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EMOTIONS AND THE CHILD:
THE CONCEPT OF EQUILIBRIUM AS VIEWED BY DABROWSKI AND PIAGET

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1) Equilibration (Piaget): "An overriding principle of mental development in the sense that all mental growth progresses toward every more complex and stable levels of organization." (1)

Although Dabrowski would agree that evolution involves a transition from the simplest toward the most complex centers, and from automatic toward more voluntary functions, he would disagree that more complex levels of organization are necessarily more stable, at least in their initial phase of development. A higher center, in order to be higher, certainly must be in better control of a wider array of nervous functions. Whether or not the organization is more stable is, to him, questionable.

2) Piaget: "...an organism presents, with respect to its milieu, multiple forms of equilibrium, from postures to homeostasis. These forms are necessary to its life, hence are intrinsic characteristics; durable disequilibria constitute pathological organic or mental states.." (2)

Dabrowski: "States of anxiety and of hyperexcitability and certain states of neurosis--self-dislike, depressive reactions, and a feeling of strangeness toward reality, for example--are often connected with the capacity for accelerated development and with psychic subtlety, a delicacy of feeling, and considerable moral development". (3) "The concept of mental health based on psychic well-being is also clearly erroneous. Fairly stable feelings of well-being are characteristic of psychopaths, patients with general paralysis and some cases of organic brain damage". "To say that mentally healthy individuals are those who have a permanent feeling of well-being is just as erroneous as the converse, that permanent feelings of sadness would constitute mental illness". (4)

3) Piaget: "A serious objection nonetheless remains possible. In maintaining that development consists of a progressive equilibration, one is up against the dual difficulty that development appears like a succession of unstable states to the end of the genetic series and that even then the stable states remain exceptional." (5)

Dabrowski: "Positive disintegration is also found in the psychopathology of eminent men. Beers, Ferguson, David, Wagner, and Dostoevski show distinct psychotic or borderline psychotic processes. During or after their illness these men manifested higher forms of creative psychic organization than before." (6)

4) Piaget: "In reality, the most profound tendency of all human activity is progression toward equilibrium. Reason, which expresses the highest forms of equilibrium, reunites intelligence and affectivity." (7)

Dabrowski: "Through the centuries we have become accustomed to the idea that reason is, and should be the function which controls our feelings and drives." (8)

5) Piaget: "In assimilating objects, action and thought must accommodate to these objects; they must adjust to external variation. The balancing of the processes of assimilation and accommodation may be called 'adaptation'. Such is the general form of psychological equilibrium, and the progressive organization of mental development appears to be simply an ever more precise adaptation to reality." (9)

Dabrowski: "We are used to treating our reason, common sense, and intellectual activities as high level human activities." (10) "Is this so in reality? In essence, the author's opinion is very different. He holds that intellectual activities in most of our human behavior are

instrumental. They are executors of that which is already decided by our intuitional, emotional and instinctive elements in some union with intellectual activities." (11)

6) Piaget: "The psychological development that starts at birth and terminates in adulthood is comparable to organic growth. Like the latter, it consists essentially of activity directed toward equilibrium. Just as the body evolves toward a relatively stable level characterized by the completion of the growth process and by organ maturity, so mental life can be conceived as evolving toward a final form of equilibrium represented by the adult mind. In a sense, development is a progressive equilibration from a lesser to a higher state of equilibrium. From the point of view of intelligence, it is easy to contrast the relative instability and incoherence of childhood ideas with the systematization of adult reason. With respect to the affective life, it has frequently been noted how extensively emotional equilibrium increases with age." (12)

Dabrowski: "What are the processes of evolution, and by what steps do we pass from simple reflexes, connected with external stimuli, to complex behavior? In contradiction to the views of Jackson and the neo-Jacksonist school represented by Mazurkiewicz, many mechanisms designated in the theories of Jackson as dissolution play a principal role in evolution. We call them processes of positive disintegration. This raises the question of the role played by disadaptation in the individual's development, including disadaptation to internal as well as external environment. It seems that in the process of evolution the factor of conflict with surroundings and one's own self has a prominent part in checking primitive impulses. Reflection, hesitation, and inhibition, instead of automatic reaction to stimuli, are the expression of disadaptation; and these

generally precede the gradual process of adaptation to new external and internal conditions. Such an unstable equilibrium gives the opportunity for the maturing of a new disposing and directing center." (13)

