

Dr. Morris B. Gross, psychological consultant for the Jewish Education committee of New York, here attempts to relate the implicit foundations of Jewish ethics to a particular school of psychological thought. Dr. Gross, who was formerly staff psychologist in New York's Mt. Sinai Hospital, received his doctorate from Columbia University. He was ordained by Rabbi Mosheh Feinstein.

JEWISH ETHICS AND SELF-PSYCHOLOGY

Ethics deals with moral conduct, vice and virtue, standards of right and wrong. However, to determine what is right or wrong for man, one must first know his nature. One cannot postulate ethical values or norms without psychological inquiry, the search for increased understanding of man. Judaism proposes a systematic design of ethical behavior and it must be assumed that these guideposts are based on specific psychological principles. This paper is an attempt to analyze some of the precepts of Jewish ethics in the light of one broad psychological approach. It is the writer's feeling that the point of view which is referred to as "self-psychology" most closely approximates the psychological insights upon which the rabbis of the Talmud and the Jewish tradition based Jewish ethics.

I.

Until recently the word 'self' was rarely encountered in modern psychological literature. Biological and scientific inclinations lured psychology away from philosophy and, with an objective study of man projected, it was felt that subjective factors could not be incorporated into a scientific study of man. Only through objective, quantifiable, and testable aspects of behavior can one properly

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“know” man. Experimental psychology, and Behaviorism, analyzed, dissected, and fragmented basic human drives and needs, but the totality of the individual human being was purposefully abandoned as unsuitable for scientific study. In refusing to consider the broad, unifying self, great strides were unquestionably being made in cataloguing partial aspects of the human, but, as in most myopic scrutiny, the forest was being lost for sight of the trees. Although the whole may be equal to the sum of its parts mathematically, the human being cannot be a mere summation of disjointed elements. The stable individual exhibits a positive guiding organization and integration of self which is more than a tabulation of instincts, impulses, drives, defenses, and impersonal forces.

The basic issue—whether the external and sensory, or the self-propelled and inherent, are most vital—has been argued long ago. Locke, scientific psychology, associationism, and many other schools of psychology stressed the visible, the molecular, the peripheral.¹ On the other hand, a long line of thinkers from Spinoza, Leibnitz, and Lecke pointed to the purposive, the strivings to self-preservation and self-affirmation, the desire to maintain and actualize the self. According to the latter, selfhood is the supreme reality and the true laboratory for psychology. Logic is psychologic, following the dictates of self symbols and self feelings, regardless of how variant from common perception. Broad descriptive terminology, which has some relevance for each particular case, can never fully delineate the psychic makeup of one single human. After all patterns, principles, and theories, the focus must be on the thought processes and mental mechanisms of the unique individual. It is his private world, his self view, his perception of reality which determines his actions. Only by delving into the innermost chambers of the mind can one be certain of what propels the single individual.

Essentially, the position being described is that of phenomenology, that behavior is determined by the perception of the experimenter.² An object may be commonly viewed as a crumpled piece

1. Gordon Allport in *Becoming*, (Yale University Press, 1955), documents these two points of view and presents an excellent summary of the basic theoretical system of the author.

2. Some of the psychologists who have approached the problem of personality from the phenomenological or, what I have termed, the self point of view follow: Gardner Murphy, *Personality*, (N.Y.: Harper, 1947), P. Lecky, *Self consistency*,

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of paper, but the individual who perceives this distant object as a raging dog, and experiences concomitant panic, can only be understood within his own frame of reference. The observer cannot comprehend the sudden flash of fear unless he descends into the thinking and feeling apparatus of the individual. The objective observer can be deceived quite easily when he tries to apply his thinking to a specific case. Poignantly illustrative is the Lothario who collects sexual conquests; although the obvious drive is sexual he actually obtains very little gratification, he needs these trophies as proof of his virility, evidence of his importance. Conversely, inanimate objects, fetishes, can be of impassioned sexual significance to one person and totally meaningless to another. What is important is the meaning to the individual, the interpretation within the deepest recesses of the psyche.

