

Chapter Eleven

WHAT IS NORMAL?

*The Convergence of Sociology,
Anthropology, and Psychiatry*

"... culture consists in the sum total of efforts we make to avoid being unhappy . . . defence systems against anxiety are the stuff that [it] is made of . . ."

GEZA ROHEIM

1962

ANTHROPOLOGISTS were never very popular at stuffy gatherings because they had a way of puncturing self-righteousness: for almost every timeless truth that one thought dear to the human heart, the anthropologist would name a tribe or a people who did not hold that truth dear—who may even have scorned it. Cultural relativity is a pitiless weapon precisely because it sets our hero-systems up on end. It takes our ideals and mocks them—even worse, it takes our ideas of what is normal, everyday behavior and it undermines them. Anthropologists tell us that a hero in one system might be a bum in another; a woman who gives away her life possessions on the streets of New York and is put away for it, might be a saint in New Delhi; an Australian aborigine who nonchalantly urinates while talking with someone he meets had better not try it in New York. And so on, and on—the examples and anecdotes would be almost endless.

Note to this chapter is on page 206.

As we might expect, the grossest differences from our modern Western definition of "normal" behavior would be found among those societies that lived in a dual universe. They would tend to value experiences in the invisible world, and a talent for such experiences. And so we find that auditory hallucinations can be normal in a culture where one is expected to hear periodically the voice of God; visual hallucinations can be normal where, as among the Plains Indians, one's Guardian Spirit manifested itself in a vision; or where, as among South Italian Catholics, the appearance of the Virgin Mary is a blessed event. Spirit possession can be a great talent even though we consider it psychiatrically a form of dissociation. What we call "hysterical symptoms" are thought to be signs of special gifts, powers that come to lodge in one's body and show themselves by speaking strange tongues through the mouth of the one who is possessed, and so on. Primitive societies may give their highest rewards to such people, as they do to the shaman whose social function it is to travel into the invisible world and cope with the spirits there. No matter that the shaman may be labelled "psychotic" by our standard psychiatric textbooks, his private experiences of trances, delusions, hallucinations can find a perfect place in tribal life, since all mysterious cause-and-effect, all vital power, lies in the dimension of the invisible. He is an admirable performer in his cultural plot because his very privatizations are valued and utilized in spirit cures for the other members of his society. Or, consider a different kind of example: the Hindu mauni who never speaks, and who might well be diagnosed as in a state of catatonic withdrawal in a particular case—but who, because of his spiritual attainment, has an admired part to play in the Hindu cultural plot.

Little wonder that when psychiatrists set out to study mental illness in strange cultures, our understanding of these matters did not advance. Was mental illness entirely relative to the kind of hero-system a society lived under? It didn't seem possible, and on closer look, it wasn't. Cultural fictions can provide parts for the oddest types of behaviors, for the

"queerest" people, but every society has individuals it cannot tolerate. Sometimes the deviant person represents an elemental and basic threat, as when he begins to destroy everyone else's garden. And so the nearest tribesman merely clubs him over the head—perhaps a bit harder each time. One of the characteristics of primitive and traditional societies was that they lacked the social machinery for dealing with mentally ill people—they couldn't lock them up in a hospital ward. This tended to disguise the fact that there was illness, and that cultures cannot accommodate with ingenuity all types of deviance. The noted anthropologist Ralph Linton once observed that when the French opened their first mental hospital on Madagascar, natives brought relatives happily out of the bush and handed them over to the French instead of putting them to death themselves, as had been the custom. For people whose life is hard, extreme eccentricity may represent a threat to the survival of all; dangerous psychotics are a universal liability.

But this is a sort of bare minimum global standard of psychosis, everyone can agree on it. It is when we leave it and go into the larger part of the spectrum of abnormality that our simple picture changes, anthropologists and psychiatrists begin to fall out and disagree. And in these disputes the psychiatrists are easily winning the ascendancy because the anthropologists are simply being done out of their subject matter. What I mean is that one of the characteristics of our times is that industrial civilization is spreading all over the world. This is bringing a certain uniformity of culture that is tending to standardize notions of what is abnormal, and tending to set up institutions to diagnose it and segregate it. We are discrediting the invisible world and making people feel uncomfortable for having talents that permit them to enter it, we are refusing to reward such talents as primitives once did. Not only are traditional societies passing, but psychiatrists from these societies are being trained in Western medical centers, and with few notable exceptions they return to their own areas armed with the Western psychiatric-textbook-bible. We might say

that mental illness, like spying by a foreign power, tends to grow as we increase the numbers of people paid to ferret it out. With standardization of industrial culture, and with standardization of medical-psychiatric perceptions, we are narrowing and bureaucratizing the spectrum of normality. What-~~*~~ever is not tailored to success in a rational, technical world, is coming to be considered unacceptable performance. If you put a premium on steady employment and the wage-work day, you can "uncover" many people who cannot fit themselves into such schedules: a rural family can easily carry along members who cannot be self-supporting for one reason or another; and if work opportunities in a backward area are irregular, then certain types of aimless people that we may diagnose "schizophrenic" go "undetected." I do not mean that the diagnoses of retarded and mentally crippled individuals are wrong, but only that the way of life of traditional society often sheltered most of them, and when that way of life begins to break up, these people begin to emerge as genuine social liabilities. In a word, we are setting up a standard game which more narrowly specifies the characteristics of the players we will tolerate.

