The Psychology of a Personal Ideal

The "personal ideal" discussed here is the image, more or less clear, of the kind of person an individual wants to be. Because the author is a psychologist, the topic will be dealt with strictly from the standpoint of psychological processes. As another psychologist has said:

The objective ideals have psychological reality when they are in one or other way capable of influencing human behavior. Such problems have been rather neglected by experimental psychology hitherto. Psychology as such can have no real interest in the factual content of e.g. the objective ideals, for this is a thing which concerns above all the political sciences. But the mental mechanism underlying the creation of these ideals is a phenomenon in which psychology must have a real interest.¹

Although findings of other disciplines will be used at least indirectly in this article, the treatment will focus primarily on the way the personal ideal affects the individual.

A person is affected by such a reality as a personal ideal in regard to his perception, his learning, his attitude, his motivation. Our concern here is with the individual's attitude toward his personal ideal, and our investigation of that attitude will show how he perceives the ideal, what emotional experiences he has, and what tendencies to action are involved. In fact, the emotional experiences and tendencies to action hinge on his way of perceiving the ideal. As these ways of perceiving it are reported, an evaluation of them will be made as satisfactory, open to improvement, inefficient, or simply false.

Past research on this topic has shown the philosopher reasoning that

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people ought to have certain ideals because these ideals are adequate for human nature. The theologian handles those ideals in terms of their suitability to the elevated vocation as children of God; thus the contribution of the supernatural element fills out the picture of the personal ideal. Within the last twenty years, the anthropologist and sociologist have reported what ideals people actually do have at different ages and in different cultures.

Psychologists, on the other hand, have investigated the relation of the personal ideal to such variables as the self-concept, adjustment, age, achievement. In psychological literature, the personal ideal is often called the self-ideal or ego-ideal. Typical of such findings are those of Hanlon: "... the correlation between the self-ideal congruence and total adjustment is positive ..." The difference between the concepts of the personal ideal for various groups has been analyzed, as Friedman did with normal, neurotic, and paranoid schizophrenic subjects. Havighurst has traced the origin of the personal ideal and reports that:

The social psychologists think of the ideal self as a name for the integrated self of roles and aspirations which direct the individual's life. These roles and attitudes they believe are taken on by the individual from parents, and from a variety of others, such as siblings, playmates, teachers, preachers, and others with prestige, and historical and fictional heroes, and worked over into his own thought and action.

D. K. Wheeler has pursued a similar line and nicely summarizes the developmental picture of the personal ideal:

This investigation shows that there is present in Western Australian youth, as in New Zealand and United States youth, the same developmental trend in the ideal self. From early to late adolescence, there is a diminution in the number of parental figures chosen and an increase in the number of characters who are either imaginary composites of desirable qualities or blends of admired traits abstracted from more than one real person. The 13- and 15-year-old groups make a good deal of mention of the body image, with details about the sort of build, face, figure and features that these boys and girls admire. The oldest seem more accepting of their physiques, though the girls tend to stress makeup, dress and hair styles. Most of the composite or imaginary figures are good at sport, popular, able to mix well with other people, and make friends. Many of the boys and girls mention that they want to have a wife or husband, be happily married, have a specific number of children, a comfortable home and a good job.

In this article, interest lies in the perception of the self-ideal rather