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A Clinical View of the Problem of Human Rights

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(1966e-e)

First published under the title “A Clinical View of the Problem of Human Rights” in *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, Menasha, Vol. 36 (1966), pp. 195-197. - Numbers in {brackets} indicate the next page in the first publication.

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What has the clinical psychologist to add to the views of political scientists, economists and moral philosophers?

Emphases of each of these disciplines will differ; the political scientist's emphasis will be on the basic human right to express oneself freely without fear of any kind and to participate in community decision-making; for economists, human rights require that every citizen should have the material basis for a dignified human existence which permits him to use his political rights; for moral philosophers human rights will be defined on the principle that every man is an aim in himself and must not be made the aim for the means of others.

Human rights mentioned before are important, but are incomplete without another right; the right to be oneself. It is precisely this right to which the clinician has something to contribute.

What does it mean, to be oneself? First, it means to be a person, not *a thing*. True, we are all persons, bona as persons, and we become things only when dead. But in our modern industrial culture we tend to transform ourselves into things while still alive. Most of our energy is spent producing and consuming things. In the process we feel ourselves as things, as small parts of a big machine. We are not only „homo faber,“ the man who produces, but we become more and more „homo consumens“ the man for whom everything--food, books, movies, sex--become articles of consumption.

Another aspect of being a person rather than a thing is contained in the *alienation* problem. Alienation means that I do not experience my own powers of {196} creativity or love or thought as my own. I transfer them to things, to the state, to big organizations, to public opinion. I am in touch with my own powers by submitting to those idols to which I have transferred my own riches; while they are big, I am small, and the richer they become, the more I am impoverished.

Being a person is to have a *sense of identity*, to have the experience of „I,“ instead of being „one,“ one of the mass, who lives under the illusion of being himself when he is actually nothing but a coin which bears the same stamp as all other coins. We are under the illusion of being individuals, but in reality we get frightened whenever we are only three feet away from the herd; we are sheep, wearing the clothes of individuality. The transformation of man into a thing, a consumer, an alienated man, and a sheep is not primarily a philosophic problem but a psychological problem. It is up to the clinical



psychologist, psychiatrist and psychoanalyst to study it.

This study requires one further step related to the most significant discovery made in psychology in this century: the *study of the unconscious*. How can I be myself, and hence exercise my human rights if most of what goes on in me is unconscious, and most of what is conscious is fiction?

Freud assumed that the contents of the unconscious were essentially instinctual drives that are not permitted to reach awareness. Half a century later we can see that instinctual drives are not the only, and maybe not the most important, part of the unconscious. All that is unconscious which the „social filter“ that exists in every society does not permit to pass through to consciousness. In the last 50 years, sexual desires and fantasies have become less and less repressed. What is more and more repressed is our boredom, our alienation, our anxiety, and the feeling that in reality the individual has no power to participate, to change the matters of concern to the - entire community. {197}

Does that mean that every citizen needs to be psychoanalyzed? I do not think that this is necessary, aside from its practical impossibility. There are many steps possible to increase awareness and to reduce the „social unconscious.“ First is removal of a major factor that leads to repression: fear to feel, think and express what one senses to be real in oneself and in society. The ever-increasing need for conformity prevents such awareness. Removal of fear as one necessary condition for increasing awareness is borne out by clinical data at the psychoanalysts' disposal.

Removal, of fear alone is not enough. Increased awareness requires a second condition: *the capacity for critical thought*, Capacity to think requires sound skepticism toward all phenomena offered by the Senses and common sense; a questioning mind; an effort to understand what is „really real,“ rather than to assume that reality is whatever the majority agree it is.

Freedom from fear, encouragement of questioning and critical thought are not enough to be oneself. A third condition is stimulation; stimulation by what? In our talk about freedom, brotherhood, love, independence, we refer to the supreme values of the humanist tradition. Hut these values and ideas have been trans. formed into idols of thought which create the illusion of being in touch with that tradition, when in fact we are losing it every day.

Discussion of human rights from a clinical standpoint leads to the conclusion that the human right to be oneself requires a renaissance of humanistic thought in opposition to the spirit of a consumer culture. Human rights--economic, political and philosophical--can be realized only if we succeed in creating a culture in which people have a sense of identity in which feelings are authentic rather than synthetic and there is encouragement of, not intimidation against, critical thought.

The clinical psychologist and psychiatrist have an important task: that of applying their basic findings not only to a person's individual problems caused by particular family situations, but to the „pathology of normalcy“ which threatens to undermine the very rights we are so proud of having achieved.