

### The Psychology of Normalcy

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To speak of a whole society as lacking in mental health implies a controversial assumption, contrary to the position of *sociological relativism* held by most social scientists today. They postulate that each society is normal inasmuch as it functions, and that psychology can be defined only in terms of the individual's lack of adjustment to the ways of life in his society.

To speak of a „sane society“ implies a premise different from sociological relativism. It makes sense only if we assume that there can be a society which is not sane, and this assumption, in turn, implies that there are universal criteria for mental health which are valid for the human race as such, and according to which the state of health of each society can be judged. This position of *normative humanism* is based on a few fundamental premises.

The species „man“ can be defined not only in anatomical and physiological terms; it also shares in the same basic psychic: qualities, the same laws which govern its mental and emotional functioning, and the same aims for a satisfactory solution of the problem of human existence. It is true that our knowledge of man is still so incomplete that we cannot yet give a satisfactory definition of man in a psychological sense. It is the task of the „science of man“ to arrive eventually at a correct description of what deserves to be called human nature. What has often been called „human nature“ is one of its many manifestations--and often a pathological one--and the function of such mistaken definitions was usually to defend a particular way of behavior as being the necessary outcome of man's mental constitution.

Against such reactionary use of the concept of human nature, the liberals, since the 18th century, have stressed the malleability, of human nature and the decisive influence of environmental factors. True and important as such emphasis is, it has led many social scientists to an assumption that man's mental constitution is like a blank piece of paper, on which {140} society and culture write their text, and which has no intrinsic quality of its own. This assumption is equally untenable and equally destructive of social progress. The real problem is to infer the core common to all the human race from the innumerable *manifestations* of human nature, the normal as well as the pathological ones, as we can observe them in different individuals and cultures. The task is furthermore to recognize the laws inherent in human nature and the inherent goals for its development and unfolding. Just as the infant is born with all human potentialities which are to develop under favorable social and cultural conditions, so the human race, in the process of history, develops into what it potentially is.

The approach of *normative humanism* is based on the assumption that as in the solution of any other question, there are right and wrong, satisfactory and unsatisfactory solutions to the problem of human existence. Mental health is achieved if man develops into full maturity according to the characteristics and laws of human nature. Mental illness consists in the failure of such development. From this premise the criterion of mental health is not that of adjustment of the

individual to a given social order, but a universal one, valid for all men, of giving a satisfactory answer to the problem of human existence.

What is so deceptive about the state of mind of the members of a society is the "consensual validation" of their concepts. It is naively assumed that the fact that the majority of people share certain ideas or feelings proves the validity of these ideas and feelings. Nothing is further from the truth. Consensual validation as such has no bearing whatsoever on reason or mental health. Just as there is a „*folie à deux*“ there is a „*folie à millions*.“ The fact that millions of people share the same vices does not make them virtuous, the fact that they share so many errors does not make the errors to be truths, and the fact that millions of people share the same forms of mental pathology does not make them sane.

There is, however, an important difference between individual and social mental illness, which suggests differentiation between the two concepts: that of *defect*, and that of *neurosis*. If a person fails to attain freedom, spontaneity, a genuine expression of self, he may be considered to have a severe defect, provided we assume that freedom and spontaneity are the objective goals to be attained by every human being. If such a goal is not attained by the majority of members of any given society, we deal with the phenomenon of *socially patterned defect*. The individual shares it with many others; he is not aware of it as a defect, and his security is not threatened by the experience of being different, of being an outcast, as it were. What he may have lost in richness and in a genuine feeling of happiness is made up by the security of fitting in with the rest of mankind--as *he knows them*. As a matter of fact, his very defect may have been raised {141} to a virtue of his culture, and thus may give him an enhanced feeling of achievement.

Spinoza formulates the problem of the socially patterned defect very clearly. He says: „Many people are seized by one and the same affect with great consistency. All a man's senses are so strongly affected by one object that he believes this object to be present even if it is not. If this happens while the person is awake, the person is believed to be insane. ... But if the *greedy* person thinks only of money and possessions, the *ambitious* one duly of fame, one does not think of them as being insane, but only as annoying; generally one has contempt for them. But factually greediness, ambition, and so forth are forms of insanity, although one does not think of them as "illness." These words were written a few hundred years ago; they still hold true, although the defect has been culturally patterned to *such* an extent now that it is not even generally thought any more to be annoying or contemptible.

Today we come across a person who acts and feels like an automaton; who never experiences anything which is really his; who experiences himself entirely as the person he thinks he is supposed to be: whose smiles have replaced laughter; whose meaningless chatter has replaced communicative speech; whose dulled despair has taken the place of genuine pain. Two statements can be made about this person. One is that he suffers from a defect of spontaneity and individuality which may seem incurable. At the same time, it may be said that he does not differ essentially from millions of others who are in the same position. For most of them, the culture provides patterns which enable them to live *with a defect without becoming ill*. It is as if each culture provided the remedy against the outbreak of manifest neurotic symptoms which would result from the defect produced by it.

