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REDUCTIONIST CONCEPTIONS OF THE HUMAN IN MODERN PSYCHOLOGY: A METHODOLOGICAL AND ETHICAL CRITIQUE

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Abstract: Reductionist approaches in modern psychology interpret the human being primarily through biological or behavioral components, neglecting the holistic nature of human existence. This article argues that such reductionism constitutes not only a methodological deficiency but also an ethical problem. Drawing on philosophical anthropology, existentialism, and existential psychology—and engaging with Viktor Frankl's logotherapy, Rollo May's critique of subject–object dualism, and Takiyettin Mengüşoğlu's ontologically grounded philosophical anthropology—the paper maintains that the human being must be understood as a holistic entity endowed with freedom, subjective experience, and moral value. The reductionist tendencies of psychoanalysis and behaviorism are characterized as an anthropological impasse (Çarkı 2022), and Kantian ethics as presented by Akarsu (1982) is deployed to show why treating persons as mere means constitutes an ethical violation. In response, the article proposes a human-centered scientific outlook grounded in ethical responsibility, addressing the human being as an anthropological whole encompassing biological as well as spiritual (noetic) dimensions. It further argues that the education of future psychologists must be reformed to integrate philosophical anthropology and ethics. A more human-centered and ethically responsible psychology is necessary to protect the irreducible worth and multidimensional nature of human existence.

***Keywords*:** reductionism, philosophical anthropology, existentialism, existential psychology, ethics, ethical responsibility, human-centered.

1. Introduction

The question of how human nature ought to be studied remains one of psychology's foundational problems. Throughout the twentieth century, modern psychology sought scientific legitimacy by modeling itself on the methods of the natural sciences. In doing so, it often adopted a reductionist conception of the human, attempting to render human experience measurable and controllable by reducing it to simpler components (Çarkı 2022, 14). Yet the human being cannot be fully captured by such simplifications without loss.

When the person is approached as a mere object—an "entity" to be explained—subjective experience, purposes, and intrinsic value may be ignored. This collides with the core principles of scientific ethics, which require that persons not be instrumentalized and that research and practice preserve dignity. Historically, conceptions of the human being have repeatedly generated ethical controversies in philosophy, because how we define "the human" shapes how we treat human beings (Çarkı 2022, 50).

This article advances a central claim: reductionist conceptions of the human in modern psychology constitute not only a methodological limitation but an ethical problem. From the standpoint of

philosophical anthropology, existential philosophy, and existential psychology, the human being must be understood as a holistic entity—free, self-aware, meaning-seeking, and value-bearing—rather than as a mechanism reducible to isolated causal elements. As Edmund Husserl emphasized, psychology is "destined to remain intertwined with philosophy" (Husserl 1997, 23, as cited in Çarkı 2022, 14); without this intertwinement, psychology risks fundamental errors in its understanding of the human being.

The paper proceeds as follows: First, it examines the historical formation of reductionism and the anthropological impasse it produces. Second, it draws on existential philosophy and humanistic/existential psychology to articulate an alternative. Third, it develops the ethical critique of reductionism with reference to Kantian moral philosophy. Finally, it articulates a human-centered scientific outlook, including implications for the education of future psychologists.

2. The Reductionist Conception and Its Anthropological Impasse

Reductionism is a general label for approaches that explain complex human experience by reducing it to simpler, measurable components. It emerged in psychology largely through the aspiration to produce objective, law-like explanations resembling those of the natural sciences. A significant part of twentieth-century psychological theory was shaped by such ambitions (Çarkı 2022, 14).

Two influential paradigms exemplify this tendency. Psychoanalytic theory—particularly in its biologically oriented strands—emphasized instinctual drives (chiefly sexuality and aggression) and deterministic dynamics as the foundational explanations of human conduct. Behaviorism, in turn, attempted to explain the human being primarily in terms of observable stimulus–response relations, treating the mind as a "black box" and generalizing from animal experiments to human behavior. While these frameworks generated influential findings and practical methods, they contributed to what Çarkı (2022) describes as an anthropological impasse: by interpreting the human being primarily as an instinctual machine or as an organism conditioned by environmental contingencies, the essential features of personhood—freedom, meaning, responsibility, and value—are pushed to the margins (p. 13).

