that it has two components. First is the assumption that self-love and self-righteous pretension are pervasive. Thus the Psalmist could declare that 'No one can see his own errors' and the Pharisee could thank God 'that I am not like other men' (and you and I can thank God that we are not like the Pharisee). Paul assumed our self-perceived superiority when he admonished the Philippians to reverse this tendency—to 'in humility count others better than yourselves.' Likewise, he assumed self-love when he argued that husbands should love their wives as their own bodies, just as Jesus assumed self-love when commanding us to love our neighbours as we love ourselves. The Bible neither teaches nor opposes self-love; it takes it for granted.

The Christian doctrine of pride assumes, secondly, that prideful self-love can go before a fall. The Bible warns us against self-

11. Pascal, B. *Thoughts,* 233 (W. F. Trotter, trans.), in M. Mack (Ed.), *World Masterpieces,* vol. 2, 38, (New York) Norton, 1965.
12. Lewis, C. S. *Christian Reflections,* 61, Glasgow: Collins (Fount Paperbacks), 1981.

righteousness—the pride that alienates us from God and leads us to disdain one another. Pride is the fundamental sin because it corrodes human community by eroding our sense of dependence on one another and on God. The Nazi atrocities, for example, were rooted not in self-conscious feelings of German inferiority but in Aryan pride. The arms race is fed by a national pride that enables each nation to perceive its own motives as righteously defensive, the other's as hostile. Even that apostle of positive thinking Dale Carnegie foresaw the danger: 'Each nation feels superior to other nations. That breeds patriotism—and wars.'

The sin that grows from human pride is an essential part of the biblical story, but it is not the whole story. In the *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible,* S. J. DeVries reduces the whole of Scripture to a pair of propositions: We find ourselves 'in sin and suffer its painful effects; God graciously offers salvation from it. This, in essence is what the Bible is about.' The salvation half of the story proclaims an unshakeable basis for self-esteem: Our worth is said to be more than we appreciate—certainly more than that of 'the birds of the air' and God's other creatures. It is worth enough to motivate Jesus' kindness and respect even toward those with little honour—toward women and children, Samaritans and Gentiles, leprosy victims and prostitutes, the poor and the tax collectors. Recognizing that our worth is what we are worth to God—an agonizing but redemptive execution on a cross—therefore draws us to a self-affirmation that is rooted in divine love.

Thus the Christian answer to self-righteous pride is the good news that *to experience grace is to feel accepted* and therefore to be liberated from the need to define our self-worth in terms of achievements, or prestige, or material and physical well-being. It is simultaneously to be liberated both from our self-protective pride and our self-rejection. Recall Pinocchio. Floundering in confusion about his self-worth, Pinocchio turns to his maker Gepetto and says, 'Pappa, I am not sure who I am. But if I'm all right with you, then I guess I'm all right with me.' In the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, our Maker signals to us that we belong to him and that we are set right. St. Paul, surrendering his pretensions, could therefore exult that 'I no longer have a righteousness of my own, the kind that is gained by obeying the Law. I now have the righteousness that is given through faith in Christ . . . '.[13]

'To give up one's pretensions is as blessed a relief as to get them gratified,' noted William James, 'and where disappointment is incessant and the struggle unending, this is what men will always do. The history of evangelical theology, with its conviction of sin, its self-

13. Philippians 3:9.

despair, and its abandonment of salvation by works, is the deepest of possible examples.'[14] There is indeed tremendous relief in confessing our limits and our pride, in being known as we are, and in then experiencing 'unconditional positive regard.' Having been forgiven and accepted, we gain release, a feeling of being given what formerly we were struggling to get: security, peace, love. Having cut the pretensions and encountered divine grace, we feel *more* not less value as persons, for our self-acceptance no longer depends exclusively upon our own virtue and achievement nor upon others' approval.

The feelings one can have in this encounter with God are like those we enjoy in a relationship with someone who, even after knowing our inmost thoughts, accepts us unconditionally. This is the delicious experience we enjoy in a good marriage or an intimate friendship, in which we no longer feel the need to justify and explain ourselves or to be on guard, in which we are free to be spontaneous without fear of losing the other's esteem. Such was the Psalmist's experience: 'Lord, I have given up my pride and turned away from my arrogance . . . I am content and at peace.'[15]

Divine sovereignty and human responsibility

The dialectic of situational and personal control finds its Christian counterpart in the paradox of God's sovereignty and our responsibility. Attacks on the idea that we are self-made people—that thanks to our free will we are independently capable of righteousness—have come not only from social researchers but also from theologians such as Augustine, Luther, Calvin, and Jonathan Edwards. *God is ultimately in control,* they insist.

Edwards would not give so much as an inch to human free-will, because to the extent that human will is spontaneous and free, God's plans become dependent on our decisions. But this, said Edwards, would necessitate God's 'constantly changing his mind and intentions' in order to achieve his purposes. 'They who thus plead for man's liberty, advance principles which destroy the freedom of God himself,' the sovereign God of whom Jesus said not even a sparrow falls to the ground apart from his will.[16] Nor is human will added to God's will such that the two together equal 100 percent. Rather, agreed St. Augustine, 'our wills themselves are included in that order of causes which is certain to God.'[17] God is working in and through our lives, our choices. He is due all credit even for our faith, insisted

14. James, W. *The Principles of Psychology,* vol. 2. New York: Holt, 1890.
15. Psalm 131.
16. Edwards, J. *Freedom of the Will* (P. Ramsey, Ed.). 253, 27. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1957.