In recognizing the phenomenal self as the only psychological reality, an entirely new perspective is realized. To know the individual, the outsider must trace the meandering labyrinths of autistic thought. Idiosyncratic distortions and fantasies will reveal more about the essence of the individual than any documented universal principle. A woman who suspects her husband of being unfaithful cannot be dissuaded by force of logic. A brilliant physicist who considers himself dull cannot be argued out of his self concept. It matters not how others view him or what others think of him. The only pertinent question is: Does he view himself as clever or stupid, strong or cowardly, handsome or ugly? Does he perceive the environment as accepting, rejecting, threatening, or persecuting? The basic attitude of the self is the primary consideration: supremely valued or utterly loathed, frustrated or satiated. Phenomenology makes one point clear, that a person's self view, including self-deceptions and distortions, is the only "true" portrait of him. The autistic world, the subjective, is the most authentic laboratory for the psychologist.

A phenomenological view furnishes a vital insight into certain kinds of enigmatic behavior. An individual experiences intense pain but forgets the incident after five minutes; the same person is mildly reproached the next morning but retains a feeling of deep disturbance for hours after. Similarly, a twelve-year old fractures a leg

(N.Y.: Island Press, 1945), D. Snygg and A. W. Combs, *Individual Behavior*, (N.Y.: Harper, 1949). Carl Rogers, Kurt Lewin, and Gordon Allport base their complete theoretical systems on the client's personal field.

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and has to remain in bed for six weeks, but accepts his lot gracefully. If the same youngster is disregarded while teams are being chosen for a game he may fret and fume for days. In phenomenal terms, the difference is not only between physical and mental pain, but, far more important, between ego-alien and self-perceived events. The tooth cavity and the injured leg are "external" occurrences that do not involve the self, the individual. But an insult, criticism, rejection, is directed to the hard core of the self. A finger is pointed at the essence of the individual accompanied by the admonition that he is not what society desires or expects. It is the individual's self concept that is on trial, that is being questioned and threatened. These are not tangential matters that are being inflicted by nature but the total self system that is being evaluated, judged, and rejected. All the others are in the group but he is not good enough. None of the others have glaring faults but his shortcomings are obvious.

The Freudian can well account for the highly repressed celibate's mental ills, but how does one explain the near hysteria which so often follows in the wake of an argument, a derogatory remark, or a social slight? Whereas sexual abstention and biological deprivation may be taken in stride, an innocuous remark, a gesture, a tepid greeting—so trivial to the objective observer—may result in excitability, extremes of tension, and intensities of feeling. Seemingly inconsequential events often trigger major personal upheavals: marital discord, family quarrels, a somatic ailment, or a coronary attack. These bewildering reactions can only be comprehended within the person's frame of reference, how they affect his self, what paramount role they play within the self system. Each person has his own threshold of sensitivity, past which there is some breaking point where he can be hurt psychologically, where he can be wounded so deeply that it may take hours to bring his blood pressure back to normal or to allow him sufficient calm to appraise the precipitating event.

What Freud did not realize is that the essence of man is not libido but self-respect, a feeling of self-importance, of being someone who counts, who belongs, who has a contribution to make. Whatever one's values, an individual lives within his own mind and his own conscience, must answer to himself, must be satisfied with his own self-portrait, must find some purpose, some feeling of status, accomplishment, meaningfulness. How one views

one's self, what belief the individual has in his own capacity, whether he admires or despises the self image perceived in the mirror, will reveal much about the tortures or tranquilities of his mind. Freud must explain how man can withstand physical torment, hunger, and even death for the sake of honor, achievement, and prestige, whereas that very same person, who will be totally unaffected by sexual deprivation and bodily abnegation, will crumble when socially ostracized or humiliated. What more difficult task than apportioning the honors and bearing the responsibility for the seating arrangements at a congregational service or wedding! Invariably someone will pout and frown, feel insulted, and bemoan the affront. Whether deserved or not, society's refusal to accept a man's degree of self-esteem will be interpreted as a wrong, as an infringement of his self-boundary. This petty jockeying for position, for trivial manifestations of status, would be humorous if not for the unfortunate residue of enmity, hatred, and conflict that it leaves in its wake. The scampering and scurrying for the slightest symbol of prestige is part of the tragi-comedy of man.

