

Crabb's Model of Christian Psychology

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(A) Introduction: If the Bible is a reliable source of truth, then this would carry some intriguing consequences for our understanding of human psychology. As a sample, consider the following verses:

- Jeremiah 17:9-10: *“The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked: who can know it? I the LORD search the heart, I try the reins, even to give every man according to his ways, and according to the fruit of his doings.”*
- 2 Corinthians 5:17: *“Therefore if any man [be] in Christ, [he is] a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new.”*
- Ephesians 4:22-24: *“That ye put off concerning the former conversation the old man, which is corrupt according to the deceitful lusts; And be renewed in the spirit of your mind; And that ye put on the new man, which after God is created in righteousness and true holiness.”*
- Romans 12:2 *“And be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God.”*
- Philippians 4:6-7: *“Be careful for nothing; but in every thing by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known unto God. And the peace of God, which passeth all understanding, shall keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.”*

- Romans 7:22-23: “*For I delight in the law of God after the inward man: But I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin which is in my member.*”.
- John 8:34: “*Jesus answered them, Verily, verily, I say unto you, Whosoever committeth sin is the servant of sin.*”

What functional model of human psychology could validate such verses? This essay sketches and examines one such model, proposed by Christian counselor Lawrence J. Crabb, Jr., (Crabb 1977). Along the way, we’ll see how Crabb’s model offers psychological accounts of the above verses. We then conclude this essay with some questions and closing remarks.

(B) Crabb’s Model:

(1) *Non-Materialism*: Unsurprisingly, Crabb’s Christian view of the mind includes a commitment to a non-physical aspect of the mind’s functioning: “I am not what is called a physicalistic reductionist...Emotion is more than glandular functioning. Thinking is more than neurobiological activity in the brain...I do not believe that how we think, act, and feel as persons can be explained completely in terms of physical correlations” (87). This gives rise to a number of predictable philosophical questions—How does the mind’s non-physical part cause changes in the brain’s physical parts? Is Crabb likewise a non-materialist concerning animal minds?—which we’ll leave alone. Our main concern is with Crabb’s “flow chart”-anatomy of the mind and its functional workings.

(2) *Anatomy of the Mind and Functional Model*: Crabb’s model consists of five main parts, which interact to give rise to human thought, behavior, and emotion—and, more specifically, can be used to give psychological content to some of the Bible-verses, above:

(a) *The Conscious Mind*: Crabb describes the activities of the conscious mind as involving “talk[ing] to ourselves in sentences,” including the making of “evaluations” of “external events” (88-89).¹ Notably, “evaluations” include moral judgments (90).

This ability of the conscious mind to evaluate “external events” has emotional significance, since Crabb (following, for instance, (Ellis 2009: 479-526)) claims that “events do not control my feelings. My mental *evaluation* of events (the sentences I tell myself)...affect how I feel” (89).

One clarification: Though Crabb speaks of the “conscious mind,” this doesn’t entail that we’re always aware of the goings-on in the conscious mind: “I may not always notice the sentences I am telling myself, but I am responding in verbal form, nevertheless (89); rather, events in the conscious mind are “conscious” in the *subjunctive* sense that, “if I paid attention to my mind, I could observe what sentences I am using to evaluate this event” (89).

(b) *The Unconscious Mind*: Intriguingly, Crabb (“tentatively”) suggests that the unconscious mind can be modeled on a careful reading of the Greek word, *phromena*. On this understanding, the unconscious mind is described as “a part of personality which develops and holds on to deep, reflective assumptions” (91), or, more specifically: “the unconscious part of mental functioning [is] *the reservoir of basic assumptions which people firmly and emotionally hold about how to meet their needs of significance and security*” (91, emphasis in original). These “basic assumptions,” Crabb avers, are best identified as “attitudes...[which] have affective (emotional) as well as cognitive components” (95).

