

MENTAL HEALTH AS A CATEGORY OF MORALITY

This paper aims at a limited purpose : to emphasise a line of argument to the effect that functional morality in contradistinction to ideal morality considerably depends upon the mental health of the individuals. It is implied that the intellectual knowledge of morality, edifying as a human value or pursuit though it be, does not necessarily lead to commensurate moral actions. Unless a piece of knowledge becomes an integral part of the total reflective-behavioural apparatus of the individual, it is not able to bridge the gap between knowledge and profession on the one hand and practice on the other. And if the gap between knowledge and practice remains overmuch, it makes for a damaging situation of deceit and hypocrisy lowering individual and public standards of conduct.

Granting that basically morality means high quality of human relations i.e., treating others as persons and not as things, the chance of reflective and conventional morality both flourishing is high if the mental health of the people is sound. With poor mental health on the other hand, the chances of poor moral perception go up, prescriptive morality runs the danger of being miscarried, moral prescription lends itself to acceptance of irrational principles and moral command conditions habits of obedience out of timidity or insecurity. However, it is not intended to maintain that morality depends on any single factor. Moral action, to be sure, is a consequence of a number of factors coalescing or conflicting among themselves as the case may be. However, what is sought to be suggested is that there is a philosophical urgency in modern 'sick society' to explore the ethical implications of mental health as also to analyse the total human situation to be able to redirect individual and cultural potentialities and ongoings for improving the moral health of the people.

It is granted that mental health is a complexity, rooted in the biological, the bodily, the social and the personal. In any case, it is an index of the quality of living, causing one to attach specific meanings to objects and persons and to interpersonal relations of conflict, co-operation and indifference. Only a rough and ready working definition of mental health can be attempted here : Rooted in a sense of security and self-assurance, a mentally healthy

person develops a certain minimum degree of self-thinking, self-discipline and self-direction. He has a certain minimum level of detachment and objectivity to be able to enjoy both the state of his own mind and his relations with the outside world. In general terms, he succeeds in striking a comparative integration within himself and without.

This morality of smug satisfaction as its critics may so style it, may be objected to on the ground that it would lead to status quo morality by cutting down heavily the powers of conflict as an engine of social change and progress. While a good deal is made of conflict and frustration as the fly-wheel of revolution and social and moral reconstruction, it can not be maintained that these by themselves are of intrinsic moral worth. As such these cannot be legitimised as moral ends. Such conflict and frustration as obtain in any culture can at best be exploited as doubtful means for moral ends. Any culture that skillfully endeavours to keep conflict and frustration in trim business so that the mill of unethical power keeps grinding relentlessly gives a lie to intrinsic moral values. For even political power, such as it be as a value, has no claim to ethical status unless it functions under the tutelage of morality. Poor mental health, inter alia, breeding as it does conflict, frustration and the rest is at once a moral loss. Of course, a clearcut line has to be drawn between pathological conflict and healthy conflict. Such noble conflict as arises out of the human urge to forge moral progress is of a different genre from the pathological conflict that feeds on personal insecurity, hatred and social injustice. The former has a constructive role in morality while the latter a destructive one. It is therefore a poor logic to deify social conflict in the prayerful hope that conflict and its allies would eventually work out to a conflict free society.

Significantly, the potentialities of sound mental health are not fully reckoned with, particularly by the revolutionaries swearing by violence. This is mostly so because mental health and violence would prove to be contradictory and would work out to two altogether different strategies of moral reconstruction. In any case, unless a strong case can be made against mental health as a negative factor in moral progress, it is obligatory to work with this as one of the central concepts, through the gamut of culture for the moral growth of the individual and society. Many a social and moral evil

from gross crime to subtle jealousy and hatred and mad pursuit of power can be easily blamed on poor mental health, whatever be its causes. A confident and self-secure person would not fly into rage or crime nor would he have neurotic urges of unreasonable jealousy, hatred and authoritarian power. It is, amongst other things, in the pathological pursuit of power that other peoples' right are trampled and human relations embittered. The sharp teeth of power have an insatiable lust for all the sweet things of life which alone make life meaningful and worth living. But, to be sure, authoritarianism as a compulsive style of life of an individual or of politics matches more the inner hollowness than the legitimate demands of ones' station or office.

The foregoing should not give an impression that mental health is not a positive concept. The mental health being talked about in this paper does not relate to the people, who though may have equanimity and mental poise and yet or because of it, are desensitised to all personal and social issues. Nor does it refer to people who in order to be smug and satisfied care little for the fruits and challenges of knowledge. The mental health as a theme of this paper has reference to persons whose enhanced powers of mind enable them to face the modern challenges of knowledge and life, helping them to give right direction to personal and social life on behalf of rationally sound moral values.

What robs mental health and morality both is selfishness incapacitating the individuals to see human relations in a proper perspective and thereby denying them the satisfying emotions attendant on sharing and co-operation. Often rugged individualism is justified in the name of freedom which has long been in the making in human history both as a value and practice. In recent history, freedom has come to occupy a central position in thought and practice and it is therefore necessary to examine its full implications for mental health and conduct alike.

