

Personality Development, Developmental Potential  
and Communal Attitudes as Seen by K. Dabrowski

by Franciszek L. Lesniak

Ladies and Gentlemen:

The purpose of my paper is an attempt to sketch in an expository rather than in a critical manner Dabrowski's view of personality development, developmental potential and communal attitudes as presented in his theory of positive disintegration.

Before I start dealing with this topic, let us ask why Dabrowski's views merit to be taken into consideration?

Dabrowski was a psychologist and a psychiatrist with a mentality characterized by the need to distinguish well, to see both sides of the coin, to regard not only horizontally but also vertically. In his psychological and psychiatric research, this need took the form of multilevel and multidimensional approach to human being and resulted in new concepts of personality development, of its growth, developmental potential and sensitivity to social influences. Some of these concepts are not only new, original and sometimes controversial, but also interesting, promising and often encouraging especially in the field of psychotherapy, mental hygiene and education.

Personality development

Then what is personality development in Dabrowski's view? What does it consist in? What is its goal? How does it start and end?

Let us start our considerations with two examples.

The first one.

In traditional clinical practice the words "adjustment" and "maladjustment" are identified with respectively mental health and mental disturbances. According to Dabrowski (1970, 1977), both "adjustment" and "maladjustment" have positive and negative connotations.

In psychosis, psychopathy and criminal activity for example, there is a negative maladjustment in its extreme. Resulting from personality pathological structure, it consists in denial and rejection of social norms.

Positive maladjustment is the characteristic of an individual at a higher developmental level who does not accept social milieu's standards, patterns and attitudes

as well as some of his own tendencies, if they are incompatible with human dignity.

Negative adjustment stands for conformity with "what is" in social milieu and in oneself, without any critical evaluation. It is a non-autonomous, inauthentic adjustment.

Positive adjustment denotes an adjustment to "what ought to be" in social milieu and in oneself. It results from a hierarchy of values consciously elaborated and subordinated to the personality ideal.

It is obvious that positive maladjustment and positive adjustment are at a higher developmental level and more human than negative maladjustment and negative adjustment. According to Dabrowski, personality positive development conceived in his theory as specific human development consists in the very process of transition from a lower level of functioning to a higher one, from, for example, negative maladjustment and negative adjustment to positive ones.

The second example.

We find in Longman Dictionary of Psychology and Psychiatry (1984) the following definition of frustration tolerance:

It is "...the ability to preserve relative equanimity upon encountering obstacles...The growth of adequate f.t. is a feature of normal ego development. Poor f.t. is a sign of inadequate ego strength."

Dabrowski saw the "poor frustration tolerance," this means the low frustration tolerance, in another way. In the books published one year before his death, he wrote on this subject the following:

"It is obvious that not each frustration can be accepted but as a rule I find that low threshold of frustration tolerance is a positive phenomenon." It makes the individual sensitive to a variety and multilevelness of every day events, to peoples' sorrows and disasters, to injuring and humiliating others, to his own failures, to "pain of the world". (1979b, 33-34).

"Everybody experiencing profoundly tragic events, problems of life sense and "pain of the world" has a low frustration tolerance". (1979a, 50). (Translation mine).

Moreover, according to Dabrowski, the low frustration tolerance leads to "affection refinement, empathy and profound emotional relationship," except in the cases of pathological conditions such as, for example, mental retardation or some psychic disturbances of organic origin. Enabling the individual to be "moved by everything" and to have "understanding for everything," it is more human and desirable than high frustration tolerance which is an expression of social and moral insensitiveness.

Thus, the transition from high frustration tolerance to low one is positive and developmental.

These two examples concerning adjustment and frustration tolerance give us an idea of Dabrowski's conception of the personality positive development. It is a qualitative, vertical process of becoming more and more human; it is a process which Dabrowski has identified with mental health (1970,173).

