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THE REFORMED FAITH AND MENTAL HEALTH[1]

THE study of man from God's point of view is a theological procedure. The psychological field is man from man's point of view. The information is gained by observation, but the significance of the observed facts is a matter of interpretation. The bare facts are sufficiently difficult to obtain. Correct interpretation is even more difficult. Since our interpretation of anything that touches man closely is strongly coloured by our conception of the meaning of life and of the true goals of man, it is inevitable that psychological theory should vary according to the basic philosophical assumptions of the psychologists who theorize. Students of human behaviour come closest to agreeing when they confine themselves to the study of observable phenomena and evaluate them on a pragmatic basis. When it comes to stating causes in unequivocal terms, opinions become widely divergent and even experimental evidence is subject to varieties of interpretations.

The fact that there is no fully developed school of Christian psychology may be a tribute to the restraint of Christian psychologists in refraining from premature attempts to fill the gaps in our knowledge. On the other hand, the Christian who would study this field may feel some lack of guidance in the process of collecting from the various schools of thought the data which seem to make sense.

Some of the schools are concerned with only a narrow field of human experience, while others attempt to embrace the whole of human experience, and in the process, develop their own philosophical interpretations. While none of the schools hold completely exclusive theories, they may be grouped according to the emphasis which they place on the various factors influencing personality development.

The constitutional group emphasize hereditary aspects and particularly the physical make-up of the individual; the biosocial group emphasize particularly the cultural influences to which the individual is subjected from infancy onward; the psychoanalytic group emphasize the instinctual drives which must be satisfied and which may become distorted by the restrictions imposed by the culture. The school of Psycho-

[1] A paper read at the second annual Canadian Calvinistic Conference, held at Hamilton, Ontario, in 1951.

biology is a school of catholic tests which seeks to weigh all possible factors and influences. Within each of these schools, there are differences of emphasis. Some on the one hand stress the deterministic nature of man's existence and behaviour, while others apparently believe in man's ability, through insight and education, to direct his own progress to better adjustment and better mental health. Are we to believe, with one author, that " the conduct through life of what we call our ego is essentially passive and that we are ' lived ' by unknown and uncontrollable forces ", or with the Mental Hygienists that not only personal peace, but also international peace, can be achieved by the dissemination of mental health principles?

Many orthodox Christians, including many of the Reformed Faith, believe that Psychiatry and Psychology are immoral and anti-christian. This charge can hardly be laid to the scientific observations made by psychiatrists or psychologists though it may be sustained against some of the interpretations put forward. Religious people, however, could make a more valid objection to psychiatric practice, namely, that it avoids moral and religious issues. Aside from the group who were openly anti-religious, the majority of psychiatrists and psychologists (and this includes believing Christians) have nominally taken the stand that they should not let their views on religious matters enter into the observation or treatment of people any more than would a medical or surgical specialist. They have felt that it was their business to deal with mental processes and not with goals and values. A psychiatrist might feel that his patient needed more faith, or a purpose in life, but he would not feel that he should direct him to a specific object for that faith, or to an objective for the purpose. In spite of this nominal attitude, however, it is unlikely that many psychotherapists have been able entirely to free themselves of moral judgments, or to avoid interjecting many of their own views and attitudes. There have been schools of therapy where positive suggestion and persuasion have been used in an effort to mobilize the moral forces within the individual to assist him in making positive adjustments to his situation. A few years ago these fell into disrepute. Recently, there has been a tendency to seek a rapprochement between Psychiatry and Religion and several articles have appeared in journals of psychiatry and psychology emphasizing the importance of goals and values in the adjustment of the individual. I think that this must have grown, at

least in part, from a recognition of the weakness of a therapy which could not answer the question, " Why should I struggle for better adjustment ? " nor rely on any other motivation than biological satisfaction.

Suppose then that we accept the importance of goals and values. What specific goals and values contribute most to mental health? There is no scientific answer, i.e., we have no valid statistics on which to base an answer. The best we can do is to describe what we mean by " mental health ", examine the means by which it is impaired or destroyed, and infer the means of acquiring or maintaining it.

There are many definitions of mental health, but all agree in stressing (*a*) the efficient adjustment of the individual to the world around him so that he may be secure and may obtain satisfaction; (*b*) smoothness of adjustment to other people. It might be summed up as the ability to get along in the world, satisfying our needs, with a minimum of distress to ourselves and others. More idealistic authors will add a positive note of warm relationships with other people, and achievement for the common good. Mental health may also be interpreted in terms of levels of expected maturity. Attitudes and behaviour which are compatible with good mental health in children may not be compatible with good mental health in young adults and still less in older adults. When we see adults with childish goals, childish efficiency, lack of control and poor direction of energies, we feel that they are immature and not in good mental health.

