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The Humanist Concept of Mental Health

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Many people of today's time talk about mental health and it often seems as if they were talking about the same thing. But actually, as with so many other words, many different things are meant by „mental health“, and in this lecture I want to differentiate between various concepts and to talk specifically about what may be called the humanist concept of mental health.

The first concept I want to mention, and perhaps the one most generally used, is a *negative one*. Mental health is defined here as absence of mental illness. The logic of this concept is that a person is healthy if he is not ill, hence we need to be concerned primarily with illness, because the very absence of it is enough to be sure that there is mental health. This tendency to define health in terms of absence of illness is quite widespread among the general public, among physicians and among psychiatrists. However, this negative definition of health makes a great deal more sense with regard to somatic illness than with mental illness, because as far as the body is concerned, we have at least the relatively satisfactory picture of its anatomy and of its normal physiological functioning. We have something definite to start out with, and hence there is some meaning to define illness as a deviation from the „normal“. As soon as we speak about mental health, however, we do not have this advantage. What is the normal man, mentally and emotionally speaking? Can he simply be defined as being like the majority? And if the majority is not healthy, would then the individual who is like the majority be a healthy man, or is it possible that the very person who is different from the rest is the healthy one, while the whole society is mad? But is there such a thing as an insane society?

These considerations lead us to the second concept of mental health, one which might be called the *sociological relativistic concept*. Generally speaking, this concept, which is used today by most sociologists and psychologists, says that any person is mentally healthy who is well adapted to society, who functions well in terms of the social order he is living in. In this definition society (or the state) is the measure, not man. This concept believes that there is a kind of pre-established harmony between man and the state, or man and society. What is good for society or the state is good for man. Is this true?

The fact is that any given society has its own structure and its own laws. This is the same whether we deal with a primitive tribe which makes a living from at-

tacking, robbing and killing neighboring tribes, or whether we think of a peaceful primitive tribe of peasants, whether we think of classic Greek society where slaves support the culture of a small elite, of medieval society where serfs support the life of a feudal class, or whether we think of modern Western society which is based on the principle that everything--things and labor--are commodities to be bought and sold on the market. The structure of a society is not accidental. It depends most of all on the productive forces which are available to society, for instance, whether the energy it uses is the energy of animals, of men, of the steam engine, of the internal combustion motor, or of atomic energy. It depends on other factors, on climate, on the geographical position, political events, population growth, etc. There is no such thing as a society but there are only specific societies structured in certain ways, functioning in certain ways, needing certain conditions for the continuity of their existence. But society does not only need certain productive forces, technical knowledge, institutions and laws; it also needs men who are formed in such a way that they voluntarily give their energy for those aims which the society requires, or to put it differently, men *who want to do what they have to do*.

The peasant of pre-industrial society was not punctual; he was not even interested in time, because in the society in which he lived it did not make any difference whether it was half an hour earlier or later. The worker, the clerk, the manager in modern industrial society must be concerned with time to a degree which sounds crazy to his brother in a non-industrial society. If things were not done in time, industrial society and its whole economy would not function. The same holds true for other human qualities: orderliness, work discipline, etc.

If a member of a warrior tribe likes robbing and killing, if the slave is submissive, if the medieval serf is loyal, and if the modern clerk is punctual and orderly, he will function well; he will contribute to the good functioning of his society, and he will get the rewards--whatever they are--that society gives for such functioning. Actually, being in accord with the purposes and aims of society, he will feel at one with the rest; he will not feel isolated, and in a certain sense he will feel healthy. It is in this sense that the normative sociological concept describes the healthy man as the well-adjusted man.

But the question arises whether a man who is useful for society is useful for himself, or to put it differently, whether what is good from the standpoint of the functioning of society is necessarily good for the functioning of man. Let me give a very simple examples. Assuming we find a man in a warrior tribe who for some strange reason does not like robbing and killing. Every time his tribe goes on the warpath, he rises in revolt and does not want to go. However, he is not aware of the fact that he dislikes the way of life of his tribe. He is not aware of it because considering the way his tribe thinks, it is simply impossible that a man would not like what is natural, and logical, and indubitable. So what happens is that every time he has to go on the warpath he has an attack of vomiting, or maybe some time a psychogenitically paralyzed leg. In other words, he experiences the conflict between a human striving and the mode of living of his tribe with a neurotic symptom. Certainly the psychiatrist of his tribe will declare that he is sick, and will have no doubt that the ones who happily go on robbing and killing are the healthy ones; but is that necessarily so? Maybe they are the sick ones and he is healthier, although in a different sense.

