

ERIKSON'S TRUTH: THE SEARCH FOR ETHICAL IDENTITY

The original stimulus for this essay was provided by the publication late last year of Erik Erikson's book *Gandhi's Truth: On the Origins of Militant Non-Violence*.¹ The Gandhi book is the latest in a series of volumes spanning the preceding score of years, each of which has celebrated another step in the progression and evolution of Erikson's thought. His books have become publishing events whose impact reaches far beyond the confines of their origins. His influence has been broad and profound. My objective here will be to bring into focus one of the more important aspects of his work for the development of ethical insight.

It may be necessary or useful to introduce the man. His origins are European and Viennese. He was at first an art critic and, after meeting Freud, a psychoanalyst. After crossing the Atlantic, he worked at Yale and in California, spent a decade or more at the Austen Riggs Center in Stockbridge (where he deepened his clinical roots and tortured his thought with the likes of David Rapaport, Roy Schafer, Robert Knight, and others), and finally for some years now has been Professor of Human Development and Lecturer in Psychiatry at Harvard.

Sigmund Freud has undoubtedly been the greatest single influence on his thought; this is apparent in all that he writes and teaches. But to try to label Erikson as a psychoanalyst is both pregnantly revealing and yet conceals more than it reveals. Erikson is a Freudian analyst in the best sense, namely, that he remains true to Freud's best psychological instincts. He retains that sensitivity to inner meaning and value which illumines Freud's work; he reveals an ever fresh and refreshing freedom from theoretical constraints which allows him to listen to the song of life and to hear its inner melodies. His gift is that he can then translate into brilliant and sometimes profound psychology the inner complexity he has perceived.

By training and personal gift Erikson is a psychoanalyst. To call him that is to enunciate a paradox—the paradox of all truly insightful and creative men, who transform the fields of their choosing even as they become more closely identified with them. If Erikson is a psychoanalyst, he has also in some measure broadened and enlarged psychoanalysis as he came to it; his coming was a mutual enrichment. Along with Heinz Hartmann and the late David Rapaport, Erikson stands out as one of the most creative and insightful of the formulators of contemporary ego psychology. The roots of psychoanalytic ego psychology lie in the later work of Freud. It was Hartmann who in 1939 published his

¹ New York: Norton, 1969.

Ego Psychology and the Problem of Adaptation, a slender volume that laid down a blueprint which psychoanalysis has been following ever since. It was the disciplined logician and systematizer Rapaport who deepened and extended Hartmann's work and thus clarified many aspects of developing ego theory. But it was Erikson who brought the color and warmth of flesh and blood to what had until then been a somewhat abstract and theoretical consideration. He brought to an evolving ego psychology a sense of vitality, of actuality, and of reality that it otherwise lacked.

I

His first major contribution came in 1950 with the publication of his *Childhood and Society*.² It was recognized almost immediately as a psychoanalytic classic. Three works stand out as major classics in the development of psychoanalytic ego psychology: Anna Freud's *The Ego and the Mechanisms of Defense* (1936), Hartmann's *Ego Psychology and the Problem of Adaptation* (1939), and Erikson's *Childhood and Society*. In this work Erikson laid out a program of ego development that reached from birth to death: the individual passed through the phases of the life cycle by meeting and resolving a series of developmental psychosocial crises. In the earliest stage of infancy, at the mother's breast, the child developed either a sense of basic trust or a sense of mistrust. In later infancy the child had to achieve a sense of autonomy or, failing that, he would be left with some degree of shame and doubt. In early childhood the child developed a sense of initiative hopefully without guilt. In latency the issue was a sense of industry without a sense of inferiority. The adolescent crisis was the crystallization of the residues of preceding crises into a more or less definitive sense of personal identity, as opposed to a diffusion of identity and a confusion of roles. For the young adult the question was the development of a sense of intimacy rather than isolation. For the older adult the issue was generativity, as a concern for establishing and guiding the next generation. And finally, in the twilight of life, the crisis to be resolved is that of ego integrity in the face of ultimate despair.