7) Piaget: "Human action consists of a continuous and perpetual mechanism of readjustment or equilibration." (14) "The interests of a child at any given moment depend on the system of ideas he has acquired plus his affective inclinations, and he tends to fulfill his interests in the direction of greater equilibrium." (15)

Dabrowski: "All gifted children and young people display symptoms of increased psychic excitability, or psychoneurotic symptoms of greater or lesser intensity." (16)

8) Piaget: "...the young child at first reacts to social relations and to emergent thinking with unconscious egocentricity, which perpetuates the egocentricity of infancy. This egocentricity is then progressively given up, according to the laws of equilibration. These laws, however, are transposed to a higher level of functioning as a function of the need to cope with new realities." (17)

Dabrowski: "The period of infancy is a distinctly integrated one since all the activities of an infant are directed to the goal of satisfying the basic necessities." (18) "Disintegration is strongly manifested during the developmental periods of childhood. We may observe distinct signs of it in infants, both at about 18 months and at two and one half years of age. Capriciousness, dissipated attention, periods of artificiality, animism, and magical thinking are closely connected with a wavering nervous system and unstable psychic structure." (19)

9) Piaget: "...affectivity from seven to twelve years is characterized by the appearance of new moral feelings and, above all, by an organization of will, which culminates in a better integration of the self and a more effective regulation of affective life." (20)

Dabrowski: "In general the various interests and capacities of children and young people coincide with complicated forms of psychoneurosis, with psychoneuroses higher in the hierarchical system of functions (psychasthenia, anxiety neurosis, obsessive neurosis) or with a higher level of the same kind of neurosis." (21)

10) Piaget: "The intellectual egocentricity of adolescence is comparable to the egocentricity of the infant who assimilates the universe into his own corporal activity and to that of the young child who assimilates things into his own nascent thought (symbolic play, etc.). Adolescent egocentricity is manifested by belief in the omnipotence of reflection, as though the world should submit itself to idealistic schemes rather than to systems of reality." (22) "...the metaphysical egocentricity of the adolescent is gradually lessened as a reconciliation between formal thought and reality is effected. Equilibrium is attained when the adolescent understands that the proper function of reflection is not to contradict but to predict and interpret experience. This formal equilibrium surpasses by far the equilibrium of concrete thought because it not only encompasses the real world but also the undefined constructions of rational deduction and inner life." (23)

Dabrowski: "In many psychiatric textbooks the ability to adapt to changing conditions of life is given as one of the characteristics of mental health. What is meant by this concept of adaptation? Does it mean clearly understanding various types of environmental reality and various human

personality patterns, including their level of development, and on this knowledge basing appropriate behavior in accordance with one's principles? Or does it mean greater or lesser resignation of one's own point of view, principles, and modes of behavior for the sake of resolution of conflict?

The first formulation is in accordance with the demands of mental health; the second is not. The developing individual should understand reality as completely^{as} possible. He should not react too emotionally to the difficulties emerging from it. He may even wisely involve himself in resistances, conflicts, and the consequent life difficulties where an unavoidable situation demands nonadaptation if he is to be consistent with his moral and social points of view. Such an attitude practised consistently contributes to the formation of moral individuality." (24)

