

Book Excerpt:

Psychology as Religion: The Cult of Self-Worship

by Paul Vitz (1977, 1994, William Eerdmans Publishing)

This book provides a compelling look into the self-actualization theories first popularized in the 1960's and 1970's. Self theories are significant because they set the stage for many social changes—including the cultural acceptance of homosexuality, and the increasingly radical redefinition of the family. The philosophy—i.e., “religion”—of unconstrained self-actualization (“selfism”) now underlies much of today's psychotherapy.

Because of its association with the hard sciences, psychology is often erroneously considered to possess scientific-truth status. But as Jeffrey Satinover has noted, psychology is meaningless without the backdrop of a framework of values. So the question then becomes, whose values? Religious values have been banished as underlying principles—but as another observer recently commented, this merely frees the “religions that don't call themselves religions from the burden of competition.”

Here, Paul Vitz says that contemporary psychology has abandoned its earlier attempts at objectivity. Instead, it has devoted itself to a philosophy of self-centeredness which refuses to acknowledge limits and responsibilities.

Here, we quote directly from the book:

This book is for the reader interested in a critique of contemporary psychology—the reader who knows, perhaps only intuitively, that psychology has become more a *sentiment* than a *science*, and is now part of the problem of modern life, rather than part of its resolution.

Self theory is a widely popular, secular, and humanistic cult or “religion,” not a branch of science...for our present purpose of showing that self-psychology commonly functions as a religion, it is appropriate to use Fromm's own definition of religion: “any system of thought and action shared by a group which gives the individual a frame of orientation and an object of devotion.”

Life Has Limits

Fromm's definition...set[s] in bold relief the aggressive ideological character of the kind of secular humanism we have been talking about, with its devotion to the “self” and to humanity. We shall use the term *selfism* to refer to this religion and its rationale for self-expression, creativity, and the like...Selfist psychology emphasizes the human capacity for change to the point of almost totally ignoring the idea that life has limits, and that knowledge of those limits

is the basis of wisdom.

For selfists there seem to be no acceptable duties, denials, inhibitions, or restraints. Instead, there are only rights, and opportunities for change. An overwhelming number of the selfists assume that there are no unvarying moral or personal relationships, no permanent aspects to individuals. All is written in sand by a self in flux.

The tendency to give a green light to any self-defined goal is undoubtedly one of the major appeals of selfism, particularly to a people in a culture in which change has been seen as intrinsically good...

The claim that self-theory is a science in invalid by any useful meaning of the term *science*, since humanist definitions no longer distinguish psychology and psychotherapy from religion, literature, political theory, and ethics. Yet by keeping the name *psychology*, which has been represented as a science for decades, by having self-theory taught by psychologists (that is, experts), in countless university classes, and by vaguely suggesting ways in which self-theory might be tested, selfism has falsely benefited from the prestige and generally acknowledged special truth value accorded to any science.

Science Cannot Verify Values

A related weakness is the tendency of selfists to imply that *psychology as a science* has somehow verified the values of secular humanism found in self-theory. Many proponents of selfism are generally quite aware of the ethical character of their system. Indeed, they argue congenitally that therapeutic psychology cannot possibly operate without values. This position is widely accepted by most thoughtful people today. But how do you demonstrate scientifically the intrinsic goodness of the self, the moral desirability of an “actualizing,” “experiencing in the present,” “becoming creative” self? Obviously, such values have not been scientifically verified.

At present, there is no satisfactory evidence that science can verify ANY value. Yet the aura or authority that psychology has derived from its scientific status is often used by those teaching selfism to imply that its concept and values somehow have, or approach, a scientific truth status.

Here I speak from considerable personal experience. As a student I sat in many classes in which, a few weeks after listening to aggressive talk about psychology as the “sci-

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ence of behavior" or the "scientific study of mind," I heard lectures on "self-actualization" and "encounter group processes and goals." No questions were raised about whether the initial arguments for psychology's scientific status still held.

As a young professor during the 1960's, I taught courses on motivation and personality, in which lectures on the theories of Maslow, Fromm and Rogers followed close after lectures on instinctual, hormonal and biochemical interpretations of motivation. All this was, and still is, typical of the curriculum in the so-called scientific study of motivation and personality. However, had I lectured on [for example] Christian interpretations of human motivation as providing a reasonable, observationally grounded synthesis of the problems of the self, it would have been seen—and would be seen today—as an arbitrary and unacceptable intrusion of religion into a secular discipline that many still think of as a science.

Selfism and the Family

There is every reason to believe that the spread of selfist philosophy in society has contributed greatly to the destruction of families...With monotonous regularity, the selfist literature sides with those values that encourage divorce, breaking up, dissolution of marital and family ties. All this is done in the name of growth, autonomy, and "continuing the flux."

...The problem begins with psychotherapy's neurotic preoccupation with the individual patient. This is reflected in the absence during most therapy of representation for the children, spouse, parents, and the like...Many self-theorists, especially Carl Rogers, give very little value to marriage—and indeed encourage divorce on theoretical grounds... Perhaps we can summarize all this best by noting that a "Rogerian" understanding of marriage created the popular expression that marriage is a "nonbinding commitment."

...[M]odern psychology has created widespread "social pollution" by its analytical and also reductionist emphasis on the isolated individual, and its relentless hostility to social bonds as expressed in tradition, community structures, and the family. It is no accident that it was modern

industrial psychology which first reduced the extended family to the nuclear family, then reduced the nuclear family to the increasingly common subnuclear family of one parent, and now works toward the parentless family where the child is raised by government programs.

The Social Sciences Rest on a Theory

The assumption that the objective method of science is a fair and unbiased procedure for correctly understanding a phenomenon is widely accepted in modern society...used in the study of human beings, this method is a profoundly prejudiced ideological tool, which leads inevitably to a particular theory of humankind.

...The problem raised by the nonscientific character of humanistic psychology began causing serious controversy within the discipline several decades ago. Traditional psychological scientists became deeply concerned by what they

saw as the erosion of the legitimate standards of objectivity for any science...[many psychologists] gave up on the APA because of its lack of commitment to science and to objective research.

Meanwhile, the APA has increasingly shown itself to be both a professional society and a political-ideological interest group. It has taken stands that are quite consistent with its secular and humanistic psychology, in favoring abortion and homosexual rights.

Thus the APA has supported the removal of homosexuality from any official list of pathologies. A strong group of pro-homosexual activists is now pushing the APA to make even psychological treatment of homosexuals who ask to be cured of their homosexual orientation a violation of professional ethics.

Whether this extreme expression of ideological bias will be accepted, remains to be seen, but in any case, the APA has become just another political interest group, lobbying for favors in Washington and elsewhere.

It now has the objectivity and professional integrity of the American Tobacco Institute.

With monotonous regularity, self theory sides with destruction of the family in the name of autonomy.

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