Karl Menninger as Author

THE VITAL BALANCE by Karl Menninger and two colleagues, Paul W. Prouser and Martin Mayman, is the December selection of the Pastoral Psychology Book Club. This book is the most far-reaching of all Karl Menninger’s writings. Its significance as a kind of “summa psychiatrica” may perhaps be better appreciated in the light of a summarizing account of his previous writings.

The first of Karl Menninger’s books was The Human Mind, originally issued in 1930, and republished in 1937 in a revised and enlarged edition. In both editions it was widely bought and even more widely read. It was a panoramic book, with the wisdom to take many of its case histories from the ordinary accounts that appear in the daily press, of course subjecting them to psychiatric reflection. It made an understandable connection between just what every one knew and a dynamic theory. It revealed many things: the superb literary gifts of the author, the sense in the nonsense of daily-reported murders and rapes and incests and other odd doings, and the significance of psychiatry and psychology in interpreting not merely remote and rare events but also the very stuff of daily existence.

At that time, more than thirty years ago, there were no textbooks on personality. Psychologists then regarded such material as too vague to be of scientific interest. A good deal of psychiatry at that time (except Freud) saw little connection between the ordinary human mind and the disordered minds it was trying to help. Menninger felt the connection was intimate. In the preface, the author described “this curious human mind” as not “a machine operating perfectly and invariably in a quiet little laboratory” but rather as “a collection of enormously complex possibilities for variation, most of the variations being called abnormal by people with some other kind of variation.” With the deep feeling for mental suffering that has always characterized him, he wrote that people who have experienced such suffering “know that no one is immune from the variations; some, only, are immune from the consciousness of them.” A persistent thread
in this book is captured in the sentence, “The adjuration to be ‘normal’ seems shockingly repellent to me. . . .” Thus, Karl Menninger, from the start, rejected all forms of passive adjustment theories, in the name of mental health itself.

The second book was *Man Against Himself*, published in 1938. Its theme was human self-destructiveness: its pervasiveness, its sources, its varied forms, and what we can do about it. As its theoretical baseline it took Freud’s last theory of instincts, in which “Thanatos” is set against “Eros,” and attempted to work out many implications of an important theory about which Freud himself had written only a little. Some aspects of this theory, such as the pervasiveness of aggressive drives or their frequent direction to the self, have become, at least since this book, widely recognized. But even among psychoanalysts, there is still disagreement on the “ontological status” of tendencies toward human self-destructiveness. Acknowledging this difference at the start, Karl Menninger nevertheless declared his intention to pursue all possible implications of the theory, for “to have a theory, even a false one, is better than to attribute events to pure chance.”

The very difficult problems involved in the Thanatos-instinct question should not deflect the reader’s attention from the important revelations of this book. Whatever the ultimate reasons (instinct or something else), man as he exists is a house divided against himself. He not only commits suicide; he also commits “chronic suicide” (like alcohol addiction, neurotic invalidism, etc.) and “focal suicide” (like self-mutilation, malingering, or purposive accidents). The extensive documentation of all these and other forms of self-destructiveness remains unparalleled in the literature. What all this evidence shows that clearly must be accepted, regardless of one’s view of Thanatos-instinct, is that any tenable theory of human motivation must be a conflict-theory, a theory involving tensions and their attempted resolution through good means or bad. The theological reader will recognize at once its striking parallel to the theological trends that had begun to appear at the same period, in this country notably in the person of Reinhold Niebuhr. Niebuhr was denying that love was a “simple possibility.” So, using different orders of data, was Menninger. In neither instance was there a denigration of love; indeed, quite the opposite. But misinterpreting it as a “simple” possibility, both men felt, was to distort reality and to chain love’s true possibilities.

The third book, *Love Against Hate*, which was published in 1942, was essentially a further application of the theme of *Man Against Himself*, but with a more explicit accenting of the creative powers of love to control man’s self-destructiveness. The author quoted a letter he had received from a reader of *Man Against Himself*, “You’ve told us . . . what science has discovered about man’s innate destructiveness. But now you must tell us what science has learned about controlling it.” The book is an attempt to speak to this question.

Much of *Love Against Hate* is realistic appraisal of the forces in human beings and in human institutions that can help to control and transform “hate” or aggression through and in the direction of love. There are chapters on work, on play, on faith, and on hope that include appraisal of economic institutions, religious institutions, and educational institutions. There is also some brilliant analysis of women as having peculiar potential powers in overcoming hatred with love. The