11) Piaget: "We have already discussed the intellectual egocentricity of adolescence, and its affective aspects are well known. The young child unwittingly models the world in his own image but nonetheless feels inferior to adults and the older children whom he imitates. He thus fashions a kind of separate world at a level below the world of his elders. The adolescent, on the other hand, thanks to his budding personality, sees himself as equal to his elders, yet different from them, different because of the new life stirring within him. He wants to surpass and astound them by transforming the world. That is why the adolescent's systems or life plans are at the same time filled with generous sentiments and altruistic or mystically fervent projects and with disquieting megalomania and conscious egocentricity. In a discreet and anonymous inquiry into the daydreams of a class of fifteen-year-olds, a French teacher found future marshals of France or presidents of the Republic, great men of all kinds, among the most timid and serious boys, some of whom already saw their statues in

the squares of Paris. In short, these were individuals, who, had they been thinking out loud, would have been suspected of paranoia. The diaries of adolescents also reveal the same constant mixture of devotion to humanity and acute egocentricity. The phenomenon is the same whether it has to do with the misunderstood and anxious youngster convinced of failure who questions the value of life itself or with the active youngster convinced of his own genius." (25)

Dabrowski: "Most of the mechanisms considered typical of psychoneurosis by Pavlov's school, such as the swaying of balance between the processes of stimulation and inhibition, excessive inhibition or stimulation, and disharmony between activities of the cortex and sub-cortical centers, or between the first and second signaling system, are phenomena generally observed in sensitive individuals with considerable abilities and potential for a high level of development." (26) "Even when suspecting psychosis, the psychiatrist must refrain from judging the case to be pathological disintegration until the end of the process. The so-called psychopathological symptoms--delusions, anxiety, phobias, depression, feelings of strangeness of oneself, emotional overexcitability, etc.--should not be generally or superficially classified as symptoms of mental disorder and disease since the further development of individuals manifesting them will often prove their positive role in development." (27)

12) Piaget: "We see, then, how the adolescent goes about injecting himself into adult society. He does so by means of projects, life plans, theoretical systems, and ideas of political or social reform. In short, he does so by means of thinking and almost, one might say, by imagination--so far does this hypothetico-deductive thinking sometimes depart from reality." (28)

Dabrowski: "We also know that, during periods of accelerated development such as puberty, we are dealing with symptoms, over a brief or long period, of decreased efficiency with respect to some functions (e.g. adjustment, equilibrium, well-being, social relations) and increased efficiency with respect to other functions (creativity, hierarchization, self-reliance, reflection). (29)

13) Piaget: "The society that interests him is the society he wants to reform; he has nothing but disdain of disinterest for the real society he condemns." (30) "True adaptation to society comes automatically when the adolescent reformer attempts to put his ideas to work. Just as experience reconciles formal thought with the reality of things, so does effective and enduring work, undertaken in concrete and well-defined situations, cure all dreams. One should not be disquieted by the extravagance and disequilibrium of the better part of adolescence. If specialized studies are not enough, once the last crises of adaptation have been surmounted, professional work definitely restores equilibrium and thus definitively marks the advent of adulthood." (31)

Dabrowski: "Herbert Spencer said that he would prefer to be a dissatisfied Socrates than a satisfied animal. We know that at certain stages of intensive psychic development (puberty, for example) negative moods predominate." (32)

14) Piaget: "...affectivity is nothing without intelligence. Intelligence furnishes affectivity with its means and clarifies its ends." (33)

Dabrowski: "Emotions play a vital role in the psychic life of man." (34)
"Experience, reflection, and the endeavor to reach a higher level of personality make a human being human. The poet Keats noted that it is

impossible for a man to develop without his sorrows as well as his joys. Sadness, depression, discontent with oneself, shame, guilt, and inferiority are essential for development, as are also the experience of feelings of joy and creativity." (35)

Intellectually and emotionally, it would appear that Piaget views the child as a defective adult.

Contrary to this viewpoint, Dabrowski regards the adult, in many cases, to be a "defective child", in that he often is, from the age of 25 years on, a regressed form of the human being he was at the age of puberty.

