

THOMISTIC COUNSELING
COURSE 1: THOMISTIC PERSPECTIVES – THE NATURE OF MAN
CLASS 1 – WHY THOMISM?

Class Outline

I. Why Thomistic psychology is needed in counseling today?

- A. We have an innate desire for truth and consistency. Solutions with lasting impact are more readily found in the ancient wisdom of Thomas Aquinas and philosophers who wrote extensively on the operations of the mind and soul of man. St. Thomas's philosophical psychology provides valuable insight into how to care for those with mental, spiritual struggles.
- B. Applying a Thomistic point of view to counseling renders methods that are concise, consistent, and cogent. A Thomistic perspective of psychology provides an understanding of the nature of man and the nature of his faculties; this understanding provides the means to know the causes of mental health and illness and provides a means to determine remedies.

II. Mental health and mental illness

A. Definitions: American Psychological Association

1. Mental health - a state of mind characterized by emotional well-being, good behavioral adjustment, relative freedom from anxiety and disabling symptoms, and a capacity to establish constructive relationships and cope with the ordinary demands and stresses of life. (American Psychological Association)
2. Mental illnesses – not defined
3. Mental disorder - any condition characterized by cognitive and emotional disturbances, abnormal behaviors, impaired functioning, or any combination of these. Such disorders cannot be accounted for solely by environmental circumstances and may involve physiological, genetic, chemical, social, and other factors.

B. Definitions: Thomistic

1. Mental health per se is that quality of the possible intellect itself by which it acts according to its own nature. That is, mental health is a quality which gives the possible intellect the capacity to act according to its nature (to exercise its 3 acts- apprehension, judgement, and reasoning)
2. Mental illness per se is a defect or defects in the possible intellect which makes it incapable of rational judgment or reasoning properly; one acts contrary to rational principles. That is, mental illness is a negation of mental health, a lack of a due quality or defect in the possible intellect which renders the faculty incapable of acting according to its proper nature.

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C. Classifying mental illness

1. Modern psychology primarily uses the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5). It has been the industry standard since first published in 1952.
2. Specific classifications of mental disorders are elaborated in the American Psychiatric Association's Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders and the World Health Organization's International Classification of Diseases. Also called mental illness; psychiatric disorder; psychiatric illness; psychological disorder.
 - a. Thomistic psychology provides a framework of the operations of the person; or how we are designed to function. One determines illness by identifying the defects in the operation of the faculties (intellective, sensitive, or appetitive).

III. Distinctions between modern and Thomistic psychology

A. Three primary schools of thought in psychology and underlying assumptions

1. Psychoanalysis: assumptions
 - a. Our behavior and feelings are powerfully affected by unconscious motives, which influence judgments, feelings, or behavior.
 - b. The unconscious mind is the primary source of human behavior. Like an iceberg, the most important part of the mind is the part you cannot see.
 - c. Our feelings, motives, and decisions are influenced by our past experiences and stored in the unconscious.
 - d. Events that occur in childhood can remain in the unconscious, and cause problems as adults.
 - e. Personality is shaped as the drives are modified by different conflicts at different times in childhood.
2. Behaviorism: assumptions
 - a. All behavior is learned from the environment and there is little difference between the learning of humans and that of other animals.
 - b. Behaviorism emphasizes the role of environmental factors in influencing behavior, to the near exclusion of innate or inherited factors.
 - c. We learn new behavior through classical or operant conditioning (collectively known as 'learning theory').
 - d. Therefore, when born our mind is "tabula rasa" (a blank slate).
 - e. While behaviorists often accept the existence of cognitions and emotions, they prefer not to study them as only observable (i.e., external) behavior can be objectively and scientifically measured.

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3. Humanism: assumptions
 - a. Man is seen as material (cognition and emotion) or as mind and body.
 - b. People have free will and choose their path to happiness.
 - c. Experiencing (thinking, sensing, perceiving, feeling, remembering, and so on) is central to happiness; pleasure is a focus.
 - d. People are basically good, and have an innate need to make themselves and the world better.
 - e. People are motivated to self-actualize (grow psychologically and enhance themselves) and will thrive in suitable conditions.
 - f. The subjective, conscious experiences of the individual is most important.
 - g. Reality is subjective.

Contrast Thomistic Psychology: assumptions

- a. Man is a body-soul composite; material and immaterial nature.
- b. People have free will and intellect as higher faculties. We trust in God for happiness, which is obtained by knowing, loving and serving Him.
- c. People are designed to know and love God; the higher faculties, intellect and will, are oriented to know truth and do good through the pursuit of virtue.
- d. People are basically good, but because of original sin, they will struggle. People and have an innate desire for happiness.
- e. Choosing and pursuing virtue, which orders the faculties, is an important objective.
- f. The tranquility of this order is a participation in God's divine nature.
- g. Reality is objective.

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Instructor:

Jeanne-Marie Ganucheau, MSW, LCSW