

Kazimierz Dąbrowski's View of Asceticism.

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Prior to the enlightenment, and in fact for the most part, prior to the 20th century, models of personality development were expressed exclusively in religious terms. These models can be found in the personal documents of mystics and in the manuals of their spiritual advisors. Of the variety of methods traditionally employed by mystics to facilitate their growth, perhaps the two that stand out as unique are meditation and asceticism. Of these two, meditation has attracted a great deal of scholarly research while the study of ascetical practices has been almost completely neglected.

Shortly after Abraham Maslow began publishing descriptions of his theory of personality development based in part on mystical prototypes, which he interpreted in secular psychological terms, numerous theoretical and empirical studies on the topic of meditation appeared in psychology journals (i.e., from the mid-1960s to the mid-1980s). On the other hand very little was written about asceticism, and even when asceticism was treated, or referred to, it was considered to be deviant behaviour motivated by subconscious guilt or masochism. In short, religious asceticism was seen as no more than a symptom of personality disorder.

One example of this approach is a chapter (almost 50 pages in length) in Karl Menninger's [Man Against Himself](#). Menninger identifies four dimensions of asceticism (and martyrdom)--i.e., aggression, a desire to be punished, an erotic motivation and a self-destructive impulse--and then proceeds to demonstrate the presence of these features in both clinical cases of neurosis and psychosis as well as in examples taken from history of religious ascetics and martyrs.

In contrast to this dismissive approach, Kazimierz Dąbrowski held that asceticism can have a positive developmental function. To begin with Dąbrowski was not of the opinion that all of the basic physiological needs had to be met in order for a person to progress to another level of development. In fact, quite the contrary, in Dąbrowski's view sacrifice and suffering, including the

suffering that comes from typical ascetical practices like fasting, can serve developmental purposes:

QUOTE: In the world of cultural values sacrifice plays a momentous role...Suffering...may...give birth to higher values...Hard experiences do not always dissolve psychic life, they often strengthen and improve it. Fasting, exercise in controlling oneself, and asceticism create resistance, strengthen one's moral vigilance, and increase one's readiness to enter a conscious struggle for the sake of principles one holds. Suffering, if we experience it correctly, makes us sensitive to the sufferings of others, awakens in us a new awareness, and creates a breach in our excessively egocentric attitude toward the surrounding world. (1967:30)

This endorsement of ascetical practices may seem to be no more than an echo of what apologists for religious mysticism have been saying for centuries. Voluntary ascetical actions build character and the acceptance of suffering encourages compassion by sensitizing persons to the sufferings of others. But Dąbrowski also explains the preconditions and functions of asceticism in terms of his theory of positive disintegration.

For example, one precondition for ascetical practices to be growth-promoting is the presence of a hierarchy of values:

QUOTE: Asceticism in the present meaning of the term consists of the dampening of natural instincts with a view of attaining a higher goal, usually of a religious and moral character. We see in ascetic practices a clearly conscious introduction of multilevel disintegration into the process of self-perfection, through a multilevel struggle between soul and body, between instincts and higher aspirations... (1967:130)

Not only were ascetical actions expressive of multilevel processes but as voluntary acts aimed at self-perfection they are typically engaged in at the fourth level of personality.

Yet another predisposing factor, of undertaking ascetical practices, seems to be the presence of strong sensual overexcitability:

QUOTE: Individuals practising asceticism manifested, on one side, enormous sensitivity to the ideal and its realization, and on the other, very strong sensual experiences and affectional and sensual overexcitability. The ability to reshape oneself through positive disintegration was characterized by developmental "compulsion," by the necessity of overpassing the thus far attained level, and by the insufficiency of "real" experiences. Ascetic exercises and struggles with the instincts made one capable of separating oneself from one's lower level. (1967:130)

A primary function of asceticism then is to weaken the attraction of strong sensual overexcitability so that the individual is free to realize the ideal of personality.