The average young child, rather than exhibiting affective, or emotional instability, would, according to the Theory of Positive Disintegration, more likely exhibit the stability of the level of first, or primitive integration. He would be free of inner conflict, easily move about without the burden of self-awareness, and use his intelligence to maintain his pleasant existence. A more highly advanced young child, on the other hand, might well display signs of the second stage of development--ambiguities in his behavior, moodiness, conflicting wills and desires. Such instability would be far from Piaget's view of the defective adult, but rather signs of a youngster experiencing accelerated development. In some cases, this behavior manifests itself as early as one-and-a-half to two years of age.

Our first youngster, according to Piaget, would be the more mature of the two, since he displays most "emotional stability". The second youngster, according to Dabrowski, would be the more mature, and the so-called instability he presents would be a sign of having broken down some of the rigid structure of the integration at the first stage of

development.

Let us now consider the cases of three young adolescents, two boys and one girl.

The first, a boy, Robert, aged 13, is noted for his good behavior. He does his work well and enjoys the teachers' pleasant attitude toward him. He has no interest in the work itself, but strives for good marks because he so enjoys the praise. He acts in a self-centered way which doesn't allow him to make friends too easily, but, using his intelligence to the fullest, he takes money from his mother's purse to buy candy which he gives to his schoolmates, not noticing that, when he has no candy, he also has no friends. He is never suspected of taking the money, for he is a "good boy" at home as well as at school. If his mother chastizes him, he is so upset that she quickly comforts him and the trouble is forgotten. The next minute he is smiling and content. His charming attitude pleases most people who know him, but one neighbour, particularly observant, regards him as "sly".

The second, a girl, Ann, aged 14 years, creates many problems, for herself and those around her. She is frequently moody, and spends much time each morning over choosing her clothes for school, often trying on as many as five or six outfits before deciding what to wear. She is miserable and angry with her brothers and sisters, but gets along well with her friends and is quite well-liked, especially by those who also feel that their own life is especially difficult because "nobody understands". Ann's moodiness displays itself in erratic performance in school. The teachers are concerned about her, hoping she will "settle down". One teacher takes the time to talk to Ann and tries to help her to get rid of her moodiness and get at her studies like the

other, better students. Another teacher, more sensitive than the first, encourages Ann to think through her problems and find a path for herself.

The third, a boy, Stephen, aged 13, is very unhappy. He is very interested in biology, but, when he gets excellent marks, some of his peers call him an "egghead". This adds to his misery. However, if he ignores his studies, he becomes very critical of himself and is unhappy with his own poor performance. He likes to do well, but is embarrassed by the teachers' praise. He feels uncomfortable with adults, and with his friends, sometimes feeling that he belongs nowhere. His special friend is a younger child who is confined to a wheelchair. With this child, he shares his nature collection and his dreams for a better world. Stephen sometimes feels very angry at his parents, but immediately feels guilty and spends some time in great despair, feeling he is an ungrateful son. Sometimes this guilt drains him so completely that he fails to pay attention at school. Several of his teachers shout at him, threatening to send him to the counsellor. One teacher, recalling a similar unhappy childhood, talks to Stephen, complimenting him on his astute observations in relation to biology. Stephen warms to the teacher, but cannot talk of his personal problems without crying and so remains silent.

What can we say of these young people? Emotionally, Stephen, our final case, seems to be in trouble. Ann, typical of many teen-agers, is a common picture to many parents and teachers. Robert, most conforming and least troublesome to others, is like dismissed as able to look after himself. In our society, the "squeaky wheel gets the grease". Ann would likely get the most attention and it would be directed toward encouraging her to conform so that eventually her behavior will be as compliant as Robert's.

According to Dabrowski's Theory of Positive Disintegration, Robert is still at the conflict-free first stage of development, Ann is at the second stage, where rapidly alternating moods appear, and Stephen is experiencing the beginning of spontaneous multilevel disintegration--level three of development.

