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# Towards a Theological Understanding of Psychopathology and Therapy

## Abstract

The desirable encounter and dialogue between Orthodox Theology and the psychological sciences require a crossing and mutual understanding of their vocabularies which have been isolated for centuries. This article attempts to correlate the traditional theological terminology of “soul” and “spirit” with what modern psychotherapies call “psyche”, “mental”, “disorder”, and “therapy”. For this purpose it reviews biblical and patristic sources about the high human energies (intellect, emotion, will etc.) which prove to be products of our common nature, namely of the inseparable complex “soul-body”. Besides, it proceeds to make distinctions between soul and spirit, and to express them in terms of contemporary psychophysiology. Furthermore it indicates that mental disorders make a distortion of human energies which, because of various etiological factors, become autonomous from

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the desired unity. At the end, it tries to legitimize the psychological sciences by claiming that modifications of disturbed human psychosomatic energies are not exclusively under the control of the hypostasis as some conservative Christians suggest in order to keep the Church away from psychology and psychiatry. Inner freedom is highlighted as a common aim of spiritual guidance and psychotherapy.

### Keywords

soul and body; psychology; psychotherapy; psyche; freedom; human energies.

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Psychotherapists frequently hear objections posed by clergy and religious, such as: "How can psychotherapy heal the soul? The human soul is sick as a result of sin and thus it is the target of the Church's pastoral care and Divine Grace". This statement implies that mental disorders require a mere pharmacotherapy - and that's it. Instead of any psychotherapeutic interventions it is proposed simply an intensification of spiritual life which supposedly will solve personal and family problems.

Priests are often asked similar questions by psychiatrists and psychologists: "What has the Church to do with our field? Scientific knowledge alone is required in order to deal with psychological disturbance".

Different epistemological starting points create different terminologies which sometimes generate antagonism while vindicating similar domains. It is obvious that a 'spiritual' and a 'technical' interpretation of psychopathology circulate, with all the tension that polarizations usually induce in their adherents. Although dialogue and cooperation have extensively developed between mental health professionals and orthodox clergy/theologians, there are still reservations and suspicion prevailing among the more conservative representatives of both fields. Is there any way to reconcile psychotherapy and pastoral praxis without nullifying or distorting either of them? This article will try to cross their vocabularies in attempting to clarify anthropological issues.

## 1. Human nature and its energies

In Christ's words "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength" (Mark 12.30), we notice the tripartite schema of the human soul, familiar

from antiquity: intellect – emotion – will («ἀεὐρίεία – ὁδίαβόεçιά – ἀϊγῆçόέδ»). Indeed, the Lord asks that all three of these *functions* be summoned for the love of God<sup>1</sup>.

Respectively, by studying psychiatry we discover that psychiatric symptoms are classified into disturbances of thought, emotion, and desire/impulse, in a schema characterised by its proximity to the aforementioned, as psychopathological signs are classified along aspects of mental functioning.

In fact, the idea that functions such as thoughts, emotions, and desires, are ascribed to the soul is already evident in the Old Testament. Of course, its authors do not refer to these functions as independent notions as abstract concepts usually do not exist in Jewish thought. For the Israelite, it is ‘flesh’ which exists as an entity, denoting psychosomatic entirety, rather than ‘matter’; similarly, there is no term corresponding to ‘emotion’ but ‘heart’ which loves or rejoices or is sad etc. In other words, Jewish anthropology does not recognise each psychological function as a separate entity; rather, it recognises man in his fullness who *exercises* the function (by thinking, remembering, feeling, desiring and so on). The phrase about God’s breath inserted into man “an exercising spirit” (Wisd. 15.11) is indicative.<sup>2</sup>

Two Hebrew terms usually render what we today call ‘soul’. One is *Nefesh*, translated in Septuaginta as ‘soul’, and the other is *Ruah*, translated as ‘spirit’. The term *Leb* (‘heart’) is also sometimes found<sup>3</sup>. However, we can observe some interesting divergences in the use of these terms. While *Nefesh* and *Leb* express nuances regarding man’s earthly life on an anthropocentric level (including even the moral autonomy of the unbeliever), *Ruah* expresses the person in relation to God, as someone directed towards Him. Thus: 1) the ‘spirit’ cannot die (“Then shall the dust return to the earth as it was: and the spirit shall return to God who gave

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<sup>1</sup> In Christ’s dialogue with the young man, the Lord quotes the commandment from Deuteronomy: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might” (Deut. 6.5) This phrase is also found with slight changes in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke.

<sup>2</sup> It means “an acting spirit”. Note: the use of male pronouns in this article is conventional and inclusive of both genders.