¹Though Crabb emphasizes “external events” in the world, his model seems able to also account for evaluations of events “internal” to the mind—i.e., evaluations of my own thoughts and feelings. For instance, while I might not actually tell off my boss, I might mentally entertain (imagine) doing so, judge such a confrontational thought as “shameful,” and feel pangs of remorse.

On Crabb’s view, these “basic assumptions” are not neutral in character: “Each of us,” he posits, “has been programmed [by the “unbelieving world”²] to believe that happiness, worth, joy—all the good things of life—depend on something other than God...[and that] we can...achieve true personal worth and social harmony without kneeling first at the cross of Christ...[and that] something other than God offers personal reality and fulfillment” (91-92).

As noted before, Crabb’s model echoes Albert Ellis’s “ABC model” in that Crabb locates a number of dysfunctional assumptions in the unconscious mind, for instance (93):

- *“I must be a financial success in order to be significant.”*
- *“I must not be criticized if I am to be secure.”*
- *“Others must recognize my abilities if I am to be significant.”*

Owing to such unhealthy assumptions, Crabb adds, “it is no wonder that many people are anxious, guilty, or resentful” (93).

Yet while these implicit assumptions guide much of human behavior, they are “unconscious” in a striking sense: bringing these assumptions to conscious light requires supernatural intervention:

Scripture teaches that we are masters of self-deception and that we require supernatural help to see ourselves as we really are (Jer. 17:9-10)³” (95). Honest and accurate exploration of the inner chambers of one’s personal being is the special prerogative of God. Christian counseling at this point depends critically upon the enlightening work of

² Crabb doesn’t speak of any of these “basic assumptions” in the unconscious mind as inborn or innate. I can’t help but wonder how this view (which seems reminiscent of Skinnerian behaviorism) squares with contemporary understandings of Developmental Psychology—especially children’s linguistic and moral development.

³ *“The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked: who can know it? I the LORD search the heart, I try the reins, even to give every man according to his ways, and according to the fruit of his doings.”*

the Holy Spirit. Without His assistance, no one will perceive or accept the truth about his self-centered and wrong approach to life (95).

(c) *Basic Direction (“Heart”)*: By “heart,” Crabb doesn’t seem to have in mind any particular *part* of human personality, but rather orientation of “the human personality as a whole” (97). Specifically, Crabb’s idea of “heart” seems to be a kind of *center-of-gravity* of the human “rationality, moral judgment, emotions, [and] will” (97).

The “heart,” under Crabb’s understanding, has one of two orientations: *self-centered* and *God-centered*; it “represents a person’s fundamental intentions: for whom or what do I choose to live?” Do I “live for self or live for God”? The former orientation, “which we all naturally do,” means that you “are left to yourself ... in meeting your personal needs.” On the other hand, if “your basic intention is, by God’s grace, to put Christ first and serve Him..., then you can *reject all of the world’s ideas* on how to become worthwhile...and you can start filling your conscious mind with the truths of Scripture” (97-98). For an illustration of this difference, contrast the two pictures in Figure 1, below, on page 12. Note, too, that this offers an interpretation for the oft-quoted Bible-verse 2 Corinthians 5:17: “*Therefore if any man [be] in Christ, [he is] a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new,*” and the imperative to “put on the new man” in the 4th chapter of Ephesians.

This, then, is Crabb’s view of the psychological difference between non-Christians and “saved” Christians. The Christian, on this view, is that the Christian has “two sources of input into the conscious mind: what Satan says through the world to our unconscious mind and what God says through the Bible to our conscious mind” (97). As a result, the Christian is often conscious of two ways to make a moral decision: one self-serving (the result of world-inculcated selfish attitudes in the unconscious), the other God-serving (the result of conscious study of the

Bible). (And Christians, as per Romans 12:2, are to opt against the selfish, “worldly,” choice by “renewing one’s mind” with Scripture.) Non-Christians, however, lack the latter, Biblical, source of guidance; thus, the non-Christian, on Crabb’s view, lives only to serve himself and “[a]ll [his] components...work together...toward the sinful goal of self-exaltation” (97).

