The Birth and Death of Meaning

An Interdisciplinary Perspective on the Problem of Man

Second Edition

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The Free Press, New York
COLLIER-MACMILLAN LIMITED, LONDON

Printed in the United States of America

The Free Press
A DIVISION OF THE MACMILLAN COMPANY
866 Third Avenue, New York, New York 10022

Collier-Macmillan Canada Ltd., Toronto, Ontario

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 70-156837

printing number
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

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conflicts (see Becker, 1969). And perhaps this is why Kafka chills us as much as Freud: if we take what is durable in the work of the two men we can understand how simple, how inevitable, how peculiarly human and tragic, is the dispossession of man.[2]

Chapter Seven

SELF-ESTEEM

The Dominant Motive of Man

"The supreme law [of life] is this: the sense of worth of the self shall not be allowed to be diminished."

ALFRED ADLER
(*in Ansbacher, 1946, p. 358*)

WE have taken our story of man's humanity step by step and are now ready to fit the central piece of the puzzle into place. We saw that the weakest part of Freud's theory was that he did not explain the nature of conscience, *what* people feel guilty about; but rather he gave us a masterful analysis of the mechanism of the implantation of conscience: of how children learn their sense of right and wrong, and how it plagues them throughout life. In a word, Freud failed to explain satisfactorily human *motives*. Whenever psychoanalysts talked about motives they seemed most fallible: people couldn't really be urged on by what psychoanalysts said drove them—it was too grotesque and far-fetched in most cases. No matter how well the psychoanalytic interpretations seemed to hold together, people were just not baboons; and even though they entirely lacked self-knowledge, they felt lingering doubts about psychoanalytic interpretations of their deeper desires. Psychoanalysts, of course, seized upon this rebellion as an example of denial based on repression: the patient did not want to admit what was true, precisely because the truth about him-

self was too awful. And so it went, and still goes, in large part, in "orthodox" Freudian analysis. And patients are still being rendered imbecilic by the psychoanalytic vocabulary of "penis envy," "primary incest wishes," "the trauma of the primal scene," and so on. Or in some cases, perhaps we could more generously say that patients are being kept from going crazy by being fetishized on sexual problems, and accepting orthodox Freudianism as divine law. Then, at least, they don't have to worry about the meaning of their lives.

But if Freud was wrong about motives it was because he was wrong about biological instincts. And if instincts do not drive man, what then, does? The main reason that the great Alfred Adler is still contemporary is that he broke with Freud very early on this problem, when he very clearly saw and strongly proclaimed that the basic law of human life is the urge to self-esteem. Once you make this break with Freud, stand up for it openly, and build your theories and clinical interpretations around it, a whole new world of understanding opens up to you. After all, you have laid bare man's *motive*, which is what Freud himself set out to do. This is why the clinical theories of Adler, as well as Sullivan, Rank, Fromm, Horney, and a growing number of young and undogmatic Freudians, give us such rich and true explanations of what really makes people act the way they do—what they are *really* upset about.

Self-esteem, as the psychoanalysts say, begins for the child with the first infusion of mother's milk, of warm support and nourishment. The child feels that all is right in his world, and radiates a sense of warm satisfaction. As the ego grows in mastery and develops adroit defenses against anxiety, the child can count on a fairly stable environment that responds to his wishes and that grants him a steady state of well being. After all, he has shaped himself into the very person who can take for granted continued parental approval and support, because he has largely tailored his action and desires to suit their wishes. Once he has done this, the problem of maintaining self-esteem is also solved. Self-esteem becomes the child's feeling of self-

warmth that all's right in his action world. It is an inner self-righteousness that arms the individual against anxiety. We must understand it, then, as a *natural systemic continuation* of the early ego efforts to handle anxiety; it is the durational extension of an effective anxiety-buffer. We can then see that the seemingly trite words "self-esteem" are at *the very core of human adaptation.* They do not represent an extra self-indulgence, or a mere vanity, but a matter of life and death. The qualitative feeling of self-value is the basic predicate for human action, precisely because it epitomizes the whole development of the ego.