Freedom within social nexus, it is admitted, is a necessary condition of mental health and morality. For without it self-discipline, self-direction and self-choice have a remote chance of realization. Nor without it is possible either the correct self-image or correct image of others both of which are otherwise essential for the moral quality involved in inter-personal relations.

Freedom as a principle and force of transcendence has its roots in the maturity of individuals and has to be achieved creatively. Accordingly, freedom and rugged individualism or selfishness are contradictory. In any case, the practice of freedom as spelt out above is rather rare due to both cultural and personal shortcomings. What passes for freedom generally is licentious conduct individually or even at times on the mass scale under the garb of philosophically sanctified ideologies. The charge on a culture and the individual first of all is to ensure the best conditions of freedom which in turn become means to ever greater freedom of an individual on behalf of self-growth and social progress. Unless both self-development and social progress are rationally integrated, freedom in our sense of the term becomes meaningless. And this cannot be done all too easily for reasons of deep seated conventional habits of thought and living including inevitably vested interests of all sorts. Therefore, a vigorous and rational individual and social action towards desirable social change does emerge as the inevitable logic of the situation.

Social reconstruction, in the nature of things, can not be accomplished at one stroke as it were. It calls for a deep understanding of interlocking personal and social forces, an experimental and rational approach shorn of all sentimentality and unexamined presuppositions. Progress in knowledge and historical forces have forced an urgency for the vigorous reconstruction of culture before it is too late. While the economic factor claims priority so that first of all the economic basis of the society is justly ordered and reasonable equality of incomes ensured to all individuals, it would be an utopian claim to maintain that the rest of the ills of an individual and an society would evaporate at the magic touch of economic equality. The human ego, to be sure, is much too complicated and vainglorious to rest content with economic equality. In view of the available knowledge of human psychology, it is impossible to establish one to one correlation between economic equality and sound mental health. All the non-economic elements therefore have to be pressed into service through acculturation and broad-based education, formal and informal, to disabuse man of greed, lust and power. Even purely economic growth cannot be successfully achieved through purely economic means. It has to galvanise the social purpose of the individuals and to win them into an

enterprise of co-operation and high motivation for production before people can enjoy its fruits.

If poverty is detrimental to mental health, no less is affluence and its erratic distribution over a small section of society. Paradoxically, both poverty and affluence have been accepted as ends in one garb or another by certain philosophers with the result that a rational approach to the production and distribution of wealth and all it implies in terms of reordering of status hierarchy and human relations, is at best a poor show. Similarly, technology has come to acquire, wittingly or unwittingly, the status of an end. And the lightning speed with which it has blasted the age-old habits and customs have thrown the moral world out of gear, enveloping it with a thick-fall-out of confusion. This willful technology is identified by many a philosopher of culture as one major cause of the cancer of mind. The oppressive technology is causing an allmost neurotic reaction to it, sending many people reeling nostalgically to the dreamland of pre-technological civilization. It is highly doubtful if one of the basic problems of humanity can be eradicated without both high and medium technology as the specific need may be. Nor without it, is it possible to maximise leisure which is indispensable for freedom and personal growth, granting of course that people be properly educated for availing of leisure creatively. It does need however all the powers of the mind and the best of planning to subdue technology to desirable human ends so that all kinds of goods including economic and political power have a chance of fair distribution making for a healthy, dialogic, face to face community away from the monolithic society of face-less individuals.

Contemporaneously, violence is on the ascendance which is symptomatic of the loss of human moorings. While the world has never been without violence, there has never been a worship of violence on such a large scale as today. What was considered a sort of helplessness in human nature is being gradually turned into a positive value; all kinds of pseudo-philosophies are being pressed into service to justify violence as an arch-value for social change. Therein lurks the catastrophe and, equally, the challenge for mankind. For peace may no longer be viewed as an ultimate goal but an immediate necessity without which civilization may not survive.

An understanding of the implications of sound mental health in the service of morality and peace suggests a limited focus on the enormous problems of violence and peace. Mere echoing of values, however noble, may not go very far. Nor may any insight into the problem of peace, however meaningful, cut much ice unless the mind is healthy enough to profit by values and insights.

While no doubt mental health itself is partly nurtured by lofty values, historical and psychological experience demands that a many-pronged attack be made to ensure mental health to the people in this ever growing "acquisitive society" smarting under runaway technology. As such, it is imperative that a continuous appraisal of our culture be made in terms of physical, interpersonal, and socio-political environment, right from the family through school to the world at large.

A full-fledged programme of mental health with a sound philosophy to back it needs to be integrated with the formal and informal education of the people. Such a programme must aim at educating the emotions and reason of the people and cultivate the things of the mind without which freedom and sanity would always be in danger. Much of the violence of the modern day is due to ontological devitalization of our society. The mental health programme must succeed in restoring to our civilization the lost biological and spiritual vitality to make this world safe for peace and efflorescence.

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