The final goal of such a development is a new personality, a personality *par excellence*, conceived as a "self-chosen, self-confirmed, self-educating and self-conscious structure of fundamental human qualities, organized around personality individual and social ideal." Having become such a personality, the individual is no longer what he is by hereditary and environmental endowment, but what he wants to be. His psychological type has been enlarged and sublimated, his life style has been changed and his biological life cycle has been transcended. His interests, capabilities, talents, ties of love and friendship and all his higher emotions have been developed to their maximum. He has become an autonomous, authentic, empathetic and responsible human being (1970, 1979b,53). I would say, he has got ontologically near God. Dabrowski termed this developmental stage personality secondary integration on higher level. According to him, it is the highest level of human development.

The lowest personality developmental level is the stage of primary integration. It stands for a compact, rigid and narrow psychic structure organized around primitive drives to which intelligence and imagination are subordinated. It is characterized by automatic, impulsive and biologically determined behavior, by negative adjustment and negative maladjustment as well as by high frustration tolerance. It lacks empathy, moral sensitivity and capacity to reflect on one's behavior and its moral consequences. It is represented by psychopaths under whom belong political criminals and other uncommon delinquents in one extreme, and, in the other, many so called average people whom I will still speak about. Between these two extremes there are individuals who are aggressive, brutal, deceitful, astute and inconsiderate in realising their small egoistic goals (1979b, 51).

How does the transition from the primary integration to the secondary one happen?

If the primary integration is not constitutional, it undergoes changes consisting in loosening and solitting of its compactness, rigidity and narrowness. This happens usually during grave life experiences and stresses. The personality structure becomes then disintegrated and neurotic. Its desintegration, or fragmentation, is unilevel, or non-differenciated hierarchically, characterized by inner frictions resulting from contradictions and inconsistencies of judgments, desires, emotions and drives. Its neurotic character is revealed - according to the individual's psychological type - in phobias, conversion hysteria, hypochondria, neurasthenia, depression, obsessions, emotional dependency, or in some other neurotic and psychoneurotic symptoms and syndromes of lower level.

If the individual's developmental potential is not strong enough, the unilevel disintegration with its neurotic symptoms and syndromes can become chronic; it can also end by suicide or by regression to primary integration. In these cases, we would have to do with mental illness. But if the personality disintegration is global and the developmental potential is strong and rich, the process of development goes on towards the next level, i.e. towards spontaneous multilevel disintegration. In each of these cases, the unilevel disintegration stands for a developmental crisis and the given individual needs therapeutic help. This help should concentrate not so much on the elimination of his psychoneurotic symptoms and syndromes as on the stimulation of their healthy elements which could absorb unhealthy ones.

The spontaneous multilevel disintegration which is the crucial period of human development derives its denomination from the fact that at this stage the individual's autonomous, or specifically human forces spontaneously take the floor as they set themselves against his egoistic needs and community moral pressure. In this way, hierarchic, or multilevel, disintegration takes the place of the unilevel disintegration. Consequently, the given individual feels torn between "what is higher" and "what is lower" in his experiences. This moral conflict with its going down and rising up is accompanied and supported by psychoneuroses of a higher level, such as anxiety, depression, obsessions and psychasthenia. It implies creative dynamisms such as feelings of guilt, inferiority towards oneself, dissatisfaction and disquietude with oneself (depression), altruistic and existential concerns (anxiety), imperative ideas and obsessive thoughts regarding mental growth (obsessions), need to adjust to higher reality (psychasthenia). These psychoneuroses further the individual in his struggle against the primitive drives. At this level, the psychotherapy consists basically in helping the patient to concentrate on his personality richness and creativity, and to regard his own symptoms and syndromes as dynamic phenomena necessary in the process of self-humanizing. It is the psychotherapy through multilevel and multidimensional diagnosis.

Stimulated by his autonomous forces, the individual begins by accepting consciously and deliberately responsibility for the process of his mental growth. He directs it systematically towards the attainment of his personality ideal which becomes more and more distinct through intuition, meditation, contemplation and ecstasy. This is the stage of multilevel directed disintegration characterized by a growing need for authenticity and autonomy. The more the individual progresses in working on himself, the more autopsychotherapy and education of himself take the place of the hetero-psychotherapy, the more his secondary integration advances, the more his behavior and interior life are characterized - to use the the apostle Paul's terms - by "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, trustfulness, gentleness and self-control." (Gal 5,22).

