

# WHAT IS SENSITIVITY?

By J. DOMINIAN

**S**PIRIT is difficult word to describe or to define. The Greek word *pneuma*, meaning breath or wind, came to be used for the 'breath of life'. But it was another greek word, *nous*, which had a more decisive influence and development. It came to mean successively the active principle of order in all things: in Plato, the faculty which allows man to contemplate the changeless eternal world of forms; in Aristotle, the activity which is characteristic of man. In the christian tradition, for St Augustine, it is more than the greek thought just described; it is the dynamic contact between man and God. In this sense the human spirit is the encounter between the finite and the infinite, the limited and the absolute, the temporal and the eternal.

The spirit operates in the whole person; it has been further delineated by the activities of intellect and will or knowledge and love. The philosopher is concerned to elucidate in greater detail the components of these factors in terms of logic, definition and meaning. The academic psychologist concerned with the study of personality will also consider his discipline fit to examine the cognitive and conative aspects of human functioning.

In this article emphasis will be placed on some aspects of the emotional development of the personality and on the place of feelings – the aspects of the human behaviour always recognized but so often thrust into the background by the enormous importance attached to the reasoning faculties of man.

Feelings and emotions are complex phenomena, subject to many theoretical formulations with to clear-cut answers. For the student interested in the academic aspects a paperback published two years ago will give a guide to recent work.<sup>1</sup>

In this paper the dynamic aspects of feelings and emotions will be considered as they are seen in ordinary human development.

Work in the last decade by psycho-analysts who have left orthodox freudian psychology far behind, tends to stress, as some of the early dissenters did, man's potentiality of growth treated as an entity

---

<sup>1</sup> Arnold, M. B.: *The Nature of Emotion* (London, 1968).

capable of realization at critical periods of his development as a child, in a complementarity between the child's needs and the appropriate parental response. The well-known American psychologist, H. E. Erikson,<sup>2</sup> has given one of the most comprehensive systems of this type of thinking.

Erikson considers that basic feelings emerge in the child at certain critical periods and need the corresponding nurturing by the parents to develop them fully.

The first year of life is critical for our survival. We are born in total helplessness and depend on mother for food, warmth, safety and stimulation – all carried out without verbal communication. According to Erikson, in this first year we acquire a sense of trust. It is clear from his writings that this sense of trust does not cease to develop after the first year: it is an unfolding process which continues once its foundations have been laid. The opposite is that of mistrust.

When we consider life at all stages, the importance of the feeling of trust stands out as of primary importance. The first year establishes the most intimate bonds of a one-to-one relationship; and the trust which springs from this experience is the indispensable requirement for all future relationships in which friendship and love are exchanged. The relationship between trust and faith is of interest both to theology and psychology. Erikson himself has this to say:

It is not the psychologist's job to decide whether religion should or should not be confessed and practised in particular words and rituals. Rather the psychological observer must ask whether or 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. The psychopathologist cannot avoid observing that there are millions of people who cannot really afford to be without religion and whose pride in not having it is that much whistling in the dark. On the other hand, there are millions who seem to derive faith from other than religious dogmas, that is, from fellowship, productive work, social action, scientific pursuit and artistic creation. And again, there are millions who profess faith yet in practice mistrust both life and man. With all of these in mind it is worthwhile to speculate on the fact that religion through the centuries has served to restore a sense of trust at regular intervals in the form of

<sup>2</sup> Cf *Childhood and Society* (London, 1967); *Identity, Youth and Crisis* (London, 1968); and chapter 8 in *Personality*, ed. Lazarus, R.S., and Opton, E. M. (London, 1967).

faith while giving tangible form to a sense of evil which it promises to ban.<sup>3</sup>

Erikson's speculations deserve serious consideration whatever their ultimate validity. What is not in doubt is the fact that faith, man's response to God, either directly or through our neighbour, requires the quality of trust which is a feeling engendered in the earliest period of life. God is reached through our parents, not only in the traditional sense of agents who teach us the rudiments of faith but as the living springs providing us with the prototypes of the meaning of God, the source of infinite trust. The trust we receive from our parents gives us also trust in ourselves, the basis of self-possession and acceptance. We can love others to the extent that we possess ourselves in a trustworthy manner, a quality exhibited by Christ with absolute certainty.

When Jesus spoke to the people again, he said:

'I am the light of the world;  
anyone who follows me will not be walking in the dark;  
he will have the light of life'.