Dąbrowski's view of asceticism can be found throughout his works. However, while occasionally he actually employs the word asceticism, he more frequently uses a number of other terms or phrases which, if not synonymous with asceticism, have closely related denotations and connotations. One of these is the concept of the partial death instinct and another is that of the deliberate frustration of basic needs. In a discussion of religion at various levels Dąbrowski states that at level IV there will be the

QUOTE: Appearance and development of the instinct of "partial death," that is, the aim, in striving for self-perfection, to destroy all that is undesirable, negative, and an obstacle to development. This can be accomplished through deliberate frustration of one's basic needs. (1977:217)

The notions of partial death and frustration of basic needs are developed in greater detail in Dąbrowski's description of the attitude towards death at level IV:

QUOTE: As a factor in development, we observe the activity of an instinct of partial death. It is a conscious and deliberate program of eradication of the lower personality structures. In order to accomplish this, the disintegrative activity of some dynamisms (for example, the rejection aspect of the third factor, the critical aspect of subject-object in oneself, or the containing aspect of self-control) may be increased in order to destroy the residual structures of primitive levels of the inner psychic milieu. This can take the form of asceticism, of resignation from personal ambitions for the sake of serving others, or deliberate and voluntary frustration of one's basic needs. (1977:172-173)

In this passage we are given an indication of some of the specific fourth level dynamisms that motivate ascetical actions--i.e., the third factor, subject-object in oneself and self-control. There is also the suggestion that asceticism functions not only to weaken the hold of sensual impulses but to disintegrate lower level personality structures as well.

Another concept related to asceticism is that of inhibition, especially the deliberate inhibition of lower level impulses. In the following passage, Dąbrowski explains that inhibition serves not just to eliminate lower level impulsiveness, but also "medium level" dynamisms (i.e., the dynamisms of levels II and early III).

QUOTE: [At level IV] The dynamics of inner inhibition are very strong as is the readiness to eliminate any "excitability" from lower sources. There is a program of methods and means of developing excitation on a higher level with simultaneous inhibition of dynamisms of medium or

low level (that is, the interface of levels II and III and early III). The practice of meditation brings about inner quietude, calm awareness of one's weaknesses, calm equilibration of what has been achieved in the struggles of everyday life. This inner calm can be considered a meditative inhibition which strengthens our achievements. (1977:121)

In this passage, Dąbrowski explains how asceticism and meditation work together to realize the goal of self-perfection. While asceticism is an expression and a means of organized disintegration, meditation increases the developing person's awareness of what remains to be done as well as what has been achieved.

Finally, Dąbrowski refers to a form of mental asceticism, one reported frequently of saints in various religious traditions, which is the deliberate seeking out of censure or criticism from others. In his analysis of criticism at level IV, Dąbrowski notes the following:

QUOTE: At this level of development, the individual is not only receptive to criticism but also promotes situations in which exposure to criticism serves him as an aid to a higher level of his own development. (1977:153-154)

Dąbrowski is aware of the fact that the partial death instinct can be negative as well as positive, as can be seen in a passage from his discussion of this instinct in The Dynamics of Concepts.

QUOTE: In its negative and even pathological form the death instinct can have certain negative aspects: the desire of nonexistence, hostility and hatred toward oneself without hierarchization of values, without the formation and growth of higher values. This would constitute a one-directional, noncreative, destructive process, frequently ending in suicide....We mean by the positive instinct of partial death the instinct which is consciously or half-consciously directed toward inner psychic transformation, toward weakening and elimination of some dynamisms. And thus, toward setting up other dynamisms which are of a higher level. (1973:36-37)

Once again the importance of a certain measure of development, or of developmental readiness, is emphasized as a relevant precondition for true asceticism.

In conclusion, unlike many of his contemporaries, Dąbrowski saw a potentially positive role for those ancient practices which are referred to by the term asceticism. The most important precondition for positive ascetical practice is an advanced level of personality--specifically organized multilevel disintegration. In fact ascetical practices are expressions of the fourth level dynamisms of the third factor, subject-object in oneself and self-control. The need for asceticism seems also to be related to a strong presence of sensual overexcitability. Finally the functions of

asceticism, mentioned by Dąbrowski, include the subordination of sensual overexcitability to higher values and the disintegration of personality dynamisms of previous stages.

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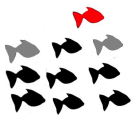
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