The energy for our development comes from within. Development itself may be stimulated, retarded or distorted by influences from the world around us. Freud describes the human situation as due to the interaction of three factors:

(*a*) Our own need for satisfaction and security;

(*b*) A potentially hostile environment which threatens us or thwarts our striving;

(*c*) A society evolved to protect us from the non-human environment, but which also threatens and thwarts us by making its own demands and imposing its own restrictions.[1]

The picture presented is a rather gloomy one in that primitive man is threatened and thwarted by the forces of Nature and civilized man is threatened and thwarted by social pressure.

[1] This describes the situation in which natural man finds himself. If he recognizes God at all, it is as part of the hostile environment to be appeased and bargained with.

Not only that, but he is also subject to divisive and conflicting elements within himself. It is interesting that Freud, who approached the study of man from an atheistic assumption, came so close to the Christian viewpoint as to speak of the Life (Erotic) and Death (Thanatic) forces within the individual.

He was also close to the scriptural view in his emphasis on disturbances of the inner life as causes of disordered conduct. It was partly because the religious thought of his time was placing so much emphasis on moral rules rather than inner change that he met so much opposition from ecclesiastical quarters. Much less attention was paid to the fact that his whole emphasis was on the biological aspect of man's nature, tacitly denying the spiritual aspect.

The Freudian school is not, and never has been, representative of psychiatric or psychological opinion. On the other hand, many of the Freudian ideas have been widely adopted and it is probable that those which have been so adopted are sufficiently true that they will remain a part of psychiatric thinking indefinitely.

One idea which stems from Freudian doctrine is the concept of the infant as essentially egocentric and egotistical. It seems that in the very nature of things the infant must be an egotist. Because of his limited awareness of the world around him, his sensations and functions constitute his whole world-experience for a short period after birth. As he gradually becomes more aware of other individuals about him, he becomes less self-centred in his awareness but more conscious of self as an entity in competition with others. Only gradually through the process of acculturation does he learn to limit his strivings for his own satisfaction. He accepts such limitation originally in the interests of his own security. That is, in order to feel secure with those persons on whom he is dependent he has to accept the limitations which they impose and to attempt to fulfil their expectations of him. If he accepts such limitations he gives up some pleasure of satisfaction in return for the comfort of security.[1]

[1] In a sense this is the way in which the religious life usually begins. We obey the Commandments in order to attain the security of heaven or to escape the pains of hell. This I would call the " infantile " conception of religion, not by way of being derogatory, but to indicate that it is only the initial step and does not approach in spiritual maturity the obedience motivated by love: " If ye love me ye will keep my commandments ".

The first step away from an egocentric existence is the mere recognition of the existence of other persons. The second step is the development of an outgoing response to the one who nurtured, first in response to satisfaction (e.g., feeding, cuddling), secondly in response to security. This may be thought of as a precursor, or an infantile form, of love. This out-going response in turn brings out a show of appreciation or approval from the parental figure which in turn gives pleasure to the infant. In this way the rudiments of mutual appreciation and emotional exchange are formed.

With expanding contacts the child meets more potential sources of pleasure and pain. In order to gain a certain amount of pleasure and to avoid an undue amount of pain, he has to develop a working relationship with others or a compromise. This is the basis of social morality and involves a practical, though not an intellectual, recognition of the principle that the individual must limit his demands on others or co-operate with others so that they will limit their demands on him or co-operate with him. Even a child of three may be heard to propose, " I can play with your wagon and you can play with my kiddy car ".[1]

In the process of development, as the child becomes more self-conscious he becomes more " psychological ", i.e., he begins to obtain pleasure and pain from psychological experiences as well as from biological experiences. One of the most satisfying of these appears to be the experience of exercising power over others. The will to power may be seen prominently in the trials of strength which take place in the temper tantrum stage—normally somewhere between three and five years of age. In many people this drive remains prominent in their behaviour throughout their lives.