The whole thing seems very forbidding and foreboding. Especially when we read regularly that anyone who protests about things in the Soviet Union is quickly whisked away to the booby-hatch. Is bureaucratic psychiatry in the service of industrial culture and nationalism going to have the ascendancy over the other sciences of human behavior? Is the powerful anthropological tool of cultural relativity to remain only a source of cocktail-chatter and anecdotes? Can't relativity give us the basic, liberating insights into man that it at first promised? Show us how our conventional notions of normal and abnormal are restricting our experience, narrowing our perceptions, preventing us from being freely inventive about our social institutions? The answer is that relativity can, but before we come to the end of it, in this chapter, we will appreciate why we have generally been so willing to tuck ourselves automatically under psychiatric textbook rubrics: to keep

from learning the things about ourselves that are the most threatening of all.

A Sociological Perspective on Abnormality

The first question we have to ask is what is really going on in society—what makes people seem queer and wholly unacceptable to us? And in order to answer this question we shall have to pick up our discussion from Chapter Nine. We are asking now about general “queerness” remember, not about people who are flagrantly and destructively psychotic. We have seen that no matter how a culture may want to, or have to try to, there are some extreme deviants whom it just cannot accommodate if it is going to survive in the daily food quest. The ability of some primitive cultures to accommodate the “textbook” psychotic types of shaman is simply an extreme case of adaptability. But what about the broad spectrum of others we call “mentally ill”—what do they have, or lack, that makes it inconvenient for us to accommodate them in society?

One of the major things we concluded in Chapter Nine was that the self exists in a world of social performance. People have to be able to play in their social ceremonials predictably and well. Otherwise we are all endangered because the social encounter is where we expose our vital self-esteem to possible undermining by others. We saw that the hopeful enjoinder that animates social life is a whispered, “Let us all protect our fragile selves so that we can carry on the business of living.” If the plot does not have competent stage personalities it cannot go on.

Now, when we talk about someone who is “socially awkward” this is precisely what we mean—someone who was poorly socialized, poorly trained as a performer. There are many subtle ways in which this poor training can show itself. Sometimes it is a matter of not being callous enough, being too sensitive, and so upsetting the straightforward role playing that makes social life so effortless. In every situation there are

certain stimuli which must be excluded from perception. A single definition of the context for action facilitates forward momentum. Some individuals have private needs and personal susceptibilities which contaminate the smooth flow of face-saving ceremony. The person we often diagnose as “schizophrenic” has unusual sensitivities to others—too much so; he sees intentions behind intentions, wishes beyond wishes, shades within shades; he is simply overperceptive and cannot shut out ambiguities in a situation. So he may, for example, be upset over the fact that his interlocutor will be upset when he notices that his fly has been open. All the while he is talking he may radiate a sensitivity to the interlocutor's genital area, and communication bogs down in all kinds of unwanted overtones.

People who have these heightened sensitivities, this inability to exclude perceptions, tend to be diffuse, vague, slippery: they don't seem solidly in front of us, don't oppose us with a convincing self with which we can transact. By the peculiar logic of social ceremonial, our interlocutor who does not have solid self-regard is a threat to us. Cooley noted this long ago:

“There is . . . a culpable sort of self-dreading cowardice, not at all uncommon with sensitive people, which shrinks from developing and asserting a just “I” because of the stress of self-feeling—of vanity, uncertainty, and mortification—which is foreseen and shunned” (1922, p. 226).

In other words, the obligation of demeanor is to have a self. Even while we insist that a man be humble, we expect this humility, as Cooley observes, to imply self-respect. Humility with self-respect means that the individual acknowledges something superior to himself, even while he believes himself to have value. Thereby, we can have faith in a hierarchy of excellence and be assured that life contains degrees of good and bad. But when an individual crumbles before everything, and has obviously no belief in himself as an object of value, his

interlocutor is pervaded by an uncomfortable feeling: the timeless standards upon which we rely for meaning are not being upheld. An individual who fails to put forth a self that others can value, by an oversensitivity to the performance, testifies to a primary failure in socialization. Somehow the child has not learned to get his self-rights respected; he has not obtained requisite appreciation from the adults around him for his discrete social self. He has nothing to give to society, because he has nothing to put forth. Cooley quotes Shakespeare to the effect that self-love is not so vile a sin as self-neglecting. If you lack pride you have no claim to social honor. There must be *actors* in our play if we are to feel its meaning, and not simply a stage propped with non-entities. The schizophrenic is often one who has never learned the simple basis for the possession of real power to enhance the lives of others, by forcefully bluffing the social ceremonial. If he failed to get self-esteem within his family he carries this same failure out into society. From the outset of his social life outside the family he does not have the talents necessary to give meaning to the cultural game, to inflate and sustain others by providing proper conviction and forceful cues for them. Being a poor player at the start he never can feel comfortable with a skill he doesn't have. Every social encounter becomes a painful stimulus to an acute self-consciousness. And so the individual may withdraw into himself more and more, since he gets no satisfactory image of himself in society. When he does step out into society he will do so on its terms and never on his own, he always fears to claim his just share of the social mana which everyone is generating. And this is the one claim that we want to see—we want others to claim a share so that we can feel there is something worth claiming. A young schizophrenic may even fail to lay confident claim to the power of a simple greeting. One of them, beginning his army career, quickly signaled his "queerness" to the other soldiers. He learned that a simple greeting used by all never failed to elicit a friendly response, and he followed others around, even to the latrine, repeating the greeting again and again.

Another learned, perhaps for the first time, a sure ritual of presentation, a reliable way to engage another in social intercourse without eliciting a hostile response: one had only to offer a cigarette. But even this act has its appropriateness, and the others quickly became embarrassed by his incessant offerings of handfuls of cigarettes, often at inappropriate times.