At this the Pharisees said to him: 'You are testifying on your own behalf; your testimony is not valid'.

Jesus replied: 'It is true that I am testifying on my own behalf,  
but my testimony is still valid,  
because I know  
where I came from and where I am going'.<sup>4</sup>

To the second and third year, Erikson gives the feeling of autonomy, accompanied by its opposites, shame and doubt. These are the years in which the child acquires an extensive range of new skills: talking, walking, feeding itself, dressing, handling a whole new range of objects and learning the rudiments of socialization. All this provides a unique and rapid extension of effective expression of its humanity. This is not learned of course at once; it is acquired through a process of trial and error in which the parent provides an umbrella-like support and security, giving encouragement, ready to step in and clear up the mess or give a helping hand. The child thus acquires *self-control without loss of self-esteem*. This is a formula which remains basic to human beings throughout their lives; it is at the very heart of the renewal of christianity at the present moment. The Church is not called Mother as an accident of history. The christian

<sup>3</sup> Erikson, E. H.: 'Growth and Crises of the Healthy Personality,' in *Psychological Issues*, Vol I (1959).

<sup>4</sup> Jn 8, 12-14.

community, the Church, is the nurturing source of our faith, and needs to act like the human mother, positively, enabling maximum growth in each baptized member, encouraging a truly independent, self-reliant, self-realizing personality. The agonizing conflicts within the Church are to be found precisely in the gap between man's possibilities to develop his potential in the secular world without an equivalent opportunity or freedom to relate to God in an appropriate spiritual manner. Instead, the emphasis has been placed on man's ineptitude, limitations, and need to rely on the strength of mother for survival; all of which inculcated a sense of impotence and unnecessary dependence.

While the second and third years are principally concerned with the acquisition of autonomy – the ability to function in essentials without external support, the next two or three years usher in the sense of initiative. Locomotion extends well beyond the immediate confines of home, reaching the neighbourhood, the kindergarten classes and beyond. Language is now perfected and imaginative initiative is the catalyst for all the new horizons that open. Having discovered in the previous phase that he is a person, the child now wants to find out what kind of person he is going to be. The result will depend a great deal on the encouragement and support that is given by parents and teachers.

Certain feelings run counter to autonomy and initiative, not only in childhood when these patterns of behaviour are first established but throughout life when they repeat themselves. Mention has already been made of the feeling of shame which may accompany the trial and error method of learning new skills. This sense of embarrassment does not cease in childhood, as all adults know when they are confronted with a new situation such as changing the wheel of a car, ordering a meal in a foreign restaurant, how to drive a car, passing an examination in a new subject, making a public speech for the first time, and so on.

Initiative is coupled by Erikson with a sense of guilt; and this universal feeling needs further detailed understanding. Traditional spiritual formulations placed the sense of guilt at a later stage in the development of the child: that is, with the so-called 'advent of the use of reason' at seven or eight. Such a conceptualization depended heavily on an understanding of the personality entirely in terms of intellect, reason and will. When the child was capable of understanding, differentiating, and acting purposively in, the choice between right and wrong, then it could experience a sense of right-

eousness or guilt – depending on its choice. This view is no longer adequate to explain feelings of guilt and shame: for the simple reason that these feelings are established in the first half-a-dozen years in terms of inter-personal exchanges between the child and its parents which have nothing to do with reason. These feelings are aroused as a result of pleasing and displeasing parents, closeness and alienation from the source of all love. They precede any guilt which arises from conscious and deliberate violations of objective reality. Thus there are two ‘feeling-systems’ operating within all personalities. One refers to approval and disapproval in personal terms, exchanging positive or negative feelings with those who matter to us; the other is based on experiences relating to the acceptance or violation of impersonal laws, civil or ecclesiastical.

This division is vital for our spiritual life. Our relationship with God is a personal encounter, in which feelings of personal significance are of the same quality as those experienced in childhood. Spiritual life has been based, in recent centuries, on the obedience to laws which have emphasized a strictly legal framework of reference. This emphasis on law diminished the infinitely more important personal core of loving encounter between us and God, which is a continuation of the intimate ties between child and parent. To this, christian spirituality is now returning, by placing love at the centre of the man-man and man-God experience, and law at the periphery, which corresponds exactly to the growth of the human personality.