Max Scheler noted this paradox early on, observing that despite the continuous increase in the number of sciences dealing with humanity, they often obscure rather than illuminate what the human being truly is (Scheler 1998, 35). Edmund Husserl reinforced this point, arguing that a psychology lacking a phenomenological perspective—possessing only a naturalistic and objectifying character—cannot successfully deal with the problems unique to the life of the spirit (Husserl 2009). Consequently, as Husserl states, psychology is "destined to remain intertwined with philosophy" if it is to avoid fundamental errors in its understanding of the human being (Husserl 1997, 23, as cited in Çarkı 2022, 14).

A further philosophical backdrop is the enduring influence of Cartesian mind–body dualism. When mind and body are treated as fundamentally distinct categories, scientific attention tends to gravitate toward the measurable—typically the body—while subjective experience is relegated to the methodologically inconvenient. As Rollo May observed, modern psychology tends to deal with the human being in a "limited and one-dimensional" manner, whereas human existence must be understood by taking into account all the dimensions to which it is related (May 2018, 158 as cited in Çarkı 2022, 133). Reductionism also generates ethical implications: human sciences cannot conduct experiments in the same unconstrained manner as natural sciences, and in research involving humans there are intrinsic limitations related to consent, vulnerability, and the prohibition of harm (Çarkı 2022, 26).

3. Existential Philosophy and Anthropological Alternatives

Existentialism challenges reductionism at a basic level: the human being cannot be exhaustively understood as a biological mechanism because the human is fundamentally an agent who interprets, chooses, and bears responsibility. In Sartrean terms, "existence precedes essence": the person is not fully determined by prior structures but becomes who they are through their projects and decisions. This orientation strongly influenced humanistic psychology, which emerged after World War II as a critique of treating the person in partial and objectifying ways.

James Bugental, founding president of the American Association for Humanistic Psychology, articulated the foundational principles of this perspective in 1963 (as cited in Yalom 2001, 35; Çarkı 2022,

113): (1) the person is more than the sum of its parts and cannot be understood by the scientific study of part-functions alone; (2) human existence is inherently interpersonal and contextual; (3) humans possess layered awareness and self-awareness; (4) humans choose and bear responsibility—they are not mere spectators but creators of their own experience; and (5) humans are oriented toward purposes, values, and meanings that point toward the future.

Carl Rogers's person-centered therapy operationalized several of these principles in clinical practice. His concept of unconditional positive regard—the therapist's acceptance of the client as a valuable human being regardless of circumstances—reflects, in therapeutic terms, the Kantian principle that persons must always be treated as ends rather than means. Rogers demonstrated that when clients are encountered as subjects rather than objects of intervention, authentic healing becomes possible (Rogers 2020).

Expanding on this, Takiyettin Mengüşoğlu's ontologically grounded human philosophy argues that human beings must be understood not through abstract biological, psychological, or cultural categories in isolation, but through their concrete biopsychic totality and the phenomena that ground their existence—knowing, acting, foreseeing, willing, freedom, historicality, speech, and the capacity to create art and culture (Mengüşoğlu 1988, 13 as cited in Çarkı 2022, 3). Mengüşoğlu makes the striking observation that humans exist "at home" only through their historical connections with other people, culture, language, art, and philosophy (Çarkı 2022, 42): to sever the person from this web of meaning and examine them as a mere organism is to examine the human being "away from home," producing inevitably partial knowledge.

Viktor Frankl's logotherapy represents perhaps the most direct existential challenge to reductionism in clinical psychology. Frankl argued that the central human motivation is the search for meaning. From his experience of the Nazi concentration camps, he developed the concept of "spiritual freedom" (geistige Freiheit): the last of human freedoms—the freedom to choose one's attitude toward one's fate (Frankl 2020, 81, as cited in Çarkı 2022, 108). His distinction between homo sapiens, the achievement-oriented person, and homo patients—the person who finds meaning through suffering and transforms adversity into human achievement—challenges reductionist models that reduce the person to cognitive performance or biological function (Frankl, 2019a, 41–42 as cited in Çarkı 2022, 120). Frankl further argued that when scientific psychology is shaped within a strict subject–object dualism imitating natural science methods, it treats the human subject as an object of manipulation; thereby the human dimension is distorted and denied (Frankl 2019b, 156–157 as cited in Çarkı 2022, 107).

