Harris, Steven-John M. "The Problem of the Gnomic Will: A Proposed Model for Spiritual and Psychological Development." *Synergeia. Proceedings of the Orthodox Christian Association of Medicine, Psychology, and Religion* 1 (November 2026): 10–17.

SCHOLARLY ARTICLES

Synergeia. Proceedings of the Orthodox Christian Association of Medicine, Psychology, and Religion

Vol. 1, 2024

The Problem of the Gnomic Will: A Proposed Model for Spiritual and Psychological Development

Steven-John M. Harris, PhD[1a]

[1] Clinical Psychologist in Private Practice

https://doi.org/10.68262/001c.173242

Abstract

This paper will briefly describe and relate the gnomic will to a model for assisting persons in spiritual guidance and psychotherapy/counseling. With its many conflicted manifestations, both spiritual fathers and similarly oriented psychotherapists encounter these challenges. Spiritual fathers prioritize aligning the human will with the divine will. Introduced will be four types of presentation styles based on levels of Openness and Introspection, and their apparent opposites: Closed and Unreflective. In this preliminary and theoretical consideration, various interactions between them are defined, and the implications for each will be briefly illustrated. Suggestions for the future of such an approach are discussed.

Keywords: Orthodox Christian Theology, Orthodox Christian Psychology, Psychology, Gnomic Will, Spiritual Fathers, Spiritual guidance, Psychotherapy, Counseling

Introduction

The first Adam, created in the image of God, possessed the potential for living out the divine life (before surrendering it) as the Second Adam ultimately did. It would require some time after Christ's earthly ministry, death, and resurrection for theologians and the Church's fathers to understand the nature of God's image through Christ's personhood. It was considered heresy to affirm His divinity to the exclusion of His humanity, and it was also considered heresy to relegate Him to being a mere human, such as a prophet, but not equal to the Father or the Holy Spirit. This theological tightrope not only has great implications for the beliefs of the church, but it also carries with it powerful implications for anthropology, if

[a] Author email: stevepsych22@gmail.com

not the *Theanthropology*[1] of humans. In the seventh century, St Maximus the Confessor would account for both Christ's divinity and His human qualities, and in so doing, he defined the gnomic will of humans.[2]

Gnomic Will: Two Wills

Adam possessed a natural (or divine) will in the Garden of Eden, living freely in Paradise in full communion with God. Whereas natural willing is acting in accordance with the Logos, gnomic willing is a form of willing that involves deliberation and making choices. As a result of choice leading to the Fall, the soul autonomously detached itself from the divine will. Thus, humankind broke communion with God and became conflicted between allegiance to this fallen will and self on the one hand, and the authentic self and will which seeks the divine will on the other. This meant that persons came to oppose the divine will and became potentially and often perpetually divided against themselves. Now, a choice always has to be made. Christ's human will acts in complete accord with the divine will. Christ has two wills, human and divine, which are permanently united. This ideal, whose presentation was made in absolute humility and sacrificial love, offered to humans the potential for "redemption of the will: perfect communion with God."[3] Difficulties resulting from the gnomic will are a focus of this work, which will consider the person's spiritual and emotional condition.

What can the gnomic will mean for the rest of humanity? The salvific goal of *theosis,* or uniting the person's will with the Divine will, comes as close to a return to paradise as we can attain. Given the potential confusion accompanying conflicted wills, practicing faith requires awareness and the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Without this, we become vulnerable to misapplying what we think is "the will of God." In a parallel vein, with limited psychological awareness, one may fail to see the difference between one's perceptions and desires and divine intentions (*logoi).*[4] Further, one could miss the entire point by mistaking the legalism of rigid adherence to rules, practice, and the administration of one's articles of faith as being faith itself and working in cooperation with God.[5] Similarly, might one apply

---

1 Panayiotis Nellas. *Deification in Christ: Orthodox Perspectives on the Nature of the Human Person.* (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1987).

2 St Maximos the Confessor. *On Difficulties in Sacred Scripture: The Responses to Thalassios*, trans. Fr Maximos Constas (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2018), 42.2, 241-2.