(d) *Will*: Crabb’s understanding of the will is familiar: it is the “capacity for choosing how to behave” (100). The behavior-options available to the will are, in turn, “restricted by the limits of his rational understanding” (100)—i.e., the truths believed by the conscious mind, plus the attitude engendered by the unconscious mind. Of course, these two sources can often be expected to conflict in the (Bible-immersed) Christian, on Crabb’s model. Suppose, for instance, a Christian is gratuitously insulted by a passer-by. The Christian’s “selfish” unconscious can be expected to kick up a desire to retaliate for the insult. But, thanks to the Christian’s Bible-immersion, her conscious mind also calls up a Biblical response to the situation: “*But I say unto you, That ye resist not evil: but whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also*” (Matt. 5:39). Needless to say, the Christian, despite her Biblical immersion, might find it difficult to overrule her unconscious selfish attitude, and forbear from retaliating: “It often involves teeth-gritting effort to choose to behave as we should” (101).

(e) *Emotions*: But of course, people aren’t like the “purely logical” Vulcans found on *Star Trek*. We are creature with emotions and feelings, and no psychological model can be complete without accounting for them and their causal role in our psychological lives.

On Crabb’s model, emotions have two main functions. First, following Albert Ellis, Crabb views emotions to be *caused* by (our conscious and unconscious evaluations of) events—recall §§(a)-(b), above. The second function of emotions is that they motivate behavior—as when we act vengefully out of a feeling of resentment, or act charitably out of a feeling of compassion.

Crabb also hastens to clarify the roles of negative emotions in the Christian life. “Christianity was never intending to be one laugh after another,” Crabb declare, “[w]e all feel bad sometimes. And all ‘bad’ feeling are not morally bad” (103). To the contrary: a feeling is sinful, on Crabb’s view, only if it is “mutually exclusive with compassion” (103). Thus, the emotions of depression, crippling guilt, resentment and anxiety are “sinful,” since in their leading to self-absorption, they crowd out a feeling of compassion for others—and motivate sinful behavior (104-105). On the other hand, anguish, “constructive sorrow,” anger, “motivated discontent,” and sorrow are not sinful—since they can motivate virtuous behavior such as (respectively) soul-searching, changing one’s behavior, rebuking sin (as when Jesus expelled the moneychangers from the Temple (Matthew 21:12-17)), changing intolerable circumstances, or forward-planning (104-105).

Pictures help, so we can see how Crabb’s psychological portraits of the non-believer and the Christian believer are contrasted at Figure 1, below.

(C) Questions and Concluding Remarks:

As we’ve seen, Crabb’s model is well-organized, elegant and allows for psychological interpretations of various Biblical statements involving human psychology. And yet, Crabb’s model suggests some questions. We turn to them now, followed by some concluding remarks.

(1) *Questions:*

(a) *Re: The Conscious Mind:*

(Q1) Crabb describes the contents of the conscious mind as “sentences” or “propositions.”

But it appears there are ample non-linguistic contents of our streams-of-consciousness. For instance, I might entertain an *image* of Charlie Chaplin’s slipping on a banana peel. (Indeed,

even Crabb points out that the “‘real you’ involves...an imagination capable of scheming hideous sins” (55.) Isn’t this an event in the conscious mind? Or is mental imagery handled by a different (and unnamed?) mental faculty? And what are we to say about pre-linguistic infants or non-linguistic animals?

(b) *Re: The Unconscious Mind:*

(Q2) Crabb claims that Satan uses “the world” to inculcate self-centered “false programming” concerning our needs and how to meet them. But is the world’s “programming” so bleak? Children are routinely taught (at home and at school) the importance of helping others altruistically (see, e.g., the perennial bestselling book, Shel Silverstein’s *The Giving Tree*). Why isn’t this “positive” programming accounted for in Crabb’s model?

(Q3) Many children are taught the importance of God—whether this Deity is called “Jehovah,” “Allah,” or “HaShem”. Why doesn’t Crabb’s model acknowledge non-Christian faith-systems which have theistic content?