<sup>3</sup> See “Let his heart be changed from man’s, and let a beast’s heart be given unto him” (Dan. 4.16) which speaks of emotions and behaviour; also “a heart, gave he them to understand” (Seirach 17.6) which is related to thought. Compare also to: “For out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies” (Matth. 15.19) and “you know... the thoughts of my heart”: S. Athanasii ad Marcellinum in interpretationem psalmodum, vii, in J.-P. Migne (ed.), *Patrologiae cursus completus* (Tomus XXVII, Paris: Garnier Fratres, 1857), p. 80C). In general, looseness in the use of terminology continues during the early centuries of the Church, so ‘heart’, like ‘soul’, sometimes denotes the soul as nature and at other points its functions.

it”, Eccl. 12.7) while the ‘soul’ is often said to die (cf. Deut. 22.26; Numb. 31.19; Job 33.22). It coincides with the ‘spirit’ only in those instances where it is regarded as immortal. 2) Unlike ‘spirit’, ‘soul’ is often used interchangeably for ‘flesh’ and ‘breath’ to denote man in his psychosomatic entirety. 3) A ‘soul’ is ascribed to animals without referring merely to their biological life (“A righteous man regards the souls of his animals”, Prov. 12.10),<sup>4</sup> while these do not have ‘spirit’ (‘their horses [are] flesh, and not spirit’ [Is. 31.3, from the Hebrew]).

These distinctions are, in my opinion, a sufficient indication that a tendency can already be observed from the Old Testament to distinguish between that component of man which we nowadays term ‘psyche’ and its functions which a) die at the time of biological death, b) can be ascribed to animals, many of which possess a rudimentary psyche<sup>5</sup> and c) do not characterise God except as anthropomorphisms. *The component which we nowadays call ‘soul’ is expressed by the term ‘spirit of man’ whereas ‘soul’ often signifies what we call ‘psychological’ functions.* More sophisticated distinctions cannot be further expected from the Old Testament because it lacked both the vocabulary and the factors which would facilitate them, as happened later with the Fathers.

In the New Testament, under the influence of Hellenism, the dipartite ‘soul-body’ schema is being shaped. Here ‘soul’ is used in its contemporary meaning and interchangeably with ‘spirit’: “And fear not them who kill the body, but are not able to kill the soul” (Matthew 10.28). The meaning ‘life’ also sometimes survives (“I will lay down my life for your sake”, John 13.37).<sup>6</sup>

The use of ‘soul’ and ‘spirit’ in a paratactic sequence is a phenomenon which appears sporadically only in the New Testament and the Apostolic Fathers. Specifically, Saint Paul prays that “your whole spirit and soul and body be preserved blameless unto the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Thess. 5.23). Some have interpreted ‘spirit’ here as the Holy Spirit, challenging others to argue that the Apostle’s wish for the Holy Spirit to remain blameless in the faithful, thus equating it with soul and body, is absurd or blasphemous. Others regressed to an (unacceptable) tripartite division to interpret it. This passage may be inscribed, in my opinion, in Old Testament terminology, according to which ‘soul’ expresses

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<sup>4</sup> Here the Greek ‘ψυχάς’ (souls) of the Septuaginta is sometimes translated in English as ‘lives’.

<sup>5</sup> See also Basil the Great: “The soul of beasts is earth ...and does not continue to exist after the dissolution of the flesh”: S. Basili, in *Hexaemeron*, in: J.-P. Migne (ed.), *Patrologiae cursus completus* (Tomus XXIX, Paris: Garnier Fratres, 1857, p. 168A).

<sup>6</sup> Again the original Greek reads ‘ψυχή’ (soul) but in many English translations we read ‘life’.

psychological functions and 'spirit' means that component which we nowadays term 'soul', the core of man which God breathed into him (Gen. 2.7); or, according to the interpretation of certain Fathers, 'spirit' is the superior psychological function of the mind (ἴϋò), and 'soul' the lower functions of emotion (ἐòìééüí) and desire (ἐðéèòìçòééüí)<sup>7</sup>.

I have discussed this issue at length in order to show that the seeds of the distinction between the soul and its functions are already found in the Scriptures. This distinction will prove particularly useful in what follows. Since the fourth century, with the establishment of the encounter between Church and Hellenism, the emerging problems were solved with terms set out by the Greek Fathers who borrowed elements of Greek terminology and thus developed further the biblical thought.

As far as our subject is concerned, the Greek Fathers attempted two significant initiatives in relation to Greek terminology: 1) they adopted the terms 'essence', 'energies' and 'person' as a basic conceptual triad required for the articulation of the mystery of God and man; and 2) they embedded the Platonic tripartite division of the soul into 'rational' (ἐἄéóòééüí), 'emotional' (ἐòìἰἄéäÝò) and 'desiring' (ἐðéèòìçòééüí) faculties; the 'recollective' (ἰçìἰἄòòééüí) and 'imaginative' (òáíòáóòééüí) are less frequently mentioned.

