EVOLUTION OF SOCIAL PSYCHIATRY: IMPACT ON CIVILIZATION

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The collective mind of mankind is motivated by many forces, not the least of these the realities of his temporal world. Reviewing the events of the centuries of recorded history we must admit that there has gradually evolved a greater compassion for the individual person. Compassion has gradually spread from a few select persons, an elite class, to a progressively larger group of people. The modern concern for freedom and The Freedoms, and for human rights are examples of this trend. Laws and judicial systems have been created to ensure that fairness will prevail in the examination and trial of those accused of crimes. The composite thrust of these and other institutional efforts has been toward improving the lot of all of the people on this earth.

A slow and sometimes not so steady progress of the compassionate forces is often overshadowed by individual, national and supranational violence. The current potential for the violent destruction of every person on earth either instantaneously or after long periods of agony and suffering is enough to unsettle even the most stoic among us. Nuclear holocaust is a real possibility anywhere in the world today.

Side by side with the advances in humanitarianism the people of recorded history have experienced the advances of scientific research and methods. The latter have given us the ability to destroy ourselves. Perhaps
they have not developed side by side with the humanitarianism, perhaps it is more correct to observe that they have clearly leaped ahead of those social behaviors of man which seek to ameliorate his psychic and somatic diseases and other disruptive behaviors.

Concern for the psyche and soul of man is not new to humanity. It has existed for several thousand years at least. Many of the institutions of society have been concerned with the disease of people. Political, religious, educational and scientific including the medical profession to name a few, have devoted no small portion of their efforts in this direction. Many persons in each successive generation and in every one of the world's countries struggle and devote their lives to these concerns. Progress seems to come very slowly. Yet I believe we can describe an evolution, a significant breakthrough in the development of man's capacity to understand himself. This development of increased understanding is a product of the scientific method.

The 19th century saw the emergence of science as a discipline and this could no longer be ignored. Prior to that time, religion and philosophy vied for the most cherished position as holder of the fundamental answers for man. Science adheres to conclusions that are drawn from verified experiment as opposed to conjecture, opinion or brief. The experiments of many sciences can be conducted in a relatively short time frame. Experiments involving the social behavior of man, psychosocial experiments may require generations of time. Nevertheless, such experiments can be scientific.

Man has always struggled to describe himself. To explain and predict for himself why he does what he does. Mental behavior is central to our objective understanding of ourselves. Poets and playwrites in metaphor and prose have tapped both the emotional and the intellectual aspects of man's mentality. With nothing but his hands, sticks and rocks, man attacked, conquered and outwitted other species. His nourishment and his safety were dependent upon these skills. The search for objective awareness about the mentality of man has led to the creation of psychoanalysis and dynamic psychiatry. The tiger and the cobra - not even smallpox remains and polio and measles could be destroyed also - so many of man's animal, insect and bacterial enemies have been or could be eliminated - yet man is perhaps now in greater danger of extinction than ever before. If not nuclear war then surely overpopulation could destroy whatever is civilized among the world's societies.