So we can understand just where the threat of the person we often diagnose "schizophrenic" lies: by failing to sustain a proper self he risks revealing that the self is merely an attitude of self-regard, a learned set of arbitrary conventions designed to facilitate symbolic action. In the more extreme forms of schizophrenic psychosis the threat is the same, but more open and direct: the average person cannot derive conviction that the plot he is acting in is unambiguously meaningful, when his interlocutor is salivating, defacating, or uttering mysterious gibberish. What we call the psychiatric syndromes are, from a sociological point of view, theatrical monstrosities to whom we cannot expose our fragile self-esteem. The manic seems to make a frantic bid for word power, and succeeds only in creating massive discomfort: "Oh, there's the doctor who was so nice to me! Look, everyone; there's the most wonderful doctor in the world. Oh, I love him, I do love him, he is so superwonderful. Here, let me straighten your glasses, so you can look as handsome as you are wonderful." The depressed person actually shows up our whole social ceremonial by choosing to opt out of it: it doesn't interest him, its motivations are meaningless to him, its gratifications totally uninspiring. Probably the most troublesome illness of all, from a ceremonial point of view, is the person who renounces all zest for life in the game we are so dedicatedly playing; it unnerves us that someone can be indifferent to everything that we cherish.

More benignly, but just as seriously, we will have to call anyone "abnormal" if he touches us at times and in places where we do not feel it proper to be touched, when we feel we have the right to remain separate and aloof—in fact, the Anglo-Saxon may feel that the Italian or Greek is less than

"civilized" for this very reason. We will have to signal as "queer" someone who submerges us with words and does not allow us to uphold our end of the conversation; or whose verbosity drowns out the interludes of silence so necessary to an impression of sustained meaning—as we saw in Chapter Nine. And we should at least have to avoid and exclude as much as we can those harmless individuals who play such a shadowy and unconvincing part that our own action bogs down into indecisiveness.

For all of these reasons we can understand that the sociological view of mental illness will depart radically from the traditional psychiatric one. It will center on the self, and on performance, as the primary deficits of the one we call mentally ill. As Erving Goffman so boldly concluded, the label "mental illness" would refer, simply, to those individuals "who are the least ready to project a sustainable self":

"One of the bases upon which mental hospitals throughout the world segregate their patients is degree of easily apparent 'mental illness'. By and large this means that patients are graded according to the degree to which they violate ceremonial rules of social intercourse" (1956, p. 497).

Those—to sum up—who most directly undermine the mutually sustaining fiction of social ceremonial, and who thus prevent the peculiar type of self-justifying action necessary to the continual anxiety-buffering needs of the human animal. It is these individuals who frustrate, by their ineptitude, the best efforts of the other *metteurs en scène* to make the show go on. They have not succeeded in masking the purely private in their makeup, and so submerge the social context with unwanted privatizations. These individuals are for the most part natural histories of poor socialization—inept performers obliged to make their way in a purely theatrical world. As such, they either prevent the show from going on or else they take the joy out of our best efforts at sustaining a flawless, total production.

The Fragile Fiction

At this point someone might be tempted to object: "But is this deficit so terrible—is the play really the thing, isn't there some deeper level of compassion or humanity on which we react to those who are mentally ill?" The answer is, for the most part, no. Running through our whole discussion, again and always, is one basic underlying message: the utter vitality of our social fictions, and the deadly seriousness of our efforts to sustain and reinforce them. The world of human aspiration is largely fictitious, and if we do not understand this we understand nothing about man. It is a largely symbolic creation by an ego-controlled animal that permits action in a psychological world, a symbolic-behavioral world removed from the boundness of the present moment, from the immediate stimuli which enslave all lower organisms. Man's freedom is a fabricated freedom, and he pays a price for it. He must at all times defend the utter fragility of his delicately constituted fiction, deny its artificiality. That's why we can speak of "joint theatrical staging," "ritual formulas for social ceremonial," and "enhancing of cultural meaning," with utmost seriousness. There is no cynicism implied here, no derision, nor any pity. We must realize simply that this is how *this* animal must act if he is to function as *this* animal. Man's fictions are not superfluous creations that could be "put aside" so that the "more serious" business of life could continue. The flesh-and-blood action of lower animals is no more infused with seriousness than is the ethereal symbolic conduct with which man organizes his dominion over nature. We may deal with flimsier coin, but, like the abstractness of high finance, the business is even the more serious for it.

The most astonishing thing of all, about man's fictions, is not that they have from prehistoric times hung like a flimsy canopy over his social world, but that he should have come to discover them at all. It is one of the most remarkable achievements of thought, of self-scrutiny, that the most anxiety-prone

animal of all could come to *see through himself* and discover the fictional nature of his action world. Future historians will probably record it as one of the great, liberating breakthroughs of all time, and it happened in ours.

Despair and the Death of Meaning

Our exploration of human nature so far has uncovered several paradoxes: for every great advantage that his nature gives to man there is an underside, a cost that he must pay. Now we are ready for the biggest paradox of all, the full price that man has to pay for his nature. It is a terrible paradox, really, and it goes so directly to the heart of the human condition that most people cannot fully savor it even after reading and reflecting about it; usually something more is needed, a certain openness of the emotions, the experience of a genuine and thoroughgoing disillusionment with this world. Then and only then can a person really see, without a veil, the full face of his fate.