Irvin Yalom developed existential psychotherapy around four ultimate concerns that arise directly from human existence: death, freedom, existential isolation, and meaninglessness (Yalom 2001, 8). These are not neurotic symptoms to be eliminated but irreducible features of the human condition that every person must confront. Yalom argued that academic psychology and psychiatry have quarantined existential approaches precisely because their positivist-empirical epistemology is incapable of addressing these dimensions (Yalom 2001, 39–40, as cited in Çarkı 2022, 107). His phenomenological approach insists that the clinician must encounter the other person's life-world directly, approaching each client as a unique subject rather than a specimen of a diagnostic class (Yalom, 2001, 44). His description of therapy as a meeting of "two equal human beings" reflects the ethical conviction that the therapeutic relationship must honor the dignity and agency of both participants—a stance fundamentally incompatible with any reductionist framing of the person.

Rollo May, for his part, described the subject–object dualism embedded in Western metaphysics since Descartes as producing "epistemological loneliness"—a profound experience of alienation in which the human being loses connection to the natural world and to others (May 2018, 158 as cited in Çarkı 2022, 133). May identified existentialism as the attempt to bridge this rupture and restore a unified understanding of the human being in the world (May 2018, 60 as cited in Çarkı 2022, 102).

4. The Ethical Dimension of Reductionism

Methodological choices in disciplines that deal with persons reflect and shape a moral stance toward the human subject. Reductionism, by approaching the human being as a limited object, can push

dignity, uniqueness, and moral worth into the background. For this reason, the critique of reductionism must be made not only on grounds of methodological shortcomings but also with reference to the ethical implications.

A clear ethical lens can be drawn from Kantian moral philosophy, as interpreted and presented by Bedia Akarsu (1982). A central Kantian principle holds that the human being must never be treated merely as a means but always also as an end. As Akarsu explains, a person who turns their own personality into an instrument for escaping hardship treats themselves as a mere thing; yet the human being is not a commodity and cannot be used solely as a means—in all actions, the person must be regarded as an end in themselves (Akarsu 1982, 218–219). Moreover, as Akarsu notes, respect for moral law teaches the human being a sense of their own value and grants an inner strength (p. 216).

This principle has direct relevance to psychology. If a client is treated as a mere "case," a diagnostic label, or a bundle of measurable variables, their subjective reality and autonomy risk is being disregarded. In clinical settings, standardized protocols can unintentionally reduce the client to symptoms rather than encountering them as a person with a unique life-world. Çarkı (2022) argues that deterministic and reductionist approaches in mental health may push clients toward passivity and avoidance of responsibility. Instead of enabling them to explore genuine causes and take ownership of their lives, such approaches may push them into an illusion in which they are merely driven by factors beyond their agency (p. 166). On this view, reductionism hinders not only accurate understanding and effective practice but also the ethical aim of respecting and supporting human agency.

Viktor Frankl's account of spiritual freedom—one's capacity to choose one's attitude even under extreme constraint—implies a corresponding ethical duty on the part of the clinician: to protect and cultivate the client's capacity for self-determination rather than to eclipse it through deterministic framing (Frankl 2020, 81–82 as cited in Çarkı 2022, 108–109). Professional ethical codes—such as those of the American Psychological Association—emphasize informed consent, confidentiality, and nonmaleficence. Yet the existential and philosophical critique presses deeper: ethics is not only about procedural compliance but about the underlying image of the human being that guides research and practice. Psychological science must take ethical responsibility not only in its procedures but also in its theoretical conceptions of the human subject.

5. Human-Centered Science and Education

The foregoing analysis points toward the need for a human-centered and ethically sensitive psychology. Such an approach requires psychology to work in productive proximity to philosophy, especially philosophical anthropology and phenomenology. If psychology proceeds on an exclusively positivist basis by setting philosophical knowledge aside, it risks remaining deficient in (1) its conception of the human being's nature, (2) its epistemological foundations and methodology, and (3) the scope and interpretation of the knowledge it produces (Çarkı 2022, 14–15).

A human-centered psychology requires holism: recognizing biological, psychological, social, cultural, and spiritual/noetic dimensions as interrelated. In clinical practice, treating depression exclusively as neurochemistry or exclusively as cognition risks missing the person's life-world, relationships, and values. The four dimensions of human existence identified in the existential-humanistic tradition—the physical (Umwelt), the social (Mitwelt), the personal (Eigenwelt), and the spiritual/noetic (Überwelt) (van Deurzen & Arnold-Baker 2017, 26–27 as cited in Çarkı 2022, 122)—provide a framework for a genuinely holistic clinical and research practice.

Ethical responsibility also extends beyond procedural compliance to include how psychological theories shape public views of human agency and dignity. Highly deterministic narratives can spread the belief that persons cannot change and cannot be held responsible. Frankl's proposal that a Statue of Responsibility complement the Statue of Liberty—for freedom must always be balanced by responsibility (Frankl as cited in Çarkı 2022)—applies equally to psychological science: the freedom of inquiry must be matched by responsibility toward the persons who are its subjects.

