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Frederick Sontag

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CAN WE THINK OF SALVATION AS A RETURN TO MENTAL HEALTH?

Frederick Sontag

A. The Modern Hope to Replace Salvation With a New Science

When we think of "mental health," we have not recently connected this to the notion of "salvation" in Christian doctrine. There once was a time, of course, when many who wanted to recover or restore mental health turned to Christianity and found their healing. There are, I suppose, many reasons which can be given for why this ceased to be true, but at least one of these involves the rise of psychiatry as a profession and the well-known anti-religious sentiments of its pioneers, most notably Sigmund Freud. Psychiatry arose as the modern and "scientific" alternative to the healing and counseling practices of Christianity. Thus, before we can decide whether "salvation" can be seen as a road to mental health today, we must go back and consider how psychiatry came to replace it.

Ernest Becker is a good guide to assist us in this reappraisal. He is a champion of the scientific status of the social sciences, and he believes in their ability to revolutionize the study of man. He has written about the role psychiatry played in this central venture of the modern age,¹ and he, an astute critic of the program of psychiatry. At the same time he is a supporter of its claim to supplant traditional religion. As the subtitle of his book indicates ("The New Understanding of Man"), the issue revolves around whether a superior and perhaps scientific knowledge of man became available which outdates all previous religious proposals for the healing of man. Should all "mental illness" now be defined to come under the general category of "the science of man"? If so, it no longer falls within the province of religion.

Briefly put, Becker's book massively documents the failure of the social sciences to achieve their proposed revolution in the understanding of man such that it becomes another area of science. He traces the reason for this failure to the founding assumptions of the social sciences. Still, he remains optimistic that all we need to complete the proposed revolution is a reordering of those original assumptions. As Becker sees it, the chief problem is that "disciplinary proliferation" has had the effect of burying man. Thus, the social sciences have failed to give us the clear, whole perspective on man we need in order to cure our ills. To accomplish this Becker proposes a "radical recentring of the human sciences"

which would take man's self-value as "the proper invariant point of reference around which the various disciplines should revolve their efforts."² In other words, Becker thinks that our failure does not lie in the original assumption which launched the social sciences but in a methodological problem. Having failed to date, we can still proceed to build "a mature hypothetico-deductive science," (p. x) or so Becker is convinced.

Of course, others have proposed that we adopt this "man-centered" orientation. What is new in Becker's proposal is that he believes we now have enough knowledge to forge a broadly inclusive and logically consistent science of man. Becker admits that we have lived through an era of "disciplinary morass." Nevertheless, for reasons which are not quite clear, he still thinks it is possible to transform this into a "compelling rational basis for moral action" (p. x). Most of the social sciences began with a crusading goal of this kind. They wanted to improve the lot of mankind, but their zeal was lost somewhere along the way as disciplinary cross-fire developed between them. The goal Becker sets out for us is to overthrow the "narrow medical view of human ills" (p. 2). Psychology, he thinks, must merge into a broad human science. "Mental illness" is cultural behavior, not a narrow medical phenomenon.

Part of Becker's rejection of the role of traditional religion in mental health stems from his conviction that the Enlightenment has come, making all things new. "Man has on the whole become more sophisticated and rational," (p. 59) he asserts. If this is true, new techniques are demanded and old ones are automatically outmoded. Becker admits "man's need to forgive himself each night, to absolve himself so that he can begin again, anew" (p. 70). This, of course, is the classical religious notion of confession and forgiveness, but still Becker feels that today "religious motives have little to do with life as most people live it" (*Ibid*). Thus, religion can be of no assistance in performing this needed task. The appearance of schizophrenia "sums up man's coming of age in society" (p. 108). In other words, rather than decreasing psychic illness, evolutionary advance increases it as man sheds his need of religion.