We have been saying that social life is a ceremonial that has to be flawless so that man can disguise his fictions and justify them; the last thing he can admit to himself is that his life-ways are arbitrary: this is one of the reasons that people often show derisive glee and scorn over the "strange" customs of other lands—it is a defense against the awareness that his own way of life may be just as fundamentally contrived as any other. One culture is always a potential menace to another because it is a living example that life can go on heroically within a value framework totally alien to one's own. Now we must ask the question that peels away just this defense, this most intimate cover over man's self-righteousness: Why is it so vital to deny that culture is fictional—why do we not want to recognize the fictional nature of human meaning? The answer will be easy for us to grasp at this point—at least on an intellectual level:

If you reveal the fictional nature of culture you deprive life of its heroic meaning because the only way one can func-

tion as a hero is within the symbolic fiction. If you strip away the fiction man is reduced to his basic physical existence—he becomes an animal like any other animal. And this is a regression that is no longer possible for him. The tragic bind that man is peculiarly in—the basic paradox of his existence—is that unlike other animals he has an *awareness of himself as a unique individual* on the one hand; and on the other he is the only animal in nature who *knows he will die*. As Laura Perls so vividly put it, man is suspended between these two poles: one pole gives him a feeling of overwhelming importance and the other gives him a feeling of fear and frustration (1970, p. 128). Lower animals are spared both the burden of importance at having emerged as sharp individualities (remember our discussion in Chapter Three); as well as the burden of the knowledge of their own finitude. But man must live the acuteness of the contradiction: he is an emergent life that does not seem to have any more meaning than a non-emergent life—in fact, that seems *all the more senseless* to have emerged at all, since it is equally mortal. And so *despair and the death of meaning are carried by man in the basic condition of his humanity*. It is an appalling burden which weighs most heavily, naturally, on those who are unique, most individuated: the geniuses and heroes of history; the pressure of the paradox is so intense in them that they live literally on the brink of distraction—which is what makes them so tormented, so unlike other men, and which gives them such "odd" beliefs: Alexander in his divinity, General Patton in his successive reincarnations, others in an immortality in which their specific talents are preserved. It is an affront to all reason that several billions of years of evolution and a few thousand of history, plus the unique circumstances of an individual life, would create gifts which might have no more reverberation than the ripples off a beaver dam.

The problem of despair can be met only in one way, as we already saw in Chapter Seven: by being a cosmic hero, by making a secure contribution to world-life *even though one may die*. But if the fiction is discredited then one has no way

of triumphing over despair, no way of denying that he is not a hero. The thing that makes the fiction so fragile, so tenuous, so much in need of disguise, protection, reinforcement, is that it is the only rationale one has, the only defense against the despair that is naturally inherent in man's condition. And so we understand the problem. There lurks constantly on the fringes of heroism the doubt and discredit of that heroism. The only way that man could *securely know* that he was a hero would be if he really knew what was going on in evolution on this planet and in the cosmos. If he knew for sure how things were *supposed to come out* and where his part fit into the outcome, then he could relax and accept death because his life would be lived in the Truth of Creation. But this is precisely what he cannot know, can never know. And so the bitter defensiveness of his fictions, the desperation of his pretense of certainty that his cultural hero-system is the true one.

Besides, this pretense begins so early, as we saw in Chapter Six, that it is literally a part of one's muscles, nerves, total organismic formation. It is worth repeating here the whole fruit of modern psychology. That the person's character is built on a denial of anxiety, loss of support, and obliteration. This anxiety stems from the child's smallness, helplessness, felt finitude. He simply does not want to be obliterated and abandoned or remain small and helpless. The symbolic self becomes his means of changing his situation from weakness to strength, and his character develops as a vehicle for this. Character, then, is a reflex of the impossibility of continuing one's early situation. What we call character is really a series of techniques or a style of living, aimed principally at two things: to secure one's material survival; and to deny the fact that one really has no control over his finitude: mutilation, accident, and death lurk at every breath, and this is what one tries to forget. If a person admitted this utter lack of control, let it rise to consciousness, it would drive him to fear and trembling, to the brink of madness. Which is another way of

saying that the person's character is specifically a defense against impotence and the threat of madness.

In order to appreciate this we must understand that for man it is not a question of "control" in any narrow sense but of the inability "to take in hand" the desperate paradox of human life. So far we have talked only about despair, about man not being able to stand the thought of his actual condition. But there is still another side to it, another aspect of the burden. When man emerged into self-consciousness he could no longer, like other animals, *take creation for granted*. The miracle of created nature, and of his own creation, also became a potential problem for him. He would now have to bear the awareness of the miraculous instead of merely *bovinely pulsing in time with the rest of nature*. But, still being an animal, he still had to live like one. Again a terrifying paradox, and a superhuman burden. One direct way to counter despair would be to give in completely to the thrill of the miraculous, but this is as self-negating as to admit despair because then the animal couldn't function; he would be rendered impotent: we are just not constructed to function practically in the everyday world and at the same time to be overawed by the miraculous. Only the shaman can contrive it because his tribe has fused the two worlds, and so they support him. In our society the shaman's descendant, the saint—who is not much good for our "efficient" world—has to be sheltered in the artificial atmosphere of the monastery. Which explains something that often puzzles us, why children lose their natural sense of wonder so easily, why they "abdicate their ecstasy" as Mallarmé put it, and as Traherne so poignantly recorded it. The answer is that they *must* abdicate it. The first awesome miracle, the first *mysterium tremendum* and *fascinans*, the object that would paralyze the child if he gave in fully to the wonder of it is—as Coleridge so beautifully wrote and understood—the mother. And so the first struggle against the power of the miraculous takes place by learning to conciliate and manipulate the parents, cut them down to earthly

size. We might say that the child becomes social partly by triumphing over the miracle of the parents. One reason the sense of conscience is so binding is that the child cannot ever completely shut out even the passive power of the parents, their power as miraculous objects of creation; and so his ability to act independently is undermined by them, by the concrete image of their faces. This is what gives man a "natural neurosis," as we put it in Chapter Six. (Cf. Maslow (1968) on the dangers of what he calls "being-cognition," which is very much what I am talking about.)

