

IDEALIZATION AND MENTAL HEALTH

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It was Meister Eckhart, I believe, who said, that "a man is what he loves." In his words lies a profound truth to which psychology, which should have been the first to affirm it, has been almost entirely oblivious. The truth is a psychological rather than a philosophical one, for it deals with such important psychological facts as attitude, value, level of aspiration, proactiveness, and the like. Those psychologists who have written on the subject are not, as a rule, members of the academic psychological guild, and their observations, accordingly, do not carry much weight. Alfred Adler, for instance, as early as 1912, said very much the same thing (1). According to Adler, an individual's character is molded by his ideal of himself, as he thinks he ought to be, by his ideal self-image, as we say today.

The ideal self-image could not have been derived from the study of infrahuman animals. Man alone of all animals is the dreamer of dreams. It is through his idealization of himself that man is enabled to idealize others. It is through his conception of himself as an ideal that he succeeds in rising above the tribal reality of his age. It is by knowing what he must be that man becomes a fully human being. Healthy human behavior is less a response to stimuli than a challenging encounter with the human condition.

THE MEANING OF IDEALIZATION

Ours is largely an age of cynicism. Debunking of idealism is a favorite topic of contemporary literature and the pride of so-called empirical investigators of human behavior. Sociologists, following the bandwagon of quantitative analysis, are particularly inclined to deflate the ideal in human relationships. The romantic complex, or "romantic fallacy," as they call it, has come in for serious, but often misguided, criticism. The trouble with love and marriage, these statistically-minded pundits say, is that we idealize the lover and the love-relationship so that neither corresponds to reality. Meanwhile, the lover and the love-relationship are both lost in the interstices of the sociologist's quantitative charts. There is no inkling in all their work that the impulse toward idealization is a necessary — perhaps inescapable — condition of genuine love. We idealize whatever we

love; and we love that which we idealize. Clinical psychologists, especially those who have investigated the role of maternal care in child-rearing, have shown that the child who receives good maternal care idealizes the donor of his gifts — the mother. Where such idealization is rendered impossible, as in the case of the rejecting mother, the child develops antagonism for the offending parent.

A good illustration of the failure of idealization of the parent is found in the personalities of the Alorese, as described and analyzed by Cora DuBois (2). In this society, the mother ceases systematic care of the child when he is two weeks old. She weans him by pushing him away from her, or by slapping him when he reaches for her breast. Worse yet, she teases him either by stimulating him with her nipples and then withdrawing them, or by creating jealousy in taking another child to her breast. Not only does this treatment result in the child's hatred for the mother, but he is given no opportunity to form an image of the mother as an affectionate helper. In other words, under these circumstances the child cannot idealize his mother as a tender and loving benefactress. He grows into a steadfast "realist," full of hatred for his mother, but with so little assertiveness in his make-up that he takes by force what is denied him: he steals. But like the proverbial worm in every flower, the object of his theft lacks the effect of a gift and the idealization of the donor, and affection is completely stifled.

The idealization of the parents results, on the whole, in an acceptant attitude toward life and people, including oneself. It is found in every psychologically healthy individual. Idealization may be defined as the *unconscious tendency to perceive ourselves and others as different from what we "really" are* — "really," that is, as disclosed in most standard measurements of personality. In this sense man is unique; animals have no perception of themselves as anything other than they are; they cannot see beyond their immediate needs. While this view of man is unpalatable to most "adjustment psychologists," the idea is as old as the history of Western thought, and conforms to the point of view of a number of present-day personality psychologists. It is not only contrary to the established view in conventional psychology but it challenges the existentialists' position as well. If we take Kierkegaard's as the basic existential position, then the lowest form of despair is the "despair at willing to be another than himself, wishing for a new self . . . the most crazy of all transformations" (5). However, we are dealing with mental health, not despair. Despair arises from our awareness of "being in the world," as the existentialists phrase it. Mental health, as we conceive it, is the outcome of *becoming* in the world. Self-transformation is the most difficult and disciplined of human acts. Goethe expresses it beautifully thus:

"When we take man as he is, we make him worse, but when we take man as if he were already what he should be, we promote him to what he can be" (3).