Action breaks down when the individual's sense of self-value is undermined. In a secular world we must create a symbolic worth on our own. When human action bogs down, meaning dies. "When the individual does not control meanings symbolically, we call him 'mentally ill'" (p. 120). Although we have been at odds about all of this for 50 years, Becker for some reason thought (in 1964) that happily "the data of the human sciences are starting to emerge; their relationships are becoming clear" (p. 132). Whether or not his optimism is soundly based is a crucial matter. If the day of religious help is past and if being alone in the modern world actually increases mental illness, all is lost, that is, unless we think all the social sciences are about to reach a level of agreement so that they can step in and provide the needed solution. Cultural advance gave us this

problem in the first place, according to Becker. "As soon as the theological world view was undermined, man was doomed to examine his miserable condition" (p. 138).

This is a neat reversal of the usual charge that religion needlessly places mankind under a burden of guilt from which the modern age, at last, can release us. "Man has rolled up his shirt sleeves, eager to tamper with his own creation" (p. 139), but the result is to make us less secure rather than more. On the positive side, Becker is convinced that we are near to developing an ineluctable law for human development. If true, this would help us reverse the tide and restore our lost mental health. For this now to be possible depends on his theory that human motivation owes almost nothing to primary biological drives. Thus, if man is self-created via his culture, the animal side counts for less. If all our conduct has been learned, it can all be unlearned, and we have a very plastic creature on our hands which we can remold, that is, if an agreed law of human development is now in our possession as Becker thinks. We no longer find it possible to give a purely physical interpretation of man, but in spite of the important role given to symbolism, Becker thinks it is possible to found a precise science of man.

He thinks that, at last, the final theory of man is here which can provide our salvation. But in response, we must ask Becker: In rejecting the doctrinal rigidity of Freud, have we not also done away with the possibility of finality? If so, then are we in such an assured position to cure the mental illness which he attributes to our loss of the theological world? Becker claims to see the human personality from the inside, and it holds no more mysteries. Since the culture we create is a fiction, he thinks, "the kind of people we make depends upon the kind of people we want" (p. 167). Unlike the notion of original sin, our restrictions have been caused by artificial restraints over which we can now assume control. Becker feels that we no longer need to struggle against ourselves, against forces deep within our nature. Rather, our only opponent is a world we ourselves have fashioned during our early training.

The anxiety we now face arose from the possibility of abrogating an entire framework of meaning. But at the same time this happened, our world lost its mystery. We lost a world, but on the other hand we now know how to build a new one. Neurosis grows due to a failure to symbolize and also by a constriction of choice possibilities. Anxiety arises due to a lack of words that symbolize. If so, this matter is now subject to our control. However, the issue we must face is: Do we really create our world? It would be much easier for us to solve our psychic problems if this were true; Becker is right about that. He thinks we know where to pin the blame for human failure: on the flimsy symbolic basis for human meaning we ourselves constructed. If this is the case, "there is very little about the peculiar human condition that is not somehow in man's potential control" (p. 183). Guilt and shame, though typically human, have been made

by man and so may be unmade by us. Yet the issue remains: Do we really create our world at will? If we do create it, of course, we can change it. But can we really do that?

Modern man, in his quest for autonomy, is forcing culture's hand because, Becker is convinced, we are about to gain control over man by learning how to construct culture. All we need to do is to liberate ourselves from the fetters of the excessive restraints of our early environment. This formula sounds easy enough, but is it working today? Becker simply assumes that man has full control over the means to construct culture, but can we agree to that? He defines "the world" as rational and as self-constructed; therefore it can be reconstructed. "Mental illness" becomes simply our failure to practice "a fully rational approach to interpersonal living" (p. 206), which Becker assumes we have now learned how to do at will. He adopts a traditional Enlightenment view: It is "ignorance" that accounts for the seemingly irrational behavior of the mentally ill. Thus, our illnesses can be cured by the new knowledge which has recently come into our possession.