Robert may never be noticed and may never change. He could grow up to be a fast-moving, smooth-talking business man who rates success in terms of material wealth and social approval, who is dishonest in business without experiencing guilt, who is charming, thus leading people not to suspect him, and who will use his intelligence to satisfy the primitive physiological and security needs. He may always buy friendship, even love, and when the truth of his situation comes close to making itself clear to him, he will throw himself with a frenzy into his business, making more money to reinforce his own value without ever fully recognizing his world is a house of cards, ready to topple at any moment. His behavior will become more rigid and automatic as time goes on, he will maintain his position through self-abasement to those he regards as superior, and will show a lack of consideration for any he considers inferior. He may never have any truly close relationships unless someone else is eager to maintain a bond based on a mutual power struggle. He could achieve national acclaim, but be a truly empty man. Those attending his funeral would do so in hopes of attaining some of his accrued wealth. Just as he gave no real love nor real happiness in his lifetime, his death would cause no real sorrow or loss. Robert would have lived the un-lived life--would die without ever having been truly born.

Ann has more potential, depending on her environment. Her moodiness

and ambiguities indicate that some of the primitive structures have broken down and she is no longer always at ease with herself. Her "dis-ease" is regarded by some adults as annoying, and to be gotten rid of through conformity, and by at least one teacher as an indication that Ann may be able to resolve her conflicts by deciding what in life is important to her. If she is encouraged to conform, she may re-integrate at the first stage of development and follow Robert's path. If she is encouraged to examine her thoughts and evaluate her goals, she may pass through the anxiety Stephen is experiencing, perhaps as a young mother, or even as a grandmother. Should she pass through this period, and in so doing, establish a hierarchy of values which no longer allows her to treat others insensitively, she will surely offer love and well-being to others, in her family, and possibly in a wider circumference, her community. Ann's future is less certain. Should she choose the first route, that of re-integration, we would regard the adult Ann as a regressed teen-age Ann.

Stephen. What will become of Stephen? Sensitive, anxious, unable to strike back when hurt--many more indicators of a higher level of development than either of the first two cases. Is it possible for Stephen to return to behavior similar to Ann's or Robert's? Is it perhaps necessary that he do so in order to survive? In a struggle with Ann, he might be, depending on her mood, treated sensitively one time, insensitively another. To what degree would he hold her responsible for her unkind acts? For many years, probably not at all. Instead, he would search himself again and again to see what he had done to cause her to be angry. What about a relationship with Robert? Stephen would be treated as an inferior by Robert, who would regard his doubt, his

indecision, his kindness as "stupid" or "naive". Robert would argue that Stephen would never get ahead in the world unless he changed.

For some time yet, Stephen may regard his inability to approach others as inferior to Robert's smooth ways, and it could be years before he is free of this altogether. If he acted in a manner similar to Robert, he would immediately be struck with feelings of guilt and consider his own actions inferior to what he is capable of doing. No matter which way Stephen turns, the future does not look bright at times. He may be unable to compete for marks, and lose out while in school or university. He may be tempted to sacrifice his ideals in order to assure himself of a job. Ann may someday be trying to decide between the two men as husbands. She may value job security (Robert) more than anything else. The road ahead for Stephen is fraught with danger. He may become immobilized--drained of energy from internal conflict, should he not conform. He may break down completely and have to be hospitalized. If this is the case, with the stigma attached to such nervous disorders in our society, he may never function in the world as a "success".

All of the above would not necessarily mean, according to Dabrowski, that he is a failure. His potential is much greater than either of the other two, and, should he be supported by sensitive others, he may emerge as an example of the most human of beings, in which case, the adult Stephen, not having compromised his early ideals, would not be a regressed adolescent Stephen, but a growing, healthy indication of where our species is heading.

Robert, Ann, Stephen--we all know young people like them. We may have been like them. We may still be.

The "Roberts" may try to control the "Stephens", but the "Stephens"

of the world will not, or cannot control the "Roberts". Where is man heading?

Which of these young people would display the most instability, according to Piaget? Obviously, Stephen.

In terms of all those falling within the major portion of the standard normal curve, development would be uneventful enough that the distinction between Piaget's and Dabrowski's viewpoint would not be too clear.

It is the exception to the rule, the mutation, the child exhibiting accelerated development who makes it clear, according to Dabrowski, that here is a distinction, that, for children with remarkable developmental potential, emotional instability is an indication, not of lack of potential, but of the degree to which it exists.