3 Ibid.

4 *Logoi* is considered to be an expression or extension of the divine *Logos,* or Christ, the wisdom of the universe that manifests itself both in creation and the world. *Logoi* thus represents a person's participation in God's will as much as one can strive for this.

5 1 Cor 13.

secular ideas about emotional and spiritual health and mistake them for salvific ones? In these examples, one's receptiveness to the Holy Spirit and discernment may be obstructed or curtailed.

Spiritual Guidance & Psychotherapy

Certainly, spiritual practice demands that one recognize the two voices or wills, one divine and the other human. We are referring to discernment. Spiritual fathers are experts in teaching this difference. From the psychological viewpoint, it seems necessary to inquire into ways our psychological dispositions affect discernment. Psychologically, the ability to engage with internal dialogue in the context of both external and private expressions of faith can be helped by psychological awareness. For example, in a publication in Greece, I was asked, alongside a pastoral counselor, to write in response to a case of a young man who was instructed to pray quietly by his spiritual father. Obedient to these instructions, his efforts did not seem to be rewarded. Instead, his mind would race, and he became increasingly unable to concentrate. Ordinarily, this recommended practice aimed at inner peace should be helpful. However, because he tended towards obsessional thought and intellectualization, he became debilitated by the approach. Somehow, the psychological space required in his mind became foreclosed by his problematic disposition—other psychological sequelae interfered with the *mental space* required for this practice.

Within just a few sentences, we have begun to inquire into a few challenges for the person to engage psychologically with the gnomic will in mind: considerations for the divine will and the soul. On the spiritual guidance side of this equation, in the training of the will, done under the direction of a spiritual father, the adherent learns to train his/her *nous* to guide the soul into closer relation to the divine will and towards union with Him. This training may also positively affect his/her emotional health. However, as we can see, many obstacles may arise along the way. These include both moral resistance and psychological defenses. Each of these can *threaten to foreclose upon the space in the mind* where human and divine wills attempt to meet. There is a distinction here. Voluntary resistance, a corruption of the gnomic will, involves the passions. At the same time, involuntary resistance is a corruption of nature resulting in disorders such as psychological disorders. St Maximus made this distinction.[6]

---

[6] This point was highlighted by Fr Vasileios Thermos, *Modalities of Healing Culture vs. Spiritual Life*. October 6, 2023, Annual OCAMPR Conference, Mundelein, IL. In this presentation, Fr Thermos utilized the writings of St Maximus as seen in the reference above (St Maximos the Confessor, *On Difficulties in Sacred Scripture: The Responses to Thalassios*, 42.2, 241-2). To illustrate, Thermos writes in *Psychology in the Service of the Church* (Alhambra, CA: Sebastian Press, 2017, 148), that St Maximus clarifies that

A particularly difficult defense called the "false self" by Winnicott,[7] is an adaptive accommodation with one's caretaker when a child conforms to pathological behavior that does not seem to permit room for the child's normal psychosomatic responses. Conforming to the pathological situation resolves this disparity to maintain the relationship and avert abandonment. False compliance like this can extend into adulthood and *must not be confused with obedience*.

These considerations lead us to some important points. A spiritual father generally provides critical guidance for the spiritual path, or ladder, if we may borrow from St John Climacus, guiding with spiritual disciplines meant to be salvific. The psychotherapist/counselor engages in what is often a more open-ended exploration to promote psychological growth that includes more adaptive behavior and effective ways of managing emotional life and relationships. Emotional difficulties often limit (but can also be an asset to) the spiritual life; likewise, spiritual problems can generate emotional problems.

I propose that on the psychological side of this equation, there are some important intersections to consider which affect both domains. Although we are often drawn into discussions that involve categorizing healthy vs. non-healthy behaviors or having more pious orientations, etc., I propose that investigating certain personality dimensions that present themselves both in therapy clients/patients and for spiritual disciples can influence how we work together between these disciplines, but it can also affect the unique relationship with whomever we are helping. Further, considering gnomic willing, it is important to distinguish between spiritual resistance/disobedience and natural psychological dispositions to face the challenges related to both disciples and therapy clients.