Medical psychiatry, of course, can no longer be in charge of the revision of man, since accomplishing this change depends on developing a symbolic view of man and the world. Becker's account makes mental illness easy. Therefore, it can be cured easily, since it only depends on unstructuring and restructuring our world views. Schizophrenia is a stupidity. The victim lacks behavior patterns to manipulate means and ends. Thus, the "normal" individual is now defined as the creative one, "the one who exercised control over his choice of means and ends" (p. 209). The history of modern psychology, thus becomes a history of its own disillusionment as a science. "Psychology has evolved back into philosophy," he thinks (p. 120).

However, since Becker does not seem aware of his own assumptions (that is, his whole theory seems obvious to him), he has turned psychology into a social philosophy. He thinks we can now stamp out mental illness by putting the control of means and ends sequences back into the hands of the people who need to make the choices. It is just that simple. As he has defined it, we now are faced with the opportunity to control the social world (p. 125). Becker makes this assertion in response to his inquiry into psychoanalysis. We can wrest control of the tools of mental health from religion, but only if we establish a new science which can exercise this kind of power, he thinks. But, if Becker is wrong, as I believe he is, and the modern world has failed in this effort, Christianity with its less precise doctrines is not in such an unfavorable position.

However, this change in man's mental health, which Becker is so sure the social sciences can induce, requires all individuals to change together. Since the criticism of religion is centered on its piecemeal approach and its lack of ability to change whole cultures, the new social science approach must be based on

mass change. If it is not, we are back to the village priest counseling his parishioner. Psychiatric problems represent human failures, because they indicate a lack of human control in situations where choice is called for. Since this is thought to depend on an ignorance of the possibilities present in an ordered world, once we realize this, mass change will come by maximizing individual choice, or so Becker postulates.

However, if it is the individual who controls his own choice rather than some "science," you have to be sure the individual will always seek change as he or she is supposed to. Maximizing choice may be the only way to meet the challenge of twentieth century society, but Becker treats it as a matter of "available vocabularies of motivation" over which the individual lacks free control. The "real problem" is the one of "individual integration" (p. 128), he says. But isn't Becker operating under an illusion: That if only we do a little something new in education, each individual will suddenly take over the task of creating himself and all will be fine. There are powerful interests who wish to curb human spontaneity, such as Marxism. Becker can only carry out his analysis by assuming that what he says is true of every man everywhere, not just of some. Becker says: "We seem to be calling for nothing less than a total reenlistment of society in the furtherance of human design" (p. 225).

At this point what we must ask Becker is: Will altering culture through education really produce free individuals, each one capable of handling decisions, or will this procedure merely inculcate another type of conformity? Becker thinks he has "a total problem" (p. 228). He has the power, via the new science, to program for a full exercise of human freedom. "The twentieth century is witnessing a revolution in self-awareness that has not been seen since the Renaissance and the time of the Greeks," Becker asserts expansively (*Ibid.*). But we need to assess this claim carefully to see if his thesis really can produce the mental health Becker desires. Like so many others, Becker gives aesthetic experience a particularly heavy role. It takes the place of religion and God in its healing potential: "The aesthetic object shows that the perfect union of ends and means is possible. It embodies...the vision that fulfillment is possible" (p. 233). Art takes on the same function as the Marxist goal of the classless society or the Christian heaven.

Religious ritual, long used as an avenue to restore psychic balance, is dismissed. Aesthetic ritual takes its place. "This is the function of ritual, to interweave inextricably the symbolic and the organic, by gesture and sound, body balance, measured movements" (p. 237). That is the modern avenue to mental health. But if we ask why art is expected to do so much for us now, we have to reply: Because religion isn't doing it. "The aesthetic object demonstrates that life is not in vain, by holding up tangible proof of human creativity" (p. 239). Art provides the meaning to life which religion formerly did, and Becker never denies that our mental health demands this kind of guarantee of human signifi-

cance. Just as religion used to transcend the world, so Becker thinks aesthetics now takes man beyond the confines of culture. Human values become supreme.

