The Woman: An Anthropological View

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The development of anthropologic medicine from psychophysical roots on the one hand, and from psychoanalytical roots on the other hand, took place here in central Europe. This development occurred over a long period of time and was marked by many setbacks and obstacles. The beginnings lie actually in the writings of Hippocrates and Plato, who occupied themselves more with the relationship between Psyche and Soma than did Morgagnie, Virchow or even today’s “School of Medical Thought”.

Psychophysics is particularly dominated by the principle of stimulus and reaction. Pavlov and his Epigons see in the reflex an integrated specific event, which is crucial in determining the somatic result of a psychic event. Psychophysics, however, remains elemental. It has not freed itself form the principle of mechanical causality. Only the methodologically tangible facets have been used as parameters. The critical, natural-scientific method must ignore what cannot be described by it (or perceived by it).

A new plateau was achieved, when important determinants were found in the “living” organism. A phenomenological conception appeared in which the constitution (i.e. of an individual) was no longer considered solely anthropometrically, but rather as the sum of all individual qualities and attributes. Even the psychic components were taken into account. Constitution became a term denoting reactive ability, which in its own right limited both adaptability and efficiency. C.G. Jung rejected the idea of accepting “constitution” as the passive fate of an individual. He said: “Constitution is an integral part of an individual that can be considered as a calling to settle differences with fate, thereby not succumbing to one’s own constitution.”

The other line of development from psychoanalytic theory via Freud, Adler, Deutsch, Thomä, Alexander to psychosomatic thoughts will be discussed more fully by Hertz in a later lecture.

Should one turn one’s attention to today’s psychosomatic research, many ideas and perspectives are available. The Duality of Body and Soul remains to be understood. As long as 50 years ago, Uexküll and Schultz perceived and described the unity of the living organism; the psychic component was regarded as being part of the “living” being.

Two terms have acquired increasing importance for the further development of this understanding: (a) the subject, and (b) functional performances. Both in Selye’s “Stress-syndrome” and Cannon’s “fight or flight” reaction the latter term was still considered as a puerly functional entity. We, however, consider performance in the biological as well as the pathological sense to be a subjective experience, dependent on the “Umwelt”
Performance is determined to a large extent by motivational factors with a history and a goal. We no longer observe a collection of symptoms attached adjacent to the human being, but rather observe “Man” in a state of disease. This becomes even clearer if we take a look at the term “subject”, as already previously mentioned. In sharp contrast to the object “Man” or “Woman” in the natural scientific sense of the words, the “subject” is an extremely individual entity. One cannot attain an understanding of the “subject” through psychological tests or laboratory probes, but rather by observing the personal history of the individual in his Umwelt. Even modern physics cannot dispense with a degree of subjective observation. Nature cannot be considered solely as an embodiment of existing realities.

There is no law that defines “what is”, only a natural law that states “what is possible”.

In the natural sciences as well as in medicine, subjectivity plays a primary role in perception. The condition determining the selection of the “experienced” parameters (i.e. intent, subjective bias, etc...) is most variable. Von Weizsäcker developed this phenomenon in his “Gestaltkreis”. The stimulus, the reaction, and the subjective feeling and sentiment are regarded as a mutual, reciprocally induced act. How this happened is determined by the performance. The performance, on the other hand, determines the individual as a “whole”. Anthropological medicine defines the individual with respect to his or her relationship to experience, to task (or role) and to responsibility. My teacher, von Gebsattel, developed the anthropological term of a sexual entity (Geschlechtsleib), a dance body (Tanzleib) and a work entity (Arbeitsleib). He meant thereby with the changing environment that the human being is a differing, evolving and changing being. The individual human becomes furious, excited, and experiences anew, only in confrontation with certain situations or particular experiences; we encounter a changed person. This manner of observing and considering the human has eminent relevance and importance if one is trying to gain an understanding of the psychosomatic and hence of the psychoanalytic parameters. No doubt it is of therapeutic relevance if I attempt to understand the woman in her way of life individually, or rather attempt to find a “psychic noxis”, using a stimulus-response methodology.

Now I would like to direct attention towards gaining an anthropological understanding of the Woman. Before the congress, my thoughts on this subject were rather clear. However, when I began contemplating that participants from more than 40 countries, with numerous differing cultural backgrounds and experiences, would be attending. I became more and more self-critical. I am fully aware that the brunt of my experience is based on my work here in Germany. The symposium: “Women in a Changing Society” may have contributed to an understanding of this problem. The variability in the beginnings, expectations and goals within the different peoples, individuals, and age groups is well worth noting and considering. I am most thankful for Prof. Hertz and Dr. Yohalem’s contributions to this topic.

We may therefore attempt to set aside the aforementioned differences and ask: Is there a specific female behaviour? Is there a unique female somatic experience and affective, intuitive and subconscious life that differentiates Activities, Intentions, Decisions and Judgements?