

CRITIQUE OF SELF-ACTUALIZATION

I. SOME DANGERS OF BEING-COGNITION

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This paper is the first of a projected series, "Critique of Self-Actualization," whose long-term aim is the further exploration of the full reach of human nature, but whose immediate, pedagogical aim is to correct the widespread misunderstanding of self-actualization as a static, unreal, "perfect" state in which all human problems are transcended, and in which people "live happily forever after" in a super-human state of serenity or ecstasy. This is empirically not so, as I pointed out in my first papers on the subject (6).

To make this fact clearer, I could describe self-actualization as a development of personality which frees the person from the deficiency problems of growth, and from the neurotic (or infantile, or fantasy, or unnecessary, or "unreal") problems of life, so that he is able to face, endure and grapple with the "real" problems of life (the intrinsically and ultimately human problems, the unavoidable, the "existential" problems to which there is no perfect solution). That is, it is not an absence of problems but a moving from transitional or unreal problems to real problems. For shock purposes, I could even call the self-actualizing person a self-accepting and insightful neurotic, for this phrase may be defined in such a way as to be almost synonymous with "understanding and accepting the intrinsic human situation," i.e., facing and accepting courageously, and even enjoying the "short-comings" of human nature instead of trying to deny them.

It is these real problems which confront even (or especially) the most highly matured human beings, that I would like to deal with in this series of papers, e.g., real guilt, real sadness, real loneliness, healthy selfishness, courage, responsibility, responsibility for others, etc.

Of course there is a quantitative (as well as qualitative) improvement that comes with higher personality evolvment, quite apart from the intrinsic satisfaction of seeing the truth rather than fooling oneself. Most human guilt, statistically speaking, is neurotic rather than real guilt. Being freed of neurotic guilt means absolutely to have lesser amounts of guilt, even though the probability of real guilt remains.

Not only this, but highly evolved personalities also have more peak-experiences (9), and these seem to be more profound (even

though this may be less true of the "obsessional" or Apollonian type of self-actualization).

That is to say, though being more fully-human means to have problems and pains still (even though of a "higher" sort), yet it remains true that these problems and pains are quantitatively less, and that the pleasures are quantitatively and qualitatively greater. In a word, an individual is subjectively better off for having reached a higher level of personal development.

Self-actualizing people have been found more capable than the average population of a particular kind of cognition which I have called Being-cognition. This has been described elsewhere (7, 8, 9) as cognition of the essence, or is-ness, or intrinsic structure and dynamics, and presently existing potentialities of something or someone or everything. B-cognition (B = being) is in contrast to D-cognition (D = deficiency-need-motivation) or human-centered and self-centered cognition. Just as self-actualization does not mean absence of problems, so does B-cognition as one aspect of it hold certain dangers.

DANGERS OF B-COGNITION

1. *The main danger of B-cognition is of making action impossible or at least indecisive.* B-cognition is without judgment, comparison, condemnation or evaluation. Also it is without decision, because decision is readiness to act, and B-cognition is passive contemplation, appreciation, and non-interfering, i.e., "let-be." So long as one contemplates the cancer or the bacteria, awe-struck, admiring, wondering, passively drinking in the delight of rich understanding, then one does nothing. Anger, fear, desire to improve the situation, to destroy or kill, condemnation, human-centered conclusions ("This is bad for me," or "This is my enemy and will hurt me") are all in abeyance. Wrong or right, good or evil, the past and the future, all have nothing to do with B-cognition, and are at the time inoperative. It is not in-the-world, in the existentialist sense. It is not even human in the ordinary sense either; it is god-like (9), compassionate, non-active, non-interfering, non-doing. It has nothing to do with friends or enemies in the human-centered sense. It is only when the cognition shifts over to D-cognition that action, decision, judgment, punishment, condemnation, planning for the future become possible (5).