Finally the directed multilevel disintegration passes into secondary integration; the directed development continues to go on - this time without neurotic tensions - towards a full identification of the individual with his personality ideal.

The outline of the process of transition from the primary integration to the secondary integration which I have sketched, would not be accomplished without emphasizing the dynamic role of neuroses and psychoneuroses. These, in the majority of cases, are not an illness but "structures, functions and processes" indispensable for the mental growth of man. They split the personality primary integration, "they build inner psychic milieu and its hierarchical levels", they also contribute to the personality secondary integration. On the other hand, they undergo themselves developmental changes during the process of personality development. In this connection Dabrowski speaks about intra-neurotic differentiation (1970). I have already given the examples thereof when dealing with anxiety, depression and obsessions characteristic of spontaneous multilevel disintegration. This differentiation is still more clearly distinguishable in hysteria, when it gradually rises up from hysterical character through hysterical conversion to hysteria-like enthusiasm, empathy, contemplation and ecstasy. I think the stigmata of St. Francis of Assisi may be considered the highest developmental level of hysteria.

If a symptom or a syndrome for example hypochondria, can't be sublimated, it declines gradually during the developmental process.

To summarise the process of personality development, I will quote Dabrowski's assertion. According to him, personality development is the process of

"transition from that which is primitive, instinctive, automatic to that which is deliberate, creative and conscious; from that which is primitively integrated to that which manifests multilevel disintegration tending towards secondary integration; from that which expresses reality at one level to that which expresses multilevel reality; from that which depends on biological reality to that which expresses moral autonomy; from that which "is" to that which "ought to be", from the empiricism of one level to multilevel empiricism which includes intuition and transcendental experiences". (1970,35).

### Developmental potential

After discussing Dabrowski's concept of personality development let us deal with the concept of developmental potential.

One meets occasionally persons who have a distinctly positive developmental potential and who, therefore, consciously and methodically direct their personality development towards autonomy and authenticity. However, their number does not seem to be large. The number of those who have already attained the secondary integration is certainly still smaller.

Equally, relatively small seems to be the percentage of uncommon psychopaths or sociopaths, though they are sufficiently numerous to make serious troubles through all the world. They have a distinctly negative developmental potential. More numerous and visible are the individuals at the second and the initial third developmental levels; they attract everybody's attention by their neurotic behavior. Their developmental potential is rather positive. The most numerous would be the so called average people, who have been classified in Dabrowski's theory at the borderline of primary integration and unilevel disintegration (1979b,51). What kind of developmental potential do they have?

Generally speaking, the average people can hardly transcend the primary integration. Indeed, they can have hot and heavy experiences but these are not of long standing. They can also have many a tense moment of reflexion, deep thought, sadness, interruption of life activities, but all these conditions and processes are not like those of eminent personalities. They lack developmental leaps and bounds, definitive change of life style, reflective enthusiasm overwhelming the whole personality. They lack empathy and readiness for accepting total and complete responsibility. They do not experience profound anxieties, depressions or obsessions nor do they trend towards a deep analysis of themselves. In stress situations, they manifest tendency to a more or less sociopathic behavior. Only an intense and lasting suffering can efficiently stimulate to a certain extent their autonomous and authentic human forces (1979b).

Why are the average people like that? Why isn't their human development accelerated like that of eminent personalities? Why don't they regress or progress in their mental growth?

The answer seems to be univocal: because they have a weak developmental potential positive as well as negative.

What is the developmental potential in Dabrowski's view?

Dabrowski has differentiated between the positive developmental potential and the negative one. The latter consists in nuclei of involutory psychosis, in hereditary forms of mental retardation, in constitutional psychopathy or still in nuclei of strong uncontrollable drives which often take the form of psychosis in the individual's advanced years.