In a pre-scientific day religion stressed the healing power of love, and now Becker ties love to aesthetics. He sounds like Paul's letter to the Corinthians when he says: "Thus love banishes shame, transcends the fictitious learning, the sham morality" (p. 241). The primary aim of psychotherapy is accomplished by love, he feels. "The individual accepts his past and his uniqueness as irrevocable, as necessarily and desirably so" (p. 240). Since the love object functions as the psychotherapist, we have here the counterpart of the religious claim that "Jesus accepts you" or "God loves you." But our question must be: Is this true for most cases? Is he treating love as a romantic ideal rather than as it exists in fact? Love may mirror the religious experience of release that men so long found healing, but can love and aesthetics accomplish this alone? Perception and contemplation of the unique, existential, loved-object has taken the place of the mass, confession, and forgiveness.

Becker wants the loved object to function as the psychotherapist, or perhaps we should say, as the priest. Jesus accepts you; God loves you, and the prime religious experience is that of release. But can art and a love object do this as well? Becker has set humankind up in a situation which does not eliminate our religious needs but rather takes them as a part of human nature, but then he proposes that these same functions be shifted to non-religious offices. Becker ties love to beauty so that art becomes involved in overcoming the split between self and world. The loved object somehow adds the meaning life needs in order to go beyond being a simple natural process. Love now has the power to forgive which people formerly sought in God. Of course, what must be noted again is that this assertion depends on a very idealized notion of "love." In ordinary circumstances love is as much the source of our bondage as of our release.

Recognizing that our situation at the present time is not quite like the picture he paints, Becker puts a great deal of stress on the changes education can bring about in the future. But if the future is to be different from the past, what will provide this change? Becker places his hope on education. He wrote *Revolution in Psychiatry* in 1964, but what has happened to education in the meantime? Rather than agreeing on a new educational program and then implementing it, we are in even greater disagreement about our educational programs, and many think the whole system is faltering. Rather than freeing us, education itself has become a prime source of controversy. We are surely further from an agreed educational agenda than when Becker wrote. If so, does that give us much optimism about the likelihood of accomplishing this revolution via education and thus providing a substitute religion? Becker has defined us into a religious situation of need, but has he left us any way to satisfy this short of a return to tradition?

In a later book (1969) Becker again stresses his aim to “educate, elevate, and free man” (p. vii).³ The problem with this, of course, is that such a change must be achieved universally, not just accomplished by an elite education for a few. Traditional religion was criticized because it offered release but only to its devoted followers. The aim of the modern world was to universalize this and to open release to all mankind. Becker pinned his hope for the realization of this goal on a new understanding of man and on an educational program which is scientifically based, just as Marx pinned his hope on an economic theory and social revolution. But the hoped for universal agreement on a new theory of human nature has not materialized; all the while our trust in education to release us has been disappointed time and time again.

We need, says Becker, “a rich and meaningful world” to which we can be committed (p. 10). But even if this is the case, the issue is: Can we create the process ourselves and keep it under our own control? To put it simply, Becker offers us a new alternative to the Christian offer of salvation. His is based on the same perception of needs, but he removes the power from God’s hands and places it in man’s. Our problem would be quite different if Becker did not agree that all men and women still do need release, forgiveness, and restoration. Like Camus’ *The Fall*, he has placed us in a situation of religious need but offers a secular solution. We must assess the basis of Becker’s optimism and decide whether something so new has been added that it enables us to be optimistic about self-rescue now when we could not be before. There is no question but that psychiatry deals effectively with some special cases, but can it cure “the human predicament”?

The proposed program of the social sciences and modern psychiatry has been around long enough so that, even if we do not pronounce it a total failure (which would be too harsh), we can say that it has not had the universal releasing effect its enthusiasts hoped for (which is also true of Marxism). In some eyes, the rise of modern science made religion’s promise of cure obsolete, but Becker’s reappraisal actually makes religion a viable option once again. If a final secular cure has not appeared as the modern alternative we hoped for, no alternate source of mental health can be ruled out as antiquated. If we reject the long-assumed notion of an absolute line of progress, we are obligated to reinvestigate all cures, religious and otherwise, which offer relief. We have today returned from universalism to individualism.