Saint Basil the Great writing that "the soul is known only from its energies"<sup>8</sup> and Saint Maximus stating that "the *logos* of natural energy is the condition of essence, characterising all those in whom it is naturally and essentially implanted"<sup>9</sup> represent a wider patristic consensus. Thus the Fathers equate man's soul with his essence or nature, and his psychological functions with the energies of nature. Saint John Damascene

<sup>7</sup> St Gregory of Nyssa suggests so: "He speaks of the body in place of the nutritive part, by soul he means the sensory one, and by spirit the spiritual": S. Gregorii Nysseni De hominis opificio, in: J.-P. Migne (ed.), *Patrologiae cursus completus* (Tomus XLIV, Paris: Garnier Fratres, 1858), p. 145C). Three early Christian passages are of the same biblical vein. The martyr Justin writes: "The body is the dwelling place of the soul, and the soul the dwelling place of the spirit. These three will be saved in those who have honest hope and absolute faith in God": S. Justini ex libro de Resurrectione, in: J.-P. Migne (ed.), *Patrologiae cursus completus* (Tomus VI, Paris: Garnier Fratres, 1857), p. 1589B). (Obviously it is not the Holy Spirit that is to be saved). Moreover, in his epistle to the Philadelphians (longer version), Saint Ignatius writes: "In whom they hope in flesh, soul, and spirit": S. Ignatii Epistola Philadelphenses, in: J.-P. Migne (ed.), *Patrologiae cursus completus* (Tomus V, Paris: Garnier Fratres, 1857), p. 840A). Finally, in the liturgy of Saint James, we pray: "Sanctify our souls and bodies and spirits". After the fourth century the use of soul and spirit in this meaning disappears because the theological terminology is being definitely formed.

<sup>8</sup> S. Basili in Ilud, attende tibi ipsi, in: J.-P. Migne (ed.), *Patrologiae cursus completus* (Tomus XXXI, Paris: Garnier Fratres, 1857), p. 216A

<sup>9</sup> S. Maximi confessoris de variis difficilibus locis ss. Dionysii et Gregorii, in: J.-P. Migne (ed.), *Patrologiae cursus completus* (Tomus XCI, Paris: Garnier Fratres, 1860), p. 1037C.

adds: “Energy is the active and essential movement of nature, and the acting agent is he who uses energy, namely the hypostasis”.<sup>10</sup>

Since the moment of conception there begins a close lifelong relationship between soul and body which will be interrupted only by death. This close relationship generates psychological functions, not being perceived from the very beginning but rather being revealed gradually, because the maturity of the body is a necessary prerequisite for their appearance. Saint Gregory of Nyssa writes that “the soul is a generative, living, spiritual essence which infuses the organic and sentient body with the power to live and apprehend perceptible things, *as long as the nature capable of it exists*”.<sup>11</sup> He continues: “In the case of the composition of man, the power of the soul is manifest *in relation to the size of the body*; it first appears in those who are formed within (the womb) through the nutritive and growth faculties, then it brings the gift of sense-perception to those who come forth into the light, and then in this way manifests the power to reason”.<sup>12</sup>

The enormous contribution of this passage, in my opinion, lies in placing the somatic growth of the embryo, the subsequent development of the senses, and finally the emergence of reason, on the same line of development. Indeed, one could say that it unites the somatic and the psychological functions as *facts of the same ontological order*, as energies of a single but dipartite (psychosomatic) human nature.

In other words, it is *the pair ‘soul-body’ together that constitutes the nature and essence of man*. The psyche’s dependence on the maturity and health of the body can be ascertained more vividly, apart from the case of the embryo’s elementary psyche, from forms of psychopathology which have a purely biological aetiology. Disturbances in the thoughts or emotions or behaviour of a person who is mentally ill or unsound, confirm the close relationship between the psychological functions and the sick brain. Yannaras writes:

“The means of existential singularity is realised and revealed through energies without being identical to the subject’s hypostasis; consequently any harm, alteration or suspension to the means of existential dissimilarity (a person’s psychosomatic functions) does not injure the subject’s

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<sup>10</sup> S. Joannis Damasceni Expositio accurata fides orthodoxae, liber III, in: J.-P. Migne (ed.), *Patrologiae cursus completus* (Tomus XCIV, Paris: Garnier Fratres, 1860), p. 1048.

<sup>11</sup> S. Gregorii Nysseni de Anima et Resurrectione, in: J.-P. Migne (ed.), *Patrologiae cursus completus* (Tomus XLVI, Paris: Garnier Fratres, 1858), p. 29B.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, p. 128A.

hypostatic identity (i.e. which is beyond or before his psychosomatic functions)”<sup>13</sup>.

In other words, in these cases the ‘psychological’ functions which constitute the person’s uniqueness are suspended (temporarily or permanently) whereas the soul of the person in question remains intact as an ontological entity. They are not ‘lesser humans’; the ontological core of the person is not harmed.

## 2. Autonomous exaggeration of a mental function

To depict the contribution of the ‘altera pars’ to our topic I will quote Donald Winnicott who has considered the inextricably bound pair ‘body-soul’ to be the starting point of the psychological life of the infant. (Indeed, he constantly writes this using Greek terms and Latin characters (*psyche-soma*)<sup>14</sup>. This body-soul pair requires a continually ‘good’ environment in the early stages of one’s life, so that adjustment to growth can occur gradually and the subjective sense of the continuity of existence is not interrupted. The good environment in the early age is understood as the proper care for somatic needs, to which care for emotional needs is later added<sup>15</sup>.