One never ceases to wonder at the predicament of the "empirical" psychologist's faith in the veridicality of the individual personality which emerges from the standard tests. Instead of revealing to us man as he "really" is, these tests too often show us man encapsulated in individual and cultural defenses. The "real" man, the man striving to become his ideal self-image, does not hide behind the façade of conventionality and "good adjustment," but is propelled forward by his image of himself as other than he "is." A man is, indeed, what he loves. It is not an accident that, generally speaking, those who most enrich life do not have life as their conscious end.

Looked at on the background of its history, psychology is impoverished because many psychologists fear to peer beyond the constricting boundaries of their empirical method. Yet, this narrow, self-enclosing positivism is quite foreign to the most advanced outlook of contemporary physics. There is little adventure in modern psychology; there is largely only the tedium of endless repetition. The pale emotions so laboriously described in conventional psychological expositions are viscerally correct, but they are affective processes that neither move men nor cause men to move mountains. Visceral movements require the passion of ideals, the powerful impetus of self-idealization, before they can be effective. If Goethe, for instance, was psychologically more healthy than Freud, and there is much evidence showing that he was, even without the benefit of the latter's "empirical" insights, it was because his "romantic" intuitions helped him to grasp reality more profoundly. Until his old age Freud repressed the romantic element within him, much to his own psychological ill-health and to the loss of wisdom to humanity, for a questionable rationalism and mechanistic determinism. This is a strange event in view of the fact that Goethe's writings affected the young Freud deeply. *Grau, teurer Freund, ist alle Theorie*, said Goethe's Mephistopheles, *Und gruen des Lebens goldner Baum* (4). Had Freud not repressed his artistic mentor's admonition, he could well have turned out to be far less pessimistic regarding man's doom of endless recapitulation of archaic impulses.

It does not require elaborate research to know that idealization is necessary in order to humanize our emotions and to develop those sentiments which are most characteristically civilized and humane.

Emotions and sentiments invest man's purposes with a sense of free and vital commitment. They are not merely visceral processes but basic qualities of the self. They are not only responses to stimuli, and unlike most drives, sentiments in particular have no discernible terminus; they cannot be satisfied, for like all ideals, they are not need-reductive but fairly permanent determinants of the total personality. It is ideals, not visceral and other reaction processes, which set the "tone" of a person's strivings and differentiate one individual from another.

In order to understand a person it is more important to know his purposes and commitments than his past performances. We appreciate great men less for their innate abilities than for their dedication to a great cause. Cause and commitments are not "realities" in the conventional sense, but idealizations of and projections into the future. Animals are "driven" toward goals, but human beings create and intentionally pursue their own ends.

HEALTHY VERSUS NEUROTIC IDEALIZATION

Although idealization has been defined as perceiving things as different from what they are, it is not a condition of self-deception. Self-deception is fundamentally neurotic in that the neurotic is less concerned in *being*, than in *appearing to be*, a certain kind of person. The neurotic person must always appear to be irreproachable, even though this condition can only be relative. Even when in moments of rare insight he is aware of the unreality of his false beliefs, of his neurotic insincerity, they still retain for him an emotional reality-value that is wholly absent in the person whose idealizations are healthy. Owing to his insecurity, anxiety, and false perception of reality, the neurotic is fearful and needs the false sense of security which he derives from his insincerity — that is, from his distorted idealization.

This same condition also makes him more sensitive to reality, including other people's insincerities. This insight robs him of the productive illusions, i.e., the idealizations, which are necessary for good mental health. Because in this way the neurotic is much closer to reality than the ordinary person, he suffers deeply.