The main danger, then, is that B-cognition is at the moment incompatible with action. But since we, most of the time, live in-the-world, *action is necessary* (defensive or offensive action, or selfishly

centered action in the terms of the beholder rather than of the beheld). A tiger has a right to live (as do flies, or mosquitoes, or bacteria) from the point of view of its own "being;" but so also does a human being. And *there* is the unavoidable conflict. The demands of self-actualization may necessitate killing the tiger, even though B-cognition of the tiger is against killing the tiger. That is, even existentially, intrinsic and necessary to the concept of self-actualization, is a certain selfishness and self-protectiveness, a certain promise of necessary violence, even of ferocity. And therefore, self-actualization demands not only B-cognition but also D-cognition as a necessary aspect of itself. This means then that conflict and practical decisiveness and choice are necessarily involved in the concept of self-actualization. This means that fighting, struggle, striving, uncertainty, guilt, regret must also be "necessary" epiphenomena of self-actualization. It means that self-actualization involves both contemplation and action *necessarily*.

Now it is possible in a society that there be a certain division of labor. Contemplators may be exempted from action, if someone else can do the acting. We don't have to butcher our own beefsteaks. Goldstein (3, 4) has pointed this out in a widely generalized form. Just as his brain-impaired patients can live without abstraction and without catastrophic anxiety because other people protect them and do for the patients what they themselves cannot do, so does self-actualization in general, at least in so far as it is a specialized kind, become possible because other people permit it and help it. (My colleague, Walter Toman, in conversations, has also stressed, that well-rounded self-actualization becomes less and less possible in a specialized society.) Einstein, a highly specialized person in his last years, was made possible by his wife, by Princeton, by friends, etc. Einstein could give up versatility, and self-actualize because other people did for him. On a desert island, alone, he *might* have self-actualized in Goldstein's sense ("doing the best with his capacities that the world permits"), but at any rate it could not have been the specialized self-actualization that it was. And maybe, it would have been impossible altogether, i.e., he might have died or become anxious and inferior over his demonstrated incapacities, or he might have slipped back to living at the D-need level.

2. *Another danger of B-cognition and of contemplative understanding is that it may make us less responsible, especially in helping other people. The extreme case is the infant. To "let-be" means to hinder him or*

even to kill him. We also have responsibility for non-infants, adults, animals, the soil, the trees, the flowers. The surgeon who gets lost in peak-wonder at the beautiful tumor may kill his patient. If we admire the flood, we don't build the dam. And this is true not only for the other people who suffer from the results of non-action, but also for the contemplator himself, since he must surely feel guilty at the bad effects upon others of his contemplation and non-action. (He *must* feel guilty because he "loves" them in one way or another; he is love-identified with his "brothers," and this means care for *their* self-actualization, which their death or suffering would cut off.)

The best examples of this dilemma are found in the teacher's attitude toward his students, the parent's attitude toward his children, and the therapist's attitude toward his patients. Here it is easy to see that some degree of B-cognition or B-love is absolutely necessary for the relationship to be a relationship-of-its-own-kind. But we must also face the necessities that come from the teacher's (parent's, therapist's) responsibility in fostering growth, i.e., the problems of setting limits, of discipline, of punishment, of *not* gratifying, of deliberately being the frustrator, of being able to arouse and endure hostility, etc.

3. *Overlapping inhibition of action, and loss of responsibility is fatalism*, i.e., "What will be will be. The world is as it is. It is determined. I can do nothing about it." This is a loss of voluntarism, of free will, a bad theory of determinism, and is certainly harmful to everybody's growth and self-actualization.

4. *Inactive contemplation will almost necessarily be misunderstood by others who suffer from it*. They will think it to be lack of love, of concern, of compassion. This will not only stop growth toward self-actualization in them, but may also send them backwards in the growth incline since it can "teach" them that the world is bad, and that people are bad. As a consequence, their love, respect and trust in people will regress. This means then worsening the world especially for children and adolescents and weak adults. They interpret "let-be" as neglect, or lack of love, or even hatred, and sadism.

5. *Pure contemplation involves, as a special case of the above, not writing, not helping, not teaching*. The Buddhists distinguish the Pratyekabuddha, who wins enlightenment only for himself, independently of others, from the Bodhisattva who, having attained enlightenment, yet feels that his own salvation is imperfect so long as others are unenlightened. For the sake of his own self-actualization, we may

say, he must turn away from the bliss of B-cognition in order to help others and teach them (2).

Was Buddha's enlightenment a purely personal, private possession? Or did it also necessarily belong to others, to the world? Writing and teaching, it is true, are often (not always) steps back from bliss or ecstasy. It means giving up heaven to help others get there. Is the Zen Buddhist correct, or the Taoist, who says, "As soon as you talk about it, it no longer exists, and is no longer true" (i.e., since the *only* way to experience it is to experience it, and anyway words could never describe it, since it is ineffable)?

