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PERSONALITY DEVELOPMENT AND EXPERIENCING GOD

As we grow older we put away childish things, yet bygone feelings and expectations still influence our lives for good or ill. Recent descriptions, by psychologists, of the life of the young child throw a flood of light on such experiences as intimacy and the ability to experience God.

Empirical research has led to an enormously enhanced understanding of our world, but still we do not understand how it is that we experience that world. Indeed, the study of this subject seems to lie altogether beyond objective testing - nearer to the field of semantics than of scientific theorizing (Rycroft, 1966).

In recent years the earliest experiences of babes and infants have received much attention. The ways in which they gradually learn to experience the world around them have been described in some new and helpful ways. Though they do not even begin to explain the nature of experience, they do throw light on the forms that experiences may take.

The Development of a Sense of Self

The paediatrician and psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott has suggested various hypotheses concerning normal emotional development at the stage in life when no words or word thoughts are available, a stage at which conceptualisation is at its most primitive.

He claims (1971a) that the experience of the infant is derived fundamentally from interaction with its mother. At birth, a child begins to live through cycles of increasing duration in which sleep and wakefulness alternate. In the waking phases it desires and is supplied with milk at the breast or feeding bottle. During these periods of maximum outer-world awareness it is physical parts of the mother and its own bodily activity which impress themselves most markedly on the infant's newly-commenced bank of experience (represented, let us imagine, in the quality of tension in the gastrointestinal and cardiovascular systems).

The metaphor Winnicott uses to describe the experiential effect of this repeated cycle of desire-satisfaction is 'illusion of omnipotence'. Because the resources of the good-enough mother dovetail almost perfectly with the infant's stomach contractions, crying and other signals of hunger, the child comes to expect prompt and devoted service whenever it is distressed. The assurance of future satisfaction guaranteed by this valuable illusion is the *sine qua non* of a subsequent process of gradual disillusionment, occasioned by an ever-increasing time-gap between the signal of need and desire, and its satisfaction. If the sense of omnipotence has been well established the infant will not panic when there is a time lag before satisfaction, but will begin to learn activities like playing with fingers and thumb around the mouth, cooing mixed with crying, and so on. Such activities fill the desire-satisfaction gap and serve to keep 'alive' the idea of mother and her attributes at a time when she is not physically present. As such they also start to play a part at the other end of the awareness period of the waking/sleeping cycle. Sucking the thumb, fingering the silk ribbon of a soft toy, incorporating the edge of a sheet into the mouth, and the like, enable the child to remain quiescent and aware of the environment in the mother's absence. In such episodes, the child is hypothesised to be developing the capacity to exist comfortably for a short while on its own, and growing alongside this is the realisation that mother too exists as a separate person in her own right. Thus a confident sense of self is presumed to be indelibly linked with an optimism (that need will be met) which is 'stretched' progressively over time-periods terminating invariably with actual satisfaction of need.

At later stages of crawling, toddling and walking, playing with toys will replace these primitive activities - although threats like strangeness, mild reproof or going to sleep will almost always evoke them. Still later, the child's play will extend to the accomplishment of play shared with another, where both participants enter this area, the in-between of desire and fulfilment, together. Finally, this will make way for adult culture - art and hobbies - and, claims Winnicott, for that sharing between oneself and another which is the experience of direct intimacy.

It is as if between the private inner world of the adult and his conventional, outer world of interpersonal behaviour, there exists a middle area, composed of the vital remnants of the teddy-bear's ribbon, the thumb-sucking and the joint play - a sort of daydream world which is never subjected to experimental validation, since it has an intrinsic validity of its own enabling the owner to tolerate its irrationality.

Experience, then, can be regarded as a synthesis of three areas:-

An inner, chaotic 'dreamworld'	+	A transitional area of 'daydream'	+	An outer world of conventional inter-personal relationships
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Winnicott sees the inner area as the shut-off remains of the infant's most primitive sense of self-and-mother-combined; the daydream area as the adult counterpart to the self-comforting activity of the child who is getting used to being an individual; and the outer area as a sophisticated version of the young child's attempts to deport himself at school, when visiting relations, when mixing with friends, and so forth.

The Sense of Self in Adulthood

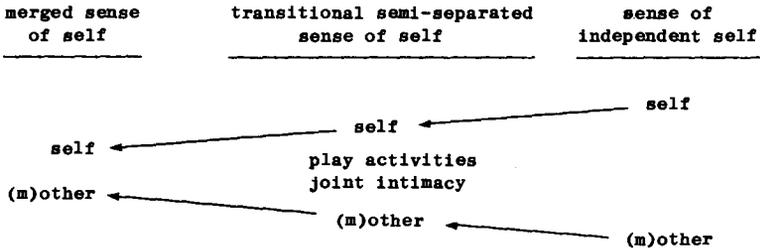
If this view is right, so that the adult sense of self may usefully be regarded as a potted biography of the achievement of separation from the sense of mother, then several points may be made about what constitutes a healthy personality (Winnicott 1971b).