This cannot be overemphasized. It permits us to take the final step in understanding the experience of socialization: the entire early training period of the child is one in which he learns to *switch modes* of maintaining self-esteem. The child learns painfully that he cannot earn parental approval, or self-esteem, by continuing to express himself with his body. He finds that he has to conduct himself according to symbolic codes of behavior in order to be accepted and supported. In other words, his vital sentiment of self-value no longer derives from the mother's milk, but from the mother's mouth. *It comes to be derived from symbols.* Self-esteem no longer takes root in the biological, but in the internalized social rules for behavior. The change is momentous because of what is implicit in it: the child's basic sense of self-value has been largely *artificialized.* His feeling of human worth has become largely a linguistic contrivance. And it is exactly at this point that we deem that he has been socialized or humanized! He has become the only animal in nature who vitally depends on a symbolic constitution of his worth.

Once this has been achieved the rest of the person's entire life becomes animated by the artificial symbolism of self-worth; almost all his time is devoted to the protection, maintenance, and aggrandizement of the symbolic edifice of his self-esteem. At first he nourishes it in the appraisal of his playmates, and usually at this time it depends entirely on his physical and athletic prowess—overt qualities that other chil-

dren easily recognize and admire, especially fearlessness. Later it may depend on earning good grades in school, on dressing well, on dancing expertly at the school prom, and so on. Finally, in the twenties one comes to earn his self-esteem by performing in the roles that society provides: doctor, lawyer, corporation man, teacher, engineer, and so on. Then we get our vital sense of inner worth by repeating "I am a good doctor . . . lawyer . . . engineer . . . Look at the operation I performed, the business deal I pulled off, the way that beautiful girl looks at me . . ." and so on. Almost all of one's inner life,—when he is not absorbed in some active task, is a traffic in images of self-worth.

The Inner-Newsreel

If our first reaction is to shrug at this as an exaggeration, let us try to be honest and admit to ourselves what we do most of the time. We run what I like to call an "inner-newsreel" that passes in constant review the symbols that give self-esteem, make us feel important and good. We are constantly testing and rehearsing whether we *really* are somebody, in a scenario where the most minor events are recorded, and the most subtle gradations assume an immense importance. After all, the self-esteem is symbolic, and the main characteristic of symbols is that they cut reality very fine. Anthony Quinn in his great role in *Requiem for a Heavyweight* earned his inner sense of self-value by constantly reminding himself and others that he was "*fifth*-ranking contender for the heavyweight crown." This made him really *somebody*, gave him continual nourishment, allowed him to hold his head high in the shabbiest circumstances. Academic intellectuals have their own fine gradations of worth: a six-hour teaching load, with *no* undergraduate teaching, in an Ivy-League school; versus a three-hour teaching load, with only *one* undergraduate course, in an *almost* Ivy-League school. How these balance in the scale of self-worth can cause agonizing life decisions.

Everyone runs the inner-newsreel, even if it does not record the same symbolic events. Always it passes in review the peculiar symbols of one's choice that give him a warm feeling about himself: the girl he seduced, the money he made, the picture he directed, the book he published, the shrewd put-down at the cocktail party, the smooth ordering from the menu in the chic restaurant, the beautifully executed piano suite—and so on and on. All day long we pass these images in review, and most of us even in our sleep. The difference is that while we are awake we have some control over the scenario. When the newsreel records a negative image—the slip-of-the-tongue, the loss of money, the bungled seduction, the bad car purchase, the lousy book—we immediately counter the negative image with a positive one, to try to get our self-esteem in balance and onto the favorable side. But while we are asleep the ego is not working, it has no conscious control over the messages we send to ourselves about our sense of worth. Our deeper experience may have on record that we really feel worthless, helpless, dependent, mediocre, inadequate, finite: this is our unconscious speaking, and when the ego cannot oppose any positive images to counteract these negative ones, we have the nightmare, the terrible revelation of our basic uselessness.