These eight phases of the life cycle and their respective crises accomplished several things. First, they made it clear that ego development was open-ended and never finished. The child's capacity to successfully resolve any one developmental crisis depended on the degree of resolution of the preceding crises. One could form a mature and integral sense of identity only to the extent that one had achieved a meaningful sense of trust, autonomy, initiative, and industry. Successful resolution

² New York: Norton, 1950; rev. ed., 1963.

at any level laid the foundation for engaging in the next developmental crisis. Second, they clarified the relation between the various phases of development and earlier phases of libidinal development. The latter had been the basic contribution of earlier efforts of psychoanalysis. But Erikson's developmental schema gave a better understanding of the way in which earlier libidinal developmental residues were carried along in the course of growth and were built into later developmental efforts of the ego. Psychoanalysis had not previously had the conceptual tools to deal with this problem, particularly in regard to the post-adolescent phases of the life cycle. Finally, Erikson's treatment of these crises as specifically psychosocial brought into focus the fact that the development of the ego was not merely a matter of intrapsychic vicissitudes dealing with the economics of inner psychic energies. It was that, certainly, but it was also a matter of the interaction and "mutual regulation" between the developing human organism and significant persons in its environment. Even more strikingly, it is a matter of mutual regulation evolving between the growing child and the culture and traditions of his society. Erikson has made the sociocultural influence an integral part of the developmental matrix out of which the personality emerges.

Development is seen as a process of complex interaction between maturational, intrapsychic, and extrapsychic processes. The child is born with fragmentary drives, libidinal and aggressive. The development of these fragmentary patterns depends on the process of tradition which guides and gives meaning to parental responses. The outcome of this completion of drive fragments by tradition, even as it issues in cooperative achievements and inventive specializations, ties the individual to the traditions and institutions of childhood, and exposes it to the autocracy of the inner voice of regulation, his conscience. One of the deepest conflicts in life is the hate for the parent who serves as the model for development of the superego—the organ of moral tradition. Inconstancy in parental morality produces a suspiciousness and evasiveness which mixes with the absolute quality of the superego and makes "moral" man a potential danger to his own ego and to his fellow men. The formation of superego requires a submergence of infantile rage which can result in a form of self-righteousness that can be turned against others as intolerance or moralistic surveillance which finds itself in the prohibition rather than the guidance of the initiative of others. In turn, the initiative of moral man can break through the boundaries of self-restriction and permit him to do to others what he would not permit to be done to himself.

The ethical concern runs as a slender thread through the entire

schema. Erikson sees adolescence as a traditional psychosocial stage between childhood and adulthood. The individual must pass from the morality learned by the child to the ethics of the adult. The adolescent mind then is prone to ideology, where the outlines of what is best and most valuable can be most clearly delineated. There is danger in harnessing human ideals to such overriding ideologies, whether they be communist, capitalist, religious, or what. The young adult, emerging from the search for and the need for identity, is ready for intimacy: the capacity to commit himself to concrete partnerships and affiliations, and to develop the ethical strength to abide by such commitments regardless of personal sacrifice. The adult phase is dominated by the ethics of generativity—regulated by what is required to promote and guide the emergence of the coming generation to the fulness of identity and generativity. In Erikson's view, all institutions codify the ethics of generative succession. This extends beyond the demands of genitality as such. Even where spiritual tradition advances the renunciation of the right to procreation, along with the concern for spiritual values there is a care for creatures of this world and for the charity which meets, as it transcends, this world. Man's ethicality ultimately rests on his prolonged infantile dependency. Only thus does he develop that dependence on himself by which he becomes dependable: his conscience. Only when he becomes thoroughly dependable in fundamental values of truth and justice can he become independent and so pass on and develop tradition. Thus the development and handing on of tradition is contingent on the development of the individual. And the ethics of generativity are ultimately contingent on the development to ethicality of individuals: the ethical sense of individuals builds and extends the traditions and values to be passed on. Erikson encapsulates this insight into the relation of adult integrity and infantile trust by saying that children will not normally fear life if their elders have integrity enough not to fear death.

