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Depth Psychology, Ethics and Mental Therapy

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The present historical moment offers us the possibility of meditating upon certain aspects of contemporary man in crisis. Unprecedented economic prosperity has affected our way of living, our hierarchy of values, and the ethical and religious concepts of the past. The present prosperity, however, has not brought us happiness. Karl Menninger, the famous American psychiatrist, observes that while it appeared that everything was going along well, that progress was a daily fact, the modern people who have everything materially speaking have finally realized that they are not happy. "Everything was succeeding for a while — progress was the order of the day. But now the new gods seem to have failed us, while the old God is said (by some) to be dead. Things are all wrong."¹ It would be impossible to discover all the factors which cause our unhappiness; we are going to explore simply a few observations about depth psychology which show how one's ethical orientation affects mental health and well-being.

It is admirable to observe the teleology existing in biology, in living organisms. For example, when an infection attacks an organism, the whole living being reacts to the danger, producing antibodies whose only goal is to destroy the bacteria or virus which have caused the infection. This mechanism of defense is automatic and efficient, and its goal is obvious: the good of the whole.

This also happens in the psychic human order, for there exists in man an automatic vital mechanism which compensates for the errors committed in the sphere of the conscious realm. This compensatory mechanism is the unconscious, which warns consciousness of its wrong psychic attitude. For example, if the individual is too introverted, the dreams coming from the unconscious will advise him to try to be more social and extroverted. In the case of a deviant conscience, the uncon-

scious reacts automatically, tormenting the individual and showing him that something is wrong. This unconscious function reveals itself in dreams, organic infections, anguish, anxiety, guilt, self-punishment, loneliness, terror, ulcers, depressions, and many other manifestations well-known to depth psychology. Depth psychology reveals that the mental health of man is deeply affected by the ethical attitude of his mind, and that the unconscious reacts spontaneously in a compensatory way, warning the individual of wrong conscious moral attitudes — a healthy warning, similar to fever and pain with physical illness. The consequences of a bad conscience appear sooner or later in life, disturbing the peace and mental life of the individual. Let us illustrate this phenomenon with a few examples taken from current literature.

Carl Jung reports the following case: "A lady came to my office. What she had to communicate to me was a confession; some twenty years ago she had poisoned her best friend because she wanted to marry the friend's husband. She had thought that if the murder was not discovered, it would not disturb her. She wanted to marry the husband, and the simplest way was to eliminate her friend. Moral considerations were of no importance to her, she thought. The consequences? She had in fact married the man, but he died soon afterward, relatively young. During the following years a number of strange things happened. The daughter of this marriage endeavored to get away from her as soon as she was grown up. She married young and vanished from view, drew farther and farther away, and ultimately the mother lost all contact with her. This lady was a passionate horsewoman and owned several riding horses of which she was extremely fond. One day she discovered that the horses were beginning to grow nervous under her. Finally she had to give up riding. Thereafter she clung to her dogs. She owned a beautiful wolfhound to which she was greatly attached. As chance would have it, this very dog was stricken with paralysis. With that, her cup was full; she felt that she was morally done for. She had to confess, and for this purpose she came to me. She was a murderess, but on top of that she had also murdered herself. For one who commits such a crime destroys his own soul. The murderer has already passed sentence on himself. . . . Sometimes it seems as if even the animals and plants 'know' it."²

Fromm Describes Case

Erich Fromm describes the case of one of his patients who had an irresistible impulse to drink more and more excessively. He was an intelligent man, aggressive, enjoying economic and social success, who devoted all his energies to making money — seemingly the only goal of his life. Although he had many friends, he hated himself and every-

body else around him. He began to drink as a way of escaping and overcoming strong inferiority feelings that overcame him on occasion. The real problem was not his drinking but his failure as a human being. No person can live without love, without feeling inferiority and self-hatred: "From the latter standpoint we do not look at the symptoms as an enemy to be defeated, but on the contrary at the friend that points to us that something is wrong. The patient, however, unconsciously, is striving for a more humane way of living. His problem is not his drinking but his moral failure."³

A patient of Karl Menninger was earning more than a million dollars a year, but had attempted suicide. Life, he said, no longer held anything of interest for him, and he had no idea what to do with his money. "I don't need it, but I can't bear to give any away. So I decided to kill myself."⁴ This man could not be cured of avarice, traditionally a capital sin. And Menninger laments: "The 'simple' life with its privations has been replaced with a complex life with many frustrations."⁵

John Sanford narrates the case of a young man who was sick and lived in terror, until the day he decided to make an honest confession and ask for pardon from those offended. "With spiritual courage he set his personal relationship straight, and made his peace with those involved. Almost immediately his physical condition improved markedly."⁶