Of course there is some right on both sides. (That is why it is an existential dilemma, eternal, unsolvable.) If I find an oasis which other people could share, shall I enjoy it myself or save their lives by leading them there? If I find a Yosemite which is beautiful partly because it is quiet and non-human and private, shall I keep it or make it into a National Park for millions of people who, because they are millions, will make it less than it was or even destroy it? Shall I share my private beach with them and make it thereby unprivate? How right is the Indian who respects life and hates active killing and thereby lets the cows get fat while the babies die? What degree of enjoyment of food may I allow myself in a poor country where the starving children look on? Ought I starve too? There is no nice, clean, theoretical, *a priori* answer. It is a practical problem with compromise as the only answer. No matter what answer is given, there must be some regret at least. Self-actualization must be selfish; and it must be unselfish. And so there must be choice, conflict, and the possibility of regret.

Maybe the principle of division of labor (tied in with the principle of individual constitutional differences) could help toward a better answer (although never toward a perfect answer). As in various religious orders some feel the call to "selfish self-actualization" and some feel the call to "doing-good self-actualization," maybe the society could ask, as a favor (thereby relieving guilt), that some people become "selfish self-actualizers," pure contemplators. The society could assume that it would be worth their while to support such people for the good example they would set others, the inspiration, and the demonstration of the possibility that pure, out-of-the-world contemplation can exist. We do this for a few of our great scientists, artists, writers and philosophers. We relieve them of teaching, writing and

social responsibilities not only for "pure" reasons, but also in a gamble that this will pay off for us as well.

This dilemma also complicates the problem of "real guilt" as I have called it, to differentiate it from neurotic guilt. Real guilt comes from not being true to yourself, to your own fate in life, to your own intrinsic nature.

But here we raise the further question, "What kind of guilt comes from being true to yourself but not to others?" As we have seen, being true to yourself may at times intrinsically and necessarily be in conflict with being true to others. A choice is both possible and necessary. And the choice can only rarely be completely satisfactory. If, as Goldstein teaches, you must be true to others in order to be true to yourself (3, 4), and as Adler states, social interest is an intrinsic defining aspect of mental health (1), then the world must be sorry as the self-actualizing person sacrifices some portion of himself in order to save another person. If you must *first* be true to yourself, then the world must be sorry over the unwritten manuscripts, the paintings thrown away, the lessons we could have learned, from our pure (and selfish) contemplators who have no thought for helping us.

6. *B-cognition can lead to indiscriminating acceptance, to blurring of everyday values, to loss of taste, to too great tolerance.* This is so because every person, seen from the viewpoint of his own Being exclusively, is seen as perfect in his own kind. Evaluation, condemnation, disapproval, criticism, comparison are all then inapplicable and beside the point. While unconditional acceptance is a *sine qua non* for the therapist, let us say, or for the lover, the teacher, the parent, the friend, it is clearly not alone sufficient for the judge, the policeman, or the administrator.

We already recognize a certain incompatibility in the two interpersonal attitudes implied here. Most psychotherapists will refuse to assume any disciplining or punishing function for their patients. And many executives, administrators, or generals will refuse to take on any therapeutic or personal responsibility for the people to whom they give orders and whom they may have to discharge.

The dilemma for almost all people is posed by the necessity for being both "therapist" and "policeman" at various times. And we may expect that the more fully-human person, taking both roles more seriously, will probably be more troubled by this dilemma than is the average person, who is not even aware that there *is* any dilemma.

Perhaps for this reason, perhaps for others, self-actualizing people so far studied are generally able to combine the two functions well, by being most often compassionate and understanding and yet also more capable of righteous indignation than the average person. A study, nearing completion in our laboratory, indicates that secure college students give vent to their disapproval and anger more whole-heartedly and with less uncertainty than do insecure subjects.

Unless the capacity for compassion-through-understanding is supplemented by the capacity for anger, disapproval, and indignation, the result may be a flattening of all affect, a blandness in reaction to people, an inability to be indignant, and a loss of discrimination of and taste for real capacity, skill, superiority, and excellence. This may turn out to be an occupational hazard for professional B-cognizers if we can take at face value the widespread impression that many psychotherapists seem rather too neutral and unreactive, too bland, too even, too un-fiery in their social relations.