Let us not talk too much about the primitive man, but about our modern industrial society as it has developed especially in Europe and in North America in

the last few hundred years. This is a society which still in the 19th century was centered around many relatively small enterprises competing with each other. The life of man centered around work, duty, family, and one of the main virtues was saving--a virtue quite natural in an economy in which the accumulation of capital was still one of the main tasks. The industrial society of the 20th century is quite different. It is centered around the big enterprise, the big corporation, the big government, the big trade union. It creates the mass man, the organization man, the man who feels strong because he is a part of a big entity, of a big organization, even though he may be only an infinitesimally small part of it. Concentration of capital led to the formation of giant enterprises, managed by hierarchically organized bureaucracies. Large agglomerations of workers work together, part of a vast organized production machine which, in order to run at all, must run smoothly, without friction, without interruption. The individual worker and clerk becomes a cog in this machine, their function and activities are determined by the whole structure of the organization in which they work. In the large enterprises, legal ownership of the means of production has become separated from the management and has lost importance. The big enterprises are run by bureaucratic management, which does not own the enterprise legally, but socially. These managers do not have the qualities of the old owners--individual initiative, daring, risk-taking--but the qualities of the bureaucrats lack of individuality, impersonality, caution, lack of imagination; they administer *things and persons*, and relate to persons as to things.

Not only in the sphere of production the individual is managed and manipulated, but also in the sphere of consumption, which allegedly is the one in which the individual expresses his free choice. Whether it is the consumption of food, clothing, liquor, cigarettes, or of movies and television programs, a powerful suggestion apparatus is employed with two purposes: first, to increase constantly the individual's appetite for new commodities, and second, to direct these appetites into the channels most profitable for industry. The very size of the capital investment in the consumer goods industry and the competition between a few giant enterprises make it necessary not to leave consumption to chance, nor to leave the consumer a free choice of whether he wants to buy more, and what he wants to buy. His appetites have to be constantly whetted, tastes have to be manipulated, managed, and made predictable. Man is transformed into the „consumer,“ the eternal suckling, whose wish is to consume more and „better“ things.

Our system must create men who fit its needs; it must create men who cooperate smoothly and in large numbers; who want to consume more and more; whose tastes are standardized and can be easily anticipated and influenced. It needs men who feel free and independent, not subject to any authority or principle of consciences yet who are willing to be commanded to do what is expected of them to fit into the social machine without friction; who can be guided without force, led without leaders, prompted without aim--except the one to make good, to be on the move, to go ahead.

Modern man is alienated. He is a stranger to himself and to his fellows. In producing things he is transformed into a thing himself, and things do not feel, things have no convictions.

In reading about the Eichmann trial I felt that he is in many ways a symbol of the modern mass-man, and of his moral dilemma. Eichmann was a bureaucrat, a cog in a busy machine. He claims to have been a small cog, but even if he had been a bigger cog, he is still a cog, and not a man. He killed men as he would

have killed cattle, but if his task had been to ship tons of coal he would not have felt differently from shipping millions of human beings. What mattered was the organization, the proper functioning within this organization, and his prestige of being a valuable cog.

The moral problem of mankind in all past history has been the problem of good and evil. Some philosophies and religions have stressed good, others have stressed evil, most have seen the conflict between the two forces, but whatever one's view on the relative weight of good and evil in the human soul is, evil is human as good is human, and hence we can say that even the most evil man is not outside of humanity. Modern mass society has created a new problem, not any more that of evil, but that of a new inhumanity, the inhumanity of the robot, of a man transformed into a thing, of a man who does not feel because he has been transformed into a thing, of men administering other men as if they were things, and being administered by others who are subject to the same law of the organization. The problem our modern society has raised is (and this is the problem in the so-called capitalistic society of the West as well as in the so-called communist society in Soviet Russia), that man, who has become fully adapted to society, is at the same time an inhuman man.