The same psychologist tells of the case of a woman who consulted him because of a severe depression and psychogenic symptoms, which were not physical in origin. At one time she had engaged in certain sexual practices, and she had reassured herself that times had changed and God didn't really hold people guilty any more for such things. In spite of her rationalization, dream analysis manifested unmistakable allusions to the forbidden experiences. Only when she accepted the voice of the unconscious, and ceased these practices was this woman relieved of the depression and psychogenic symptoms: "It was her dreams which revealed to her that her unconscious refused to tolerate what had happened and so tried to force her to deal with herself."⁷

Francis MacNutt tells of many cases of physical and mental illnesses related to the moral attitude of the persons affected, especially regarding their resentment, bitterness and hatred. For example, he mentions the case of a young woman who came up to him after repentance service and said that a pylonidal cyst had been instantly healed at the moment she was able to repent of a long-standing grudge.⁸ He also emphasizes the importance of our relationship with the parents. If there is a lack of love between the child and one or the other parent, chances are the person will carry that hurt on into adult life, which is what depth psychology teaches. "I remember once pray-

ing for a woman whose complaint was that her inner life was always bleak and boring, even though her professional life was in itself full and exciting. When we finally found what had caused her to shut off the flow of life it was an incident that happened when she was ten years old."⁹

These examples, among many others, show the relation between the moral attitude of individuals and their mental and even physical health. There seems to be a natural law which cannot be transgressed with impunity. Fromm says: "The psychoanalyst is the physician of the soul. This view is based on the premise that there are immutable laws inherent in human nature and human functioning which operate in any given culture. These laws cannot be violated without serious damage of personality. If anyone violates his moral and intellectual integrity he weakens or even paralyzes his total personality. He is unhappy and suffers."¹⁰ And Jung: "Morality was not brought down on tables of stone from Sinai and imposed on the people, but it is a function of the human soul, as old as humanity itself. Morality is not imposed from outside; we have it in ourselves from the start — not the law, but our moral nature without which the collective life of human society would be impossible. That is why morality is found at all levels of society. It is the instinctual regulator of action which also governs the collective life of the herd."¹¹

The fact that "things are all wrong" — that we are not happy — can be interpreted, at least in part, as a compensatory reaction of the unconscious which is warning us of our moral failure. Pain and fever are also the symptoms of illness; they are useful signals of a struggle for health. This is the case with the "disease of bad conscience" as Igor Caruso calls some neuroses: "The neurotic symptom represents punishment and exhortation in a conflict situation of conscience. . . . This is where the positive aspect of neurotic symptom is revealed, the aspect which, like an expiation, punishes the neurotic for this irreconcilable desire and exhorts him to find a solution."¹² In many instances an intimate connection seems to exist between mental health and moral integrity.

Mental Health Therapy and Ethics

The goal of depth psychology is mental health. Therapy must depend upon a technique, but the technique in its turn must depend upon a philosophy of life, which should permeate that technique. For Caruso, the "Christ archetype" is the central factor in any psychotherapy. In his search for a redeemer, the neurotic meets his therapist.¹³ "The longing for redemption is based on an eschatological, messianic archetype. Unless the analyst in some way answers to this longing, his work would be the confirmation of a total illusion, a temptation to

total neurosis and thus anything but wholesome. . . . These links between sanity and redemption are particularly intimate where it is a question of freeing a delusion or 'life-heresy'; for true self-knowledge is like a spiritual renaissance or even resurrection." 14

Hence the neurosis can be treated only by a therapy which can see the spiritual core behind psycho-physical signs and symptoms. This presupposes a restoration of the hierarchy of values which modern man has turned upside down. For if our individuality is regarded as the highest value, this will inevitably result in a philosophy dominated by private feelings. "Through the inflation of the ego relative values are given an absolute status. That is the very heresy of life. . . . It has metaphysical, ethical, and biological aspects. Just as heresy in religion extends beyond its religious significance to all aspects of life, the 'life heresy' implicit in neurosis is not just an aberration as it were of 'hygiene' but also of ethics and metaphysics." 15 For Caruso, therapy and mental health depend upon ethics whose function is to provide a sound hierarchical system of values.

Menninger explains how the moral problem currently is usually solved, namely by projection, denial, symptom formation, ritualistic undoing and so forth. All these manifestations are typical manifestations of neuroses and the solutions neurotic solutions. The only permanent solution is to admit the existence of sin, to make atonement and to change our hearts. The wages of some sins are death, and they have been forgotten and repressed into the unconscious. The aim of therapy is to bring to mind the previously repressed offenses along with their guilt feelings, and to try to solve them in a rational and conscious way, but never to keep the conflict and the guilt in the unconscious. 16

Menninger then adds: "Hence sin is the only hopeful view. The present world miasma and depression are partly the result of our self-induced conviction that since sin has ceased to be, only neurotics need to be treated and the criminal punished. The rest may stand around and read the newspaper. . . . As it is, vague, amorphous evil appears all about us, and when this or that awful thing is happening and this terrible thing goes on and the wretched circumstance has developed, and yet, withal, when no one is responsible, when no one is guilty, no moral questions are asked, when there is in short, just nothing to do, we sink to despairing helplessness. We wait from day to day for improvement, expectantly but not hopefully." 17 In other words, only if we accept sin and moral responsibility will "hope . . . return to the world with it." 18

