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The Biblioscene

Accentuating the Negative

FRED MASSARIK

The popular literature is replete with homey advice to “think positive!” Who needs to be reminded of the phenomenal sale of books such as *The Power of Positive Thinking*, and who can forget the classic admonition: “Every day, in every way, I am getting better and better”? But, somehow, it is not so simple as all that.

There are the countervailing suggestions that it is always darkest before the dawn and that things will get worse before they get better. Accent on the negative has never been completely absent from the writings of those concerned with enhancing personal and social welfare. The struggles and accommodations among id, ego, and superego in the process of becoming human within a cultural context (Freud), concern with conflict and stress in organizations (Kenneth E. Boulding, Robert L. Kahn, et al.)—these and other lines of thought illustrate this thrust. Still, the reader browsing through current book announcements is likely to do something of a double take when he comes upon the startling title, *Personality-Shaping Through Positive Disintegration*, by Kazimierz Dabrowski (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1967. 270 pp. \$11.50). The words themselves appear to have something of the bounce of some of the *au courant* marquee titles (“The Roar

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of the Greasepaint . . .," "Dad, Poor Dad, Mummy's Hung You in the Closet . . ." et cetera). But without question, this volume is an important and a serious effort.

What is positive disintegration? A simple verbal definition is elusive. The intent is clear, however: at a mild level, it appears as a pattern of growing pains—negativism, ambivalence, a sense of inferiority. At a more severe level, there are feelings of guilt and anxiety and soul-shaking identity crises.

In contrast with the popular quasi-medical model of therapy, Dabrowski approaches the issue of personality change by way of the concept of "self-education." The process of disintegration sets the stage for a reassessment of the person's internal conditions and for a movement toward a relevant level of integration, reaching out toward some kind of personality ideal.

It is rather akin to the notion of the crisis in therapy—deeply experienced feelings of self-doubt as precursor to reorientation and reconstituted adequate functioning. To use the borrowed analogy: "To get the fishhook out, one first needs to move it in more deeply, so that when it finally comes clear it does not tear the flesh."

But then, what is positive and what is negative in disintegration? Can one tell apart these antithetical types without aid of a program? This issue presents what O. Hobart Mowrer in his enlightening preface characterizes as a "most serious—but by no means fatal—weakness in the entire approach." There is an unfortunate tendency toward tautology in Dabrowski's efforts to deal with this crucial bifurcation in theory. For instance—

We call a disintegration negative when it does not produce effects which are positive in relation to development or when it yields negative effects (p. 77).

There remains, of course, the usual recourse to clinical judgment:

. . . an experienced clinician . . . may . . . not only give a good or bad prognosis for a given disintegrative disease; he may also often foresee the effects of disintegration (p. 77).

In general, positive is as positive does, and events in the person's life that do not completely destroy him and that leave some hope for his ultimate salvation, however defined, represent the "plus" side of the disintegration scale. One is reminded of Camus' concern with the problem of suicide which, as an existential issue, opens the very core of the question of the meaning of life, requiring, as it does, the confrontation of the significance of living with the alternative of self-induced death. But ultimately, neither Dabrowski nor others influenced by his thinking argue that self-destruction, psychological or total, represents a positive outcome. Hope for reunifying the disparate elements in the person, laid bare in chaotic disarray by the disintegrative process, "springs eternal."

As Mowrer notes in the preface, the present work by Dabrowski traces its roots to two important antecedent publications—a monograph published in 1937, *The Psychological Basis of Self-Mutilation*, and in 1964, *Positive Disintegration*. These works develop the theme, here presented in more (may we use the term?) integrated fashion, that there is a point in the study of human development when accentuating the negative is in order. Dabrowski himself alludes to the concept's early history, mentioning Descartes, Spencer, Jackson, Sherrington, and Pavlov. Beyond these philosophical and psychological roots, there are important recent counterparts in the study of this negative "dip" in an anticipated upward curve of growth. In social psychology, Kurt Lewin's well-known "unfreezing" as a precondition for the initiation of change and Paul Sheats's closely related concept of "complacency shock" are examples. And, as most practitioners in sensitivity training will acknowledge, early confusion among participants—"What am I supposed to be doing here? Why don't we get things spelled out? What is this all about?"—constitutes a significant, and probably an essential, element of the training process.

Beyond the conceptual difficulty (or perhaps operational impossibility) of distinguishing positive from negative disintegration, there are some other aspects in Dabrowski's work that are subject to question. There is, for instance, a tendency

to shift fundamental assumptions. While Dabrowski, for the most part, avoids the pitfall of inappropriate analogy, we do find (as in the use of the term "disease" in the earlier quotation) a vacillation between a conventional medical and a broadly humanistic viewpoint. The assumptions of illness and its alleviation vie with those of total personality development.

In another context, there is Dabrowski's rather peculiar use of the term "adviser." He notes that "particularly in initial and following phases—in the period of great . . . conflicting and creative tensions . . .—the adviser plays a fundamental role in the development of personality" (p. 151). In usual parlance, the term "adviser," for better or worse, denotes "giving of advice"—a rather direct, well-meaning telling people what to do. This is not what Dabrowski intends. He indicates that while the adviser may be, for instance, a parent, tutor, or teacher, he ". . . must . . . be well prepared, in the areas of psychology, psychopathology, and pedagogy, and must know how to use the most modern methods in these branches of science" (p. 153). Evidently the adviser is, after all, not viewed as a simple, didactic advice giver. The rather flexible role that Dabrowski poses, ranging from rapid intervention to long-term planning, would seem to deserve a more descriptive term.

