

Brian Tomasik

Due: December 9, 2003

Journal XV – Evaluation of the Shift from Religion to Psychology

All absolute truths have exceptions [sic]. Counterexamples can be demonstrated for almost any generalization or category the human mind creates, from the classification of all mammals as viviparous to the characterization of a political policy as entirely negative. Those unconditional statements that remain unchallenged are protected only by the shield of the limited nature of human cognizance. It is for this reason that I refrain from any absolute generalizations regarding the shift in society from reliance upon religion to the utilization of psychology to respond to human nature. But, with due consideration to this caveat and my limited knowledge of the topic, I believe that the conflation of sound science and genuine reason will almost always produce a recommendation for action that is the best option relative to all others available.

This does not mean, however, that I would support *all* aspects of the movement from religion to psychology per se, precisely because the way in which the transition has occurred has not always conformed to my definition of “genuine reason.” The shift from therapy to medicine alone is one example. I believe that the scientifically materialist explanation for such emotional disorders as depression is accurate insofar as it is the best understanding available at the present time (although it will undoubtedly be modified by further scientific discoveries). Furthermore, medication *can* prove helpful—and sometimes even indispensable—in the treatment of medical disorders. However, it is contrary to logical reason to rely exclusively or predominantly on chemical treatments unless the disorder is unaffected by ordinary counseling.

It is true that an imbalance of chemicals is the direct cause of depression. But it is also true, and much more importantly true, that a chemical imbalance is usually the consequence of severe emotional and social disturbances. Thus, materialistic science confirms the efficacy of “spiritual counseling”: it may not actually “soothe the soul” in the metaphysical sense, but it is highly capable of alleviating, or even almost wholly eliminating, the psychological disorders that create the chemical imbalance. In view of these findings of science, genuine reason would dictate that counseling be employed primarily and medication, secondarily, in most cases.

Medication is a short-term palliative of the symptoms of a long-range problem, and in almost all cases, prevention truly is the best medicine. Exclusive medical treatment of depression in instances where therapy could be employed would be just as logically absurd as the application of an anesthetic alone to assuage the pain of a broken leg without attempting to realign the fractured bones. From the rational standpoint of evaluating the *long-term* benefits minus the costs (both in terms of health and money) of any treatment, I conjecture that counseling would typically be the best option. (An even more cost-effective, long-range solution, of course, would be to reform the conditions that create psychological disorders in the first place, such as abuse and neglect; this would probably be the most rational, science-based solution of all.)

While recent trends in the treatment of medical disorders may not always match my notions of the preeminence of long-term solutions, new attitudes regarding the origins of misbehavior certainly do. The rejection of old conceptions of innate “evilness,” in favor of the idea that people are not inherently depraved, represents a realization of the complexity of human nature. Furthermore, this understanding—that all human behavior has a cause, that human vice is not the result of some uncontrollable disposition but rather the consequence of a broad array of genetic and environmental factors—is extraordinary, not just as an abstract concept, but more importantly as an influence on social policy. Where the old conception may have advocated prisons for the incorrigible, the new understanding would support rehabilitation centers; where the old view may have accepted widespread poverty as the product of intrinsic laziness, the new realization would promote government intervention to address the origins of destitution; where the old beliefs may have considered international terrorism to be the acausal result of the inevitable cruelty of groups of “evildoers” who can only be stopped by their complete and total extirpation, the new perspective would recognize that, while existing terrorists must be brought to justice, the truly effectual, long-term solution is to alleviate the indigence and truly endeavor to resolve the conflicts that dement compassionate people into brutal destroyers.

While it is obvious that many of these attitudes based on the changing notions of human nature have not yet been realized in policy, there is a growing movement of activism in support of them. It is inspiring to think about all of the people promulgating these principles and promoting these policies, in pursuit of a world that is founded on true reason and genuine science and is, at the same time, more happy and just.