When the environment falls short in the task of bringing the infant to maturity, Winnicott continues, hyperactivity in the psychological functions begins in order to heal the *experience of interruption in subjective continuity*. In particular, the intellect, which in normal conditions constitutes a function of the ‘body-soul’ pair, may undertake to organize the care for the psychosomatic existence, replacing the mother to a certain extent. Confusion and psychological disturbance are expected to occur in the subject in extreme cases of incomprehensible or unexpected maternal behaviour. In cases of moderate failure, the intellect becomes a thing in itself and replaces the mother, rendering her superfluous. The psychic apparatus is then detached from the synthesis which it ought to have with the body and gets attached to the intellect<sup>16</sup>.

The key concept in Winnicott’s theory is *the ‘autonomy’ of a psychological function* which means an unnatural exaggeration in disharmony with the rest of the psyche. Of course, this is not capable of interpreting all kinds of psychopathology; it merely describes the particular case of the

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<sup>13</sup> Yannaras, *Σχεδιάσμα εισαγωγής στην φιλοσοφία*, p. 171. ‘Singularity’ here is another word for ‘uniqueness’.

<sup>14</sup> Winnicott, ‘Mind and its relation...’, p. 244.

<sup>15</sup> *ibid*, p. 245.

<sup>16</sup> *ibid*, p. 246-247.

intellectualisation or the false self. (He would later develop the concept of the false self more fully).

However, we can apply the model of autonomy of a psychological function to almost all shortcomings in a person's development which produce psychological disturbances. For example, Winnicott again states that if the disturbances occur at an earlier stage of development, before the subject has acquired the ability to love and hate, then he is simply disorganised or internalises aggression, ending with self-blame and perhaps also depression<sup>17</sup>. That, is, emotion is forced to become autonomous here.

Psychoanalysis was the first to deal extensively with the impact of stressful conditions on human psyche and developmental psychology followed the same line. The developmental significance of trauma helps us to form a clearer picture of the landscape which a human meets as an infant at the threshold of his life. He will need to pass successfully through a multitude of stages and trials in order to avoid a future psychopathological state. It is not sufficient for only some of these to be passed successfully but rather almost all must be passed; and he is exposed to a multitude of stimuli both from outside and within. In other words, it is not unlikely for something to go wrong; the various mental disorders and pathological characters represent certain 'psychological' functions becoming relatively autonomous and crystallized around a traumatic core.

The question of which psychological function will become a-thing-in-itself rests upon a combination of different factors at each time: the subject's age, temperamental predisposition, the character or even psychopathology of his parents, previous traumas, corrective experiences from the environment, duration of the stressful factor etc. Sometimes the intellect becomes more autonomous, more frequently though do emotions and desires as in the case of a disturbed sentimentality or urgent impulses. These two parts are basically associated with 'passions' because, according to the Fathers, they constitute the 'unreasoning' part of the soul. Naturally, passions do not constitute the prerogative of those who are psychologically disturbed but their development is facilitated by a pre-

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<sup>17</sup> So the absence of anger and hatred does not necessarily signify meekness. Here we cannot fail to remember the passage from the *Ladder of Divine Ascent* by Saint John of Sinai, regarding 'natural' virtues which have no particular value because they were acquired without any effort. "Some... by nature so to speak, are inclined towards continence or stillness or chastity or silence or meekness. And there are others who have a nature which opposes them when they struggle to acquire these virtues and force themselves as far as they are able. Although at times they are defeated, nevertheless I praise them more than the former since they are violent against their own nature, as the Lord has ordered" (26.22).



existing autonomy in the psychological functions<sup>18</sup>. However, it is usually the *emotional* function which is disturbed and in turn can distort both understanding (intellect) and the content of desire.

The research and literature about the infants' early relationships with their significant others and the impact of the family system on the psyche is vast. Similarly, abundant research is being carried out in the field of the biological investigation of psychological disorders. Mental disorders have also been linked to disturbances in neurotransmitters, that is, the chemical substances which allow the electrical stimuli to be transmitted among the brain's cells. Thus, schizophrenia has been linked to increased dopamine, while depression has been linked to decreased noradrenaline and serotonin. In some patients it is the biological factor which is dominant, in others the psychological, and in others both together.