The opposition and the demands of the environment at times enforce submission on the individual so that his life becomes a varied pattern of dominance in some situations and submission in others. For healthy development a balance

[1]Morality, in this sense of recognition of mutual rights and responsibilities, thus seems to be a purely natural development of common sense in interpersonal relations. It is, therefore, almost incredible that we fall so far short of achieving it in our society. Is it because we lack the degree of social judgment necessary to accept the principle, or the personal discipline to obey it? Certainly adequate lip service is paid to the so-called " Golden Rule " without corresponding fervour in application. And yet this principle involves nothing more than might be expected of mature, sensible pagans.

between these two attitudes is required. The child who is always permitted to dominate the situation develops a distorted personality and so does the child who is always forced to submit. This does not imply that discipline should be inconsistent but means that in any situation there is a time to allow freedom of action and a time to set limits. We have to keep in mind that we wish the child to learn to be either aggressive or submissive as is appropriate to the situation. The ability to change rôles is essential to social living.[1]

During the period of childhood a set of standards is developed within the child himself. " Good " is applied to those conditions which actually or potentially bring pleasure, " evil " to those which bring pain. From a series of experiences over a period of years the standards are incorporated as automatic responses. The set of standards which has been incorporated into the personality on the basis of the pleasure-pain principle is known in psychology as " the super-ego ", and by some is equated to the conscience. It is easily seen that the character and strength of the super-ego will have been determined by the character and intensity of the early demands and restrictions imposed on the individual, good or bad, weak or strong. Therefore it depends on the attitudes of those persons who enforced the standards in the first place. The built-in standards, or the super-ego, continue to influence the individual even after he has become more independent and adopted other, possibly even contradictory, standards of his own, so that when he acts contrary to the super-ego, even in accord with his best judgment, he may suffer distress.

Since there is both a threatening and a promising aspect to almost all life situations the child is likely to experience a feeling of ambivalence in any situation until he has learned to evaluate it in one way or the other, i.e., preponderantly dangerous or preponderantly satisfying. In the neurotic we see an inability to resolve this ambivalence. For example, the neurotic may be experiencing feelings of love, dependence and resentment toward another person all at the same time. He may resolve his conflict by denying one or more of the incompatible feelings and by repressing them or he may vacillate between these feelings, being

[1] While we link dominance with a sense of power, apparent submission in subtle ways may be used to gain power, as is seen in the sense of obligation or dependence which the apparently dominant person often feels to the apparently submissive one.

at one time very affectionate and at another openly hostile. He has to learn to accept the unacceptable but to throw his weight on the side of the emotion which he feels to be compatible with his general outlook.[1]

The person whose relationships with others tend on the whole to bring him satisfaction and security and who develops a consistent out-going response tends in time to enter into the feelings of others so that a real love develops. (Cf. 1 John iv. 19, " We love Him because He first loved us.") Sullivan defines real love as follows: " When the satisfaction or security of another person becomes as significant to one as is one's own satisfaction and security, then the state of love exists." Sullivan states that this kind of love normally begins in the pre-adolescent period. However, judged by his criterion, many people never know what real love is and many more find themselves regressing from time to time to the more infantile type.

We may summarize the requirements for the healthy development of the child as follows:

> Love, in the sense of dependable nurture, recognition and approval.
>
> Discipline, in the sense of the gradual channelling of effort into the channels which will be most rewarding in the long run, with the elimination of activities which are not acceptable, and with gradual transition to self-discipline.
>
> Opportunity to learn as many of the skills in living as possible so that the child may gain confidence, develop resourcefulness and ultimately achieve independence.

The lack of love in early life may lead to feelings of worthlessness, feelings of guilt, or, on the other hand, a narrow self-love due to the fact that the individual has never known the warm exchange of feeling in being loved and giving love. The lack of discipline means lack of direction and leaves the individual to be driven by impulses of the moment and by the ever changing influences of the environment. This is associated with inner

[1] A teen-age child may feel a strong urge to independent action and may resent he restrictions imposed by parents. At the same time because of filial love and duty he may feel guilty. He is, therefore, in a conflict within himself, but it is a natural and " normal " conflict. However, it is a conflict which must be resolved. He may attempt this by taking one side of the conflict and rebelling or by taking the other side and submitting. However, neither of these solutions bring comfort. If his parents are wise enough to allow him increasing freedom of action and at the same time to help him to assume responsibility for his actions, he will eventually achieve independence and see his relationship to his parents in a new light. Many people never value their parents properly until they have achieved their own independence.

insecurity and leads to erratic conduct. The lack of opportunity results in a person who is restricted in experience, unresourceful and fearful of new experience.

The foregoing, while far from a complete discussion, may serve to indicate how distortions in feeling, thinking and action, may arise as a result of unfavourable influences during the developmental period. It is important also to realize that differences in endowment, in inherited biological make-up, render individuals more or less capable of coping with the various vicissitudes which they meet at the various stages of development.