Luther. His grace operates within the processes of nature, suggested Thomas Aquinas; God sustains and orders the natural processes that shape us.

But there can also be no doubt that the Bible assumes that *we are responsible.* We are accountable for our choices and our action. The streams of causation run through our present choices, which will in turn determine the future. So what we decide makes all the difference. Even our decision to believe—to choose whom we will serve—is in our hands.

Everything depends on us and everything depends on God. 'I . . . yet not I, but the grace of God,'[18] said St. Paul. C. S. Lewis notes that the New Testament puts these two ideas together

> into the amazing sentence. The first half is, 'Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling'—which looks as if everything dependent on us and good actions: but the second half goes on, 'For it is God who worketh in you'—which looks as if God did everything and we nothing. I am afraid that is the sort of thing we come up against in Christianity. I am puzzled, but I am not surprised. You see, we are now trying to understand, and to separate into watertight compartments, what exactly God does and what man does when God and man are working together. And, of course, we begin by thinking it is like two men working together, so that you could say, 'He did this bit and I did that.' But this way of thinking breaks down. God is not like that. He is inside you as well as outside. . . .[19]

Faced with this paradox of divine responsibility and human responsibility, or with the twin truths of social and personal control, we might think of ourselves as like someone stranded in a deep well with two ropes dangling down. If we grab either one alone we will sink deeper into the well. Only when we hold both ropes at once can we climb out, because at the top, beyond where we can see, they come together around a pulley. Grabbing only the rope of God's sovereignty or of our responsibility plunges us to the bottom of a well. So instead we grab both ropes, without yet understanding how they come together. In doing so, we may be comforted that in science as in religion, a confused acceptance of seemingly irreconciliable principles is sometimes more honest than a tidy over-simplified theory that ignores half the evidence.

Divine image and finite creature

The tension between the grandeur of our cognitive capacities and

17. Augustine, *The City of God,* Book 5, Chapter 9.
18. I Corinthians 15:10.
19. Lewis, C. S. *Mere Christianity,* Book III, Chapter 12.

our vulnerability to error was anticipated by the Psalmist. Thus he could exult that human beings are 'little less than God' in the very next breath after wondering 'What is man that thou art mindful of him?' Pascal's *Pensees* reflect a similar ambivalence. One moment we read that 'Man's greatness lies in his power of thought' and the next moment that the human mind is 'a cesspool of uncertainty and error.'

And so it is throughout the scripture. *We are made in the image of God,* crowned with honour and glory, and given dominion over God's created world. Humanity is special. We are the summit of God's creative work. We are God's own children.

Yet we are also a part of the creation. *We are finite creatures* of the one who declares 'I am God, and there is none like me.'[20] Loved by God, we have dignity, but not deity. Thus Karl Barth warns us never to make an idol out of our religion, by presuming our own thoughts to be God's absolute truth. Always we see reality in a mirror, dimly. 'For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.'[21]

So we see that in Christian belief, much as in contemporary psychology (see Table 1), the whole truth seems best approximated by complementary propositions: we are, now and in eternity, bodies alive, yet we are also created for spiritual relationships; faith is a source of action and a consequence of action; pride is the fundamental sin, but grace is a key to self-acceptance; God is in control, and we are responsible; we are made in the image of God, and we are finite creatures. These Christian propositions find their counterparts in recent psychological inquiry. Both sets of propositions are the creations of human minds, mere approximations of reality that are subject to revision. Still, the parallels of content and of dialectical form are noteworthy. Because faith always seeks understanding in the language of the day, psychology can perhaps enliven ancient Christian wisdom. Perhaps it can also help us feel more comfortable with the yin and yang of truth. To ask whether it is more true that we are body or spirit, whether faith or action comes first, whether God or we are responsible, whether pride or self-rejection is the problem, or whether we are wise or foolish, is like asking which blade of a pair of scissors is more necessary. Always it is tempting when emphasizing one truth to forget the other. Martin Luther once likened us to the drunkard, who, having fallen off his horse on the right, would then proceed to fall off it on the left. In our time, at least, the cutting edge of truth seems to lie between the yin and the yang.

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20. Isaiah 46:9.
21. Isaiah 55:9.

YIN AND YANG IN PSYCHOLOGICAL RESEARCH AND CHRISTIAN BELIEF

. . . in psychological research

1. Brain and Mind
   a. Mind emerges from brain.
   b. Mind controls brain.

2. Attitudes and Behaviour
   a. Attitudes influence behaviour.
   b. Attitudes follow behaviour.

3. Self-Serving Bias and Self-Esteem
   a. Self-serving bias is powerful and perilous.
   b. High self-esteem & positive thinking pay dividends.

4. Situational and Personal Control
   a. We are the creatures of our social worlds.
   b. We are the creators of our social worlds.

5. Rationality and Irrationality
   a. Our cognitive capacities are awesome.
   b. To err is human.

. . . in Christian belief

1. Body and Spirit
   a. We are, now and in eternity, bodies alive.
   b. We are created for spiritual relationships.

2. Faith and Action
   a. Faith is a source of action.
   b. Faith is a consequence of action.

3. Human Pride and Divine Grace
   a. Pride is the fundamental sin.
   b. To experience grace is to feel accepted.

4. Divine Sovereignty and Human Responsibility
   a. God is ultimately in control.
   b. We are responsible.

5. Divine Image and Finite Creature
   a. We are made in the image of God.
   b. We are finite creatures.