Crucially, a human-centered orientation must influence the education of future psychologists and researchers. Psychological education should integrate philosophical anthropology and ethics so that stu-

dents develop a critical and holistic view of the human being and avoid reductionist traps. Interdisciplinary collaboration—for example, including philosophers or ethicists in research projects where interpretive questions are substantial—should be actively encouraged. Psychological theories and interventions should also be subjected to periodic ethical evaluation, including reflection on how models shape public conceptions of agency, responsibility, and dignity.

To summarize, a human-centered and ethically responsible psychology should: (1) engage philosophy as a constitutive partner; (2) adopt a holistic perspective rather than absolutizing a single explanatory dimension; (3) center subjectivity and lived experience alongside measurement; (4) maintain ethical integrity in both research procedures and theoretical anthropology; and (5) aim at human flourishing, treating persons as ends rather than as instruments.

6. Conclusion

This article has offered a multi-layered critique of reductionist conceptions of the human being in modern psychology. Reductionism, while often motivated by scientific rigor and objectivity, generates both theoretical incompleteness and ethical harm. Existential philosophy and existential psychology highlight the irreducibility of freedom, responsibility, meaning, and dignity—dimensions that reductionist models characteristically neglect.

The paper has argued that reductionism is an ethical problem—not merely a methodological one—because it leads to objectification, undermines human agency, and weakens respect for human worth. Drawing on Kantian themes as discussed by Akarsu (1982), on the existential-anthropological framework developed by Çarkı (2022), on Frankl's logotherapy and concept of spiritual freedom, on May's critique of epistemological loneliness, on Yalom's four ultimate concerns, and on Mengüşoğlu's ontologically grounded philosophical anthropology, the article has proposed a human-centered scientific outlook for psychology grounded in ethical responsibility.

Psychology's ultimate purpose is to contribute to a better understanding of persons and to support human well-being. This purpose can only be achieved if psychological science remains attentive to the full reality of human existence and to the ethical demands that follow from human dignity. A psychology that treats persons as ends, engages their lived experience, and acknowledges their meaning-making capacities will be both scientifically richer and ethically sounder—and closer to the ideal of a genuine human science.

A Note on Takiyettin Mengüşoğlu and the Legacy of Turkish Philosophical Anthropology

Several arguments in this article draw on the philosophical anthropology of Takiyettin Mengüşoğlu (1910–1984), whose work deserves brief introduction for international readers. Mengüşoğlu was a Turkish philosopher who developed an original, ontologically grounded philosophical anthropology within the broader tradition of twentieth-century German philosophical anthropology alongside Max Scheler, Helmuth Plessner, and Arnold Gehlen. Crucially, he was a student of Nicolai Hartmann, one of the foremost ontologists of the twentieth century, whose layered theory of being deeply shaped Mengüşoğlu's approach to the human being. Mengüşoğlu's major work, İnsan Felsefesi (Philosophical Anthropology, 1988), argues that a genuine philosophical anthropology must begin not from abstract biological, psychological, or cultural categories but from the concrete biopsychic wholeness of the person and from the phenomena that belong distinctively to human existence. He explicitly opposed those predecessors who, in making the human being an object of knowledge, had reduced it to a particular faculty or cultural dimension, and insisted instead on grasping the human being in its disharmonic, bipolar totality.

Mengüşoğlu's intellectual legacy extended powerfully to the next generation of Turkish philosophy. Among his most distinguished students was İoanna Kuçuradi (b. 1936), who became one of the most internationally recognized figures in contemporary ethics and philosophy of human rights. Kuçuradi served as President of the Fédération Internationale des Sociétés de Philosophie (FISP)—the world federation of philosophical societies—a position that reflects the global standing she achieved. Building directly on Mengüşoğlu's ontological foundations, Kuçuradi developed an influential philosophy of value and a rigorous account of human rights grounded not in convention or social contract but in the

ontological characteristics of the human being as such. Her work insists that human rights can only be adequately understood and defended if we first have a philosophically sound conception of what the human being is—an insistence that resonates directly with the central argument of the present article. The lineage from Hartmann through Mengüşoğlu to Kuçuradi represents a distinctive and philosophically rigorous tradition of human-centered thinking that deserves wider recognition in international discussions of ethics, science, and the study of the human being.

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