It has been stated, with good reason, that the two main goals of human beings are satisfaction and security. In actual experience the circumstances of life and the reactions of other people frequently block our satisfaction and threaten our security, with resulting frustrations or fears. In such situations, we may develop hostility and resentment. The lack of ability to choose an attitude or course of action because of uncertain standards or of overwhelming threats or promises brings conflicts. Fear, frustration and conflict are inevitable in human existence and, if not too intense, are actually stimulating to personality growth. However, unless there is some secure element in our life that is not going to be changed by changing circumstances, and unless we have developed ways of using our resources effectively and accepting our restrictions gracefully, we develop anxiety and experience distress. Severe anxiety is the most intolerable of human experiences and therefore our natural tendency is to develop defences against it. Most of these involve some degree of self-deception which is apparent in such manoeuvres as wishful thinking or phantasy, denial, projection, rationalization. The child's reaction to an accusation shows the incipient tendency which may become fixed in the adult, e.g., " I did not " (denial), " you did " (projection). The child may recognize these defences as deceptions but by the time he reaches adult life he may deceive even himself. Therapy often consists largely in bringing the patient to the point where he can bear to look at the situation as it really is. When he can do this, we say he has developed " insight ".

The concern of Mental Hygiene is to prevent development of such distortions of human personality as have been mentioned. The concern of Psychiatry is to correct them when they have

developed. Both are interested in the development of a healthy pattern of life either from infancy or from a " fresh start " made by an ailing adult. The goal of such development is a state which may be described by the rather vague term " maturity ". The mature man differs from the immature man in many ways, including the ability to control his impulses and to act in terms of what is best in the long run. The one outstanding characteristic of the mature man is his greater ability to get away from self-interest and to take an objective outlook. He is able to evaluate things for their own value and not just for their effect on himself. The ability to be objective makes for greater calm and better judgment since the individual is not constantly involved with personal fears and frustrations. The mature man has some conception of law and order in the universe and accepts the processes of the external world as something which he must learn to understand. He realizes that he may learn in a small way to control some of these processes and to adjust to others, but that there is no point in rebelling against " the nature of things ". He accepts the inevitable but he does not accept every event that occurs to him as being inevitable. He recognizes his own errors in adjustment but seeks to correct them rather than impotently to bemoan them or condemn himself for them. He is humble in that he is willing to face his own frailty and proneness to error and to egotism, but he has a sense of dignity in recognizing that he has a place in the scheme of things which only he can fill in his own individual way. He accepts other people as having the same essence as himself though there may be those less fortunate or more fortunate in their realizable potential and freedom from distortion.

How does one arrive at a mature outlook? It is likely that some inherit greater capacity for becoming mature than others. Then there is example, training, the " accidental " influences, and the practice of wholesome attitudes. It is unlikely that anyone ever becomes fully mature and it seems quite evident that even the most mature have their lapses from time to time. If, however, a man recognizing his own egocentricity were to seek to develop greater maturity, he might proceed by first trying to face the situation (his own nature, other people and the world about him) as it is without distorting the picture to make himself more comfortable. Then he might proceed to picture for himself a goal to be achieved. Perhaps the greatest goal that the natural man has ever set for himself is " the good

life "—self-discipline and self-realization, with the accomplishment of a maturity such as has been described above.

The importance of keeping one's eye on a goal rather than on one's own imperfect performances is borne out by studies in suggestion. A good illustration is provided by the method employed by Nicolaides, a teacher of drawing, who instructed his pupils to study the subject to be drawn so intently that they might almost feel the contours and the texture of it. Without ever taking their eyes from the subject to look at their drawing pads, they were to draw, letting their hands automatically reproduce what their eyes saw. The first attempts were scarcely recognizable but, with practice of this method, the student ultimately could represent the subject with far greater reality than would have been possible if he had carefully traced its form. Similarly, in broader spheres of life, man's conduct tends to reproduce automatically the things which have most reality to him inwardly.

This may sound to you as though man can save his own soul, psychologically speaking. Actually, from the psychological point of view, the outlook is very dark. Inherent in the Freudian theory and in other psychological theories is a profound pessimism which is expressed in the doctrine of psychological determinism. According to this theory, the life of the individual constitutes a causal series, i.e., any action at any time is determined by the whole history of the individual and even of his ancestors and by the forces playing upon him at the time. This being so, he has no choice as to his behaviour. Not even the most rigid interpretation of the doctrine of Predestination could present such a gloomy outlook. The psychologist, however, is faced with the practical fact that man must be held accountable for his actions. Therefore, he must take account of the possibility of choice in any situation. How determinism and choice can co-exist is no clearer to the psychologist than to the theologian.