The positive developmental potential stands for nuclei of specifically human or autonomous forces called the third factor. All that Dabrowski said about it is that these forces are of an "unknown origin"; that they grow under appropriate social conditions; that they enable the individual to counter his primitive drives and the social pressure as well as to elaborate a hierarchy of values; that they express themselves distinctly through the dynamisms of the spontaneous and directed multilevel disintegrations (1970,34, 72-73).

From the clinical point of view, it is important that the autonomous forces have certain "defining characteristics" which allow us not only to detect their presence and to

measure their strength but also to diagnose the individual's developmental potential.

These characteristics are psychic ~~oversensitivities~~ also called overexcitabilities or simply nervousness. Their concept refers to the experiencing of one's environment and of oneself to an extent which is disproportionate to the stimulus situation in terms of intensity or duration. According to different psychic modalities, this experiencing consists in reactions and attitudes of either a sensual, psychomotor, emotional, imaginative, intellectual, or of a mixed nature (1958). Accordingly, nervousness has been differentiated by Dabrowski into five respective forms, or dimensions, of mental functioning, and defined as a "higher than average responsiveness to stimuli, manifested either by psychomotor, sensual, emotional (affective), imaginative, or intellectual excitability, or the combination thereof" (1979b,178).

How does the nervousness (oversensitivity, overexcitability) work?

Dabrowski compares (1979b,181) its five dimensions of mental functioning to very sensitive receiving sets, and his collaborator, M. Piechowski (1977,32) to selective channels through which the various external and internal stimuli reach the individual. If all the five sets or channels are present and acting, and if the stimulation transcends the individual's tolerance threshold, as it happens in unbearable stress situations, his nervousness takes the form of neurosis, psychoneurosis and even of psychosis and, consequently, disintegrating unilevelly the individual's personality, it thus enables his third factor to take the floor.

What will further happen with the individual's development depends on his oversensitivity pattern. In a favorable case, when the emotional, imaginative and intellectual sensitivities are dominant, the sensual and psychomotor being components, and the social conditions favorable, the unilevel disintegration will take the form first of spontaneous and then directed multilevel disintegration. If the emotional and psychomotor sensitivities are dominant, the individual will probably have difficulties to transcend his psychological type as well as the biological life cycle, for example, to sublimate his sexual drive. If the psychomotor and sensual sensitivities are dominant, the individual's primitive drives will be stimulated to the extent that psychopathic behavior is to be foreseen. This would be a case of a negative developmental potential. If all overexcitabilities are present but the emotional is not distinctly dominant, the secondary integration, if any, will be retarded, even if the given individual is rich in capacities and talents.

This appears to be the case of Michael Ange Buonarotti.

In my psychotherapeutic practice, I meet two categories of clients. When they hear me speak about the perspectives of human development, some become very much fascinated while others start to yawn. According to my professional experience, these two types of reaction point out respectively to the presence of emotional, imaginative and intellectual

oversensitivities and, consequently, to a good developmental potential and a favorable prognosis in the first case, and, in the second, to the lack of these oversensitivities, and, consequently, to a weak developmental potential and a non-favorable prognosis.

With regard to the average people, we may say that they are characterized not so much by oversensitivity as by ordinary or average sensitivity. This means that their developmental potential is rather weak; that their frustration tolerance is "adequate"; that they can't be profoundly desintegrated; that their interior life is not hierarchic and their relationship to the environment is rather superficial, that, in their behavior, they are closer to psychopaths than to eminent individuals; that, for example, they are more inclined to vengeance than to pardon.

### Communal Attitudes

According to Dabrowski, everybody needs an exterior help to actualize his humanity as fully as possible. The only exception in this regard is the persons who have already arrived at a higher level of personality development. These persons are however rare.

This help can and should be given by the community in which one lives, by the family, school, friends, occasionally by a physician or by so called public opinion which is the expression of the community culture.