As soon as one posits the centrality of the self, a fearful responsibility is placed in the hands of man. To abet another's self-acceptance and self-enhancement is to help create in him a feeling of strength and value. To contribute to another's self-contempt and self-detestation is to be a partner in the destruction of his ego, his very essence. There are some verbal psychopaths, (many of them quite successful in their various pursuits), who have hyperdeveloped antennae with which they are able to detect another's weaknesses. They seem to have a sixth sense, an uncanny ability to find in their fellow men just those tender spots which when touched, result in ego explosions. They joyfully pounce on a victim in public and glory in his squirming and twisting. Theirs is the art of psychological murder, of jabbing at the self's sensitivities, of wrecking a painfully erected self-structure. The insult is their rapier, and debasement and abuse are their ammunition. Though no court of law will ever try their case, the pain and hurt they bring about, usually borne in viscera-abrading silence, can never be measured. The broken homes, perforated ulcers, dissolved friendships, and devastated egos resulting from these civilized assassins can never be computed, will never be tabulated among statistics.

II.

It is in this area of interpersonal friction or cooperation that Jewish ethics and Self Psychology converge. Psychoanalytic and religious literature have correctly stressed the erotic and sensual aspect of man, but a broad fund of bitterness, misery, and hostility has no relation whatsoever to sexuality. Both phenomenological thinking and Rabbinic ethics, therefore, find position more important than possession. Recognition, status, and importance are among the basic needs of life and, accordingly, the ethical battle is fought in the arena of respect and concern for the ego, regard for one's dignity and pride.

An example of the rabbis' appreciation of another's feelings and status, a common theme in almost all rabbinic writings, is the following account in *Megillah*, 27b. The disciples of R. Nechuniah b. Hakkanah asked him, "Why have you merited long life?" He answered, "I never tried to elevate myself at the expense of my neighbors. As it happened with R. Huna who was carrying a pickaxe. R. Channa b. Hannalai took it away from him with the intention of carrying it. R. Huna said to him, 'If it is your custom to carry such a thing in your town, do so now; but otherwise I will be honored by your disgrace. This I do not want.'" Significantly, a later thinker finds the roots of emotional upset or anger within the self system. Rabbi Chayyim Vital, in his *Shaarei Kedushah*, states that anger is an offshoot of pride, for a person is furious when he thinks highly of himself and is not treated accordingly. Any infringement upon a man's self concept, any deflation of self or insult to his prestige, will totally upset his poise.

Assuming, then, a phenomenological view of man, there is good reason for rabbinic literature, cognizant of the suffering and anguish engendered, to reserve a special opprobrium for those who prey on other's egos: "All who descend to Gehenna will arise except for . . . one who shames his neighbor publicly and he who calls his neighbor by a nickname."¹ When viewed from the position of self psychology, the severity of the rabbis' condemnation is readily understandable. Physical pain is transitory and does not affect the self, but public embarrassment touches the core of man,

1. *Baba Metzia*, 58b.

damages the personality, devalues the self, and devours an individual long afterwards.

Similarly, the *Maharal* explains the severity of referring to one's nickname: The essence of man is his name and a misnomer denotes the total obliteration of the self. Physical murder eliminates the body, but the essentially human, one's reputation, prestige, and station, remain untarnished. Not so, however, when publicly shamed, ridiculed, and contemptuously dismissed.¹ The rabbis seemed well aware that the ultimate of obloquy is character defamation, that the supreme indignity is nonrecognition or utter negation. To die with self-respect and integrity intact is to round out an unstained self-concept, but to suffer a maligned and depreciated self portrait is to experience the erasure of the very meaning of man.

