Psychological Science and Christian Faith

INSIGHTS AND ENRICHMENTS FROM CONSTRUCTIVE DIALOGUE

Malcolm A. Jeeves

and Thomas E. Ludwig
To Ruth and Deb, for their love and support.

~

To Kathryn Brownson and Kayla Pouliot.
Your assistance has been invaluable.
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Given psychology’s position as the “science of behavior and mental processes,” in any discussions of the relationship between psychology and Christian faith we should consider what can be learned from the other sciences. Fortunately, historians have documented the shifting relationship between religion and the various scientific disciplines across many centuries. Indeed, if one also takes into account science’s forerunner in the form of “natural philosophy,” it is possible to trace these changing relations over two millennia. This historical research demonstrates that scientists and theologians have both made errors along the way, and there are lessons to be learned from those errors. For example:

- Scientists reached premature conclusions before all the relevant evidence was examined, or made sweeping claims that went beyond the evidence.
- Theologians made reflexive reactions against new scientific discoveries that appeared to challenge familiar religious concepts.
- Scientists and theologians both constructed “concordisms” that tried to harmonize current scientific theories and currently accepted interpretations of scripture.

The lessons learned by other sciences and from earlier generations of Christians should help us avoid making similar errors as we work to formulate a constructive relationship between psychological science and Christian faith. The purpose of this book is to promote progress
toward that constructive relationship. Throughout this book we attempt to show the inadequacy and inaccuracy of the conflict motif and the dangers of premature concordism. We highlight examples of an alternative approach—often called complementary perspectives—that emphasizes the mutual insights and enrichments that can emerge from a cordial working relationship between psychology and theology.

Why did we choose to attempt this task? One of us (MAJ) has been privileged to be involved personally in some of the major scientific developments in psychology over more than half a century, including

- The onset and development of the so-called cognitive revolution
- The development of neuropsychology
- The rapid advances in evolutionary psychology

These personal connections are described more fully in the paragraphs below—first for Malcolm Jeeves and then for Thomas Ludwig.

**The cognitive revolution.** According to Howard Gardner (Gardner 1985), the cognitive revolution began at a meeting held in Cambridge, England, in 1956, called by Sir Frederic Bartlett and jointly organized with Jerome Bruner of Harvard. Malcolm was privileged to be a participant in, and the secretary of, this international conference. Thus, he has been involved in cognitive psychology from the very beginning and has followed developments in this area ever since, as well as publishing research on thinking and structural learning, which were central themes of the cognitive revolution (e.g., Dienes and Jeeves 1965; Dienes and Jeeves 1970; Jeeves and Greer 1983). As one indication of the impact of these publications, they have been translated into French, German, Hungarian, and Italian.

**Neuropsychology.** Malcolm has been active in research in neuropsychology and cognitive neuroscience for more than fifty years (e.g., Jeeves 1965; Jeeves and Baumgartner 1986; Lassonde and Jeeves 1994; Milner and Rugg 1995; Jeeves et al. 2001). For part of that time he served as editor in chief of Neuropsychologia, the major scientific journal reporting research in this area. That alone ensured that he was consistently up-to-
date as reports of the latest exciting developments worldwide crossed the editor’s desk seeking publication.

**Evolutionary psychology.** As well as initiating and publishing work in comparative psychology and evolutionary psychology, including carrying out some of the first systematic studies of marsupial behavior (e.g., Rajalakshmi and Jeeves 1965; Jeeves and Winefield 1969), Malcolm has been privileged to be a member of a university department with an international reputation in evolutionary psychology. This has provided regular opportunities to participate in seminars by world leaders in evolutionary psychology and to keep up-to-date with new developments in the field.

Thomas Ludwig has been involved personally in research on a variety of topics in cognitive psychology and cognitive neuroscience, including hemispheric specialization for verbal and spatial skills, emotion processing, and the physiology of forgiveness (e.g., Ludwig 1982; MacKay and Ludwig 1986; Ludwig and Jeeves 1996; Witvliet, Ludwig, and Vander Laan 2001). In addition, for four decades he has been at the forefront of developing computer-based experiments and simulations to facilitate the teaching of psychological science to college students (e.g., Ludwig [1986] 2015; Ludwig 2002; Ludwig and Perdue 2005). His work has emphasized the ways in which psychological theories can and must be put to empirical testing if the science is to move forward on a firm foundation.