II

Erikson's next major effort came with the appearance of *Young Man Luther* in 1958.³ His search for the rudiments of identity had carried him to the study of the lives of great men. His study of Luther was a study of the manner in which one great historical figure resolved the crises of late adolescence and young adulthood. It is significant that Luther is a religious reformer. It is in a way inevitable that the ethical concern carry the inquiring psychoanalyst to the threshold of religion. Erikson had written: "the psychological observer must ask whether or

³ New York: Norton, 1958.

not in any area under observation religion and tradition are living psychological forces creating the kind of faith and conviction which permeates a parent's personality and thus reinforces the child's basic trust in the world's trustworthiness."⁴ All religions share the childlike surrender to a beneficent deity who dispenses blessings and graces, and are based on the insight that individual trust must become a common faith and individual mistrust a common evil, that the need for restoration must become part of a common ritual and thus a sign of the trustworthiness in the community.

Religion tries to give dogmatic permanence to the reaffirmation of that basic trust with which the individual emerges from infancy. Thus institutionalized religion cements the faith which gives support to future generations. The roots of faith are to be found in the infantile rudiments of basic trust: the regression is intrinsic to faith itself. But, Erikson writes,

must we call it regression if man thus seeks again the earliest encounters of his trustful past in his efforts to reach a hoped for and eternal future? Or do religions partake of man's ability, even as he regresses, to recover creatively? At their creative best, religions retrace our earliest inner experiences, giving tangible form to vague evils, and reaching back to the earliest individual sources of trust; at the same time, they keep alive the common symbols of integrity distilled by the generations. If this is partial regression, it is a regression which, in retracing firmly established pathways, returns to the present amplified and clarified.⁵

Religion assumes an important function in preserving the societal matrix within which individual trust and the ethical sense of identity are generated and can be passed on to succeeding generations.

III

In 1964 a series of important lectures dating from the late 1950's and early 1960's appeared under the title *Insight and Responsibility*.⁶ In these efforts Erikson became more explicit and specific about the ethical dynamism in his thought. It became clear that the ethical dimension is central to his developmental perspective. He wrote:

... that the collective life of mankind, in all its historical lawfulness, is fed by the energies and images of successive generations; and that each generation brings to human fate an inescapable conflict between its ethical and rational aims and its infantile fixations. The conflict helps drive man toward the astonishing things he does—and it can be his undoing. It is a condition of man's

⁴ *Identity and the Life Cycle* (New York: International Universities Press, 1959) p. 64.

⁵ *Young Man Luther*, p. 264.

⁶ New York: Norton, 1964.

humanity—and the prime cause of his bottomless inhumanity. For whenever and wherever man abandons his ethical position, he does so only at the cost of massive regressions endangering the very safeguards of his nature.⁷

Man's basic ethical sense was in turn contingent on the inner strengths that supported and sustained it.

Erikson turned his attention to the concept of virtue in a sense that is reminiscent of the traditional notion, but enriched by the deeper understanding provided by his basic psychoanalytic perspective. What is that "virtue" that goes out of a man when he loses strength, and what is that strength that he acquires when he achieves that spirited quality without which "his moralities become mere moralism and his ethics feeble goodness"? Virtue, he answers, is that human quality of strength which the ego develops from generation to generation. The virtues he selects for analysis are hope, will, purpose, competence, fidelity, love, care, and wisdom. The astute reader will note that Erikson has selected eight virtues, and if he infers that they are correlated with the eight stages of the life cycle he will not have gone amiss. The developmental phases provide the source and rationale of these basic strengths which are inherent in ego maturity. And these virtues contain the source and resource of ethical identity and value which alone preserve the integrity and vitality of human life—in individual egos as well as in the sequence of generations.

Erikson draws a distinction between morality and ethics. Moral rules are based on a relatively immature and primitive level of development. They are derived from fear; they are a response to threats of abandonment, punishment, exposure, or the inner threat of guilt, shame, or isolation. Ethical rules, however, are based on ideals to be striven for. The moral and the ethical sense are different in their development and in their psychodynamics. This does not mean, however, that the primitive morality of fear and retribution can be bypassed developmentally. They exist in the adult mind as remnants of the child's development. Every major step in the comprehension of the good in one's cultural universe is related to another stage of individual growth. The child's morality precedes the adult's ethical sense not only developmentally but in the sense that the earlier stage is necessary for the emergence of the later.