All of which supports our contention about the inhibiting power of the miraculous in general. By the time the child grows up he has already banished from consciousness the sense that to have been created at all is an inexplicable miracle; he no longer carries the superhuman burden of the miraculous, no longer feels the weight of having emerged on this planet without knowing why. He has thus exiled from awareness that which would prevent him from acting and living with a minimal animal equanimity, which would reduce him to a wide-eyed creature trembling in a waking trance and gazing toward the heavens. In order to function as a man in the world of men we must reassert enough animal equanimity to ignore both awarenesses: of despair as well as of miracle. There is no way out for us, we are truly "fallen" creatures: we cannot be wholly animals, serenely living miracles, or wholly angels joyfully heralding them, but we must be men earning our bread by the sweat of our brow and salting it with our tears.

Kierkegaard is still contemporary because he understood better than anyone before or since that a man's character was a defense against impotence and the threat of madness; in fact, he is more than contemporary because most people will still not admit this basic truth. Yet modern psychology has confirmed Kierkegaard's analysis and deepened it. Erich Fromm said that all human strivings are an attempt to avoid insanity in the face of the contradictions of man's existence, all man's passions are an attempt to relieve the terrible paradox of his nature, the existential dilemma of what we might call

his individuality-within-finitude. Or, as Rank had so much more fully and incisively analyzed it earlier, the *polar* twin fear of man everywhere: the fear of emerging into life and the fear of descending into death. In the face of this basic dilemma, Fromm mused that "the real problem of mental life is not why some people become insane, but rather why most avoid insanity" (1955, p. 34). And he went on to show how characters vary because people choose different ways to relieve themselves of this existential paradox. Some refuse to emerge as distinct persons, which is one way of softening the burden of individuality and also the helplessness in the face of death: we call them oral-passive, dependent types; they live tucked-into others, embedded. Others blunt the paradox by burying themselves in the forms of things, by so carefully, correctly and dedicatedly playing the hero-game of their society that they never risk uniqueness. We call them obsessive-compulsive types: by splitting hairs they control reality to avoid being sucked-up by it, they try to banish the idea of accident, obliteration, death.

Today these views can no longer seem brash and unjustifiably reductionistic: the literature is there for all to see, from the great Kierkegaard through James, Freud, Adler, Reich, Rank, Schachtel, Fromm, Norman Brown, Robert Lifton, and dozens of others. They helped us understand why growth and change were so difficult, even impossible for most people. The challenge of growth and change always goes back to one's earliest childhood, to his basic character. In order to grow he needs to renounce precisely that form of comfort and salvation that have become inseparable from his deepest values as these are grounded in the muscles and nerves of his organism. The Oedipus Complex is the protective umbrella which one feels he needs in order to make life liveable and worthwhile: the easy nurture, the secure gratifications, the convenient lies about life. The person has to renounce precisely that which he feels at least able to renounce—that which is as dear as life itself because it has become the indispensable condition for his life.¹ We can understand, then, that "getting over one's

Oedipus" is not a matter of simple reflection about his early family life, or even bringing to consciousness some of the most distasteful events of his childhood, or least of all a hard, rational scrutiny of one's motives. It is, as the Stoics and Shakespeare had already taught us, the going through hell of a lonely and racking rebirth where one throws off the lendings of culture, the costumes that fit us for life's roles, the masks and panoplies of our standardized heroisms, to stand alone and nude facing the howling elements as oneself—a trembling animal element. In the Christian view of a great poet like Charles Williams one cannot even begin to be an adult unless one has gone through the most heartbreaking baptism of all: the banishment of one's self-respect to Hell; or in our words, the disintegration of the self-esteem that sustains one's character. And as Camus and the existentialists have reminded us, such a growth crisis has elements of a suicide crisis because if it is authentic, one's life is thereby already almost ended and it would be but a small step to completing the ending physically; suicide may be a real temptation at this time because one has no strength left, no rooting in a sustaining source of power: when, like Lear, a person has thrown off his cultural lendings, he is as weak and helpless as a newborn babe. The question of personality growth and change, if it is deep-going and authentic, is usually whether one will end in madness or suicide or whether one will, somehow, be able to marshal the strength to take the first few new steps in a strange world.

Psychoanalysis and Society

It is over a dozen years since I read Roheim's famous definition of culture: that it was composed of the mechanisms of defense of an infant "afraid of being alone in the dark." I remember being repulsed by what I considered blatant psychoanalytic reductionism, and when noted authorities in anthropology pooh-poohed Roheim I was relieved. Surely

culture was more than a simple reflex of childhood anxieties, surely the grandiose structure of human arts, sciences, religions, architecture, technology, represented a quality of creativity and aspiration that left the experiences of a child's first five years way behind.