Proposal: A Four-Dimensional Personality Model

To consider this challenge further, I propose a model that explores the interaction between two personality traits, Openness and Introspection, and their presumed opposites, Constrictive/Closed and Unreflective.

---

nature was also corrupted after the Fall and that energy also participates in the corruption of nature, and therefore "does not lie exclusively with the intentions of the gnomic will."

7 Donald W. Winnicott. "Ego Distortion in Terms of True and False Self" in *The Maturational Process and the Facilitating Environment: Studies in the Theory of Emotional Development* (New York, NY: International Universities Press Inc., 1965), 140-159.

Openness has been studied extensively through research on the Big Five personality test,[8] whereas Introspection, although it's a familiar trait, has been researched far less. It did draw the attention of psychology pioneers such as Wundt and Titchener in the late 19th century, who studied introspection in the context of consciousness, introspection, or a probing examination of one's own emotional and mental processes. Their research holds considerable value for sober reflection, or *nepsis,* which is the watchfulness of the heart and conflicts that are found in the *nous.*

The interaction between openness and introspection appears to have considerable promise. However, any study of these factors should include their presumed opposites, Constrictive and Unreflective.

For our discussion, I tentatively offer[9] the following descriptions and characterizations of these basic traits:

- Openness. Creative, trying new things, problem-solving, curiosity, imaginative, potentially naïve, or gullible.
- Closed. Very focused, defensive.
- Introspective. Thoughtful, serious, contemplative, pensive, meditative, ruminative.
- Unreflective. Action-oriented, often willing to take charge, flippant, impatient, impulsive, and less focused on inner meanings.

As mentioned, I do not wish to assign positive or negative values to these, but rather to help us explore their implications for the spiritual father/psychotherapist's role. Each may have assets and drawbacks and exhibit themselves to different degrees in these dimensions. To evaluate these factors together, let us group interactions into four combinations or types:

- Open/Introspective. Creative, innovative, curious, contemplative, non-conformist, confident, self-sufficient.
- Closed/Introspective. A narrow focus introspective quality may be painful/anxious.

---

8 Donald W. Fiske, "Consistency of the factorial structures of personality ratings from different sources," *The Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology* 44:3 (July 1949), 329–344.

9 I am suggesting that these two terms be considered the opposite of openness and introspection. More validation studies (construct, criterion-related, and factor analyses) would have to confirm them or alternate terms to empirically represent their validity.

- Open/Unreflective. Action-oriented, take charge, may lead well within structure, content, lack insight, blind spots, impulsive.
- Closed/Unreflective. Concrete, structure important, less insight, fearful, more vulnerable to being overwhelmed.

Perhaps one of the most challenging issues with these combinations is that some present themselves consistently while others may change from context to context, mood to mood, or over time. Thus, some of these combinations may be states, while others may be traits or both.

Having reviewed these categories, I would like to focus the rest of my discussion on how they can affect mental space. Mental space will be defined here as a dialectical process between subject and object, self and other, object and symbol, and, for our purposes, self and God.[10] The provision of mental space allows for learning, tolerance of dialogue, the ability to see from multiple perspectives, and so on. Multiple perspectives are not meant to imply moral relativism. Mental space here means simply more room for thought. Moral discriminations and choices are viewed as a separate function.

We might say that our great teacher, Jesus Christ, operated this way when He spoke in parables to widen our vision towards more mental space and when He said, to illustrate the point, "What you have done unto the least of these My brethren, you have done unto Me." By urging us to consider our daily treatment of fellow human beings as an expression of our relationship with Christ, much introspection, self-reflection, and self-observation (forms of mental space) might ensue. Thus, mental space is generated by attending to Christ's teaching. While it can be helpful to have the capacity to have mental space, it can also be quite helpful to realize when it is not possible. This capacity has been foreclosed upon and can be useful to determine when persons are negating the other. Thus, it seems implied in loving others (or missing love). Also, too much mental space can be overwhelming when a strict and clear orientation is helpful (e.g., closed or constricted)—thus, narrowing is helpful at other times.