Am I exaggerating in calling Eichmann a symbol of the trend of the time? I do not think so, in view of the fact how the governments of big industrial states play with nuclear bombs and calmly discuss the destruction of half, if not of all of the world. When you hear discussions in which it is said that the immediate death of half the population of a big country is still acceptable (acceptable to whom? to the dead or to the living?), if you hear it said that after the catastrophe of an atomic war and the destruction of half the world life will go on as before and people will enjoy their cars and refrigerators, then indeed, you ask yourself whether this world has not been seized by a general madness, and whether what we are witnessing is not the healthy automaton who is at the same time a very sick person.

These considerations lead to the discussion of the third position, that of the humanistic concept of mental health. The humanistic concept has certain general premises, the first one being that man is not made for the state, for the purposes of society, but that the state and society have to serve man. The second is that man can be defined not only anatomically and physiologically, but also psychically and mentally. That in spite of differences between individuals, that in spite of differences between nations and races, man is one. Humanity is not an abstract concept, but a reality. That inasmuch as we are human every one of us represents humanity. We are all saints and all criminals; we are all children and we are all adults, who know that they have to die. We are all different, and yet we are all the same, and it is because of this that we can understand each other, that we can understand even the stranger, that we can enjoy the art of the primitives and the art of classic Greece, and Cervantes, Shakespeare and Dostoevski, in spite of the fact that they lived in cultures so completely different from our own. Art has many expressions and forms, and yet it is a universal language because it is the expression of universal humanity. This concept, that humanity is one and that all men share in the same basic human qualities, is the concept of humanism, is the concept of the Bible, and it is the concept of Buddha and Lao-tse as well as it is the concept of Spinoza, Leibniz, Hegel, and Marx.

The third premise of humanism is that there are certain values which are not only a matter of taste, but which have objective validity. This concept of objective

values is not too popular today when people are reluctant to be committed to anything but their profit and their amusement. Even most psychiatrists refuse to accept this idea, and yet they find themselves in this peculiar paradox: If a patient comes to them and says: „Doctor, I hate everybody, I hate my wife, I hate my children, and I hate all strangers,“ then no doubt the psychiatrist would believe that this man is very sick. The psychiatrist would have to admit that in this respect his clinical observation co-exists with certain moral values recognized by all humanistic philosophy, that hatred is morally bad, and that it is a symptom of sickness, psychologically. But he refuses to accept the idea that there are certain positive goals, like love, comprehension, a sense of justice, which are inherent in the very structure of man, and which are desirable both from the standpoint of traditional humanist ethics, and from the standpoint of mental health.

What, then, is this rational definition of good?

Generally speaking, it may be said that good is what is good for the unfolding of man, given the peculiar peculiarities of existence and the laws which govern it. In fact, the problem is not different from the question of what would be good for the seed of an apple tree. If the seed of an apple tree could think, it would feel that good are those conditions of the soil and the sun and the air which would help it grow into a fully-developed apple tree, and not a crippled one, or one which never bears fruit. If we know the specific conditions of human existence, then indeed we can also know that the fully developed man is like the man who has become what he potentially is, the man whose moral maxim is *that he ought to be what he could be*.

From this standpoint of normative humanism, mental health cannot be defined as the absence of symptoms; it cannot be defined as adjustment to existing society, regardless of whether the society itself is healthy or sick. It can be defined only in terms of the fullest realization and unfolding of man's potentialities. Let us try to see whether we can say something more specific about what well-being is from the standpoint of humanistic philosophy and psychoanalysis.

The first approach to a definition of well-being can be stated thus: *Well-being is being in accord with the nature of man*. If we go beyond this formal statement the question arises: What is being, in accordance with the conditions of human existence? What are these conditions?

Human existence poses a question. Man is thrown into this world without his volition, and taken away from it again without his volition. In contrast to the animal, which in its instincts has a „built-in“ mechanism of adaptation to its environment, living completely within nature, man lacks this instinctive mechanism. *He has to live* his life; he *is not lived by* it. He is *in* nature, yet he *transcends* nature; he has awareness of himself, and this awareness of himself as a separated entity makes him feel unbearably alone, lost, powerless. The very fact of being born poses a problem. At the moment of birth, life asks man a question, and this question he must answer. He must answer it at every moment; not his mind, not his body, but he, the person who thinks and dreams, who sleeps and eats and cries and laughs--*the whole man*--must answer it.

What is this question which life poses? „The question is: How can we overcome the suffering, the imprisonment, the shame which the experience of separateness creates? How can we find union within ourselves, with our fellowman, with nature? Man has to answer these questions in some way; and even in insanity an answer is given by striking out reality outside of ourselves, living completely within the shell of ourselves, and thus overcoming the fright of separateness.