Self-esteem is of such importance in christian spirituality that it needs further amplification. All of us are born in a state of helplessness and depend totally on our parents for survival. We survive because they nurture us, we learn to love others because we have first felt loved by them; we acquire our sense of significance, of feeling wanted and appreciated, through these distinctive attributes which we receive from them. In a wider sense it can be seen that all this is possible because God first loved us, the meaning of justification by faith. But let us return to the child-parent relationship. What happens if, for one reason or another, the child does not experience these feelings of being wanted and loved by its parents? In the circumstances in which it finds itself, it is too small and helpless to risk blaming them for their failure. The situation is in fact reversed: the child blames itself or accepts the parental accusations of its own badness and unworthiness as real. From now on, whenever its legitimate needs for attention and love are experienced,

the child will feel greedy, demanding, selfish and self-centred. These feelings will be reinforced later on theologically by a false spirituality which, lacking the understanding of true humility, will compound the problems of such people by translating legitimate but unfulfilled yearning into selfish demands.

A situation is now reached where the parents, and parental figures such as God, will be treated in an idealized way. They and they alone are good, strong, powerful and rich; by comparison the child is small, insignificant and unworthy of attention. This is a familiar picture; and such people who on the surface appear to exhibit the appropriate characteristics of obedience, submission, humility and self-denial, are full of anger, resentment and envy, not only because their legitimate needs were not met in childhood but because they live emotionally in a state which reinforces this denial. Having never received adequately the tokens of acceptance, they have grown up with an acute sense of their unworthiness which now does not deserve love and acceptance. Psycho-analysis has penetrated this tangle of twisted layers of the human personality by uncovering the basic distortions. When the fundamental denial of the appropriate feeling is reached, such a person also reaches his anger and fury at feeling cheated and denied. This is the moment when many people, unless they have recourse to psycho-analysis or equivalent help, lose their faith. The loss is difficult to interpret because, until then, they appeared to fulfil all the correct external criteria; yet underneath there was no real contact of love between themselves and God. On the contrary there was fear, submission and self-rejection, with exaggerated emphasis on personal insignificance and unworthiness. All this has nothing to do with an authentic relationship with God: he does not seek our meiosis or diminution, but the greatest possible realization of his image in us which he has freely bestowed in an act of love.

To the extent that the institutional Church has been seen and experienced as a depriving mother, scornful of man's legitimate achievements scientifically, sociologically and psychologically, there has been a corresponding angry withdrawal from and abandonment of Mother Church, experienced as a parental figure incapable of loving her children appropriately and letting them grow up effectively. Both the mother and the children are feeling hurt. The mother because her over-protection was not recognized by her to have been a stunting denial of her children's humanity; the sons and daughters because their act of rebellion has left them cut off

from their authentic source of love and attachment. The *rapprochement* is slow and painful, but it has to go on.

One way that psychology can contribute to this in the field of sensitivity is by reassessing the meaning of humility. There can be no true humility in the absence of a core of self-acceptance. This self-acceptance enables people to feel worthy of attention, praise and acknowledgement in accordance with their gifts; but also, and this is far more important, on the basis that they are worthy to be loved simply as persons and independent of their talents.

We cannot earn or buy love from others; we can only receive it and accept it on the basis that, having first been loved by our parents for simply being ourselves, we continue to be loved by others on the same basis. In the same way we love others freely for what they are rather than for what they do. A false sense of humility which tries to reinforce a basic and unconscious feeling of being unlovable has no place in a sensitive structure of spirituality – one that always seeks to discover the basic goodness present in our very existence, enhanced by the grace which God has freely given to us in baptism. Those who are loaded with a sense of their own inadequacy and use humility as a means of reinforcing their own rejection of themselves, need to be encouraged to abandon this ‘false self’, as Winnicott describes it,<sup>5</sup> and to be reached afresh for the first time on the basis of unconditional love and acceptance.

Jealousy is a different process, basically related to the anxiety of losing something good through the intervention of a third person. Envy belongs to a one-to-one relationship, jealousy characteristically to a triangular situation. The young child is threatened by the arrival of younger brothers and sisters, by the presence of the father who wants the attention of mother, by other children who are potential predators of his goods, status and significance. Jealousy and competition have to be separated; and once again the answer lies in the core of self-esteem. All those who are basically secure within themselves about their own fundamental value and goodness because they have felt sufficiently loved are capable of distinguishing between the outcome of a competitive situation, in which the best person wins without destroying the significance of the losers, and jealousy, in which the success of others threatens a personal eclipse. Such personal calamity is likely to occur when the individual who

---

<sup>5</sup> Winnicott, D. W.: *The Maturation Processes and the Facilitating Environment* (London, 1965), chap. 4.

is lacking in sufficient self-esteem needs the visible proof of success and total defeat of others as the only evidence for his or her own value, now gained through activity rather than a reassurance received through personal inter-action with others. Other people are hell, according to Sartre; but this is true only if there is no abiding heaven within oneself, however small, given once and for all by parents and through them by God which no-one can take away.