7. *B-cognition of another person amounts to perceiving him as "perfect" in a certain sense which he can very easily misinterpret.* To be unconditionally accepted, to be loved utterly, to be approved of completely, can be, as we know, wonderfully strengthening and growth promoting, highly therapeutic and psychagogic. And yet, we must now be aware, this attitude can also be misperceived as an intolerable demand to live up to unreal and perfectionistic expectations. The more unworthy and imperfect he feels, and the more he misinterprets the words "perfect" and "acceptance," the more he will feel this attitude to be a burden.

Actually of course, the word "perfect" has two meanings, one for the realm of Being, the other for the realm of Deficiency, of striving, and of becoming. In B-cognition, "perfection" means totally realistic perceiving *and* acceptance of all that the person is. In D-cognition, "perfection" implies necessarily mistaken perceiving and illusion. In the first sense, every living human being is perfect; in the second sense, no person is perfect, nor ever can be. That is to say, we may see him as B-perfect while he may think that we perceive him as D-perfect and, of course, may be made uncomfortable, unworthy and guilty thereby, as if he were fooling us.

We may reasonably deduce that the more capable a person is of B-cognition, the more he is able to accept and enjoy being B-cognized. We may also expect that the possibility of such misunderstanding may

often pose a delicate problem of tactics upon the B-cognizer, the one who can totally understand and accept another.

8. *Possible over-esthetitism is the last tactical problem entailed by B-cognition that I have space to speak of here.* The esthetic reaction to life often conflicts intrinsically with the practical and with the moral reaction to life (the old conflict between style and content). Depicting ugly things beautifully is one possibility. Another is the inept, unesthetic presentation of the true or the good or even the beautiful. (We leave aside the true-good-beautiful presentation of the true-good-beautiful as presenting no problem.) Since this dilemma has been much debated throughout history, I confine myself here merely to pointing out that it also involves the problem of social responsibility of the more mature for the less mature who may confuse acceptance with approval. A moving and beautiful presentation of, e.g., homosexuality or crime or irresponsibility, arising out of deep understanding, may be misunderstood as inciting to emulation. For the B-cognizer who lives in a world of frightened and easily misled people, this is an additional burden of responsibility to bear.

EMPIRICAL FINDINGS

What has been the relation between B-cognition and D-cognition in my self-actualizing subjects (6, 9)? How have they related contemplation to action? Though these questions did not occur to me at the time in this form, I can report retrospectively the following impressions. First of all, these subjects were far more capable of B-cognition and pure contemplation and understanding than the average population, as stated at the outset. This seems to be a matter of degree, since everyone seems to be capable of occasional B-cognition, pure contemplation, peak-experience, etc. Secondly, they were also uniformly capable of effective action and D-cognition. It must be admitted that this may be an epiphenomenon of selecting subjects in the United States; or even that it may be a by-product of the fact that the selector of the subjects was an American. In any case I must report that I ran across no Buddhist-monk-like people in my searches. Thirdly, my retrospective impression is that these most fully-human people, a good deal of the time, live what we could call an ordinary life—shopping, eating, being polite, going to the dentist, thinking of money, meditating profoundly over a choice between black shoes or brown shoes, going to silly movies, reading ephemeral literature. They

may be expected ordinarily to be annoyed with bores, to be shocked by misdeeds, etc., even though this reaction may be less intense, or more tinged by compassion. Peak-experiences, B-cognitions, pure contemplation, whatever their relative frequency may be, seem, in terms of absolute numbers, to be exceptional experiences even for self-actualizing people. This seems true even though it is also true that more matured people live all or most of the time at a higher level in some other ways, e.g., more clearly differentiating means from ends, profound from superficial; being generally more perspicuous, more spontaneous and expressive, more profoundly related to the ones they love, etc.

Therefore the problem posed by the title of this paper is more an ultimate than an immediate one, more a theoretical problem than a practical one. And yet these dilemmas are important for more than the theoretical effort to define the possibilities and the limits of human nature. Because they are also breeders of real guilt, of real conflict, of what we might almost call "real psychopathology," we must continue to struggle with them as personal problems as well.

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