B. *The Return to A Christian Notion of Salvation*

What did “salvation” originally mean as an offer to restore mental health? In forming a reply to this question, we should note that all Christians have not and do not agree on one precise meaning for “salvation.” Yet in opposition to Becker’s

proposal some features stand out: (1) A relation to God is required for effective cure versus simply the use of human procedures; (2) this involves a transcendence of nature. That is, we admit that the means of our salvation are not totally available to us at will, which is precisely the notion modern humanists fought against; (3) God has acted through revelation to open salvation to all who will accept it, but this depends on certain persons, scriptures, and the institutions that stand for these; (4) at least some who receive salvation find themselves radically transformed, returned to mental health. But this happens by a power which comes from outside, not from inside nature. The action that restores is essentially done to them, although human instruments or intermediaries may be involved; (5) however, all this being said, we must admit that an interest in religion and a tendency to mental imbalance lie close together. It is not so simple a matter as that everyone is restored who has contact with religion. Since the pursuit of religion destroys some who become involved, it is a mixed factor in human life. Were this not so, we would not have the intense feelings which arise when friends or family experience traumatic conversion to new religious movements. Many fear the cure all the while it is pursued.

But when it does come, what are the therapeutic effects of salvation? How does it produce mental health, and do these results differ significantly from those obtained by secular procedures? The main factor in the religious situation, I believe, is that the person has come to feel burdened with guilt, however acquired, and this places his psychic life under a shadow. Those who still believe the promise of the Enlightenment fight against the religious feeling of guilt as being "abnormal." Release from this oppression can come but only as a result of forgiveness, Christianity contends. Essentially, this generous gift is thought to be divine in origin, but it may be administered by human agents of religion. The return to mental health, then, involves lifting the burden of guilt. The result is often reported as a return to wholeness. The one who suffers from guilt feels split and incapacitated because of the accumulated burden. The cleansing action of forgiveness releases psychic energy to function effectively, rather than digging one deeper into self-recrimination. The man or woman acts and feels as if he or she had been made new.

It is this feeling of restoration to a lost original state that is most characteristic of salvation as an avenue to mental health. Popularly we call it to be "born again." Although it is not always rightly understood, this phrase is an accurate symbol for the person's restored state. Wrong actions and unsuccessful projects have burdened down the individual to make him or her feel old before his or her time. Thus, salvation is a recovery of newness and the return to a sense of the innocence of youth.

Kierkegaard thought that innocence was not a virtue one should wish to recover, but much of Christianity differs with him on this matter, although 'innocence'

need not involve 'naivete.' Mental illness is the state of carrying a burden too heavy to bear. Salvation is the release from that incapacitating burden. Adam's actions banished him from the Garden of Eden. He was doomed to suffer and operate at a lower capacity until such time as he could recover his lost state of innocence. That is why salvation is spoken of as the state of becoming a child again. The lost Garden of Eden is restored, in the sense that one feels innocence recovered and no hindrances to the exercise of natural powers. Secular therapy explores childhood states, but its aim is to carry the patient beyond them. Salvation claims that it is only by return to an earlier, primitive state which all once shared that mental health can be restored.

Of course, anyone who advocates following the religious life as a means to mental health has to admit that many who seek it never find it. Just as salvation lies near to destruction in the religious syndrome, many who seek it end up lost. Thus, a certain lack of control goes with the method of religion, versus the claim of psychiatry to greater accuracy with its method. One needs to assent to much more in Christianity than in modern psychiatry as a precondition to sharing in its promised health. One need not "believe in" Freud or Jung to be cured by their methods, or so it seems. Thus, Christianity is not a "full rationalism," because it assumes that reason is as much a part of the problem as it is of the answer. Our cure is often blocked by our belief in Becker's assertion that reason alone should now take control. Our confidence lies in our power to recreate ourselves although society often corrupts us. Rational investigation, traditional Christianity believes by way of contrast, can never be more than a stage of the initial quest. Reason as such does not move the emotions in the way they need to be altered, Christianity asserts.