From this sense of ethics there derives an ethical principle, which Erikson puts in terms of his reformulation of the Golden Rule: "Truly worthwhile acts enhance a mutuality between the doer and the other—a mutuality which strengthens the doer even as it strengthens the

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 45.

other.”⁸ In the deed the doer is activated in whatever strength is appropriate to his stage and state of life, even as he activates in the other whatever strength is appropriate to his (the other’s) stage and state of life. This is an extension of Freud’s theory of genitality, in which the strivings of sexuality and love point to the mutual activation of the potency and potentialities of each partner. A man is more of a man to the extent that he is able to make a woman more of a woman.

The Golden Rule according to Erikson is intended to encapsulate his concept of an adult ethical sense. The understanding, even though admittedly partial, is central. Man must grow beyond childhood, which provides the moral basis of identity, and beyond the ideology of youth, to reach the adult ethical maturity which alone can guarantee to coming generations the opportunity to experience and internalize the full cycle of humanity and ethicality. The danger of any ideology or value system that chooses to remain juvenile is that it absolves itself of responsibility for generational concerns and thereby advocates and procures an abortive human sense of identity. Only through authentic ethicality can man transcend himself and his identity and reach beyond the limits of his own individuality. It is the ethical sense that is the mark of the adult as it subsumes areas of responsibility, competition, and libidinal investment and thus transforms the moralism of childhood and the ideological conviction of youth. Thus he writes:

Moralities sooner or later outlive themselves, ethics never: this is what the need for identity and for fidelity, reborn with each generation, seems to point to. Morality in the moralistic sense can be shown to be predicated on superstitions and irrational inner mechanisms which, in fact, ever again undermine the ethical fiber of generations; but old morality is expendable only where new and more universal ethics prevail. This is the wisdom that the words of many religions have tried to convey to man. . . . The overriding issue is the creation not of a new ideology but of a universal ethics growing out of a universal technological civilization. This can be achieved only by men and women who are neither ideological youths nor moralistic old men, but who know that from generation to generation the test of what you produce is the *care* it inspires.⁹

IV

The Gandhi book was an attempt to study in the matrix of personal development, culture, and history the flowering and coming to fulfillment of that generativity and care that marks the fulness of adulthood—even as the Luther book had sought out the elements of identity and fidelity. Even more, it was a search for the ethical core that formed the inner dynamism of Gandhi’s life and work: the Satyagraha, the “truth

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 233.

⁹ *Identity: Youth and Crisis* (New York: Norton, 1968) pp. 259–60.

force." The inquiry could not stop itself at the threshold of ethicality. Its momentum has carried over into the realm where the ethical fades into the religious and the religious expresses itself in terms of the basically human and ethical. Gandhi was certainly a political man; but he was also a religious man. The logic of his life carried a conviction of truth beyond all authority based on a divine covenant which reaches beyond all parental prohibitions and "moralities." He dared to stand, naked and unprotected by any conventionalities, between absolute evil and absolute truth.

The religious man is one who confronts ultimate realities and ultimate facts. Religiosity is a striving for ethical clarity in the face of the one fact that gives all humanity a shared identity: a consciousness of death and the love of all men as equally mortal. Between the morbid adolescent consciousness of death and the imminent certainty of death in old age there must be a period of consolidation that traditionalizes the illusion that classes, nations, or churches can provide a security or certainty superior to the fact of death. The illusion is supported by the signs of procreative and productive capacity. Religious ritual offers regular ceremonial confrontations which try to both reveal and conceal the fact of death through the security of dogma. Religious men gather into priesthoods and religious orders to serve as the craftsmen of ritual. They pledge poverty and chastity in order to serve as living bridges to an eventual clarity of existence, or at least to provide a sense of consolation which makes it possible to produce, create, and serve without despair in the face of death. "Craftsmanship, however, tends to become crafty, and all ritualization and consolidation leads eventually to rigidity, hypocrisy, and vanity. This, in turn, is felt with deep indignation and passionate concern by those men who are the true *homines religiosi* of their age."¹⁰