This balancing of negative and positive images of self-worth begins very early. One youngster, who did not have the habit of remaining passive in the face of experience, was taken to see a movie that had creatures in it that proved to be somewhat overwhelming for him. He could not stay in the theatre, and rushed out, remarking that his sister "wants to see" him. He had obviously gotten a total negative sensation about himself, and was now eager to balance this weak feeling with the strong sense of self he got when being viewed with approval by his younger sister. He was already, at the age of three, a budding *metteur-en-scène*. Similarly, his sister, when manipulated too much by a group of older children, would often break away, remarking that the (family) dog "wants to watch

me." It is well known that family pets often give youngsters the warm sense of self that their peers, or even their parents, fail to give them.

When we think about the terror of the nightmare, or the simple disgust of a bad dream, with its confused and degrading images of ourselves, we can see that something really important is at stake here. The scenario of self-value is not an idle film hobby. The basic question the person wants to ask and answer is "Who am I?" "What is the meaning of my life?" "What value does it have?" And we can only get answers to these questions by reviewing our relationships to others, what we do to others and for others, and what kind of response we get from them. Self-esteem depends on our social role, and our inner-newsreel is always packed with faces—it is rarely a nature documentary. Even holy men who withdraw for years of spiritual development, come back into the fold of society to earn recognition for their powers. Nietzsche said of Schopenhauer that he was a model for all men because he could work in isolation and care nothing for the plaudits of the human market-place. The implication is that he had his sense of value securely embedded in himself and his own idea of what his work was worth. Yet this same Schopenhauer spent his lonely life scanning the footnotes of learned journals to see whether there was ever going to be recognition of his work.

That is why everyone is always bothering everyone else for a recognition of their basic value: "See how great I am, how important, how unique, how good—you see, you notice it, you admit it?" We either occasionally ask it outright or continually act it, and even the most self-effacing person is nevertheless continually putting the question: "Do you value *me?*" (I think here of Herman Melville's great story, "Bartleby the Scrivener".) The anthropologist Robert Lowie once said that primitive man was a natural peacock, so open was he in self-display and self-glorification. But we play the same game, only not as openly. Our entire life is a harangue to others to establish ourselves as peacocks, if only on furtive and private inner-newsreel images. Again the brilliant writer teaches us

the scientific truth, as did James Thurber in "The Secret Life of Walter Mitty."

The Psychoanalytic Characterology

If the reader gets a feeling of pathos in all this, it is only logical: after all the humanization process is one in which we exchange a natural, animal sense of our basic worth, for a contrived, symbolic one. Then we are constantly forced to harangue others to establish who we are, because we no longer belong to ourselves. Our character has become social. Alfred Adler saw with beautiful clarity that the basic process in the formation of character was the child's need to *be somebody* in the symbolic world, since physically, nature had put him into an impossible position. He is faced with the anxieties of his own life and experience, as well as the need to accommodate to the superior powers of his trainers; and from all this somehow to salvage a sense of superiority and confidence. And how can he do this, except by choosing a symbolic-action system in which to earn his feeling of basic worth? Some people work out their urge to superiority by plying their physical and sexual attractiveness—what the psychoanalysts call the "Don Juan" character. Others work it out by the superiority of their minds; others by being generous and helpful; others by making superior things, or money, or playing beautiful music, or being an unusual mimic and joke teller; some work it out by being devoted slaves: "I am a locus of real value because I serve the great man." Others serve the corporation to get the same feeling, and some serve the war-machines. And so on, and on. The great variation in character is one of the fascinations and plagues of life: it makes our world infinitely rich, and yet we rarely understand what the person next to us really wants, what kind of message he is addressing to us, what kind of confirmation we can give him of his self-worth. This is the problem of our most intimate lives—our friendships and our marriages: we are thrown against people who have very unique ways of deriving their self-esteem, and we never

quite understand what they really want, what's bothering them; we don't even know what special inner-newsreel they are running. On the rare occasion that we make a breakthrough and communicate about these things, we are usually shocked by how finely they have sliced their perceptions of reality: "Is *that* what is bothering you?"

The reason scenarios of self-esteem are so opaque even in our closest relationships is embarrassingly simple: we ourselves are largely ignorant of our own life-style, our way of seeking and earning self-esteem. Each of us has a more-or-less unique life-style, formed during our early training. And this formation is largely a process of conditioning that begins even before we learn symbols, it is pre-symbolic. As a result, we have no way of getting on top of this process of conditioning, no way to grasp it because we did not as children know what was happening to us. The child continually loses battles he does not understand. The psychoanalytic characterology is the study of the efforts that the child makes to salvage an intact self-esteem from this confusion. These efforts become his "mode of being in the world."