Erikson finds faith and trust intimately linked, introduced in the first year of life. The next few years allow the growth of autonomy and initiative. If parents approve and encourage these tentative but gradually more confident acts of achievement, then to faith is added hope, laying the foundations of expectation, fulfilment and achievement which, according to Erikson, develop a little later on.

If, for one reason or another, parents cannot allow this show of independent realization, then a sense of gradual uselessness and despair will take the place of hope. The despair is experienced in two ways. It is a despair interpreted as a personal rejection. Nothing is ever done well enough to please or satisfy the parents; and, by inference, the child never feels personally acceptable whatever its concrete achievements. Then, later on, it is confirmed in its own sense of uselessness both in activity and through this in personal significance. Such inadequacy is usually rationalized in feelings of badness experienced as selfishness, self-centredness or egocentricity. But the despair of the young goes deeper than the surface expression of failure. Ultimately, it is linked with the sense of having the temerity to challenge the monopoly of success encountered in grown-ups. The right to succeed belongs to parents, figures of authority, everyone who knows and understands more, to anyone, that is, except themselves. They admire and respect others, whilst at the same time expressing their envy by inviting them to become humble like themselves. They are happiest co-existing with others whose failures and defects appear to make them bed-fellows. This attitude lies at the root of the sudden and unexpected viciousness which is expressed when a person of authority falls from grace in one way or another.

Contemporary man is once again at cross-purposes with a traditional interpretation of christianity which sees the God-man relationship in an over-submissive hierarchical structure, where each one has his place and no one can move one rung up the ladder without permission. Modern man has in fact said: 'I can do without God, or if necessary I shall be God-like'. He has rejected christianity



which appears forbidding, embarrassing and humiliating. Such a view of christianity has no scriptural foundation. God created man in his image and invites him constantly to participate in the fulness of love which God himself is.<sup>6</sup> Man does not need to compete with God because the Father sent his Son in whom we are all one. There is no show of strength in the Creator, only an abundance of love which he wants us to respond to and to share with him.

On that day

You will understand that I am in my Father  
and you in me and I in you.<sup>7</sup>

The confidence which we receive from our parents, that we matter to them independently of our works and achievements, is reinforced in our whole spiritual life, which confirms that we matter to God: because we exist and are offered constantly a relationship of significance, independently of our worthiness. But if our parents have given us the basis for loving ourselves, we have also to love others, since christianity is based on the commandment of loving our neighbour as ourselves.

So far this paper has been deliberately concerned with the second half of that commandment, the 'as ourselves', thus reversing the traditional order. The reason for this is simply that we cannot love others unless we first know the meaning of loving our own selves. All loving of others which is not founded on self-acceptance is a precarious exercise, because underneath we need others more than they need us; and sooner or later our need will come through. Very often it is explicitly clear on the surface in all those whose loving is based entirely on the condition of being appreciated and acknowledged in return, and ceases immediately this need is not fulfilled. But granted that we have a minimal acceptance of ourselves, how do we love others?

We cannot love others unless we are able to recognize their needs. In man's history these needs have been predominantly material. Food, shelter, warmth, the cure of disease, poverty, are self-evident requirements to which human beings have responded and which the Church has made prominent in its caring. But as these needs recede in the West with the intervention of the State, at least for large numbers of the community, we are recognizing far more clearly a different sort of hunger: the yearning of human beings who,

<sup>6</sup> I Jn 4, 8.

<sup>7</sup> Jn 14, 20.

strangers to themselves and to others through their emotional isolation and impoverishment, are anxious to rediscover the meaning of life in personal terms. But this yearning of society reflects accurately the meaning of christianity, if only the latter can find the right language and understanding to reach the hungry and lost sheep of this age.