Well, there is no point here in re-opening this dispute in anthropology and parading out reflections on a matter that now seems to have largely settled itself. But since this matter touches the very heart of our discussion let me try to sum it up simply. With the discrediting of Freud's theory of sex, Roheim's attempt to reduce culture to aspects of childhood sexuality, or make inferences from the favorite sexual postures in a given society, could not go very far. More important still, there are urges in man that are not covered by childhood anxieties or the standardized beliefs of society. There is a sense of curiosity and mystery, a spontaneous natural delight, a stirring toward beauty and the unfolding of beauty, a pulse of hope that draws on natural wonderment—these things cannot be reduced to a reflex of fear. Gothic cathedrals, Rembrandt's paintings, Beethoven's music, Einstein's formulas, Augustine's religion—these draw on the spectrum of mystery and awe to which a part of human emotion responds, and they represent the urge to creative triumph over man's limitations. Of course there is always a large element of childhood conditioning in even the greatest genius, and psychoanalysts of the stature of Erikson are able to give us a fascinating portrait of the mainsprings of a Luther: like everyone else he is responding to the world largely out of the force of his conditioned urges. But with the possible exception of Erikson, these analyses—for all that they reveal to us about how much of a reflex of our life histories even the most creative of us may be—stop short of full satisfaction, as Rank, more than anyone, taught us decades ago (1932). Psychoanalysis is, after all, the science of the conditioned and not of the spontaneous, as Freud himself admitted. It does not deal with intuition, with spontaneous emotion, with the pull of man toward awe and

infinity, with the impulsion of all of these in an energetic will that strives for a creative solution of a man's conditioned situation.

But having said this the matter is not dismissed with easy satisfaction: man cannot rise with simple, natural yearnings to triumph over the real determinism of his early years. There is a large truth in Roheim and in the whole psychoanalytic approach to society, if we read them broadly. The general character of a man, his life-style, his orientation in the world, the quality and scope of his perceptions—these are an attempt to deny his peculiar burdens. His character is his style of living the human paradox of individuality-within-finitude. Since the child is partly conditioned before he can manipulate symbols, he is formed without being able to put any distance between himself and what is happening to him: he cannot back off from his experiences, get a symbolic grip on them. The result is that the person acts out his hero-style automatically and uncritically for the rest of his life—for the most part. Since his choice of mechanisms of defense, of a style of life, is the child's adaptation to superior powers, this choice does not reflect his own real feelings, his own true perceptions. In fact, it would be difficult to determine what these might be since, in large part, the child was not given the chance to have them. This means that the child's denial of his burdens is "dishonest," not fully under his control, unknown to him: his character, in a word, is an *urgent lie* about the nature of reality. His whole life is an attempt to "be cool" about his lie, to try to appear as though what he did made good, logical sense, and was the authentic expression of himself.

If we agree that this much of psychoanalytic thought is true (and I don't see how anyone could today deny it on scientific grounds) then it becomes easy to agree that Roheim was largely right about culture. Culture would reflect the particular style that a society adopts to deny despair, the particular ways it lies to itself about the nature of reality. The experiences of childhood directly affect that style, not

in any one-to-one reductionist way, but as part of a general, shared orientation to a segment of reality. If everybody lives roughly the same lies about the same things there is no one to call them liars: they jointly establish their own sanity and call themselves "normal." This total cultural style of denying despair is easier to see on simpler levels of social organization and in smaller societies where everyone is doing much the same thing. Freud's insight into primitives, that they were obsessive-compulsives, is true for many primitive societies. They are obsessive-compulsive on the invisible level of causality because this is where they are desperately trying to control things in order to hide despair.

It remained for Freud's followers to see that modern Western culture, in most of its forms, was just as obsessive-compulsive as some primitives: only now on the level of the visible world and not the invisible one. Wilhelm Reich saw that our whole culture was sick, and Erich Fromm went on to coin that beautiful, liberating yet empirical scientific expression: "the pathology of normalcy." Otto Rank held that all our human problems arose from man's ceaseless attempts to impose his fictions on the natural world, to over-control it. It was a great break-through in human self-consciousness, this development out of Freud, because it meant that man could now bring under critical scrutiny not only personal lies about the nature of reality but whole "social lies." We came to realize that not only is there a "*folie à deux*" but there can be a "*folie à deux cents millions*." Not only can there be, but there is, which is what recently moved the Nobel laureate Albert Szent-Gyorgi to condemn the whole species in a book aptly titled *The Crazy Ape*. Modern man is denying his finitude with the same dedication as the ancient Egyptian pharaohs, but now whole masses are playing the game, and with a far richer armamentarium of techniques. The skyscraper buildings, the cloverleaf freeways, the houses with their imposing façades and immaculate lawns—what are these if not the modern equivalent of pyramids: a face to the world that announces: "I am not ephemeral, look what went into me, what represents me, what

justifies me." The hushed hope is that someone who can do this will not die. Life in contemporary society is like an open-air lunatic asylum with people cutting and spraying their grass (to deny untidiness, hence lack of order, hence lack of control, hence their death), beating trails to the bank with little books of figures that worry them around the clock (for the same reason), ogling bulges of flesh, bent over steering wheels and screeching around corners, meticulously polishing their cars, trimming their hedges (and of course spraying them), giving out parking tickets, saluting banners of colored cloth with their hand on their heart, killing enemies, carefully counting the dead, missing, wounded, probable dead, planning production curves that will absolutely bring about the millenium in thirty-seven years (if quotas are met), filling shopping carts, emptying shopping carts, nailing up vines (and spraying them)—and all this dedicated activity takes place within a din of noise that tries to defy eternity: motorized lawn mowers, power saws, electric clipping shears, powered spray guns, huge industrial machines, jack hammers, automobiles and their tires, giant jets, electric shavers, motorized toothbrushes, dishwashers, clotheswashers, dryers, vacuum cleaners. This is truly obsessive-compulsiveness on the level of the visible and the audible, so overpowering in its total effect that it seems to make of psychoanalysis a complete theory of reality. I mean that in this kind of normal cultural neurosis man's natural animal spontaneity is almost wholly stifled: the material-technological character-lie is so ingrained in modern man, for the most part, that his natural spontaneity, his urges toward mystery, awe, and beauty show up only minimally, if at all, or in forms that are so swallowed up in culturally-standardized perceptions that they are hardly recognizable: I have, for example, seen someone in ecstasy over a new Edsel, and looks of beatitude on the faces of people contemplating a vast new stretch of concrete or a box-like new apartment building. Modern man is closed off, tightly, against dimensions of reality and perceptions of the world that would threaten or upset his standardized reactions: he will have it

his way if he has to strangle the segment of reality that he has equipped himself to cope with.