According to Dabrowski (1979b, 304-306), the community is supposed to awake and to strengthen the individual's capacities to observe in a critical way his own attitudes towards himself and the others, to know and to develop his interests and abilities, to refine his taste for fine arts, to empathize with those who suffer, and to elaborate his own philosophy of life based on his own painful experiences in realizing his ideals. Awakening and strengthening these capacities, the community would stimulate the individual's psychic sensitivity, especially the emotional, imaginative and intellectual as well as awake and strengthen his developmental potential.

The community is able to fulfill these expectations, if it has an understanding for human development and its needs. The problem is that the community as a rule does not have it. Some examples will follow.

The union between the parents is ordinarily of a biological character and not of a psychological and moral one. This diminishes educational possibilities of the family. Moreover, the parents, as a rule, are not prepared for the education of children. Consequently they are not able to give them a solid developmental foundation.

In school, the teacher considers the students as a class and not as individuals with differentiated needs. He does not understand nervous children and often he traumatizes

them and blocks them emotionally for the rest of their life.

Should a neurotic child, an adolescent or an adult consult the physician, this will concentrate on what is disturbed but not on what is healthy in the patient; by a chemical intervention he will choke symptoms and syndromes together with nuclei of human development.

A couple of days ago, I read in a Canadian paper that there were in 1981 in Quebec, 142 girls who became pregnant at the age of less than 15, and 78000 at the age of less than 19. The specialists in this field say that 50 percent of the girls at the age between 13 and 19 have an active sexual life. The adolescents who have not been engaged in sexual life are considered by their peers to be non-mature and foolish.

It is good to have a close friend especially if this friend presents a higher developmental level. However, this is a very rare case. As a rule, the friend is one of the community average people who does not understand the individual on a higher level, say a psychoneurotic. The result is that the friendship aggravates the neurotic conditions or pushes back to the primary integration.

All these examples indicate that the community does not fulfill the hope which was laid in it; that if it has some influence on the actualisation of the individual's developmental potential, then it is rather a negative one.

Dabrowski has emphasized this point, when he deals in his book *Two Diagnosis* (*Dwie diagnozy*, 1974) with the community role in human development of oversensitive persons. He says that it is not the oversensitive person that is ill but the insensitive community.

Indeed, if we take into consideration such facts as violence through all the world, the danger of nuclear holocaust, unceasing wars, the increasing number of suicides, divorces, drug addictions, pregnancy interruptions, or concentration camps, social injustices and crimes, pragmatism and materialism of the West and communism of the East, we may generalize and say that humanity has no understanding for human values that it is insensitive; that it is ill.

What is to be done with all these facts?

Dabrowski saw a solution in mental hygiene conceived as a multidisciplinary science of human development, characterized by multilevel and multidimensional approach to mental health problems. He dreamt of mental hygiene institutes and schools, of centers of mental hygiene consultation for healthy people. He wanted to introduce psychology of human development to medicine and especially to psychiatry, and mental hygiene to family life, to schools, to hospitals and prisons, to politics, industry and every day life, to philosophy, in brief: to every sector of life (1974, 1979c).

With all his convictions and plans, was Dabrowski a realist or a dreamer? It may also be, that he was a realistic dreamer. The future will answer these questions.

#### Final remarks

At the beginning of my paper, I said that Dabrowski's views are not only new and original but controversial, interesting, promising and encouraging.

Then, what is new and original in his views?

Certainly the new is the differentiation of all personality structures and functions according to the five developmental stages. New is the concept itself of the transition process from stage to stage and of its dynamisms. New are the definitions of mental health and of mental hygiene.

New and original is the concept of the developmental potential and its measuring.

New, original and controversial but promising and encouraging is the positive evaluation of the role of psychoneurosis in the human development.

Interesting and encouraging are Dabrowski's positive thinking and faith in the mental hygiene possibilities as well as his psychotherapy through multilevel diagnosis.

I think, Dabrowski's psychology and psychiatry are the psychology and psychiatry of tomorrow.