Suppose that in our Western culture movies, radios, television, sports events, and newspapers ceased to function for only four weeks. With these main avenues of escape closed, what would be the consequences for people thrown upon their own resources? I have no doubt that even in this short time thousands of nervous breakdowns would occur, and many more thousands of people would be thrown into a state of acute anxiety, not being different from the picture which

is diagnosed clinically as „neurosis.“<sup>1</sup> If {142} the opiate against the socially patterned defect were withdrawn, the manifest illness would make its appearance.

With a minority, the pattern provided by the culture does not work. They are often those whose individual defect is more severe than that of the average person, so that the culturally offered remedies are not sufficient to prevent the outbreak of manifest illness, but there are also those whose character structure, and hence whose conflicts, differ from those of the majority, so that the remedies which are effective for most of their fellowmen are of no help to them. Among this group we sometimes find people of greater integrity and sensitivity than can be found in the majority, those who for this very reason are incapable of accepting the cultural opium, while at the same time they are not strong and healthy enough to live soundly „against the stream.“

The foregoing discussion on the difference between neurosis and the socially patterned defect may give the impression that if society only provides the remedies against the outbreak of manifest symptoms, all goes well, and it can continue to function smoothly, however great the defects created by it are. History shows us, however, that this is not the case.

It is true, indeed, that man, in contrast to the animal, shows an almost infinite malleability; just as he can eat almost anything, live under practically any kind of climate, and adjust himself to it, there is hardly any psychic condition which he cannot endure, and under which he cannot carry on. He can live free, and as a slave; rich and in luxury, and under conditions of half-starvation. He can live as a warrior, and peacefully; as an exploiter and robber, and as a member of a cooperating and loving fellowship. There is hardly a psychic state in which man cannot live, and hardly anything which cannot be done with him and for which he cannot be used. All these considerations seem to justify the assumption that there is no such thing as a nature common to all men, and that would mean in fact that there is no such thing as a species „man,“ except in a physiological and anatomical sense. Yet, in spite of all this evidence, the history of man shows that we have omitted one fact. Despots and ruling cliques can succeed in dominating and exploiting their fellow man, but they cannot prevent *reactions* to this inhuman treatment. Their subjects become frightened, suspicious, lonely, and if not due to external reasons, their systems collapse at one point because fears, suspicions and loneliness eventually incapacitate the majority to function effectively and intelligently. Whole nations, or social groups within them, can be subjugated and exploited for a long time, but *they react*. They react with apathy or such impairment of intelligence, initiative, and skills that they gradually fail to perform the functions which should serve their rulers. Or they react by the accumulation of such hate {143} and destructiveness as to bring about an end to themselves, their rulers, and their system. Again, their reaction may be such inflows of independence and a longing for freedom that a better society is built upon the creative impulses. Whichever reaction occurs depends on many factors; on economic and political ones, and on the spiritual climate in which people live. But whatever the reactions are, the statement that man can live under almost any condition is only half true; it must be supplemented by the other statement, that if he lives under conditions which are contrary to his nature and to the basic requirements for human growth and sanity, he cannot help reacting; he must either deteriorate and perish, or bring about conditions which are more in accordance with his needs.

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<sup>1</sup> I have made the following experiment with various classes of undergraduate college students: they were told to imagine that they were to stay for three days alone in their room, without a radio, escapist literature, although provided with „good“ literature, normal food and all other physical comforts. They were asked to imagine what their reaction to this experience would be. The response of about 90 per cent in each group ranged from the feeling of acute panic, to that of an exceedingly trying experience, which they might overcome by sleeping long, doing all kinds of little chores, eagerly awaiting the end of this period. Only a small minority felt that they would be at ease and enjoy the time when they are with themselves.

The point of view taken here is neither a „biological“ nor a „sociological“ one if that would mean separating these two aspects from each other. It is rather one transcending such dichotomy by the assumption that the main passions and drives in man result from the total existence of man, that they are definite and ascertainable, some of them conducive to health and happiness, others to sickness and unhappiness. Any given social order does not *create* these fundamental strivings, but determines which one of the limited number of potential passions are to become manifest. Man as he appears in any given culture is always a manifestation of human nature, a manifestation, however, which in its specific outcome is determined by the social arrangements under which he lives.

The answer to the question of what is a „sane society“ must start, then, with a concept of man, his nature, and the laws which govern his development. The sane society is that which corresponds to the needs of man; not necessarily to what he *feels* to be his needs--because even the most pathological aims can be felt subjectively as that which the person wants most--but to what his needs are *objectively*, as they can be ascertained by the study of man. Provided we agree that the aim of social life is to be conducive to the fullest development of man--and nothing else--we must judge any given society by this criterion. Our problem, then, is a twofold one: the anthropological and psychological one of the nature of man and of his needs stemming from it; and the social-psychological one of examining any given society from the viewpoint of its furthering or inhibiting influence on the realization of these needs. Since no society so far, including our own, has created the conditions for the full realization of man, the main task is essentially one of critical evaluation of society, which must be combined with the constructive attempt of considering which socio-economic forms would be more in accordance with man's nature and needs.

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Ursrainer Ring 24, D-72076 Tuebingen, Germany, E-mail: frommfunk[at-symbol]aol.com.