Mental Space: Some Implications for Spiritual, Psychological Development

For brevity, I shall provide a few examples to illustrate their potential utility. For example, for the *Open/Introspective* type, there may be the risk of self-sufficiency and vulnerability to the passion of pride. This can result from having more resources for "figuring things out" and overlooking the needs

---

10 This definition was developed by the author from the conception by Thomas Ogden in "On Potential Space," *International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 66:2 (1985), 129-41.

of others. This can be a liability for the community, the individual, and the faith. The limitation may be vulnerable to *lacking relational space*. These individuals can be helped by helping them see the multitude of ways they need others. On the other hand, these individuals can be visionaries in their communities and are capable of quality relationships.

For *Closed/Introspective* presentations, the drawback can be not allowing in new information that can be helpful to growth. Often driven by a need for protection, such personalities experience a different kind of limitation—that of being aware of many things, but "cutting themselves off at the pass," in a manner of speaking. Since they narrow the scope of experience, I propose that they seem vulnerable to melancholy, despair, and emotional deprivation and can be robbed of the fulfillment that comes from enriching relationships. These may drain their energy by shutting down the potential rewards of *experiential space.* They can be quite aware of the meaning of their faith and can be psychologically insightful. Still, they need help to expand their awareness into areas that limit their ability to learn new perspectives. Things for them can feel already resolved, or "said and done." Ranging from self-righteous rigidity to the important "keepers of the flame" of tradition, they can also be insightful and humble.

The *Open/Unreflective* style may possess something closest to the qualities of the extrovert. Seeing new vistas and being willing to take charge, often confident and willing to act, these individuals tend to be more content and enjoy themselves when they can inspire and help. The vulnerability here can be the lack of foresight into the implications of their decisions. They want to care, and they mean to, but they can also miss that what is "good for the goose" is not always "good for the gander." They may miss that the one that needs "saving," so to speak, is themselves. As a result, they may sometimes, through premature actions, shut down *interior mental space.* They may be enriched by learning to understand psychological projection. However, they should not be discouraged from their ways of helping but rather helped to see the meanings their strivings hold for themselves. Often, they are natural leaders, and learning more awareness can strengthen their growth and service.

Those we observe as Closed/Unreflective orientations can seem the most concrete, fearful, grim, and rigid because of their apparent lack of mental space and resources to manage. They carefully manage with adherence to structure and can seem very legalistic, following the "letter of the law." We can see that they appear to close the door to and *constrict mental space.* When engaged in a community, they can be counted as the most reliable. They are vulnerable to having difficulties grasping symbolic meanings or the points of view of others. While they may easily be overwhelmed by complexity or ambiguity, it is helpful for them to have spiritual fathers or therapists whom they trust to point them towards growth, we might say, to help with carrying the mental and spiritual space for them, so to

speak. The potential for complementary collaboration seems most relevant here—especially when mutual respect can be cultivated. A spiritual father with this characteristic style of relating may be an asset to less-disciplined individuals and communities that need a steady hand.

Conclusion & Future Research/Applications

Considering the gnomic will, this brief model introduces further complexity to our understanding of spiritual and psychological development and mental space. The effort to align human will to divine will seems to involve discernment at various levels of spiritual and psychological awareness on our way to a healthier dependence on each other and God. Considering their application, what might we gain from being mindful of these styles of relating? Can we be more helpful to each other and more realistic about our dispositions? Perhaps rather than our tendency to think of mental health as addressing behavior or problems at the fringes, could our mental health involve finding ways to help us think about our differences along the way to our common allegiances and faith? Our efforts may be enhanced through our growing awareness of "The one and the many" and the various parts of the Body of Christ, which operate differently but also unite to coordinate their efforts to serve the one body. Further, from the perspective in part from John 17:20-21, "for those who will believe in Me through their word; that they all may be one, as You Father, are in Me, and I in You; that they also may be one in Us," and each person contributes his or her part to the whole. Thus, we all need each other in the Body of Christ.

This typology is the product of both observation and speculation. However, factor analytic studies have not validated these qualities and different types. Future research is needed to evaluate these and other related variables.

Published: November 05, 2026 CST.

Copyright held by author.

This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License (CCBY-NC-ND-4.0). View this license's legal deed at https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0 and legal code at https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/legalcode for more information.