PSYCHOLOGICAL MATURITY IN CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE

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IT MIGHT SERVE to confuse rather than to clarify were the attempt made at the beginning of this paper to tease out all the theoretical questions involved in the psychological specification of human maturity. Such questions would include those of how to define the psychologically normal and abnormal; what place values have in a present day psychology which has scientific aspirations, if not scientific methods; and beyond these, philosophical issues touching psychological method and man's knowledge of himself could scarcely be avoided. Between them, these questions would touch on most of the disciplines of human wisdom. Mindful, then, that in trying to say anything sensible about human maturity, reverence is perhaps the most appropriate starting point, I propose simply to note that *mature* usually means, in english, *complete in natural development*, and, without pausing long enough over these four words to get arrested with some scruple or other, pass on directly to consider how some contemporary psychologists treat of this topic in greater detail.

Within the field of contemporary psychology there are a number of different approaches to the description of human maturity. There is, for instance, the skilful attempt of Paul Halmos[1] to specify, necessarily in negative terms, what he thinks constitutes the universal minimum of human abnormality: that which would be out of human order anywhere and at any time (the *universal abnorm*, as he calls it). For present purposes, however, I prefer to consider the more positive attempts that have been made to specify maturity. With this in mind, Allport's well-known treatment of the subject has been chosen as a starting point.[2] This choice might appear arbitrary: let it suffice for the moment to say that it is chosen because

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1 Halmos, P., *Towards a measure of man* (London, 1957), ch. 2.
2 Allport, G., *Pattern and growth in personality* (New York 1961), ch. 12.

it can be regarded as a weighty and typical contribution to recent secular psychological history, and leave it at that.

Allport's specification of maturity

Allport begins his chapter concerning human maturity by facing the fact that maturity is not a concept that can exclude values. The definition of maturity is not, therefore, simply a question of head-counting or of statistics any more than the notion of a mature tooth is arrived at by finding the average number of holes folk tend to be afflicted with in their teeth. Allport's method is to review a broad field of personality studies and give summaries of several different accounts, from which he later draws for his own proposal of what maturity of personality is like. One of the accounts he reports is that of Erikson who, like Shakespeare, speaks of seven ages of man: *infancy*, with its characteristic quality of trust; *early childhood*, with its growing autonomy; *play age*, with its initiative; *school age*, with its industry and competence; *adolescence*, with its personal identity; *young adulthood*, with its intimacy; *adulthood*, with its generativity; *mature age*, with its integrity and acceptance. Allport does not comment that where Erikson describes the beginning and middle of a life, Shakespeare, with considerably fewer words and rather more humour, goes on from the beginning and the middle to the end of life too. After being 'full of wise saws and modern instances', 'the sixth age shifts into the lean and slippered pantaloon with spectacles on nose and pouch on side', before arriving at 'second childishness and mere oblivion, sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything'.[1]

Allport then explores the formulations of another recent american ego-psychologist, Abraham Maslow, and also the more empirical study carried out by Barron in California in 1954. The latter is of some interest. In this study, the maturity of students was rated (with fair technical reliability as it turned out) by a university department team. The features they found characteristic of persons they agreed were mature included; effective organization of work towards goals; correct perception of reality; character and integrity of ethical sense; personal and interpersonal adjustment. Much, of course, is buried away in the various adjectives and designations they used, but the study serves to name certain areas of conduct – the perceptual, the cognitive, the social and the moral – in which maturity was thought discernible.

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[1] *As you like it*, Act II sc vii.

Coming now to his own personal contribution, Allport lists five principal features which he considers characteristic of the mature. These are as follows:

Extension of sense of self: by this is meant the extension of the boundaries of the self so that the welfare of another is as important as one's own.

Warm relating of self to others: by this is meant the capacity for intimate and compassionate dealings with others; usually, but not necessarily, accompanied by genital sexual maturity.

Emotional security: by this is meant self-acceptance and tolerance of frustration.

Realistic skills, perceptions and assignments: by this is meant that, although maturity does depend on what Allport calls a 'sturdy minimum' of intelligence, it is not co-terminous with IQ or high IQ. Maturity entails, as Freud indicated when he said that normality was the capacity to love and to work, a certain problem- centring of work and an ability to get lost in the work being done. A certain degree of economic maturity is also part of it.

Self-objectification: insight and humour: this characteristic recalls the socratic *gnōthē seauton.* Allport notes that technical psychological experiment confirms the common experience that self-knowledge and subjective estimates of it by no means always go together. Humour is seen by him as having to do with a person's apprehension of the distinction between pretention and performance.