One difficulty which Christianity faces, in addition to its individual versus universal offer, is that its salvation is never full and complete at the time. The "restored person" is only partially or provisionally returned to new life. The person may enjoy his or her release as if it were a complete act. But the notion of Jesus' "Second Coming" is a symbol for the fact that the present era must be brought to a close and the whole earth transformed before individual restoration can be complete and final. Thus, the individual who experiences salvation and the gift of new life does so only by participating, in advance, in a world yet to be brought fully into existence. This partial or provisional nature of all Christian experience of salvation can lead to disappointment or loss. A first experience of joy moves easily to disappointment, particularly if the individual is unable to sustain his hope for the future and cannot continue his religious life in anticipation of a final transformation. Furthermore, in Christianity this new hope must be shared and passed on to others by specific acts to relieve their suffering. It cannot be held alone. It fades fast if not transferred.

This fragile and incomplete nature of salvation leads to the common

phenomenon of disillusionment or even bitterness that often develops in the religious novice only too soon after conversion and its experience of release. The new member of the religious group often expects something more complete and permanent than an indefinite transitional stage can offer. The joy of experiencing the return of mental health causes the receiver to count on more than has been promised. The human intermediary in this religious process may have made stronger or more absolute promises than the doctrine and past experience can support. Or, in their enthusiasm, disciples project greater powers of transformation onto the leader than any one but God can provide. This explains the psychological necessity to claim a divine status for the "messenger of God." In addition, since God is at the center of all this and not a humanly contrived knowledge, the notorious elusiveness of Divinity makes the search for mental health through salvation more like a life-long pilgrimage than a permanent present discovery. The issue is one of whether you can find health and release in a situation of permanent quest. Disillusionment can set in early in both love affairs and religious transformation.

As Ernest Becker illustrates, the ages of modern science and rationalism hoped to open a route to mental health that was universally available, one more under human control, one less involved in transcendence and more permanent in its effect. In addition to our previous discussion as to whether this project has succeeded, as we look over the record of psychiatry, we must also ask if the human psyche is of such a nature that its mental health will always be volatile and vulnerable. One illustration will suffice to indicate the nature of this difficulty. I stated above that God's involvement in the process of salvation introduces added complexity as well as offering help. Many representatives of religion offer their road to salvation as secure, final, and seemingly easy. But when the psyche faces God, the neatness of the offered solutions often fade away as one discovers how elusive and difficult God can be to deal with, due to Divinity's transcendence of human ways and norms. This is why "faith" is required to continue on in any religious group. That is, release may come, but salvation is a matter which knows no final solution in the present age.

Beyond all this lies the question of whether some, if not all, human consciousness demands, or is oriented to, a transcendence of the natural order. The modern age intended either to domesticate God, as Descartes did, or to place him outside nature, as Hume and Kant both did. This left us free to deal with the psyche as a natural phenomenon. But if God is an unavoidable object of search for many human beings, our psyche remains open to transcendence in a way that predisposes it to heroic quests. Becker himself suggests this, but hopes to keep it within natural bounds. The tendency to look beyond the natural order prevents us from settling down to a restricted and controllable sphere of activity. That which offers us new life and mental health is the same force which drives us continually

beyond both ourselves and nature in a life of search for the Divine. If this is the human situation, mental health is not easy to find or to maintain, and it can never be possessed with finality. But human life as an open-ended challenge can be exciting, once we have gotten over our natural disappointment in the failure of the social sciences to provide us with mental health on a universal and permanent basis within our control as modern scientists. Today the promises of religious salvation remains a possibility for every man and woman to explore, even if the mental health which Christianity offers is a pursuit and not an achieved state.

Pomona College

NOTES

1. *Revolution in Psychiatry*, (New York: The Free Press, 1964).
2. *Ibid.*, p. ix. All page numbers following are to this vol.
3. *Angel in Armor*, (New York: The Free Press, 1969). All page references are to this edition.