The healthy idealist, on the other hand, is not plagued by such insincerities, and he is aware of their neurotic value for the sick individual and of their cultural genesis in the ordinary human being. He knows that culture itself imposes evasion, duplicities, and de-

fenses upon people, in the form of custom and etiquette. He perceives them properly as forms of adjustment to "things as they are." His will-to-idealize functions not as wish-fulfillment, not as a denial of reality, but as a form of creation. Reality for him is not merely given, but transformed in the light of his own goals. This is not a fictional process in the narrow sense, but an act of liberation from the standards imposed upon us by the group. It is the view of things under the aspect of moral and aesthetic sensibility. It is the act of breaking the bonds which imprison man within the limits of the prosaic human condition — an act of creative self-affirmation.

Neurotic self-deception, in contrast to healthy self-affirmation and self-transformation, is characterized by fear of imperfection and by insecurity. The neurotic person dreads risks lest they expose his flimsy self-deceptions and insincerities. Unlike the healthy person's anticipatory fears which are self-affirming since they point to a not-yet-actualized reality, the neurotic's destructive anxieties lead only to intensification of his illness. The healthy individual's fictionalization of reality is productive because his encounter with the world goes beyond the encounter itself to its many possibilities. In this process lies the healthy idealist's freedom: the freedom to surpass every moment of himself and every instant of reality. It means going beyond himself without losing himself. Instead of locking himself in chronic conflict with reality and being hurt by it, as the neurotic person does, the healthy individual engages in realistic self-affirmation.

This way is open to the healthy person because of his self-commitment. Self-commitment is the opposite of flight from reality, of emptiness, and of meaninglessness. It is the freedom to determine one's own destiny through decisions regarding one's future. It is not the affirmation of a reckless indeterminism, but of freedom to act within the limits of the possibilities which inhere in one's finitude. Within this finitude man can strive mightily to realize his own potentialities, his own destiny.

The tragic sickness of the neurotic individual is that he can accept neither the conformism of the average man nor the self-affirming idealization of the mentally healthy person. The first creates rebellion against the comfortable, the second, dread of the unpredictable. The neurotic molds himself unsuccessfully on the image that he wants others to believe, and lives in constant dread of being discovered; the healthy person molds himself effectively on a model of what he desires to become and feels the exhilaration of continuous adventure.

While the healthy individual's fiction of himself may appear quite visionary to a prosaic psychologist, we must remind the latter that in advanced physical science, in contrast to crudely empirical psychology, reality is becoming increasingly impalpable. Matter has dissolved into a dream, a fiction as far removed from "reality" as the spirit of man has departed from its visceral activity.

THE INCOMMENSURABILITY OF IDEALIZATION

A mark of the truly civilized individual is the presence in his psychological make-up of this projection of himself into the problematic future. The appearance of the proactive self in the evolution of man is an event of the first order, a miracle in the order of natural events comparable to the eye with which man comes into nontactual contact with the world, or with the prehensile hand that has enabled him to create the shining jewels of the great civilizations. He is further characterized by an impassioned protest against the dehumanization of man which is going on apace in our positivist-empirical and narrowly objectivist tradition in psychology. He sees ominously before his eyes the consequences of this tradition: tribal collectivism with its deadly uniformity, manipulation of the person in selective conditioning and menticide, enslavement of the human mind by rigid formulas, the indignity of craven fear cultivated through organized terror, and the meaninglessness of life induced by all of these.

Good men are often impelled to blame the physical sciences for these existential ills. This is largely a mistake: the real culprit in this meaningless tragedy is the trivializing character of much contemporary psychology. By basing its description of man on the animal or the machine model it has stripped him of his human dignity. This trite term means more than the sense in which it has been used and abused: human dignity refers to man's uniqueness, to his irreplaceability. By tying all his impulses to the dead past, psychology has robbed man of his viable future. The proactivert knows what few positivists realize, that, to use Dostoyevski's idiom, man wants not bread alone, but an answer to his questions. Drive-reduction is a fit paradigm for physiological behavior but a thin program for human psychology.