Thus, we write about what we know firsthand, as actors and participants rather than as spectators. After examining the conflict model, attempts at concordism, and attempts to integrate psychology and religion, we provide examples of complementary perspectives from the areas of psychological science in which the two of us have been directly involved for decades: neuropsychology, cognitive psychology, and evolutionary psychology.

The book’s final chapters provide additional examples of complementarity (as well as examples of conflicts and concordisms) from other areas of psychology with which we have less direct contact, including social psychology and personality psychology. In order to be as comprehensive
as possible in our discussions of the relations of psychological science and Christian faith, we have invited one of today’s leading social psychologists, David Myers—who is also the author of the best-selling general psychology textbook—to contribute a chapter on social psychology in which he calls for “authentic dialogue—a dialogue between the emerging insights of science and biblical scholarship.”

Each of the research specialties mentioned here has changed as it has developed over the decades, highlighting the danger of assuming that what science is revealing to us today is set in stone. This progressive development of science is directly relevant to one of the main themes of this book, namely, the futility of constructing a concordism or harmonization between today’s science and today’s most widely accepted interpretations of scripture. Thus, on the basis of centuries of historical evidence in other sciences and a century of developments in psychology, we shall argue that we need to move away from both conflicts and concordisms. We shall also argue that, although the attempt to integrate psychology and Christian faith has seemed a worthy goal, the time has come to minimize the use of that term. Instead, we should focus on the insights and enrichments biblical theology can provide for psychological research and theory, as well as on the insights and enrichments that psychological science can offer to theology, and to our understanding of scripture, of ourselves, and of the world in which we live.

We should note that the general approach taken in this book resonates strongly with and develops further the approaches advocated recently by theologian and historian Alister McGrath and his wife, psychologist and Anglican priest Joanna Collicutt McGrath. The potential for mutual enrichments (described by McGrath) and the relevance of academic psychology to many science and faith issues (emphasized by Collicut) are central themes of this book, and we are indebted to them both.
PSYCHOLOGICAL SCIENCE AND CHRISTIAN FAITH
What Sort of Psychology Are We Seeking to Relate to Christian Faith?

Why Psychological Science and Christian Faith? Why not simply Psychology and Christian Faith? There is a substantial literature on the relationship between psychology and Christian faith that expresses a wide range of views about the nature and scope of contemporary psychology. For example, two influential edited volumes on this topic are *Psychology and the Christian Faith: An Introductory Reader* (S. Jones 1986) and *Psychology and Christianity: Five Views* (E. Johnson 2010). Although these two books were published almost twenty-five years apart, both have guided discussions of the relationship between psychology and Christian faith in North America. What is striking about the content of these volumes is that they barely mention several areas of contemporary psychological research that have been among the most intensively researched, widely reported, and generously funded over the past six decades, including

- Cognitive psychology
- Neuropsychology and cognitive neuroscience
- Evolutionary psychology

Why are these omissions regrettable? Howard Gardner has documented the crucial role of the cognitive revolution in modern psychology—as
the foundation for a large segment of contemporary research, as well as the entire field of artificial intelligence (Gardner 1985). The importance of cognitive neuroscience was emphasized by the US government in its declaration that the last decade of the twentieth century should be labeled the “Decade of the Brain.” Likewise, the first decade of the twenty-first century has been labeled the “Decade of the Mind.” The impact of evolutionary psychology is evident from the explosive growth in research funding and publications in this field. The minimal coverage of these research areas in the two widely read volumes mentioned above demonstrates a serious mismatch between what is happening at the cutting edge of psychology and what is included in the typical science-faith discussions. We believe that any current and future discussions of psychology and Christian faith should take note of psychology as it is today and as it is taught to today’s college and university students.

One way of finding out what contemporary psychology looks like is to examine the contents of a current standard textbook. For the past three decades, the most widely read textbook of psychology in North America is the one written by David Myers, now in its twelfth edition (Myers and DeWall 2018). In this book, the prologue and chapter 1 deal with the story of psychology and research methodology. The headings of the remaining chapters are as follows:

Chapter 2 The Biology of Mind
Chapter 3 Consciousness and the Two-Track Mind
Chapter 4 Nature, Nurture, and Human Diversity
Chapter 5 Developing through the Lifespan
Chapter 6 Sensation and Perception
Chapter 7 Learning
Chapter 8 Memory
Chapter 9 Thinking and Language
Chapter 10 Intelligence
Chapter 11 What Drives Us: Hunger, Sex, Friendship, and Achievement