Admittedly it requires a certain frame of mind, or better, of feeling, to see society as an open-air lunatic asylum, but this is not mere impressionism or, least of all, personal peevishness: it is part of a scientific case being put forth by some of the leading minds of our times. This is the significance of Reich's, Rank's and Fromm's work, and today, of Ronald Laing's. For Laing everyone is crazy, because everyone sees the world within the culturally neurotic perceptual system. The only one who has a chance of getting out of it is the one who is mentally ill, who has a breakdown and so leaves the old perceptual system behind and emerges into a new, less automatic and constricting one. (Remember our discussion of growth and change, above.) The fearful conclusion of Laing's work and the fruit of the whole tradition of psychoanalysis is nothing less than that normalcy is illness. How could it be otherwise? Each child is in some way dispossessed of his own center as we saw in Chapter Six; this is the price he pays for becoming human, the paradox of stepping away from animal reflexivity. Each person will twist the world in some way to try to accord it with his fantasies, wishes, fears; he will fail in some way to see obvious things in the world because these obvious things are a threat to him; he will knuckle under to some kind of authority, some source of sustaining and transcending power which gives him the mandate for his life and nourishes his equanimity. Neurosis is a constriction of perception and action due to the need to maintain a positively valued self from within an inferior power position. And so we can flatly and empirically say that everyone is neurotic, some more than others.

The great break-through in the contemporary theory of mental illness is that it represents a kind of stupidity, a limitation or obtuseness of perception, a failure to see the world as it is (cf. Becker, 1964; Leifer, 1966). It is not a disease in the medical sense, but a failure to assign correct priorities to the real world. The neurotic bungles small quotas of reality, the

psychotic, large quotas. And so, whole societies which fail to act on real priorities for their survival can be said to be psychotic. Take, for example, a society which puts on one side of the decision-sheet the following priorities: potential environmental collapse, possibilities of atomic and germ war on a global scale, possible economic collapse, rumbling social revolution by dispossessed minorities, actual collapse of the traditional hero-system; and on the other side of the sheet, escalation of a life-sapping and losing war costing billions of scarce dollars per year, in a small, unimportant country of no real strategic value. The psychotic choice in this matter would be on the second side of the sheet and for the past half-dozen years we have seen one of the greatest world powers annually make a choice which completely fouls reality and puts into jeopardy its own well-being and survival.

In the light of all this we can today look back with a new tolerance at Ruth Benedict's characterization of some cultures as "megalomaniac" and others as "paranoid." It was a scientifically correct beginning, again being revived by courageous younger anthropologists (see Kennedy's outstanding paper, 1969). Benedict ran into trouble because it seemed ethnocentric to pass psychiatric judgment on small primitive groups, groups which themselves were varied and complex in personality types. It seemed that we were setting ourselves up as supremely sane and using our psychiatric textbooks to legislate normality in the world. But now that psychoanalytic thought has developed to its inevitable critical conclusion, we can see that this line of approach has to be revived and made central to the global study of mental illness. If everyone distorts reality to some degree it is obvious that everyone is "sick," and general standards of normality cannot be matters of clinical judgment but are instead matters of cultural convention about the range and types of sickness that a society will tolerate. (The only time social criteria melt away is in the extreme case that we mentioned earlier: the person who is dangerously psychotic, or the one who can no longer function and seeks help.) Discussions of mental health always refer

to some conventional ideal, and it is hardly reasonable for one society to use its conventions to judge another. This was the great radicalness of cultural relativity, and the reason for the outcry against Benedict. Now we see that the psychiatric nomenclature has to be applied not only to primitive societies, but turned on our own contemporary ones—just as Reich, Rank, Fromm and Laing have done. But we said that standards of normality are cultural, not clinical: how are we going to cut through the range of variability, the cultural relativism? How are we going to complete our task and turn cultural relativism into a liberating scientific weapon? This is the question we began this chapter with, and only now can we fully understand what the answer must be.

The answer would have to be to set up the highest possible standard we could, an ideal standard of health, and use that as a measure, a critique of mental illness. Then, the psychiatric nomenclature could be put to its proper use: it would work as an empirical measure within an ideal vision. Not, as it now works, as an empirical measure within cultural conventions; which is why we are witness to the tragic uses of psychiatry as a means of social control of deviants (even as punishment for dissent), or, at its most innocuous, as a way of fitting people uncritically into their standard hero-games (cf. Leifer, 1969; Szasz, 1970). To put it graphically, if we were critical about the game it would be honest to reveal cripples who cannot play it; but it is hardly a humanistic position to let the whole onus of cultural neurosis fall on cripples. What, then, would be the highest possible standard? It could be nothing less than that of the most complete liberation of man: from narrowness of perception that prevents him from seeing a larger reality to which he must adapt; from rigid conditioning that prevents his changeability in the face of new challenges; from a slavish rooting in a source of power that constrains him and prevents his own free and independent choice; from uncritical functioning in a hero-system that binds his energies obsessively and that channels his life tyrannically for him. The syndromes we find would

then not be confirmations of psychiatric textbook rubrics, but a critique of society.