The fact that man does not lift himself by his own bootstraps is borne out by man's lack of progress towards a mature outlook in spite of the fact that the principles of the good life have been taught for centuries. The explanation for this may be found in man's universal egotism which Niebuhr has equated with sin (independence of God). This appeals to me as the most reasonable psychological explanation of the doctrine of Original

Sin, for it is a characteristic which is inborn, universal and always operative.

The Scriptures insist that we must face the fact of our sinful nature—a primary principle of Mental Health. I wonder if David was not showing acquaintance with the procedure of modern depth-psychology when he prayed, " Search me and see if there be any sinful way in me ". This sounds as though he were asking God to cleanse him even of the sin of which he was not conscious.

On the other hand, one sometimes gets the impression that the adherents of the Reformed Faith are too preoccupied with the sinfulness of man. The doctrine of total depravity has meant to some that everything in man is totally evil—his affections, his intelligence, his very body. Yet, if that man is converted, though his affections may have a different object and his intelligence and his body may be used for different purposes, they may have shown no change in their mode of functioning.[1] When St. Paul states, " In my flesh there dwelleth no good ", I wonder if he is not using good in the positive sense, that is, there is absence of good, rather than necessarily presence of evil. It seems to me that we have to think of the various aspects of the personality aside from the central self as non-moral. If the central self is evil, all will be evil. If the central self is good, all will be good.

In this life, however, the central self is never totally good (i.e., free from egotism) and what good there is, is never totally in control. That is why complete maturity and complete sanctification are never attained. An appreciation of this fact would do much to correct the perfectionism which is all too common and which is devastating to mental health. By perfectionism, I do not mean a desire to be perfect but an inner demand for immediate perfection in every detail. Such a state of mind cannot fail to cause constant and profound distress. It is as, one author has put it, an attempt " to play God ". People who suffer from this malady are chronic doubters. They leave nothing to the grace of God but must demonstrate to themselves their acceptability. It is interesting that when these characteristics develop to the degree that the individual must come for psychiatric help, the symptoms are those of obsessions

[1] I am not now considering the probability that even mental and physical function may improve with improved spiritual health.

and compulsions, very suggestive of the rituals employed to expiate the gods.

A sense of imperfection may give rise to guilt. The feeling of guilt appears to be a normal human experience and people who appear to be incapable of feeling guilt are described as psychopathic personalities. However, there is a difference between healthy guilt and pathological guilt. The former is the normal reaction to a known breach of standards. The latter is a haunting uneasiness which is not related to any particular misdemeanour and for which the sufferer can ascribe no known cause.[1] In many cases it has been attributed to a chronic feeling of parental disapproval in childhood or to a feeling of separation from the parent for which, in some way, the child felt responsible. One wonders how much of the uneasiness of mankind may be attributable to the unconscious sense of separation from the Heavenly Father.

The remedy for guilt when there has been a real offence is forgiveness and reconciliation. In some cases which one sees clinically, however, the sense of guilt appears to have arisen from a misapprehension of the situation and in some way or other the person must be made to feel acceptable.

When the problem of guilt in relation to God is solved, the Christian will find a great source of strength in the doctrine of the Sovereignty of God. This is the ultimate security. Any of the sources of security which are available to man outside of a religious faith are susceptible to change—health, wealth, friends, reputation. The highest source of security available to the pagan is the cultivation of his own character, but even this has its limitations. Under a stress which overwhelms him, man looks for absolute assurance of some kind and without faith, and particularly faith in an absolutely reliable person, he cannot get it.

My own belief in God as a Person who has a personal relationship with each believer is strengthened by what I know of psychology. It is generally accepted that the field of interpersonal relationships is the most important, and in fact, the entire field of interest in the study of human behaviour. It seems unlikely then that the highest human experience could be other than in a Supreme Interpersonal relationship.

[1] The sufferer in an attempt to explain the feeling may ascribe it to a cause which is either not a real cause or not an adequate cause.

I have mentioned before that the focus of attention is an important factor in changing character. The Reformed Faith is avowedly God-centred. If it has any transforming power, it owes it to this fact. I venture to suggest that the psychological mechanism employed by the Holy Spirit in the process of sanctification is similar to that described above. For confirmation, I turn again to St. Paul: " Beholding as in a glass the glory of the Lord, we are transformed into His image from glory to glory ".

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