### 3. Crossing the vocabularies

Clinical practice of psychiatry and psychotherapy shares with the biblical and patristic model presented above some similarities, since the continuum between body and soul is verified in both. Yet it should not be thought that body and soul are not two different entities, two distinct components in a human<sup>19</sup>. *It is inside the limits of our cognitive capacity that they cannot be separated*. Nothing can be learnt about either of them if one proceeds to a conceptual abstraction of the other. Father Dimitru Staniloae's words on this issue are significant: "The person's self is rational and even sensitive, but it is above and beyond this, it is not governed by reason and sensitivity, functions with which he conceives and dominates the aesthetic rationality of the body and the world".<sup>20</sup> (Here with the technical term 'self' he means the soul. He is not concerned with the contemporary technical term *self* that reflects the mental representation of psyche and body). However, he continues: 'The body complements this spiritual hypostasis so fundamentally that without it man could not be an existence capable of possessing self-consciousness, which also entails consciousness of the world'<sup>21</sup>.

Thus, to return to the relationship between essence and energies, I am setting out here the opinion that I formed from the biblical and patristic material. The body as essence (nature) of man does not dispose of its own

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<sup>18</sup> Emotion seems to be the psychological function which is almost always influenced, even where intellectualisation (e.g. in obsessive-compulsive personality) appears to be dominant for defensive reasons.

<sup>19</sup> See Makarios "Ἑλληνική...", p. 19-21.

<sup>20</sup> Staniloae, "Τό ἀνθρώπινο σῶμα", p. 9.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid. p. 7.

(bodily) functions (energies), nor in turn does the soul as essence (nature) too of man possess corresponding psychological functions (energies). Rather, *the 'body-soul' pair, as the unitary essence (nature) of man, possesses and emits joint functions (energies), some of which are characterised as 'psychological' and others as 'somatic'*. What differentiates them? The perceptible and measurable element of the 'somatic' functions, in contrast with the 'psychological' ones. The criterion of distinction is not theoretical but empirical. The phenomenon whereby an immaterial nature can produce psychological functions exists, but only for angels. The phenomenon whereby the body produces purely somatic functions is found only in animals. In man's unique but composite nature, *the terms 'psychological' and 'somatic' functions are conventional, since they refer only to the function's form and not to its origin.*

Saint John Damascene leaves no room for doubt: "A natural energy is the active movement of nature, for example the rational movement of the mind, vitality, sense perception, nutrition, growth, procreation, and impulsive movement, that is the movements of the body, and imagination and recollection, disposition, desire and will, or rather appetite and suchlike".<sup>22</sup> All the somatic and psychological functions, from the most raw to the most refined, belong to the order of natural energies. I again cite a small excerpt from Yannaras:

"For the Christian thought of the Greek East, it is not possible for the elements of the human composite – soul and body – to correspond to ontological definitions; they do not define the way in which a person is, but they are defined and marked out (always relatively or even conventionally speaking) as distinctions of the result of natural energy. We speak of somatic or psychological or spiritual manifestations, referring objectively (and thus conventionally) to the manifest result of natural energy".<sup>23</sup>

In other words, ontologically speaking, there is only one energy which is natural, but it has many apparent characteristics and a huge variety of forms according to the content. I consider this implication to be extremely important and valuable as regards our subject matter. We now realise that there is no ontological difference between mental disorders caused by perinatal events, by disturbances of neurotransmitters, by deficient maternal care, by traumatic experiences, by family dysfunction etc. It is clinically possible that they may present enormous differences, and indeed a valuable means of treating the one may prove useless for the other. However, ontologically (for this is our current concern) they are *things of the same order, disturbances of the energies of human nature*; disorders of thought, emotion, desire, will, behaviour, memory, etc. which according to

<sup>22</sup> S. Joannis Damasceni Institutio elementaris ad dogmata, J.-P. Migne (ed.), *Patrologiae cursus completus* (Tomus XCV, Paris: Garnier Fratres, 1860), p. 109AB.

<sup>23</sup> Yannaras, *Τό πρόσωπο και ό έρωας*, p. 73.

theological criteria constitute accidents of the same order like those disturbances of the 'somatic' functions also known as physical illnesses.

What unites all of them? The corruption of human nature which consists of two kinds: the inclination to sin on the one hand, and the corruptibility of psychosomatic existence on the other. Saint Maximus the Confessor is of critical importance on this matter:

"Adam's free choice was first corrupted from its natural *logos*, and *corrupted nature with it*, casting off the grace of the absence of passions, and sin came about. The first sin, the fall of free choice from good to evil, was blameworthy. The second came about on account of the first, and was *the blameless change of nature from incorruptibility to corruptibility*. For two sins occurred in the forefather through the transgression of the divine commandment: the one was blameworthy, the other which occurred as a result of the blameworthy sin, was blameless. The one happened when free choice willingly cast off what was good; the other, when nature *unwillingly* cast off immortality on account of its free choice."<sup>24</sup>

Man is now inclined towards sin, so the corruption of his intention constitutes the moral part of the drama. However, his nature too shows a propensity towards illness and death and this makes the biological and psychological part of human tragedy. The corruption of nature takes on a specific form and content through the personal course and experience of the psychosomatic identity of each subject, through the corruption of the energies of his nature which are sometimes 'psychological' and at other times 'somatic'. *The corruption of the intention is the target of the spiritual struggle and pastoral work, while the corruption of the energies of nature is dealt with through the different branches of medicine and psychotherapy.* The dual therapy corresponds to the blameworthy and to the blameless branches of corruption.