In order to recognize and meet this quest in others, what is needed is the capacity to 'empathize'. Sympathy is the ability to feel for others; empathy, on the other hand, enables us to feel with others, to put ourselves in their shoes without losing our own separate existence. So often loving never starts because the emotional requirements of others are not recognized; or it stops too soon because, having recognized the needs of others, the giver becomes afraid of being swallowed up in their demands. Empathy allows an identification of the emotional predicament of others. It is beautifully and succinctly described in Christ in St John's gospel:

But Jesus knew them all and did not trust himself to them;  
He never needed evidence about any man; he could tell what  
a man had in him.<sup>8</sup>

To tell what another human being is thinking and feeling requires an accurate insight, and our Lord has just that. His empathy extended beyond intellectual comprehension. He felt the inner world of others, and was ready and able to do this because there was no part of himself with which he was not familiar and which had not been accepted by him. Since he did not need to reject any part of himself, he could reach and be reached without having to withdraw or hold himself back.

Such empathy coincided with an unlimited availability, which is another characteristic in the process of loving. This availability is not merely physical presence but, even more important, the quality of the exchange. Much has been learned from the psychological sciences and the processes of psycho-analysis and psycho-therapy. In fact, what this availability means is the offering to another person of a second chance to grow up emotionally. The process of growing up is complicated. We need others to help us to see ourselves, to reach those bits of ourselves which are unconscious or have never developed. Having been assisted in this way, we still need them for a period in an exchange in which we learn new ways of

---

<sup>8</sup> Jn 2, 25.

feeling and reacting. It is not enough to understand intellectually the nature of a problem, we have to learn step by step new patterns of emotional behaviour; and for this we need the help, encouragement and support of others who love us as they need us to love them.

This availability avoids judging and giving advice. The judging is already taking place in the other person who is evaluating his own inner world and chooses to change. If we judge others, we are merely reinforcing their own sense of guilt and alienation. Since they are already in the midst of these feelings, our own reproach will yield little of value. This approach runs counter to the traditional belief that we have to stir up in people a sense of their own badness. They, more than anyone else, know their imperfections, what they need from us is the availability of patience and concern, which will provide a fresh opportunity to learn new ways of inter-acting. Those who do not feel the need for change will receive the criticism of others with indifference, pay the price demanded by the law or morality, but remain untouched in the core of their personality.

Similarly regarding advice: a true change of heart must be a free action of every individual. They cannot run their lives our way, through our advice. They are certainly going to ask for it; but far more important is to help them to reflect on their own inner world, from which will emerge the points that need strengthening or changing.

Empathy, and non-judgmental availability, are in fact the foundations on which psycho-analysis, psycho-therapy and counselling are based. It is taking an exceedingly long time for christianity to discover that, in these processes instituted by an atheist, some of the most authentic aspects of Christ's relationships with others will be found.<sup>9</sup>

Instead the therapist, and that means all of us who act as therapists to others as they do to us, concentrates on an entirely new dimension, that of feeling. Feelings of trust, mistrust, hope, despair, initiative, achievement, envy, jealousy and self-esteem have all been mentioned. There are others; but some basic principles transcend the individual qualities.

Many find feelings difficult to experience or to share with others. They cut off into a physical or intellectual way of experiencing themselves and others. Hysterical behaviour is the technical term

---

<sup>9</sup> Dominian, J.: 'Human and Divine Love', in *New Blackfriars*, Vol. 51 (September 1970).

for describing the transformation of feelings into bodily substitutes, and the whole of psycho-somatic medicine examines this aspect of human behaviour. Rationalization is the commonest attribute, the particular attribute of the West, which has placed such an enormous emphasis on reason and intellect. One wonders if Christ would have been remembered to-day if his divinity had been proclaimed in purely metaphysical terms. Sensitivity is that aspect of the personality which allows us to reach and be reached in affectionate terms, whether of joy or sadness, anxiety or trust, hope or despair.

But what is the purpose of sensitivity? The whole message of christianity is to be found in the conviction that God exists, that he has revealed himself, and that his nature is love. Furthermore he has created us in his image and invited us to love ourselves and others as he loves himself and us. Faith sustains us in striving for this goal; and as our knowledge of human beings deepens we learn in greater depth the meaning of being human. We are now reaching the stage of confronting the layer of being which goes beyond intellect and reason, touching the instinctual, affectionate parts of man. Man's response to himself, to his fellow human beings and above all to God, has to incorporate this level of awareness which adds a whole new dimension of sensitivity, allowing us to realize a little more the image of God in us.