The book's style and treatment are not difficult. Especially the brief case histories (Michelangelo, St. Augustine, et al.) are most readable. There is, however, a measure of diffusiveness and elusiveness of concepts that makes it necessary for the reader to search, sometimes arduously, for the author's specific meaning. Often the context must be relied on to carry the message. But it is a message well worth considering.

Dabrowski values the negative in the unfolding of the human potential for the sake of the affirmative unity that is to evolve as a consequence.

* * * * *

Now, but a few months after his death, it may be too early to attempt a thoroughgoing assessment of Gordon W. Allport's life work. One observation may be in order even at

this time: Whatever the specific direction of his versatile spirit and empirical investigations, Allport never lost sight of the need for a comprehensive view of the human person and of the quest for selfhood. This persistent search for wholeness pervades Gordon W. Allport's *The Person in Psychology: Selected Essays* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1968. 440 pp. \$9.95).

The initial essay, a lecture presented in 1963 and published subsequently in *Acta Psychologica*, sets the theme: "The Fruits of Eclecticism: Bitter or Sweet?" By way of response, it is clear that eclecticism to Allport was not the cuss word that it is to some. He defines it as ". . . a system that seeks the solution of fundamental problems by selecting and uniting what it regards as true in the several specialized approaches to psychological science" (pp. 5-6).

And the flavor of the reply is "bitter, yes; sweet, yes." There is the inevitable risk of being viewed as opportunistic in following a particular trail of inquiry because it seems momentarily tantalizing, rather than turning back toward some theoretical main highway, well staked out in advance, as a fundamental guide. But also there is the opportunity for drawing together that which appears most significant to a total grasp of the human condition, whatever its apparent origin.

Eventually, Allport proposes a "systematic pluralism." This view holds that, as "the starting point, . . . the human person is himself a primary system," and that it sees as its goal ". . . a conception of the human person that will exclude nothing that is valid" (p. 116). With this focus, virtually all variables considered in psychological and social inquiry are appropriate as raw inputs. Thus it becomes necessary for tomorrow's theorist to search for relationships among recalcitrant and unwieldy components and to fashion from them a framework for the understanding of man that may be both conceptually elegant and empirically verifiable. It is a task that Allport did not complete but one that remains a dream in the eyes of some.

This final collection of Allport's writings, itself dedicated to a

philosopher interested in the issues of unification of knowledge of the human condition,* is divided into four parts: "Which Model for the Person?" "Personal Conditions for Growth," "Prejudice in Personality," and ultimately and significantly, "Persons." In the closing section, Allport assesses aspects of the works of William Stern, William James, John Dewey, Karl Bühler, Kurt Lewin, and Richard Clarke Cabot. Finally, there is Allport's autobiography.

There is much more that could and will need to be said about this book specifically and about Allport's other writings. These comments must be deferred. Still, whatever the judgment of the future historian of Behavioral Science, this is a good time to draw ideas and insights once more from the breadth and depth of Allport's delightful blend of sound theory, open-system philosophy, and carefully conducted inquiry.

MAKING THE BIBLIOScene

* * * * Poetically, asked Edgar Allan Poe so many years ago:

Science! true daughter of Old Time thou art!
Who alterest all things with thy peering eyes.
Why preyest thou thus upon the poet's heart . . . ?

Similarly, George A. Miller forewarns the reader to the paperback re-issue of George Kingsley Zipf's *The Psycho-Biology of Language* (Cambridge, Mass.: The M.I.T. Press, 1965. 336 pp. \$2.95): ". . . [this book] is not calculated to please every taste. Zipf was the kind of man who would take roses apart to count their petals." But as a matter of rediscovery, a new look at Zipf's vast, numerical (and, let's note, precomputer) labor of love is well worth the effort. Zipf searched for regularities in linguistic behavior. The curves that came to bear his name probably raise many more questions than they answer. A language instructor early in his career, a positivist and a *behavioral* scientist before that term had currency, he focused on language as an objective phenomenon worthy of statistical analysis. Today we may question the nature of the explanation that he proposed for the consistencies that he found, but as an approach to research in a persistently crucial area—man's

* Boston University's Peter A. Bertocci.

use of verbal symbols—Zipf's work remains a fascinating monument.

* * * * How does a community go about solving its acute problems—in providing health services, in working with its handicapped, in education? In myriad forms, this question is asked every day, and the answers take shape through vast budgets in as many concrete modes of implementation. How one community, Elmont, New York, mobilized its resources in the education of the emotionally and mentally disturbed child is reported in *Teaching the Troubled Child*, by George T. Donahue and Sol Nichtern (New York: Free Press. 206 pp. \$2.45). Its use of team process, linking the professional competences of psychiatrist, psychologist, and educator, is no longer unique. But of special interest are the specification and legitimation of the "teacher-mom" concept, the effective healthy mother role in a classroom, as support and supplement to other elements in teaching the child who has difficulties that affect his learning and growing.

* * * * The frustration ("Help! I'm swamped!") induced by the information explosion constantly affects the conscientious reader. All the more, he needs help. Not only abstracts and academic grapevines must come to his rescue; the good review journal deserves a special place. *Psychiatry and Social Science Review* (59 Fourth Ave., New York, N.Y. 10003) ranks high on the list. With commentaries on important works by topnotch scholars in the field, well written and lucid, this publication serves as an effective guide to much of the significant literature in the behavioral sciences. The photographs and drawings, too, combine entertainment and insight. Take a look. . . .