SOCIAL ENTAILMENTS OF THE THEORY OF SELF-ACTUALIZATION

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Growing interest in an ethics of "self-actualization" is being generated in this country and abroad by the new "humanistic" or "third force" psychology, through the writings of such proponents as Abraham H. Maslow, Erich Fromm, Rollo May, and Victor Frankl.

"Self-actualization" offers itself as the up-dated perpetuation of the eudaimonistic "self-realization" of classical humanism. At the heart of both theories lives the doctrine of the priority of self-love. The following citations exhibit concord concerning what is thought to be this doctrine's central weakness.

"If this assumption is sound," writes Gordon Allport, "the outlook for improving human relations is of course dim. Rationalize our self-love as we will, we remain frauds. Human relations cannot be improved; they can only be prettified." ¹

More explicitly, Morris Ginsberg contends that "the formula of self-realization leaves out of consideration the central problem of ethics - that of the relation between self and others." ²

Less conclusively, Pitirim Sorokin agrees that "Eros always has difficulty in finding room for love to man." ³

Conclusively again, Irving Singer summarizes his study of Eros in Plato and Aristotle with the claim that "it could not account for the love of persons." ⁴

And in still stronger terms Anders Nygren identifies self-love as man's "natural condition" which is responsible for his "perversity of will." ⁵ According to him, "Eros does not seek the neighbor for himself; it seeks him insofar as it can utilize him as a means for its own ascent." ⁶

The citations are deliberately drawn from diverse sources to indicate

⁶ Ibid., p. 214.
the breadth of agreement concerning the presumed defect of the doctrine of the primacy of self-love. But formidable as this array of critics appears, I believe that the focal point of the citations is a mistake which is attributable to superficial understanding. In what follows I shall seek to demonstrate that Eros, when its depths are sounded, provides secure and compelling ground for the love of others, affording a viable social ethics which, moreover, has singular relevance to problems of our time.

In both its classical and its contemporary formulations, self-actualization embodies two tenets which here warrant our careful attention. The first tenet stipulates the priority of the self in the matters of knowledge, love, and fulfillment. The second offers the nature of the self as a determinate “destiny” (classical), or “project” (Sartre), or “vital program” (Ortega y Gasset), or “vocation” (Ortega and Max Scheler).

Inscribed upon the temple of Apollo at Delphi was the famous “gnothi seautón,” Know thyself. It constituted the first imperative of classical humanism and furnished the pre-supposition to Protagoras’ “man the measure.” These two maxims ascribe priority to man generically and individually. But within the classical sensibility this priority was carefully circumscribed. Contrary to a popular belief, classical humanism did not assert man’s metaphysical or moral ascendency, nor did it attribute priority to man in the cosmic process (physis), either in point of origin or of destination. Rather, it repeatedly warned against such “disproportion.” Its counsel of sophrosyne (moderation) was directed in the first instance to man’s estimate of himself. Moreover the conditions of the tragic stage demonstrate keen respect for the surpassing power of a variety of inhuman forces in the world – archaic Fate (moira), capricious chance (tyche), the nature mechanism (automaton), the imponderable wills of mischievous gods.

The priority ascribed to man by classical humanism was in the status of a problem. Man appears in the universe as the locus of the problematic – the first problem, the resolution of which is prerequisite to the meaningful confrontation of every other. The locus classicus of this recognition (though by no means the earliest expression of it) is to be found in Plato’s Phaedrus, in which the human soul is depicted as a charioteer and two winged horses, the black one pulling earthward while the white struggles aloft. By this image Plato identifies man’s nature as an argument with itself, a radical equivocation. Nearer our own time the same recognition appears in Schopenhauer’s observation that man is the only being which “wonders at its own existence.” 7 It reappears when Max Scheler identifies man as being’s discovery of the “radical No,” 8 and likewise in Sartre’s description of consciousness as

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