(Q4) Crabb claims that, “Apart from God’s sovereign work, people ultimately are out for themselves” (97). This view is well-known in the philosophical literature as psychological egoism. Moreover, there are abundant arguments which show that psychological egoism, while superficially plausible, is ultimately a false characterization of human motivations (see, for a primer, Feinberg 1999).

(Q5) Is Crabb’s psychological egoism borne out by empirical evidence? Why aren’t people’s altruistic(-seeming) responses to natural disasters (for instance) evidence against psychological egoism?

(Q6) Crabb distinguishes the Christian from the Non-Believer as one who (i) “loses oneself in Christ” and (ii) avails oneself of “what God says through the Bible to our conscious mind”

(99). Couldn't this process also be achieved by, for example, *losing oneself in Allah* and *availing oneself of what Allah says through the Quran to the conscious mind*? If not, why not?

(Q7) How is the conscience to be understood on Crabb's model?

(d) *Re: The Will:*

(Q8) By Crabb's model, an unbeliever's rejection of Christianity isn't a result of a “weak will”; rather, “the problem with an unsaved person is not his inability to choose God...but [rather] his darkened understanding [i.e.(?) the conscious and unconscious mind] will not allow his will to make that choice. He does not need a strengthened will, he needs an enlightened mind, and that is the work of the Holy Spirit” (100-101). But if the will is not “allowed” to choose Christianity by “the understanding” (save a supernatural intervention by the Holy Spirit), in what sense does a non-believer *freely* choose his non-belief? In what sense is an atheist *morally responsible* for his belief, if he couldn't have chosen otherwise (save a supernatural intervention by the Holy Spirit)? .

(e) *Emotions:*

(Q9) In what sense are depression and anxiety “sinful” emotions, as Crabb terms them?

Something is “sinful” only if someone is morally responsible for that emotion. Yet medical science recognizes types of depression and anxiety which are not a “choice” by the sufferer, but rather symptoms of a neurological condition (insufficient serotonin levels, for instance). How does Crabb's model account for advances in psychopharmacology, which shows that

various emotions are products of neurochemistry, rather than the volitional products of a person's psychodynamics?

(Q10) Crabb suggests that the emotions are *effects* of *evaluations* by the conscious mind and/or *attitudes* of the unconscious mind. But isn't it evident that emotions can *cause* events in the mind, as well? Is a person suffering from clinical depression *because* of their pessimistic thoughts? Isn't the contemporary neurological explanation for clinical depression that a person's pessimistic thoughts are caused by a depressed mood (which, in turn, is caused by an imbalance in neurochemicals (e.g., serotonin))?

(f) *General Questions:*

(Q11) Obviously, non-believers have occasion to read the Bible. How does a non-believer's exposure to the Bible differ from that of a believer's, on Crabb's model? Is this because of factors that are *present* in the Believer's mind, yet *absent* in the non-believer? Or *vice-versa*? Or both? Would such differences be observable in a brain-imaging scan (such as an fMRI)?

(Q12) What differences between Crabb's model and non-theistic models might be amenable to experimental tests (if any)?

(Q13) Many models of human moral development don't distinguish between a person's religious affiliations (see, e.g., Lawrence Kohlberg's). Yet Crabb seems to suggest that non-Christians' moral development is "arrested" at an egocentric, self-centered stage. How would the defender of Crabb's model respond to discrepancies between non-religious theories of moral development and Crabb's model?

(2) *Concluding Remarks:* Crabb's model gives rise to a number of thought-provoking questions. Some of these questions appear to cause no trouble for the Crabb model; a

refurbishment or clarification might address them sufficiently. Other questions, though, seem to present significant challenges to Crabb's model, concerning the topics of child development (questions (1) and (2)), human altruism (questions (4) and (5)), and neurobiology and psychopharmacology (questions (9) and (10)). So Crabb's model may call for adjustment and amendment—but, at the very least, it prompts a number of illuminating questions. If Crabb has made mistakes, I aver that they are certainly *interesting* mistakes.

