

A Personality Theory Essay - Psychodynamic, Person-centred, and the Christian Worldview by Dan Everett

Introduction

We are skin and bones, and so much more: memories, hopes, and dreams swirling within our depths, aches and pains rooted in the body, the past, the present, and the future intertwined within a single being.

It is within this complex fabric of experience and embodiment that personality develops, shaping how we think, feel, and respond to the world around us.

Personality Theory aims to offer a framework for a shared understanding of what defines a person, including the motivations and feelings behind thoughts, words, and actions, and how these develop over time. “The scientific study of personality and individual differences promoted by psychology is a systematic attempt to develop description and vocabulary capable of making sense of the rich variety within human beings.” (Francis, 2002)

Therefore, counsellors aiming to work with individuals must have a thorough understanding of Personality Theory. This enables them to offer appropriate support and empathy while collaborating with the client to use appropriate approaches and interventions that will relieve the client's distress, understand their underlying motivations, and help the client achieve the goals agreed upon in therapy.

Different branches and approaches to psychotherapy have evolved over the years. Today, many therapists operate with an integrative approach to psychotherapy (McLeod, 2025). This integrative approach involves therapists combining insights, techniques and interventions from across a wide range of therapeutic approaches to work with their clients (Geldard & Geldard, 2005). Alongside drawing on established therapeutic models, many therapists have also incorporated faith and spirituality, neuroscience, research, cultural awareness, and self-help activities into their therapeutic approach (McLeod, 2025). This essay will explore personality theory from the Christian worldview, the person-centred understanding, and the psychodynamic model, and consider how these perspectives can be understood within an integrative framework.

The Christian Worldview of a Person

The Psalmist wrote, “For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother’s womb. I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made” (Psalm 139:13-14a, NIV). The

writers of the Bible assumed that there was something within a person that was truly incredible. In the Old Testament, they used Hebrew terms such as *nephesh* (soul), *leb* (heart), and *ruach* (spirit) to speak of the inside. The New Testament writers did the same, though the Greek language allowed them to define a greater specificity and complexity, using terms such as *psyche* (soul), *sarx* (flesh), *kardia* (heart), *nous* (mind), *suneidēsis* (conscience), and *pneuma* (spirit) (Baldwin, 2012).

Baldwin (2012) states, “humanity [is] a special spiritual creature immersed in a spiritual universe while having physical experiences, as opposed to a physical creature having spiritual experiences in a material universe.”

In the Christian worldview, a person's worth is not determined by their good behaviour, beauty, hard work, social status, or personal achievements, but by being made, created, and shaped in the image of God. Ling and Roberts (2020, p. 50) explain, “Our dignity as human beings or human persons is inherent and not earned. All people, without exception, have great value because they have been made in the image of God.” For the counsellor, this results in treating each person with respect, love, and compassion. It also embodies a profound hope for healing, freedom, and transformation.

Jesus describes the highest task of a human being as loving “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, NIV) In doing so, He affirms that the motivations of the heart, the emotions of the soul, the thoughts in the mind, and the physical being are all to be congruent in this purpose.

However, elsewhere in the Bible, it is described that parts of the human being remain hidden from the self. “The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?” (Jeremiah 17:9, NIV). An individual may be unaware of deeper parts of themselves, such as their underlying motivations. Human beings have the capacity to deceive both themselves and others.

Brenner (2004) explores the call to self-discovery: “God is the only context in which our beings make sense. People who are afraid to look deeply at themselves will be equally afraid to look deeply at God.” To know God better, understanding oneself more clearly will help.

The worldview of Christianity is that each person is free to make their own decisions, and this free will means that each person is responsible and accountable for their actions, and, as Vitz (2009) argues, is central to any Christian model of person and personality.

The Apostle Paul writes in Romans chapter 12 that one should choose not to conform to the world but instead renew one's mind, which will change them from the inside out. The inner life (beliefs, emotions, thoughts) will guide the outer life (relationships, actions, behaviours); therefore, if our inner life is transformed into a more Christ-like one, our outer life should follow suit.

The Bible does not shy away from the real suffering and distress experienced by both people of faith and of no faith. Scripture traces this back to the Fall of mankind (Genesis 3), and God's rescue plan for humanity is fulfilled in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, as recorded in the Gospels. Therefore, counsellors with this worldview operate with the understanding that while deep pain and suffering are truly experienced, there is great hope for the present and future.

Person-centred Understanding of Personality

Person-centred understanding of personality, as hypothesised by Carl Rogers, begins with the idea that each individual has a self-concept. These self-concepts are a person's own view of themselves, composed of one's values, beliefs, abilities, and a sense of worth.

Counsellors who have adopted a personality theory based on the person-centred approach hold the view that "self-concepts are not unalterable and attitudes or behaviours can be modified or transformed" (Mearns & Thorne, 2013, p. 13), and this serves as hope for change within a therapeutic alliance.