Confusion is sometimes being witnessed between these two levels, moral and psychological. We may have difficulty discerning which of the two is dominant, and often our difficulty is reasonable. The corruption of the intention and the inherent passions may be centrifugally conveyed to all 'psychological' functions. The sinful content of thoughts, emotions and desires is an unquestionable personal reality. However, the two axes of Saint Maximus make an indispensable aid in the task of discernment. Here we need some clinical examples:

The hatred towards imaginary persecutors felt by a person suffering from paranoia is fundamentally different from the hatred felt towards someone who makes an obstacle to unlawful desires or narcissistic goals. The latter stems from the moral corruption of the intention. Both persons can kill under the influence of this hatred, but in the paranoid individual the

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<sup>24</sup> S. Maximi confessoris ad Thalassium, scripturae sacrae quaestionibus ac dubiis, J.-P. Migne (ed.), *Patrologiae cursus completus* (Tomus XC, Paris: Garnier Fratres, 1860), p. 405C.

disturbance of the psychological function is primary. The same occurs with disturbances of thought: delusion of persecution does not coincide with the 'evil thoughts' described by the Fathers.

Moreover, the affect of a depressive patient is a primary disturbance of emotion and is clearly different from the natural sadness of the person who is frustrated or wounded. The latter are of a spiritual kind and may result from spiritual neglect and the passionate love of the self.

Likewise, the anxiety of the borderline person in the face of his (real or perceived) abandonment is not due to lack of faith, but to a primary failure of the emotional and representational function in the internalisation of the care-giver.

In the same way, the seductive behavior of a woman with a hysterical character is not due solely to the passion of longing for pleasure but to the fact that she knows only this way for regulating her narcissistic balance, a means arising from problems in the oedipal phase of psychosexual development.

Furthermore, the disturbance in the behaviour of a teenager can frequently be interpreted on the basis of the patterns with which his aggression is directed towards his family and not by considering him as just 'mean'.

Even in the case of the drug addict, the substance is used as a drug against narcissistic blows; that is, the emotional disturbance imposed its own terms.

I could provide many examples. What I am trying to convey is the distinction between intention which is of a moral order and with which the Church is concerned in her pastoral role, and the problem of a psychological nature which is served by psychiatry and psychotherapy and which is constructed through the process of one or more 'psychological' functions becoming autonomous. What is, however, of particular interest is that both these cases frequently coexist.

#### 4. What about freedom?

Some fear that acknowledging psychological reality and its therapies may undermine the significance of freedom as a moral agent. Yet a person's moral freedom gets limited but not removed by psychological disturbance. We are all aware that there are psychotics who are atheists while others are extremely pious; some compulsive or hysterical individuals lead a licentious lifestyle and others are faithful; some who suffer from depression are unbelievers and others are Christians who strive in the faith.

However, it is as we move from psychoses and neuroses to character disorders (narcissistic, borderline, psychopathic, compulsive, hysterical, schizoid, paranoid, dependent, passive-aggressive, avoidant) that personal freedom is being unfolding. This interesting diagnostic category does not contain typical illnesses which can be treated with drugs, but characterological traits embodied in the personality which are in practice remarkably hard to cure. *Character disorders* condensate in the best way the mystery of man and the boundaries between, as Saint Maximus calls them, 'sin because of our fault' (the vulnerability of nature) and 'our own sin' (the corruption of intention). I believe that it is essential for Theology and the Church to study and pay attention through pastoral work at character disorders, since these are mainly involved in marital problems and interpersonal relationships, complicate the life of the Church, and distort spiritual warfare.

Since we are now concerned with personal freedom and responsibility, the following question arises: are 'somatic' and 'psychological' disturbances located at the same 'distance' from sin?<sup>25</sup> For example, are tuberculosis and rheumatoid arthritis related in the same way to personal sinfulness as depression is? Obviously not. *A person's freedom is basically expressed through 'psychological' functions, like desire or emotion or intellect, functions which are superior to the 'somatic' ones.* Let us not forget that the first sin in the world was committed by someone without a body: the devil. After all, in the lives of saints we see them suffering more often from somatic than mental illnesses.

There should be thus no fear that by disconnecting sin from psychopathology we are abandoning moral evaluation in favour of an assessment which fails to ascribe responsibility (even though in many cases it is possible for the moral responsibility to be diminished). My aim is to show that besides the spiritual laws of virtue and sin, beyond a certain point there can be found *another group of laws, the ones of psychopathological processes*, which restrict a person's freedom and inhibit the work of Grace. Thus, a person who is psychologically disturbed does not cease to be a candidate for spiritual reformation; however, the long course which his impaired psychological functions have taken in the space and time of his personal existence have formed relatively autonomous intrapsychic entities which require an appropriate psychological help.