Unifying philosophy of life: by this is meant that maturity entails directedness of life and organization of it in terms of values, be they theoretical, economic, aesthetic, social, political, or religious. Such an organization of life includes, evidently, an integrated sense of moral obligation.

Reflection on Allport's account

A reflection on the foregoing suggestions might lead us first to consider with interest the method which Allport uses to arrive at them. In a broad sense of the term, his method is empirical. That is to say, his conclusions draw on statements of others who might be thought competent to have views on this matter: Erikson, Maslow, Barron in California, groups of psychiatrists and others. Allport is, then, calling on a selected jury to assist him in his judgment; although, of course, the selection is not one with which one would readily disagree. What he proposes therefore amounts to an argument from professional authority. At the same time, although his

approach is in this sense empirical, it is not empirical in the rigid sense of one who might follow the contemporary unwritten rule of much psychological enquiry which runs (as someone put it): 'Measure what you can, not what you will' and 'reflect only on what you can measure'[1]. In so far as he sets such a rule aside, he is open to the criticism of being an easy-going observer. Such at least would be the view of those whose chosen norm of verification is restricted to what can be framed statistically. But against this it can be pointed out that there is something well-balanced about Allport's use of numerically expressible evidence. Where it is available he uses it; where it is not available or cannot possibly be hoped for, as must surely be the case concerning those things at the heart of man's maturity, he uses the best available source of evidence that is to hand: in this case, the advice of a professional jury.

Other reflections which could follow Allport's account might include the observation that he does not make sufficient allowance for sexual and other, more artificially, embodied human variations: e.g. cultural ones. What he says is proposed as equally applicable to man and woman, to jew, gentile and to greek alike. This is a puzzling feature of an account which is avowedly empirical.

One might also dwell on the more precise meanings of certain terms and adjectives used in the Allport account. Much unclarity can be bundled away out of sight into terms like 'realistic', when used of perceptions, skills, etc. One might be led to conclude that the very use of such a term implies that there is a reality which all good men and true can come in some way to know. This is a notion which starts off in the direction of the notion of right reason, as used by traditional scholastic philosophers. In fact, there would be some propriety in the suggestion that while he is talking what seems to be a scientific language, he is in some ways making a philosophical statement. The theme, it could be argued, that runs *de facto* through all his suggestions is that of the deepening and broadening play of *reason* in the maturing man's life; that reason flow through and order what he feels towards himself and others; that reason lead him to the knowledge that man is not and cannot be isolated nor the centre of creation; that therefore he is to be warmly open to others; that reason operate in giving directedness to his life with others and that, finally, reason indicate that without acknowledgement of transcendent as well as of created love, there is no ultimate sense in human

[1] Halmos, P. *op. cit.*, p 241.

existence. In a genially unsystematic way, then, Allport can be said to be presenting us with what is an implicitly philosophical account in contemporary terms of none other than right reason: reason, that is to say, not considered as something separate from and governing human existence from without, but reason considered as this living personal mind, not obsessed by or conniving at present disorderly delights, but warmly open to all good, to other persons, and to the transcendent goodness from which it springs and in which it is to be homed.

Psychoanalysis and virtue

Where from a psychological point of view Allport may be thought to give rather exclusive attention to the conscious and unchanging aspects of human maturity, Erikson, whose work we now briefly turn to, approaches the same matter in a more psycho-analytic way. At the same time, he belongs to that group of contemporary psychologists sometimes known as ego-psychologists.[1] In general, Erikson's view of human development differs from Allport's. He places more emphasis on the description of stages of development rather than of an unchanging ideal of maturity. It is not, however, this difference of view but rather the elements which Erikson discovers in his attempt to delineate maturity which will be dwelt on hereafter. His chief contribution to the specification of mature ego-strength takes the somewhat surprising form of a *schedule of virtues*. By virtue, Erikson says, he means certain qualities of ego-strength as it develops from stage to stage, and is imparted from generation to generation.[2] In his scheme of things hope, will, purpose and competence are listed as the rudiments of virtue developed in childhood; fidelity is the adolescent virtue; and love, care and wisdom are the central virtues of adulthood. Some further precisions of definition are of interest:

Hope: is the enduring belief in the attainability of fervent wishes, in spite of dark urges and rages which mark the beginnings of existence.

Will: is the unbroken determination to exercise free-choice as

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[1] Ego-psychology is that development of mainly psycho-analytical theory which has taken place since the second world war in USA. The central theme of it is that human behaviour develops to maturity away from its merely biological roots, into a more reasonable and human order. Allport's concept of *functional autonomy of motives* (1937) was one of the ideas that fostered its growth.