One cannot measure or calculate the self and its idealization. One can truly know another self only by entering into it, by participating in another person's encounter with reality. This leads to a principle of qualified indeterminacy in psychology. When you enter into the self of another, you know it, you transform it into something other

than it is. As in the act of measuring physical phenomena we change them, so in the process of trying to understand another's self we recognize it as a new form of being. We can and do obtain detached and objective knowledge of the human personality because we can measure many of his reactions; but knowing these reactions only we do not know the *person*. Understanding a person requires a knowledge of his image of himself, and not only his reactions to stimuli: "A self which has become a matter of calculation," as Tillich astutely remarks, "has ceased to be a self. It has become an object" (6). In the very act of trying to measure the self, we lose it — like Heisenberg's physical particle which, in the process of measuring it, is transformed into something else.

In this connection, Adler was more scientific than Freud, for Adler was aware, as Freud was not, of the self-transforming character of man. In Freud's system, despite its claim to being psychodynamic, man changes only in the form of repeating what he already is. This is a static view. In Adler's system man changes as he moves toward the values and ideals which he has committed himself to achieve: the ideal self.

The process of idealization is often described as a form of romanticism, and contrasted with the naturalistic or mechanistic approach of science. However, the two attitudes are not antithetical, especially when we recognize the historical fact that naturalism has been many things during the growth of science. The view underlying the present discussion is that romanticism and mechanism can be synthesized through creative evolution in voluntaristic naturalism. It recognizes the lawfulness of nature, including human nature, by affirming the transformation of what is into what might be. It goes beyond the palpable to the incalculable. It affirms that, while man is a product of his past, he is also an emerging self molded by his future. Past, present, and future are in psychology, as in contemporary physics, mutually interactive. We have here a fusion of science and humanism which enables us to interpret the nature of man not only as he is disclosed in the positivist tradition of quantitative measurement but also as he reveals himself in the humanist tradition of art, literature, and philosophy. Furthermore, the humanistic side of the study of man portrays man in the light not only of his drive-reductive processes, but places him in the center of the human predicament — the crisis of our age.

Our way of conceptualizing psychological health by stressing its idealizing qualities destroys the age-long cleavage between subject and object, the inner and the outer, the rational and the irrational, and other dichotomies. The plague which has affected the sick corpus of psychology for a half-century is its artificial separation of the psychologist's abstract formula from psychological reality; between prediction and control on one side and understanding on the other. The scientific description of man has been naively affirmed in the former, with little or no awareness of the fact that to be scientific is also to pursue an idea with uncompromising vigor to its final unravelment. Since its inception positivism has falsely conceived science as completely independent of man — a position refuted by such eminent natural scientists as Werner Heisenberg and Niels Bohr. The subject's involvement in his object — the participation of one self in the self of another (Sullivan's "participant observation") — is a surer way to see the other person clearly than by abstractly knowing only his reactions to a set of stimulations. My idea of another person is a very important characteristic of myself and of the other person. Accordingly, today the "fictionalists" are the most uncompromising realists.

To return for a moment to our description of romantic love: to the lover his beloved is surely the dearest thing in the world, even though on rational grounds we know that the love-object of every other lover is equally esteemed. Every moving experience is of this nature. It is the search for that which is not yet. Instead of being illusory, or worse yet, pathological, as such experiences are often visualized by positivists, it is most real, for it is the search for an ideal, for a meaning. The search for a meaning is the truest expression of mental health, for it is the search for a life task, as Adler conceived it. In this search man grows according to his image — his "illusion," if you will — of himself. He becomes more and more like the picture of himself that he carries around in his head. No amount of unmasking, however valuable it is within sensible limits, can destroy this fact.

One of the most important scientific consequences of this way of conceiving the inner and the outer, as well as one of the surest guides to mental health, is that it destroys the *false* belief that man can be understood only as an external object. It liberates the mind from the positivist's closed system and brings into focus the importance of subjective reality. Detachment and abstraction alone do not lead us to scientific discovery. A so-called fact, in the final analysis, gains its

reality — most certainly its meaning — only as it is actualized in a human consciousness.