The 'psychological' functions are indeed superior to the 'somatic' ones and it is through the former that a person's freedom acts. So those overemphasizing freedom may expect that its power should be capable of

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<sup>25</sup> I constantly keep the quotation marks for these two words to remind of their conventional name.

overcoming mental disorders; at a first glance their expectation seems justified. According to Saint John Damascene, “just as the natural appetite lies within all sensory natures, so too does freedom within all rational natures. Everything which is rational has freedom, and this is the essence of having been created ‘at the image of God’”.<sup>26</sup> They may share with Metropolitan John of Pergamos the correct idea that

“The particular identity of man in relation to the other animals is not located in his rationality, since lesser animals also have a degree of rationality and conscience, albeit to a lesser extent... The creation of civilisation requires a much more fundamental difference between men and animals, and not only a difference in the degree of reason... No animal would be able to oppose the innate rationality of its nature. Man is able to do this, and in doing so he shows that his unique characteristic is not rationality but something else: freedom”<sup>27</sup>.

But our conscious intervention in the ‘psychological’ functions, even when they are healthy, is not omnipotent: none can improve his intellect as much as he would want, or to regulate his emotions and desires as he would wish. This happens because the ‘psychological’ functions, too, do not cease to be products of the *nature* of man, and hence are susceptible to all its sufferings and limits. For this reason it is not reasonable to assign the subject either the change and healing of psychological disturbances when these have gone beyond a certain point, or the adjustment of his character. Indeed, the corruption of nature left not even its highest energy (freedom) intact, either in the daily struggle with the ‘other law’, (“the evil which I would not, that I do”, Rom. 7.19), or in the particular aspect of psychological disturbance where the restriction of freedom is deeper and more complex.

## 5. A theological understanding of psychopathology and therapy

As we have seen, the corruption of nature is sometimes manifested on the level of ‘psychological’ functions while at other times it is manifested on the level of ‘somatic’ functions. We all chant at Paraklesis “on account of my many sins, my body is ailing and my soul also is ailing” but for our somatic illnesses we seek medical attention. That is, we admit the primitive link between sin and the ‘somatic’ energies of our nature, but simultaneously we recognise that, given the diffusion of the not blame-worthy corruption into human nature, the health of each individual cannot be entrusted to his spiritual father, but demands specialised ways and means of the appropriate field.

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<sup>26</sup> S. Joannis Damasceni Institutio elementaris ad dogmata, J.-P. Migne (ed.), *Patrologiae cursus completus* (Tomus XCV, Paris: Garnier Fratres, 1860), p. 112A. He calls animals ‘sensory nature’ and man ‘rational nature’.

<sup>27</sup> Zizioulas, *Ἡ κτίσις ὡς εὐχαριστία*, p. 98, 100-101.

In the same way, when the psychiatrist administers drugs, he intervenes in the disturbances of the biochemical energies of our nature, whereas the psychotherapist intervenes in the disturbances of the emotional and rational and volitional energies of our nature. They namely treat the problem with the corresponding proper means, which intervenes in the functions of nature, both 'psychological' and 'somatic'. Psychotherapy is one of these: the emotions developed in its course intend to 'unlock' the affective entanglement which the various personal ordeals have given rise to and established within the psyche. Similarly, it is possible to obliterate pathological patterns of communication and behaviour through the therapy of the family system.

Some define mental disorders as disturbances which the spiritual life is capable to influence or even cure. Their basic objection is: "Why not control and modify disturbed 'psychological' functions through free will?" By asking so they connote that the human person is capable of absolute domination over his mental functions, which would be the case only if the energies stemmed out of the hypostasis- a serious theological error. But energies stem out of nature, which has undergone traumatic experiences and thus has been partially distorted (what was previously described as functions having become relatively autonomous). One should be cautious here because *by ascribing priority and absolute domination of the person-hypostasis on the corruption of nature, we assume, like the Monotheletic heresy, that energies stem from the person and not from nature*. In the famous dialogue between Patriarch Pyrrhus and Saint Maximus, the former insists that energies stem from the person, and it is for this reason that he sees only one energy in Christ.

It is to be expected that there should exist a very short step for this theological view to turn to moralism, which makes a devaluation of the human potential: according to Pyrrhus, each human 'kinesis' (movement) is a 'passion'. Saint Maximus corrects him: *each human kinesis makes an energy, that is, a quality*. Sometimes it may become a passion on account of the content of the will<sup>28</sup>.

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<sup>28</sup> S. Maximi confessoris Disputatio cum Pyrrho, J.-P. Migne (ed.), *Patrologiae cursus completus* (Tomus XCI, Paris: Garnier Fratres, 1860), p. 352 AB. It is characteristic that theological pitfalls are normally generated by ontological errors. Before progressing to Christology, Saint Maximus corrects Pyrrhus: "The condition of every nature is the *logos* of its essential activity" (ibid, 345D) and "energy, being natural, is the constituent and inherent stamp of nature" (ibid, 348A). Thus we see that the energy also participates in the corruption of nature and does not lie exclusively at the 'jurisdiction' of intentions.