In other words, the highest possible standard of health for man would be a humanistic-critical one that would help him develop as a free, self-reliant, independent being; the thing that prevents this kind of development is precisely his automatic conditioning into cultural fictions; and so, the standard of health must at all times be "*What is Real?*" As the noted anthropologist Meyer Fortes recently so well pointed out, to "see what is real" is the great evolutionary problem that emerges from transcultural studies (1965, p. 61).

But how can we hope to handle scientifically an evolutionary problem of such dimensions?—we who are ourselves culturally shaped in our perceptions of reality, we who are ourselves part of a normal neurosis, who must also struggle in a lie against despair. To this final *dénouement* of our story we may now turn with some trepidation.

Chapter Twelve

WHAT WOULD A SCIENCE OF MAN THEN BE?

The Merger of Social, Psychological, and Political Theory

"The real possibility is one which *can* materialize, considering the total structure of forces interacting in an individual or in a society. The real possibility is the opposite of the fictitious one which corresponds to the wishes and desires of man but which, given the existing circumstances, can never be realized."

ERICH FROMM
(1964, p. 140)

ONE thing that right away lightens the burden of our inquiry into the real is that all of human evolution and history has been a search for the true interrelationships of things; we have been probing reality for hundreds of thousands of years. When man found that certain ways of doing things worked to bring him satisfaction and survival, these ways became true and right; ways that didn't work became false and wrong. And so moral codes grew up around the interrelationships of things, theories of good and evil that tried to separate the real from the illusory.

The curious thing about this long search for reality, as

Note to this chapter is on page 206.

1962). On the other hand, there are dramas, especially in those societies which live partly in the dimension of the invisible, which play down the importance of self-aggrandizement in the visible world. One of the striking differences between primitive man and modern Western man is precisely that the primitive self exists in a multi-dimensional spirit and power world; consequently, he can enjoy great self-esteem in secret dimensions of his self; modern Western man exists only on the visible dimension, and so he has to address his identity dialogue *exclusively* to his fellows. There are many subtle differences in self-body dualism and the extensions of the self in primitive experience that would have to be brought to bear on the notions of deference, demeanor and face-work, that we cannot go into here. The interested student should consult Lévy-Bruhl, 1928; Leenhardt, 1947; Gusdorf, 1953; and Van Peursen, 1966. (Cf. Note 1, Chapter Thirteen.)

Chapter Eleven—What Is Normal?

1. Just as we saw in Chapter Five that there are two kinds of anxiety, basic anxiety and learned anxiety, so there are two kinds of despair, equally intermingled: neurotic despair and real despair. If culture is a screen against despair it is first and foremost the parents' screen for their despair, inflicted upon the child. It is this that is handed down as cultural styles of life. Neurotic despair would be a reaction against losing the protection of one's life style and all the identifications that go into it. This is the anxiety of identity change. But when this neurotic despair is peeled away one comes face to face with real despair over man's fate. Very few ever get to see the bare reality of this kind of despair because they never remove the neurotic defense against it. We might say that the problem of authentic growth in a person's life is to get rid of neurotic despair so as to come face to face with real despair, *and then* make a creative solution of his existence in greater freedom and full knowledge. This is the conclusion of Kierkegaard's teaching now supported by the full weight of a mature scientific psychology.

Chapter Twelve—What Would a Science of Man Then Be?

1. This kind of total, compensatory aggression is different from the category of aggression that Fromm calls "archaic blood thirst": the intoxication and the sense of plenitude over shedding blood.

Fromm points out correctly that this is part of an elemental "kill or be killed" philosophy lived by many peasants and an occasional individual in any society. You find it, too, in the rituals of blood sacrifice that are still practised today; as Fromm so well observes, this is part of an experience of dealing in the basic mysterious coin of life, transacting with its "essence." This is not the violence of the psychic cripple, says Fromm, but of the "man who is still enveloped in his tie to nature." His is a passion for killing as a way to transcend the limitations of life (1964, pp. 33-34). In my view this can also be approached as an adult version of the category we listed earlier, "aggression as an organismic self-affirmation over other forms of life" that we find in children who dismember insects, etc. It is a kind of clumsy esthetics, a stubborn dealing with the basic coin of nature: you make your *equations of meaning* with the most elemental materials, those which have their *natural value embedded in them* so that there can be no symbolic falsifications or intellectual misjudgments: blood is blood, a life is a life; you spill it, you sacrifice it, you die. It is all so very "clear and final"—even "clean." We can see that it represents the fascination of simple Truth in a world where things are treacherously complex, second-hand, and false; it is allied to the "truth" of sexual indulgence—the primary value of body experiences in a world of symbolic artificiality (remember our discussion of these dualisms in Chapter Four). So it is, as Fromm says, a regression, a falling back on the primacy of physical meanings.

Of course the "organismic self-affirmation over other forms of life" need not be encompassed by this kind of primitive philosophic rationale: it can also be the result of severe deprivation and weakness. This is what we see in violent rape, murder, dismemberment of corpses, cannibalism of breasts and other body parts, and so on. Whereas children use insects, the deprived adult uses others. He gets a feeling of plenitude and self-expansion in inflicting pain, in controlling another's body and watching it writhe. We read in the clinical study of sadists that they can begin to feel normal pleasure with another person only *after* they have brought themselves out of their own power deficit: they have to experience an elemental outburst of powers in hurting others, in order to relax and feel some kind of ability to relate to these others; and so they become potent only after inflicting pain in the clumsiest, one-sided ways. We see this also in the "little" sadistic aggressions of

The Birth and Death of Meaning

*An Interdisciplinary Perspective
on the Problem of Man*

Second Edition

by Ernest Becker

THE FREE PRESS
New York London Toronto Sydney Singapore

1962 ('71)