Finding a Cure for Psychology

by Theodore Dalrymple

Claims to understanding are not understanding itself: indeed, sometimes it is far from clear what understanding would consist of. As the Haitian peasants say, behind mountains, more mountains: that is to say, one never arrives at the final cause of anything. We have to make do with whatever explanations satisfy us, and seem to work, for our current purposes.

There is often a strange disconnection, however, between claims to understanding and the practical consequences of that supposed understanding. For example, the National Institute on Drug Abuse in Washington has sometimes claimed greatly to have advanced human understanding of addiction, largely thanks to itself, at the same time as the country in which it is located has suffered from an unprecedented epidemic of deaths from

overdose—of drugs of addiction. The total of these deaths far exceeds that of all American military deaths since the end of the Second World War, two major wars included. One might have thought that this would give pause to those who claim increased understanding, but this does not appear to be the case.

The vast increase in the study of crime has not resulted in the diminution of crime, on the contrary, though it has certainly increased the number of criminologists. Perhaps these two increases—in crime and in criminologists—are not causally related, but it is at least possible that they are. I think it fair to say that criminologists are more likely to concern themselves with the perpetrators than with the victims, and their investigations are invariably exculpatory in effect, undermining justification for punishment. They are also under institutional and social pressure to come up with arcane theories, because there is no point (and no career advancement) in concluding what any drunk in any pub has concluded without much reflection.

One often hears the demand that the fundamental causes of crime should be understood, failing the discovery of which nothing much can be done about it. This is mistaken on two grounds: apart from attributing everything to an unmoved mover, one can always ask what the cause of a cause is, so that the fundament is never reached; but this does not normally paralyse us completely.

Another field of study whose academics and practitioners have made claims to great strides in understanding is psychology. This study too has undergone a vast expansion, indeed out of all recognition. Psychology is now the third most popular subject in American colleges and universities, and no doubt elsewhere as well. I suspect that this popularity is a manifestation of mass narcissism rather than of curiosity. If Alexander Pope were alive today, he would not write that the proper study of mankind is man, but that the proper study of

myself is me.

Those who think of studying psychology often say that they want to understand themselves, and in the event are rather disappointed when they have to administer electric shocks to blameless rats in cages. I have asked such young persons to give me an example, purely hypothetical, imaginary or fictional, of an explanation that would so satisfy them such that they would be able to say, "Ah, *now* at last I understand myself." Not surprisingly, they are unable to do so and will remain unable for the rest of their lives. I tell them that they should not strive to find themselves, but to lose themselves: for, as Francis Bacon said more than four hundred years ago, "It is a poore Center of a Mans Actions, Himselfe."

The similarity of this sentiment to that at the beginning of Sonnet 62 has led certain commentators into the labyrinth (from whose bourn no traveller returns) of the Shakespearean authorship question:

Sin of self-love possesseth all mine eye

And all my soul and all my every part;

And for this sin there is no remedy,

It is so grounded inward in my heart.

Baconians conclude that the real Shakespeare (the author of the poetry and plays) was not the half-educated ignoramus from Stratford, but the studious young prodigy of a prominent father, Francis Bacon.

At any rate, if it is not self-love that impels young people towards psychology as a subject of study, it is an allied quality, self-importance. It is also what impels people towards psychoanalysis, which is licence to invest the most minor fluctuations of their mentation or emotion with the deepest significance. Admittedly my forthcoming observation is

not scientifically unimpeachable, but it has been my experience that people who spend years in psychoanalysis become, if they did not start out, tediously self-absorbed and indifferent to the rest of the world.

What the Viennese satirist Karl Kraus (who had the good fortune to die before the Anschluss) said of psychoanalysis, namely that it was the disease which it pretended to cure, is partly true, that is to say true to a lesser extent, of psychology. Clearly, physiological psychology has a respectable basis, albeit that like all scientific study its findings are subject to revision; and there is little doubt that problems such as arachnophobia (but not Islamophobia) can be treated by psychological methods.

All things considered, however, the results of psychology have been meagre, both from the point of view of human self-understanding and from that of beneficial practical results. Despite unprecedentedly large numbers of psychologists, the psychological condition of the population does not seem to have improved. If reportage is to be believed, the young and adolescent have never been as miserable as they are today, despite their being in some ways among the most privileged generation in history.

Of course, this is taken as an indication of the need for an even greater number of psychologists, as if they—the young and adolescent—were suffering from something with a technical solution that only psychologists had mastered. Sometimes it seems as if the model of society that the supposedly-caring profession have in mind is of half the population being incapacitated while the other half looks after it—for pay, of course. Another analogy would be of a dog chasing its own tail.

But what if the psychological fragility of the population is actually caused not so much by the psychologists personally, but by the increasing psychologisation of human life itself?

It has been my experience that the habit of examining one's mental state and trying to explain it in supposedly objective or scientific terms, has the effect of alienating people from their own direct conscious experience. People talk of their brain chemistry, or of some other supposedly technical explanation of their conduct, as if they were talking of someone other than themselves. This, not surprisingly, is an obstacle to honest and truthful (but often or potentially painful) reflection on their situation.

One indication of this is that the word *unhappy* has almost been replaced in the common lexicon by the word *depressed*. For every time you hear someone claim to be unhappy, you hear a hundred claim to be depressed. This is significant: for to be depressed is now to be suffering from a medical condition, which it is the role of professionals to cure. But the fact is, and will probably always be, that unhappiness as a mental state is inevitable for human beings, though not any particular instance of it, which may well be subject to alleviation—though, again, not by medical means or those of technical psychology. To pretend otherwise is to do humanity no service.

That melancholia as a medical condition exists is almost certain; once seen or experienced it is never forgotten. But to subsume all human unhappiness under its rubric is a manoeuvre typical of professions that seek to extend their scope, all the more urgently because they, the professions, have been increased vastly in size thanks to an expansion of tertiary education beyond the capacity of society to absorb its products in any other way.

Thus it is important from the point of view of professional psychology that people should be rendered fragile: incapable, for example, of being insulted or offended without psychological collapse, or of facing distant hypothetical prospects—that, say, of catastrophic climate change—without paralysing degrees of anxiety requiring professional

assistance to overcome. (I read recently that there are psychotherapists in California who specialise in allaying anxiety about climate change, though not of course eliminating it, for *that* would be to kill the goose that lays the golden eggs.)

The habit of constantly examining one's mental state like a hypochondriac constantly taking his pulse, his temperature or his blood pressure, is productive of anxiety, misery and triviality. The sooner we abandon the very notion of mental health the happier we shall be—though not *perfectly* happy.

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