Christology thus confirms the ontological independence of the energies of nature<sup>29</sup>. However, the human being that resides in the mind of materialist psychotherapists is handicapped as they admit 'psychological' functions either without a full human nature or impersonal (non-substantialized)<sup>30</sup>. That is why *the human image of secular psychotherapies is defective when compared to the theological one*. This constitutes an unavoidable result of the absence of any ontological foundation in psychiatry and psychology. The problem is particularly acute in our era on account of the widespread dissemination of various asian religious beliefs and practices disguised into therapies, which invite people to self-knowledge, while they are characterised by an obscure or inconsistent or destructive ontology.

A pastoral theory and practice which does not reckon characterological idiosyncrasies in its strategy is not theologically grounded and is doomed to fail. Conversely, it is essential that the psychotherapists' bewilderment in the face of whatever religious beliefs are held by their patients should be sensitive to human perennial existential demands, spiritual and moral in their nature, that characterise themselves too, aware or not. After all, it is these demands which motivate the abuse of psychotherapy in the West where people have addressed therapists to find meaning of life. That is, using the terminology we have presented, they were not satisfied merely with the therapy of the corruption of nature but they also sought the content of the will.

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The pain of psychopathology results to the tragedy of the lack of freedom. The poet crumbles under the weight of human corruption and wonders at the lack of freedom and its meaning:

"What eraser I wonder is there for our internal ugliness,  
What transforms the slavery of so many years,  
Repentants you from the other world, tell us..."

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<sup>29</sup> To return to the example of the sun's rays, the psychopathological state has a dual character, just like the light of the sun: it maintains its continuum with the world of sin and virtue, like a wave, but at the same time it possesses relative self-sufficiency like a quantum (photon).

<sup>30</sup> According to Saint Gregory Palamas, the view that 'psychological' functions stem from the body characterises only animals: "The soul of each of the irrational animals is the life of the body which is animate through the soul, and these animals have life not as an essence but as an energy, since life is attached to something else and not a thing in itself. For the soul is seen having nothing else, since it is necessary for the things which are active through the body not to be broken up with it when it dies": S. Gregorii Palamae physica, theologica, moralia et practica capita, in J.-P. Migne (ed.), *Patrologiae cursus completus* (Tomus CL, Paris: Garnier Fratres, 1865), p. 1141A.



What could compensate for the pain  
Which should only one suffer it, we all cry out  
How long, how long

I took paths and again found myself facing them...  
Each with a round moon in hand,  
His own night.  
They live still, they live, they advance and lament.  
*Why? Why?"*<sup>31</sup>

The tragic nature of man lies in the fact that, when the person consciously undertakes moral agency and the spiritual task of sanctification, namely at childhood and adolescence, the emotional development has already paved more than half its way. The weight of nature which has piled up is sometimes overcome, often deteriorates, and usually ends up in a moratorium between nature and person, which forms the various compromises in each person's daily psychological life.

If and when a person's seeds of freedom lead him to confession or psychotherapy and if he contributes to his cure in these two contexts, his existence gets liberated from the determinism of corruption and acquires more freedom. If he wishes, he can turn this towards God, hence the salvational character of confession. If he does not wish, he can merely enjoy his freedom, the highest element of the person who is created 'at the image' of God, and this is no less joyous. That is why amid the hushed or anguished tones of the psychotherapeutic session a creative process takes place which, unlike confession, does not have a directly redemptive character, but nevertheless has consequences of a potentially ontological nature. This is a process which (admittedly not always) has the power to break the perpetual recurrence of corruption.

In this article I tried to articulate a theological justification of therapies for mental disorders based on a theological conceptualization of the latter's nature. My hope has been to contribute to a mutual understanding between clergy/theologians and mental health professionals for the patients' benefit. I think that any effort should be made to promote this promising dialogue and to inscribe it into the wider context of the encounter between Orthodox Church and modernity which has historically developed with a relative delay.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Elytis, Odysseas (1980) «Αἰῶνος εἰδωλον» in the collection «Τὰ ἑτεροθαλῆ» Icarus (English Translation by Carson, J. and Sarris, N. (1997) 'Idol of the Century' in 'Stepchildren', *The collected poems of Odysseus Elytis*, Baltimore and London). Elytis has been an eminent Greek poet, a Nobel laureate (1979).

<sup>32</sup> To my knowledge the only work in the Orthodox world that attempts to explore the differences in vocabularies of theology and the psychological sciences and to bring

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them into correlation is the book of monk Chrysostomos Dionysiatis (now hieromonk Gregorios Tympas) *Θεός Λόγος καί ανθρώπινος λόγος: οἱ ἐνέργειες τῆς ψυχῆς στήν πατερική ἀνθρωπολογία* [God-Word and human ‘logos’: the energies of the psyche in patristic anthropology, in Greek], Monastery of Dionysiou publ., 1998. This is a rich and fruitful ‘opus magnum’ and its translation to other languages is worthwhile.

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