The *question* is always the same. However, there are *several answers*, or basically, there are only two answers. One is to overcome separateness and to find unity by *regression* to the state of unity which existed before awareness ever arose, that is, before man was born. The other answer is to be *fully born*, to develop one's awareness, one's reason, one's capacity to love, to such a point that one transcends one's own egocentric involvement, and arrives at a new harmony, at a new oneness with the world.

Returning now to the question of well-being, how are we going to define it in the light of what has been said thus far?

Well-being is the state of having arrived at the full development of reason: reason not in the sense of a merely intellectual judgment, but in that of grasping truth by „letting things be“ (to use Heidegger's term) as they are. Well-being is possible only to the degree to which one has overcome one's narcissism; to the degree to which one is open, responsive, sensitive, and awake. Well-being means to be fully related to man and nature affectively, to overcome separateness and alienation, to arrive at the experience of oneness with all that exists--and yet to experience *myself* at the same time as the separated entity *I am*, as the individual. Well-being means to be fully born, to become what one potentially is; it means to have the full capacity for joy and for sadness or, to put it still differently, to awaken from the half-slumber the average man lives in, and to be fully awake. If it is all that, it means also to be creative; that is, to react and to respond to myself, to others, to everything that exists--to react and to respond as the real, total man I am to the reality of everybody and everything as he or it is. In this act of true response lies the area of creativity, of seeing the world as it is *and* experiencing it as *my* world, the world created and transformed by my creative grasp of it, so that the world ceases to be a strange world „over there“ and becomes my world. Well-being means, finally, to drop one's Ego, to give up greed, to cease chasing after the preservation and the aggrandizement of the Ego, to be and to experience one's self in the act of being, not in having, preserving, coveting, using.

There are perhaps still other and simpler ways to express the meaning of well-being and mental health. You might simply say the healthy person is constantly changing, and yet he remains the same. He has convictions which originate in himself, and not synthetic opinions as if he were a disc on a record player. He can see the reality of his personal life and of the life of his society, and penetrates through the fictions which most people believe to be the reality. He can know the difference between words and reality, and not mistake the one for the other. You might even put it in a simpler form and say the healthy person has a passionate interest in the world. Not everybody necessarily in the same aspects of the world, but still an interest which absorbs him, which excites him, and which to fulfill gives him satisfaction. I would even go so far as to say something which is quite unorthodox: If I were to see one man with this passionate interest, let us say in science, in art, in medicine, or whatever it might be, but unfortunately suffering from claustrophobia, and another man suffering from nothing, but not having a passionate interest in anything, I personally would call the man with the claustrophobia healthier than the man with the lack of interest.

We have spoken before about the connection between individual mental health and the life of society. It is quite clear that the development of well-being as I have tried to describe it here depends on certain social premises. A society which is stagnating or which is blocked in its own development a society, which

suffers from unsolved contradictions between rich and poor, a society which does not develop its own resource, will be at the same time a society in which most people do not have hope, and hopelessness is one of the basic obstacles to mental health. Hence the first condition for the development of mental health in any given society is the fact that there is hope, but not the kind of fictitious hope which is raised by ritualistic speeches, but that which is based on the reality that the society is developing and unfolding, and that it achieves an ever-increasing equality, and offers the material basis for a dignified and rich human life for all its citizens.

I should like to add that students are in a particularly fortunate situation as far as mental health is concerned. They have chosen an activity very different from carrying stones, different from doing monotonous work. They have chosen an activity which in itself is interesting and exciting, which more than any other activity lends itself to the development of a passionate interest in the world. The student has, one might say, if he is truly a student, the main pre-requisite for being a healthy person, and yet we know empirically that so many students lack in mental health. This condition can be changed in two ways, and both must be taken: one by making study truly exciting, and by trying to reduce the number of those students who only study because it seems to them to be the easiest way to make money. The second way is to examine individual factors which make it difficult for a student to be truly interested, in spite of the fact that he has good teachers and an interesting field of study. Here clinical psychology has its wide field, but let us never forget that from the standpoint of the humanist tradition the healthy man is the man who is productive, the man who is related to the world, and concerned with the world, and mental health is never only absence of illness; it is never only the capacity to function well, but it is a state of mind in which the person is stimulated by the world around him, and hence he can be stimulating to others.

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