[2] Erikson, E., *Insight and responsibility* (London, 1964), ch. 4.

well as self-restraint, in spite of the unavoidable experience of shame and doubt in infancy.

Purpose: is the courage to envisage and pursue valued goals, uninhibited by defeat of infantile fantasies, by guilt, and by the fear of punishment.

Competence: is the free exercise of dexterity and intelligence in the completion of tasks, unimpaired by infantile inferiority.

Fidelity: is the ability to sustain loyalties freely pledged, in spite of the inevitable contradictions of value systems.

Love: is mutuality in devotion, forever subduing the antagonisms inherent in divided function.

Care: is the widening concern for what has been generated by love, necessity, or accident; it overcomes the ambivalence adhering to irrevocable obligation.

Wisdom: is detached concern for life itself, in the face of death itself.

A certain well-ordered conceptual balance is notable in these not unpoetic descriptions; each so-called virtue is a positive quality which is to prevail over a corresponding negative possibility. At all events, such descriptions may come as a surprise to some because they are such a far cry from the biologizing often ascribed to Freud, whose acknowledged follower Erikson is. Little wonder that one review of the book in which this list appeared suggested that nowadays it is to psycho-analysis that the world looks for its sermons.[1] It would of course be of some interest to hear how a scholar of scholastic philosophy and psychology might compare Erikson's concept of virtue with traditional ones. It is indeed questionable how far any merely empirical notion of virtue can possibly contain the element of an interior principle of action, as opposed to a mere classification of appearances. But Erikson, in using the phrase 'human quality', so frames his definition as to pass this criticism by; it cannot be shown that eriksonian virtue is like a psychological grin without psychological face-muscles, let alone a psychological cat.

Problems of verification

It is unnecessary to comment that neither Allport nor Erikson is representative of the full scope of present day psychological enquiry. This raises in its turn the question as to what might be the reaction of a more behaviouristically oriented psychologist like Eysenck[2] to

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[1] *New Statesman* (22 April, 1966), p 578.

[2] Cf e.g. Eysenck, J., *Crime and personality* (London, 1964).

either Allport's or Erikson's views. It is well known with what fervour Eysenck has hounded the freudian super-ego and other psycho-analytical concepts down the corridors and out of the door of the Maudsley Hospital where he works. In place of them he has developed a systematic approach to human drive control and satisfaction based on contemporary learning theory derived, in part at least, from Pavlov, Hull, Mowrer and others.[1] Further than this, the applicability of such a scheme to human behaviour and social problems as a whole has been claimed – all in the name of scientific verifiability and technical precision. It is not our present intention here to enter into a detailed discussion of what, if anything, learning theorists like Eysenck have to say about maturity. But the question that is of interest at this point is that of the verifiability of such accounts. Those of Allport and Erikson are open to the criticism that their derivation is largely unverifiable in terms of detailed and publicly sharable evidence. Even the very fact that maturity is possible, which is a supposition of both writers, must be in the last analysis a matter of well-informed but nonetheless personal conviction alone. For those who, not without some justice, put the ultimate verification of possibility into scientific terms and demand public, and perhaps technically expressed, evidence, verification of what they say must seem a long way off. And meantime, who would be stirred to do battle for his own or anyone else's maturity by so unsure a trumpet call? Perhaps, as Halmos suggests,[2] all who help others are in the end moved by some nameless faith. But if it is indeed a faith, is it not one which as yet lacks reasonable motives of credibility? This is not in the least to disparage the accounts we have been considering, but it is to suggest that the ultimate grounds for supposing that what psychologists so prize is, in fact, generally attainable, must be looked for outside the field of psychology itself.

The possibility of christian maturity

This brings us, then, to attempt to say something of what christian maturity might entail to the believer, and how the matters under previous discussion might be related to it. In speaking of the possible definition of psychological normality, Halmos says, 'If I had the

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[1] Eysenck does not apparently dwell on the notion of maturity. He spends about one paragraph of his lengthy *Handbook of Abnormal Psychology* on the subject of how to define abnormality. Maturity finds mention on two occasions in the rest of the text, on both of which the term is not explained.