When one sees psychic overexcitability, the nuclei for the inner psychic milieu, and early special abilities or talents, on the basis of such an analysis, Dabrowski hypothesizes such a youngster indicates "the future development of man".

Stephen was such a youngster, with his emotional and intellectual overexcitability. Also, he exhibited dynamisms of the inner psychic milieu--shame and guilt, feelings of inferiority toward himself, subject-object (concern for the invalid), disquietude with himself. His special talents lay in his astute observations of nature and his desire, all on his own, to take careful notes and keep a rare collection.

The child, in his growth, can develop by collision or collaboration with his environment. Ann is an example of a child in collision with her environment, but this is not a high level of maladjustment. Should she show signs of positive maladjustment to something in her environment

which she objects to on principal, rather than for personal gain, she would develop even more rapidly. Further signs of continued development would be heightened creativity, (the result of collision or collaboration) and eventually autonomy and authenticity. It would be possible for Ann to achieve partial harmony as a result of continued conflict. During this period she will almost constantly display signs of emotional instability, which Piaget would regard as an indication that she is moving away from, not toward, maturity.

In his later writings, Piaget stated that emotions and instinctive functions play the same role as intelligence in development. "There is a constant parallel between the affective and intellectual life throughout childhood and adolescence." (36) He had previously stated that affectivity is nothing without intelligence.

He doesn't deal with emotional and instinctive functions per se, but gives the results of emotional development on the basis of his observations of intellectual development. "Let us note, first of all, that with the progress of intelligent behavior, the emotions linked to activity become differentiated and multiplied; joy and sadness linked to success and failure of intentional acts, effort linked to interest, fatigue to disinterest, etc." (37)

Dabrowski would disagree sharply with this statement for, if joy and sadness, for instance, are linked to success and failure of intentional acts, we could be dealing with a very intelligent person at either of the first two levels of development. (Both Robert and Ann are good examples of such a case, and they are less well developed than Stephen, who gets no joy from teachers' praise for his good marks.)

Therefore, according to Dabrowski, emotional and instinctive

functions not only play the same role as intelligence in development, but are even more important. Stephen's great unhappiness, his positive maladjustment to the competitive school system, his joy in sharing his collection with his invalid friend, his emotional overexcitability when approached by a kindly teacher--all are manifestations of the "inner psychic milieu" which indicates that Stephen's development has accelerated far beyond either Robert's or Ann's.

Dabrowski's formula would be: Collision or collaboration plus emotion yields authenticity.

Stephen is approaching it.

A point of view such as this shows us that, often, in the period of child development, we have much more creativity and authenticity than we have in adults coming close to what Piaget calls "equilibrium".

Often, in fact, our adult influence goes against the normal creativity of children. When conformity, without emotion, is demanded of a child, we can regard the formula as such: Equilibrium = domination ^{by} primitive instincts.

In the periods of negation, and especially puberty, and as well as other periods of stress, children present something like creative, positive disintegration, even an indication (as did Stephen) of multi-level disintegration. As well as biological development, signs are: rigid moral attitudes, resistance to rigid religious attitudes, and searching for an ideal (which is a form of authenticity).

Unfortunately, in our society, by the age of 22-24, these developmental embers are snuffed out, with only superficial ambitions and a false value hierarchy left. One compromise after another has been made, as "human goals" are given up as impossible to attain.

Not only in gifted, but also in normal children, we can see, during these accelerated growth periods both disequilibrium and signs of future equilibrium, a dynamic rather than a rigid equilibrium.

The disequilibrium manifested along with the biological upset of puberty should, according to Piaget, go away if the child is to mature. According to Dabrowski, the more disequilibrium, the better, although, the child may need help for awhile (Stephen).

Most psychologists view this as a dangerous and negative period and wait (as did Ann's teachers) for it to go away.

Dabrowski would argue strongly for a change of attitude in educational institutions, the daily environment of the child during his most important developmental years.

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