When a person's self-image does not fully match their ideal self, they experience incongruence. Incongruence may cause psychological problems for the person, such as anxiety, distress, internal tension and confusion (Carter, 1974). The greater the overlap between a person's experience of self and their total psychological experience as an organism, the greater the congruence and ability to self-actualise. A congruent person is someone whose internal and external beliefs, values, and behaviour are aligned.

According to Patterson & Joseph (2007), the core idea of the theory is the belief that human beings possess an innate tendency towards growth, development, and optimal functioning. This is known as the actualising tendency and acts as the internal guidance system throughout an individual's life, enabling them to become who they really are. Congruence enables a person's Organismic Valuing Process (OVP) to guide them toward psychological well-being, helping them make decisions that support self-actualisation and realise their potential. The OVP is affected by the self-concept and conditions of worth.

McLeod (2025, p. 148) states, "Rogers observed that, in the process of making judgements or evaluations about issues, people could be guided by externally defined sets of beliefs and attitudes, or could make use of their own internal feelings on the matter, their organismic valuing process. An over-reliance on external evaluations is equivalent to continued exposure to conditions of worth, and is associated with seeking to conform and to please others." Therefore, if a person is

intrinsically motivated, they act in accordance with the OVP. However, if they are extrinsically motivated, they seek to achieve goals or meet expectations or standards imposed by others, explicitly or implicitly, which are known as conditions of worth (Patterson & Joseph, 2007).

Conditions of worth are formed by internalising expectations from influential figures; for example, a child internalises expectations and values from parents or other close adults to feel accepted. If a person's conditions of worth are not supportive, they will likely become increasingly disconnected from their true self, leading to incongruence and negatively affecting their psychological well-being. Their OVP and ability to self-actualise are limited. When a person then experiences unconditional positive regard, it enables them to become more congruent and grow once again as a person (Tan, 2022).

In counselling, the therapeutic alliance between the counsellor and client is essential to help a person become more congruent and realise their potential. According to person-centred theory, three core conditions are necessary to do this: the counsellor's own congruence, the counsellor's unconditional positive regard for the client, and empathetic understanding (Mearns & Thorne, 2013).

Psychodynamic Model of Personality

Psychodynamic theory aims to explain human behaviour primarily through understanding unconscious processes, that is, forces beyond an individual's awareness. (Deal, 2007)

Sigmund Freud, often seen as the founding father of the psychodynamic model of personality, suggested that much of human behaviour is shaped by unconscious drives and early childhood experiences. He identified three main systems that comprise an individual's personality: the id, the ego, and the superego. These components work together as a unified whole (Tan, 2022).

In this model, an individual also has three levels of consciousness: the conscious, the preconscious, and the unconscious. The conscious is what one is aware of; it is the experience that one has at a specific moment. This is regarded as a small part of a person's mental life. The preconscious is the part of a person on the edge of awareness, such as easily recalled memories. Finally, the unconscious is considered the largest part of consciousness and contains everything one is unaware of, such as hidden needs and motivations (Tan, 2022).

The id is where instincts, fears, and selfish motives exist at the unconscious level. "It is driven by the pleasure principle, always seeking to avoid pain and to experience pleasure and

satisfaction of its intrinsic needs. The id remains so throughout a person's life, wishing and acting to fulfil desires without rational thinking." (Tan, 2022, p. 40).

The ego functions at both the conscious and preconscious levels and is the rational part of the mind that deals with external reality, makes decisions, and mediates between the id and superego (McLeod, 2025).

Meanwhile, the superego, the 'conscience', acts as the storehouse of rules and taboos about what you should and should not do. The attitudes a person has in the superego are primarily an internalisation of their parents' attitudes (McLeod, 2025).

Sigmund Freud proposed five psychosexual stages of development. A person is born with the id, and then during the oral stage (birth to 18 months), the ego develops and guides the individual towards self-sufficiency. The anal stage (18-36 months) is when the individual learns to exercise control and make decisions. The phallic stage (5-6 years) is when the individual develops their superego, which is formed through the internalisation of society's standards, such as those from family, church, and school, and in this stage, they begin to master urges. The latent stage (from 6 years to puberty) is when social skills and confidence are developed, and children are drawn to productive and rewarding activities. The genital stage begins at puberty and continues into adulthood. During this stage, an individual enters maturity and settles down. It is common for individuals to regress to some or all of the previous stages during the genital stage. If there are any developmental challenges during any of these stages, the individual may face difficulties later in life.