It would be absurd to deny the imperious force of the homeostatic drives — of hunger, thirst, and sex. However, as fundamental as, and surely more creative than, these is the affirmation of one's own being. It is more creative because in healthy self-affirmation one creates one's own life, which is the highest of all human ends. Accordingly, the excessive emphasis on such concepts as drive-reduction and adjustment give us a fragmented picture of man. It becomes a part of the neurosis of our time, for it deflates man's capacity to idealize and actualize his own being. It denies the reality of our experience and affirms abstractions to be real. The narrow positivist view, erroneously equated with all natural science, has made man into an automaton whose behavior can be precisely measured, but whose sense of being a person remains a mystery and an illusion. But most unscientific of all is the psychologist's illusion that he makes no value judgments; for in his denial of such judgment he has shown himself to be the most prejudiced of all; and so it appears that some of the staunchest realists are in fact "illusionists." This is a condition dangerously close to neuroticism, for in neurosis we mistrust our inner experience and the values of our society. The crucial sameness of an acknowledged neurotic and a misguided psychologist is that fundamentally both mistake personal fixations for objective actualities — the neurotic in the sphere of the emotions, the psychologist in the realm of ideas.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

In this paper I have called attention to a neglected problem, the role of idealization in mental health. Idealization as here conceived is neither neurotic phantasy nor a form of sentimentality, but a way of conceiving one's self in the process of becoming a person. It refers to the act of seeing oneself as different from what one is. It is not a falsification of the self, but an emphasis on the self in the process of approximating an ideal. Without ideals man is not human, for an important aspect of humanness is the capacity to envision ends and to realize them in action. The neurotic suffers because he perceives life as meaningless and himself as a person caught in an impersonal fate. His anxiety, or better yet his dread, is a state of paralysis in the face of options and decisions. His image of himself is that of a victim of blind destiny, of a predetermined fate over which he has no effective

control. His life appears to him to be unalterable because in his neurotic superstition he perceives himself as utterly helpless.

The psychologically healthy person, on the other hand, perceives himself as an active, self-affirming being who, although he is no superman and is consciously aware of his finitude, has faith in achieving his ends, if only by successive approximations. In his imagination he is not building castles in Spain, for that is the way of the neurotic, but shows the courage to envisage and to anticipate a challenging, and perchance a disappointing, future. He knows that in the act of self-actualization he contributes to the realization of his destiny. If he did not visualize himself as capable of actualizing his potentiality he would, like the typical neurotic, remain fixated at a psychological dead-center. By obeying the demands of his ideal self he achieves a meaningful life. The ideal self is that aspect of the healthy personality which surpasses itself. This surpassing of itself is the process of becoming; it is not reality as it is, but as it might be. Thus the mentally healthy individual acts *as if* his ideal were already an established fact: this is the process of idealization, fictionalization, the affirmation of a self that is not yet but is coming into being.

This way of conceiving mental health implies the partial rejection of the conventional adjustment psychology and the reactive principle on which the latter is based. Both are ways of formulating human behavior in static terms. They describe man as a passive reactor to stimuli, rather than as an active seeker of future ends. Both views are fragmentations of the essential unity of man. Stimulus-response psychology describes personality, both normal and abnormal, as the end-product of the organism's habit-systems. Adjustment psychology describes man largely in homeostatic terms. Man, they say, seeks to reduce his tension, and when he succeeds he is well-adjusted, which is to say, mentally healthy. There is no recognition in these views of the fact that while man is engaged in reducing his tensions, at his healthiest he also enjoys them, increases them under some circumstances, and finds them a viable source of creative activities in still others. Becoming is itself a form of healthy tension, whereas neurosis is a state of static and unproductive self-defense. Becoming involves potential crises, not a comfortable homeostasis. The sick individual protects himself from reality by surrendering his awareness of himself as a person in an aborted process of becoming. He regrets his past, abhors his present, and dreads his future. He is caught in a state of suspension, and he can move neither backward nor forward. Fear and boredom are the terrors of his life.

Superficial analysis of this point of view might well describe it as a form of irresponsible optimism and dogmatic prescription. It is neither. It is a description of man facing alone, but confidently, the terrible human situation of modern life. It is an *inductive diagnosis* which recognizes that there are no formulas for making choices. It asserts that in the light of his own knowledge and search, each individual must find his own criterion for choosing the life that he aspires to achieve.

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