Jung as a therapist was interested in the growth of the personalities of his patients. Becoming a "whole is a function of 'individuation,' which is the process by which we achieved the purpose of life. Hence, the science of the psyche must embrace the whole man. One cannot treat the psyche without touching on man and life as a whole. The

more 'psychological' a condition is, the greater its complexity and the more it relates to the whole of life." 19 Jung says that nobody can conceive the moral, ethical, philosophical, and religious conflicts that crop up at the problem of neurosis: the facts surpass the imagination. 20

Start of Individuation

The process of individuation, Jung says, invariably starts when the individual becomes conscious of the "shadow." Everybody carries a "shadow" because not everything in man is perfect and good. But usually the educated man tries to repress the shadow and thereby forces it into revolt. For the more he represses his shadow, the worse it gets; the less conscious a man is of his shadow, the blacker and denser the shadow becomes. 21 If the shadow is recognized, there is always a possibility of correction; if it is repressed, there is no possibility; on the contrary, it is liable to burst forth suddenly in a moment of awareness, upsetting the ego and breeding neurosis. 22

Mental therapy requires much more than a mere intellectual confrontation with the shadow, a pure descriptive speculative analysis of its nature; it requires a vital, prudent, and courageous approach to its evils, which demands humility, fortitude, patience, and confession. By confession we throw ourselves into the arms of humanity again, and are freed at last from the burden of moral exile. 23

When there is resentment (or even worse, hatred) at the root of neurosis, then the tormented soul can only find its cure through forgiving and forgetting. "Healing may be called a religious problem. In the sphere of the social or natural relations, the state of suffering may be civil war, and this state is to be cured by the Christian virtue of forgiveness and love of one's enemy. That which we recommend, with the conviction of good Christians, as applicable to external situations, we must also apply inwardly in the treatment of neurosis." 24

Jung observes that pride and egoism are the causes of many neuroses. Consequently, generosity, humility and boundless love are required to oppose them. For example, he tells of a neurotic man about thirty, very clever and intelligent, who could not understand why he was not cured. "Please, tell me what it is I have overlooked or I am still repressing." Actually what he had overlooked was to mention that he was spending the winter in St. Moritz, and the summer in Nice, at the expense of a modest woman who saved the money by stinting herself, naturally in the hope of a later marriage. 'Don't you think,' I asked, 'that the fact that you are financially supported by this woman might be one of the chief reasons why you are not cured?' . . . He was one of many who believe that morals have nothing to do with neurosis and that sinning on purpose is not sinning at all, because it can be intellectualized out of existence. . . . The power of reason, however,

cannot violate the feeling values.”²⁵ It is obvious that in this case the only possible therapy was a revamping of the patient’s ethical viewpoint, followed by a new pattern of behavior more in accord with healthy moral principles.

Many functional neuroses, Hobart Mowrer asserts, are indications of a hidden history of serious misconduct which had not been adequately acknowledged, atoned for, propitiated, or otherwise canceled out. “And if this be so, then confession, expiation, and a new life in Christ (or some equivalent conversion) have a practical pertinence which far exceeds the boundaries behind which some theologians have attempted to hold them.”²⁶

To summarize: Depth psychology has discovered, *a posteriori*, through clinical experience, the importance of the moral integrity of man. The lack of psychic, of mental health, are more often than we believe consequences of sin, of a wrong conscience, or of a false hierarchy of values. The restoration of true mental health not only demands a technique, but also a *metanoia*, the “change of heart” or “re-birth.” Therapy and mental health are intimately connected with ethics and even religion. Psychiatrists cannot ignore ethics, nor can ethics disregard depth psychology.

Summary

The connection between mental health and the moral integrity of man is often disregarded by philosophers devoted to the study of ethics, by ministers, and by priests. Depth psychology, however, is manifesting to the philosopher the intimate relation between morality and mental health — between the reaction of the unconscious to the transgressions of the moral order by man. First, we illustrate these relations by including concrete examples taken from the literature of depth psychology. Next, we analyze the connection between mental therapy and the ethical dimension of man. The restoration of true mental health not only demands a technique, but also a *metanoia*, the change of heart or rebirth.

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9. *Ibid.*, p. 187. *Cf.* p. 186. MacNutt says that the more he prays with people for healing the more he discovers the close interrelation between all forms of healing. What he realized with increased intensity is that: “1) Physical healing often requires first a forgiveness of sin or an inner healing; 2) The most important repentance is of bitterness and resentment, sins which Christians often do not recognize as sins in themselves” (pp. 176-177).
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