[2] Halmos, P., *The faith of the counsellors* (London, 1965), pp 156 ff.

audacity to attempt a definition of the absolute norm, I would be conspicuously lacking in wisdom, for there are some very good reasons why the absolute norm cannot be defined'.[1] Any attempt therefore to speak of what corresponds in matters of belief to the task he declines to undertake as a sociologist, cannot surely be made with less circumspection. This is more than ever the case since there are also good reasons for saying that, in a sense not to be misunderstood, an absolute norm of christian maturity cannot be defined either in terms of what is externally observable. There can be no ultimate blue-print of visible christian behaviour, if by behaviour we mean a visible or tangible human state or change of that state in time and space. Further again than this, every created person is individual in his christian calling. Each is called to give glory to God in a way that is personal to him or to her and which is irreducibly different from that of any other. 'But they that are learned shall shine as the brightness of the firmament; and they that instruct many to justice, as stars for all eternity'.[2]

But this being said, can anything be ventured at all concerning christian maturity? Certainly this: that there is such a thing. This we know from the exhortation of Christ himself: *estote teleioi*, be ye full grown, even as your heavenly Father is full grown.[3] That christian growing up is centred in Christ himself we also know from his saying: 'Separated from me, you have no power to do anything'.[4] Christ is the vine, not just the trunk, and his faithful the branches. That it can however be through the instrumentality of others that we grow is equally clearly recalled from the words of St Paul: 'My little children, I am in labour over you until Christ's image be formed in you'.[5] The first reflection we are then humbly permitted is that there is such a thing as being fully formed in Christ, and that it is accessible to all. This can be known in faith; and the things hoped for by psychologists have substance therein. The believer is also helped by the certain knowledge that, in our Lady's Assumption, the full stature of Christ has actually been shared in soul and body by one of the human race. To the faithful, the mystery of the Assumption of our Lady also affirms the possibility of maturity in Christ.

But the certainty of faith does not, of course, absolve the christian

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[1] Halmos, P., *Towards a measure of man*, p 53. [2] Dan 12, 3.
[3] Mt 5, 48. Cf Yarnold, E., S.J., A new study of the word Perfect (teleios) in the NT.', in *Bellarmine Commentary*, 1960, 2, pp 122–127.
[4] Jn 15, 5. [5] Gal 4, 19.

or the christian psychologist from a deeper search after what in his own life and the lives of others might be the congruent appearances of the embodiment of christian maturity. To aid him in this we have, for instance, the inspired operational definition of charity by St Paul,[1] and many behavioural exhortations in holy scripture, like those of St John and St James[2] and the very first specifications of godly maturity come, of course, from Old Testament times.[3] With all these in mind it is not inappropriate to attend briefly to a recent, if not novel, account of some psychological aspects of the theological virtues. This is taken from a chapter of a recent work which deals with the religious aspects of the mature man.[4]

Psychological aspects of the theological virtues

Defining the relationship of the elements of religious belief and practice to the mature and well-adjusted person, the author singles out psychological elements which are proper to each of the theological virtues in turn. *Faith* is above all, he points out, a positive attitude, giving support and permanence to the believer. This is because faith, psychologically defined, is basically reliance on another; and it adds the authority of infinite Truth to the compelling force of evidence which moves men to assent. Faith does not require that the believer be able to prove positively the truth of the mysteries to which he adheres. Further, the believing person is one who cannot remain long silent about his beliefs. His faith is full of warmth and feeling: aspects of his belief which are of especial service in times of personal crisis and emergency. Again, it may be suggested that there attaches to repeated acts of faith, or of any other virtue, a well-ordered element of rational self-orientation; although, of course, the believer has to beware of the temptation to ritualistic perfectionism. *Hope* involves man's willing and feeling and helps him to look forward to a state when he can rest secure from striving; it goads him actively by reason of the thought of a successful outcome; hope is an anticipatory response, in virtue of divine promises. Hope, as St Thomas also pointed out, is opposed to despair; hope energizes a man in the overcoming of difficulties; it entails, one might suggest, the well-ordered mobilization of christian aggression. Hope enlarges the christian's life sphere, looking as it does to divine support; it elates without inflating. Hope aids to the tolerance of frustration.

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[1] I Cor 13. [2] I Jn 2, 9; Jas 1, 17. [3] *E.g.* Wis 7, 22–30.
[4] Herr, V. V., S.J., *Religious psychology* (New York, 1965), ch. 5.

Where faith is a divine gift which perfects intelligence, and where hope supports our striving by building on human desire for a source of confidence, *charity*, divinely infused altruism, leads to the performance of actions with the explicit intention of having one's neighbour share the benefit of them. Man cannot mature unless he learns to share, to receive less and to give more. Unselfishness is something that can develop from within outwards in a christian's life; it is less likely to be something that can be imposed from without inwards. Special personal relationships and events can enter into a person's formation in unselfishness; his sources of ego-strength here receive their crucial test, in union with the divine Altruist himself.