The journey through thumbsucking to the ability to function with others while retaining individuality, will not, if successful, have been made as a panic escape from one awfulness to a lesser. As John Bowlby (1979) puts it, the self-reliant person is paradoxically able to rely totally on someone else (think for example of the manoeuvres required of an astronaut and his control team) - he is not scared to revert to the more primitive areas of experience. The non-objective nature of cultural experience will be welcomed without shame or coyness. Rather than an addiction to regressed and over-intimate relationships, there will be an appropriate occupancy of any of the worlds of experience, as situations demand.

But what of the person who did not experience good-enough caring in early life, who had no sense of 'omnipotence', who separated only with tears and protests from mother and entered into adult life with the anticipation of having to steel him (or her) self against the rigours of hard loneliness? Here one might expect several opposite features. There might be an inability to tolerate a gap between desire and fulfilment. More privately, there might be a precipitate speed with which nigh-on total union is attempted after getting briefly to know another person (going 'overboard' in personal revelations; sexual intercourse after minimal courtship). There could be an over-prizing of the structured world of conventionality due to a horror of showing up one's inability not to precipitate immediate union with another. All of which would point to a lack of capacity to remain with another individual in the middle daydream world of intimacy.

An Extension of these Ideas

Suppose the development of adult interpersonal intimacy were to be summed up as a reversal of the child's journey into the experience of self as a person separate from other people?



On such a view sexual intercourse, for example, would not be regarded so much as a gratification of some imagined 'sex drive', but rather as a merging of the boundary of the sense of self with another, expressed in deep physical metaphor (Rogers 1978). However, the relationships envisaged are not just those ending up in erotic sexual behaviour. What is being emphasised is that experience by touch (whether erotic or affectionate, like hugging) utilises a gross vocabulary subjecting the recipient to far more vicissitudes of interpretation than the more verbally-mediated transitional area of the day-dream world. A headlong rush into the 'inner' world without spending time developing a biography of experience in the daydream area runs the high risk of misinterpretations of the gross language of physical touch which cannot be tolerated or financed by a prior reserve of transitional intimacy.

The suggestion, therefore, is that personality development does not cease at the age of six or seven, or even at eighteen or twenty-one; but that adulthood is the time of testing the resilience of a seemingly independent self, and if necessary correcting lacks in flexibility of operation in the three 'worlds' of experience. This testing and correction is accomplished within the network of friendship and acquaintanceship created by interpersonal relationships throughout life.

Deep Human Relationships Compared to the Personal Experience of God

Becoming a Christian is seen in the Bible as a bringing together of two estranged parties *via* the legal reconciliation wrought by Jesus Christ on the cross, and operationalised by exercising the gift of faith to the individual. But into what kind of relationship is the person reconciled?

The words used in Scripture to describe interpersonal relationships are somewhat cut-and-dried: love, obedience, repentance, forgiveness, and so on. These words are perhaps similar to the 'perchings' of William James' (1890) famous description of thought processes *via* the analogy of birdflight; what is required, he says, is something more like the 'flights'. So here, let us say, it is not so much the 'love' that the Scriptures refer to but something more like the 'dwelling in' love. This *experience* of the relationship seems frequently to defy appropriate verbalisation. But suppose the various aspects of private Christian devotion - activities like reading and meditating on the Bible, communion in prayer, the experience of breaking of bread, the realisation that God is 'speaking' to one through a sermon - suppose these were to be construed as the transitional area of intimacy, a preparation for that unspeakable final union with God, a merging but not submerging of self with His self. While some may find this merging periodically to occur in earthly life, the clear message of the New Testament is that with resurrected bodies we shall be totally one with Him in heaven.

The Bible gives several broad hints that we should view our here-and-now personal experience of God as a transitional area of intimacy. We think of such passages as "My son, give me thy heart" (Prov 23: 26); "My Beloved is mine and I am His" (Song of Sol 2: 16); "As Thou, Father, art in Me and I in Thee, that they also may be one in Us...I in them and Thou in Me" (from Jn 17: 21-23); "This is a great mystery: ...I speak concerning Christ and the church" (from the passage on the marriage relationship, Eph 5: 22-23).

That this is a mystery for which our best metaphors end up sounding sadly wooden, is hardly surprising. Even in the realm of merely human relationships the area being dealt with has only a rudimentary vocabulary, and no public grammar whatsoever. Perhaps, though, an interpretation of deep human relationships adds to our feeble yet assured grasp on a glorious future, and makes the enterprise of knowing God slightly less unknown. And on the other side of the same coin, the growing personal experience of God may allow the Christian to gain various interpersonal flexibilities from which his own upbringing precluded him.

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