Moralism and dogmatism tend to bring the fanatic religionist to split himself into a harsh judge and a wicked sinner, and somehow to grant himself the right to view others and treat them as no better than the worst in himself. Adult moralism is easily subverted to moral vindictiveness. There is a violence inherent in the moral sense. We violate children and arouse them to an inner rage when we keep from them the guidance and support without which they cannot develop fully. Non-violence means more than the preservation of another's physical inviolacy; it means the protection of his essence as developing person and personality. Erikson writes:

Nonviolence, inward and outward, can become a true force only where ethics replaces moralism. And ethics, to me, is marked by an insightful assent to

¹⁰ *Gandhi's Truth*, p. 195.

human values, whereas moralism is blind obedience; and ethics is transmitted with informed persuasion, rather than enforced with absolute interdicts.¹¹

Gandhi's truth is at once a statement of the ethics of nonviolence and a statement of the ethics of generativity. Under the Babul tree Gandhi announced: "That line of action is alone justice which does not harm either party to a dispute."¹² One cannot find a way to avoid physical and moral harm to another person without surrendering the impulse to violence and without caring for the development and growth to maturity of that other. If the other is a child, the care is that of one generation for another. If the other is an adult, it is for his achievement of identity and ethical maturity, so that he too might reach and carry on the fulness of humanity and generative care.

The fulness of the life cycle evokes ultimate concerns for the transcendence of man's individuality and identity. Great religions carry within them a tradition and a wisdom which is directed to ultimate individuation, while remaining true and responsible to the culture in which they live. They seek transcendence by renunciation, yet maintain an ethical concern for the things of this world. A religion is measured by the measure of meaning which shapes the origins of the next generation and gives to them the opportunity to grow to meet the ultimate questions with clarity and strength. From the stages of life evolve those basic strengths which flow into and give life to human institutions. Institutions falter and fail without them; but

without the spirit of institutions pervading the patterns of care and love, instruction and training, no strength could emerge from the sequence of generations. Psychosocial strength, we conclude, depends on a total process which regulates individual life cycles, the sequence of generations, and the structure of society simultaneously: for all three have evolved together.¹³

One might wonder how it is that the inner dynamism of psychoanalysis should lead to an insistence on man's ethical sense as integral to his nature and development, or how it is that that same dynamism should lead to the threshold of man's religious spirit and belief. It is Erikson's genius that he has been able to embrace the fundamental insights of psychoanalysis and integrate them meaningfully into a higher and broader view of man without doing violence to the inner truth of those basic insights. He has brought into focus within a psychoanalytic perspective the complex aspects of man's reality as socially embedded and culturally related. Psychoanalytic man is no longer a creature

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 251.

¹² Quoted in *Insight and Responsibility*, p. 239.

¹³ *Identity: Youth and Crisis*, p. 141.

closed within his own psychic structure and wholly caught up in the inner vicissitudes of drives and instincts. Under Erikson's molding he has become a creature open to and involved in the social processes around him in a pattern of continual interaction and mutual regulation that persists through the end of the life cycle.

I have attempted this synthetic statement of Erikson's views with two objectives. The review of one psychoanalyst's work makes it very clear that the supposed antagonism and irreconcilability of psychoanalysis with a religious view of life is illusory. It, in fact, re-emphasizes the truth that the most authentic dynamism of psychoanalytic and of religious thought brings their respective concept and image of man into parallel if not congruent approximation. The insight is valuable and enriching to both disciplines. The second objective is to underline the point that I think may be essential to the clarification and relevance of ethical doctrine for contemporary culture: that ethical thought must become more authentically empirical in the sense that it find itself more specifically attuned to the complex realities of human life and the profound actualities of human existence with all of its psychological, social, and cultural (and I am sure Erikson would add "generational") embeddedness.

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