Time and again the rabbis stressed the seriousness of ego damage and showed that gnawing at another's self concept is not to be considered a trivial matter. "Ethics of the Fathers," (*Pirkey Abot*) was purposefully placed in that section of the laws pertaining to property loss and personal injuries. Although no jail sentences could be imposed, the Rabbis underscored the gravity of ego decimation. The Talmud is replete with admonitions for those who indulge in gossip, tale bearing, calumny, and those who laugh at another's expense. Using the strongest possible language in stating the future consequences of their acts, the rabbis were aware that gossip has as its primary psychological purpose the belittlement of the very self of the victim, and concomitant self-inflation of the tale-bearer. When people discuss another's marital problems, financial difficulties, or sickness, the subconscious motive is to make themselves feel better, stronger, more important, to perceive their self-portraits in more glowing terms.

By deflating another's ego, one gains a feeling of power and self-inflation. Character assassination is the most highly socialized and most devastating form of stepping on another's self to enhance one's own self. It is the civilized version of the jungle battle of survival where the strong feed on the weak. This is the ultimate of feeding on another's ego, of enhancing one's status and rank on the wreckage of another's sense of importance and self-respect.

Ethics, what is right or wrong, helpful or harmful to another, takes on an entirely different complexion in the light of Self

1. Rabbi Loew of Prague, *Netivot Olam, Ahabat Reyo*, 1.

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Psychology. For example, the individual who contributes monetarily to a friend in need is certainly exhibiting ethical behavior. Yet, Maimonides, in his famous eight degrees of charity, lists the highest rung as: "To aid a man in want by offering him a gift or loan, by entering into partnership with him, or by providing work for him, so that he may become self-supporting."¹ The key concept is the latter phrase, indicating that the ultimate desideratum of ethics is to raise an individual from his position of inferiority to one of dignified self-support. It is comparatively easy to donate for the sake of the weak and sick and poor; much more difficult is the other-aid, often incomprehensible to some charitable individuals, which preserves the integrity of the self of the beneficiary. Proud, well dressed, dignity intact, the prominent businessman about to collapse financially will not beg or grovel; nevertheless, Maimonides maintains that *preventing* his fall or bolstering his finances so that he may be able to keep an independent course is the most sublime achievement of charity. From the standpoint of Self Psychology the reasoning is clear: man gains subconscious pleasure in viewing another's plight or lowly station and he derives a feeling of strength and potency as he doles out benefactions to the needy and those dependent upon his mercies. But the ultimate of Jewish ethics is to elevate another spirit, to put him in a position of equality and autonomy, to deprive ourselves of the subconscious gratification of viewing a broken self.

Ethics, in a word, is based on respect for another's ego. The extreme of other-concern was reached by Hillel when he gave a poor man, who came from a wealthy family, a horse to do his work and a slave to attend upon him.² Hillel's ear was attuned to the other's needs and feelings. Charity varied according to the other's psychological, as well as physical, needs. Another of Hillel's maxims was pointedly stated in the negative: "What is hateful to yourself, do not to your fellowman."³ Man cannot ignore his own feelings and self involvement, but Hillel requires that man also open his heart to another's feelings, another's frame of reference. Man must remove the heavy lid of self-preoccupation and pervasive self interest. Man must achieve the inner strength to permit another's self to flower and bloom, to consider another's

1. *Mishneh Torah, Matnot Aniyyim, 10:8-14.*

2. *Ketubot, 67b.*

3. *Shabbat, 31a.*

self-importance. Hillel knew well that other-love could not possibly pervade an insulated and isolated Self. But Hillel could plead that man must escape the confines of egocentricity to attain a psychological awareness of ethics—concern and respect for another person's growth.