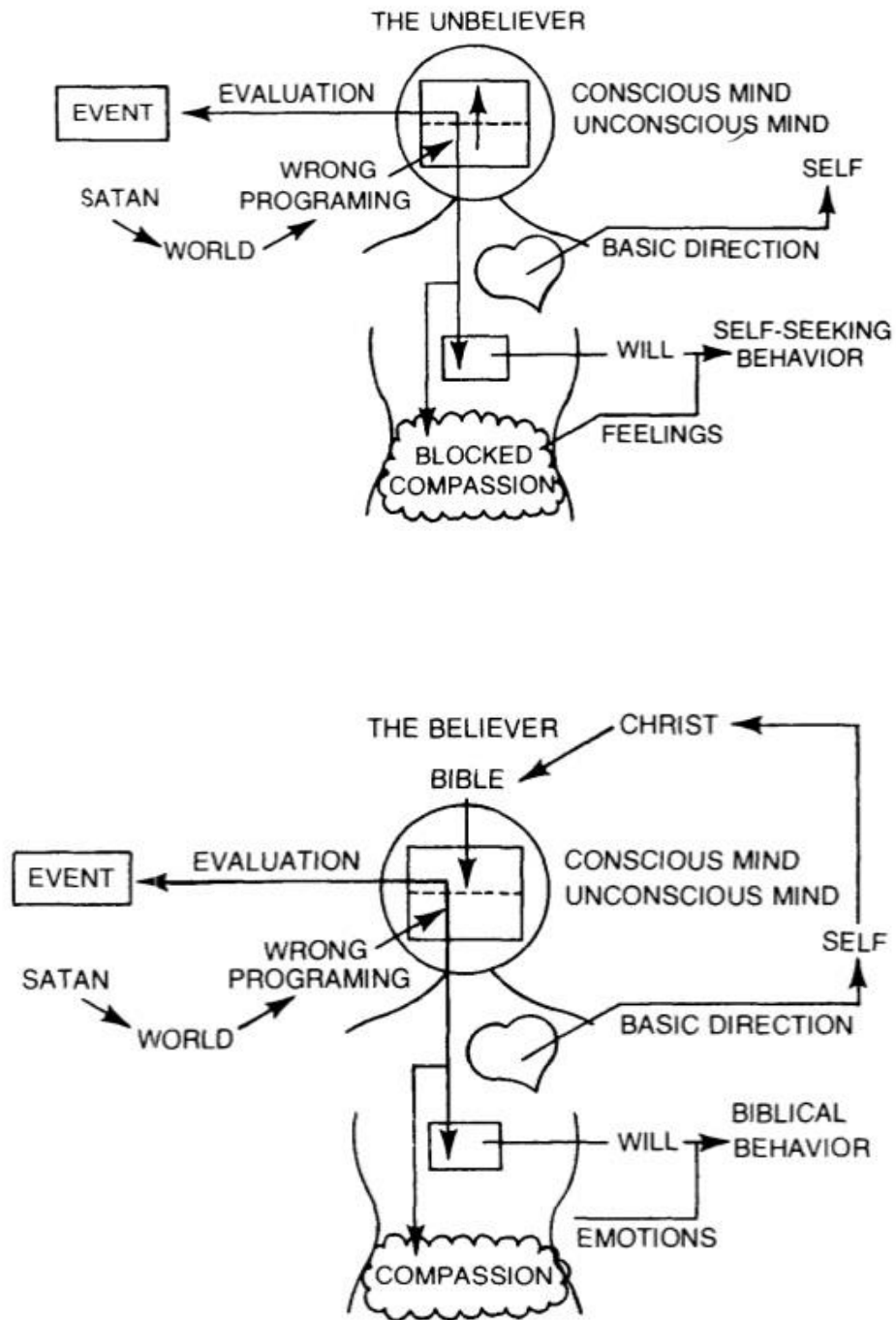


Figure 1: Diagram of Crabb's Functional Portrait of the Mind for the Christian and Non-Christian, respectively (106-107)

Works Cited

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