Now, if this mode of being were simply a matter of finding out what symbol-system one had unwittingly chosen in order to get on top of all the burdens of his early situation, we could all fairly easily get self-knowledge. But the sense of right and wrong, our way of perceiving the world, our feelings for it and for who we are, are not a "mental" matter—they are largely a total organismic matter, as Dewey saw long ago, and as Frederick Perls has recently reminded us. We earn our early self-esteem not actively but in large part passively, by having our action blocked and re-oriented to the parents' pleasure. This is what triggers the process of introjection and appersonization, as we saw in Chapter Four: we take large parts of our parents' images and commands into our own self—without, as Perls so well insisted, "digesting" them, making them an integral part of ourselves that responds to our honest control. As a result, the self is largely a confusion of insides, outsides, boundaries, alien objects, and it is de-centered and split off

from the body in some measure. Also, as we noted in Chapter Three, some children are allowed to be more active, others are made to be largely passive: this passivity results in aggravating the self-body dualism in some people. What we call our character, then, is a peculiar configuration of self-other and self-body relationships. The thing that makes the study of character so fascinating and so difficult is that it is largely a matter of sorting out bizarre collages. These are so confused and so personal in the weight of their meanings and symbolisms that it is impossible to do a complete decoding. Only the person himself can really know what experience means to him, only he can feel the quality of his perceptions; and even he cannot know, because these matters are in large part pre-symbolic, unconscious. That is why analysis, and self-analysis if one wants to work at it, is a task for more than one lifetime—it can really never be finished. What makes the psychoanalytic corpus so compelling from a scientific point of view is that it has mastered the general problem of character by finding recurrent types, gross groupings into which everyone more-or-less fits: oral-aggressive, oral-passive, anal-sadistic, phallic-narcissistic, and so on. In fact, these groupings are universal because there is a limited spectrum of variation in self-worlds, a limited spectrum of self-body differentiation and confusion, and a limited number of ways we can get satisfaction from others. We can rarely know exactly the unique character a given person has, but his mode of earning self-esteem as a way of keeping action moving out of the confusion of the early training period, is more or less identifiable in terms of the basic psychoanalytic characterology.

If we merge it with the characterology developed by Dilthey's followers, the modern existentialists, and the data of anthropology, we have a fairly complete cosmography of the inner worlds of men. This is an immense scientific achievement; I daresay that it has a sophistication equal to that of subatomic theory in physics, and perhaps an even greater difficulty. The Nobel people have never rewarded the great innovators in the study of human character, and perhaps rightly

so: so far there is no proof that this has anything to do with the progress of man on this planet; and if most people knew these things about themselves it would probably throw whole nations into chaos. Witness the treatment that the brilliant modern student of character, Erich Fromm, receives at the hands of *Time Magazine* which dismisses him with the epithet "marxist-culture quack." Better to let the matter rest on the fringes of "respectable" science.

Chapter Eight

CULTURE AND PERSONALITY

The Standardization of the Self-Esteem

"We are born to action; and whatever is capable of suggesting and guiding action has power over us from the first."

CHARLES HORTON COOLEY

". . . mankind's common instinct for reality . . . has always held the world to be essentially a theatre for heroism."

WILLIAM JAMES

IF there were any doubt that self-esteem is the dominant motive of man, there would be one sure way to dispel it; and that would be by showing that when people do not have self-esteem they cannot act, they break down. And this is exactly what we learn from clinical data, from the theory of the psychoses, as well as from anthropology. When the inner-newsreel begins to run consistently negative images of one's worth, the person gives up. We see this clearly in depressive withdrawals and schizophrenic breakdowns. I remember one psychiatric patient who had passed his life in review and concluded that he had been "kidding himself" all along, that he really was nobody. The psychiatric resident did not take this symbolic balance-sheet seriously enough, and considered it merely self-indulgent, pessimistic ruminations—until the patient acted on his self-appraisal and leaped from a sixth-story window. We can never really know when the *metteur-*