Freud also hypothesised that two primary drives, Eros and Thanatos, the life instinct and the death instinct, respectively, function as the main motivators behind a person's behaviour (McLeod, 2025). These drives originate in the id, and although restraints on gratifying these desires can be externally imposed, they ultimately stem from within the individual through the ego and superego (Deal, 2007). This can cause a person to experience internal conflict between the id, ego, and superego, leaving them to experience distress, anxiety, or other psychological challenges.

According to the British Association for Counselling & Psychotherapy (2026), psychodynamic therapy "helps you understand how your current feelings and behaviour are shaped by your past experiences and your unconscious mind and impulses." Therefore, the psychodynamic model of personality enables counsellors to help individuals resolve inner conflicts by understanding how childhood challenges to personality development have influenced them as adults, and how unconscious motivations shape their current experiences.

A Comparison of Personality Theories and an Integrative Approach

The theology of grace and redemption in the Christian worldview emphasises the potential for and expectation of lifelong change. This is similar to the person-centred approach, where an individual's OVP guides them towards self-actualisation. In contrast, a Freudian psychodynamic perspective is considerably more deterministic, suggesting that a person's personality is largely established by age five or six (Tan, 2022). I recognise that there is a great deal of wisdom in the psychodynamic understanding that childhood experiences are highly influential in a person's development and can explain distress or issues an adult may face. However, my view is that, as these experiences are brought into the conscious mind, they enable the person to continue to change and not be held back by them.

In Freud's psychodynamic theory of a person, we see that unconscious motivators drive individuals to think and act in certain ways, or to feel they should behave in specific manners. Likewise, the Christian worldview acknowledges that our hearts can be deceitful, as referenced earlier. From Freud's perspective, the drivers in the id are natural and selfish; the Christian view, in contrast, is that our motivations, desires, and ambitions can be redeemed, and that we can be motivated by genuinely selfless reasons to love others. I believe it is possible to act from genuinely altruistic motives, but it is really important to take time to examine our motivations, as we can easily deceive ourselves into thinking we are acting for the right and good reasons when we might have mixed or unconscious motives that are actually selfish.

The person-centred view of personality expects that human beings will naturally move toward well-being and potential through the Organismic Valuing Process. I agree with Tan (2022) that, in contrast to Rogers' person-centred theory, the Christian worldview holds that human beings don't necessarily move toward constructive growth left to their own devices, given sinful human nature.

Again, the person-centred view differs from the Christian worldview in the source of ultimate authority over morality. Person-centred theory holds that authority comes from within an individual, and the more congruent they are, the more capable they are of living a moral life. Extrapolating from this position places moral authority within the individual rather than in an external source of truth, which contrasts with the Christian worldview, which holds that God, as an external being, possesses that authority rather than an individual's subjective experience and understanding of themselves (Tan, 2022). However, because of the Christian view that every person

is made in the image of God, there is some natural tendency for individuals to recognise what is right and wrong, especially when they are truly congruent.

I find the integrative approach to personality most valuable because it combines the strengths of each model while reducing the limitations of any single perspective. For example, psychodynamic theory offers valuable insights into how early childhood experiences influence a person and what the underlying drives are. Person-centred theory demonstrates the power of congruence in helping a person move towards their potential and highlights the conditions of worth motivated by external sources in the childhood environment that can hold someone back. The Christian worldview aims not just to explain what happens but also to explore the reasoning behind human nature and development, while bringing hope and healing into dark places.

I believe that every human has great potential for good because they are made in the image of God. However, various factors, including one's own sinful nature and negative experiences in childhood and later life, create internal barriers in their belief system and thinking, which prevent them from fully embracing life as God intended. There needs to be openness to this change and a willingness to embrace the process, through counselling or otherwise, which can also be a long and difficult journey. Many of these obstacles lie within the subconscious, but through growing in self-awareness and taking responsibility for one's own history, thoughts, and behaviours, especially when supported by close relationships of family and friends, wider communities such as church fellowship, and in partnership with the Holy Spirit, there is always hope for healing and transformation for an individual to move forward and into their potential.

Conclusion

These approaches provide valuable insights into human behaviour, motivation, and capacity for growth. They explore the depths of the lived experience of an individual, revealing both pain and suffering, while also highlighting the potential for healing and transformation.

An integrative approach to personality allows a counsellor to gain broad insights into the problems a client may present with. When an integrative approach is applied across these three models in practice, it enables the counsellor to explore unconscious motivations and influences (psychodynamic), establish a supportive and empathetic therapeutic alliance (person-centred), and incorporate meaning from a spiritual and faith perspective (Christian worldview).

Whether from a single perspective or an integrative approach, the main aim of personality theory is to enable individuals to gain a deeper understanding of themselves, so they can move

beyond psychological challenges and make decisions that feel aligned with who they truly are, leading to a more fulfilling life.

As research and practice continue to evolve, integrating insights from multiple perspectives will deepen our understanding of human nature and enhance how we support personal growth and well-being.

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