The author's method in framing these descriptions is not, I confess, altogether easy to define. He is reflecting, it would appear, on the infused theological virtues, on what scripture says of them and theology has formulated concerning them, and then endeavouring to express their content in terms which are linguistically unscriptural and often those in current use in the psychology of personality, but, at the same time, bearing explicitly in mind the fact that the centring of growth in these virtues lies in Christ himself. At a time when there is much demand for re-statement of traditional belief in contemporary and, where possible, secular terms, such a manner of reflecting can make a real contribution to the understanding of and communication of belief. Meantime, we cannot fail to see the similarity of content between many points of the psychological elaborations of the theological virtues, and the secular accounts of maturity already mentioned.

Seven ages of Christian maturity?

Once again, though, it may be felt that the consideration of theological virtues in the context of christian maturity rather suggests that this is something static and unchanging. Can anything be said about the stages of temporal progress towards this goal? are there christian counterparts of Shakespeare's, or Erikson's, seven ages of man? What are we to say of Jung's observation concerning the fundamentally religious nature of the problems of his patients over the age of 35?[1] On the strictly empirical level there is in fact very little of any substance that can be said in answer to any of these questions. This may at first seem suprising, but it can be borne in mind that even in face of the facts of human maturation in

[1] Jung, C. G., *Modern man in search of a soul* (London, 1933), pp 265-270.

middle age, the contemporary field of psychology and psychiatry have very little indeed to say. In the context of religious maturation, the only work which comes to mind as being at all directed this way is that of Dom Thomas Verner Moore.[1] His example is, perhaps, one that could be discreetly followed with advantage, bearing always in mind that christian maturation does not and cannot thrive on self-consciousness or dramatization. But it can also be recalled at this point that in her annual liturgical cycle (as in month or week-long Spiritual Exercises, or the hour-long rosary) the Church has all her faithful move from Advent to Pentecost in union with Christ, reliving the temporal ordering of the mysteries of his life. Are these not, in a real sense, the several ages of christian maturation?

One further reflection is permissible here: we noted at the beginning how Erikson's seven ages of man differ from Shakespeare's in the emphasis given to the end of life. It is one thing to have eriksonian wisdom: to have a detached concern for life itself in the face of death itself; it is another thing to *be* sans everything. It is a fair comment to observe that, by and large, psychological accounts of maturity, such as those we considered above, have as yet more reference to the beginning and the middle than they do to the end of life. They have more to do with growth into and possession of, rather than the inevitable and actual detachment from, temporal life that faces us all. Just as the meditations of the christian faithful each year extend to all, and not just some, of the mysteries of the life of Christ, to the joyful and the sorrowful, to glory and to Advent (for the last things are not yet totally realized), so it may be that a christian critique of secular accounts of maturity will always use just this test of comprehensiveness and, where necessary, adjust any tendency to over-particularization against its own totality. In the search for sure foundations for facing problems of human ageing and death, religious belief has a very readily observable relevance. Does it not take a supernatural principle to see a man through his death of deaths, for which no unchallengeable motive can be offered outside union with Life himself, Christ our Lord?

Conclusion

If we try to draw these reflections together into some sort of unity, we can first recall that the appearances of human maturity can be spoken of in secular terms, including those of virtue. At the same

[1] Moore, Dom T. V., *The life of man with God* (New York, 1956).

time, secular accounts also try to describe temporal stages of maturation. It has been noted that these accounts do not come from that part of contemporary psychology wherein empirical verification is most analytically and numerically pursued; it has been noted that the verification offered for these accounts amounts more or less to that of contemporary professional authority and that the accounts themselves are, to some degree, if not explicitly, metaphysical.

On the other hand, reflection from within explicit faith shows how the belief in the possibility of christian maturity might be grounded. It has been noted that the theological virtues, the Christ-centred supernatural principles of this, have their describable aspects which, in many particular ways, are reflected in the contents of contemporary secular accounts of maturity. Christian maturation is Christ-centred both in its several stages, if we may so speak, and in its passage with Christ through death; in these ways the difference appears between the secular and the religious accounts of maturation.

There are then, in conclusion, two accounts that can be attempted of human psychological maturity. One is from within the framework of human discovery from which no final account can, with unchallengable certainty, yet be framed. The other is from within the framework of revelation from which, in Christ-centred principle, though not yet in total appearance, such an account can be framed. The inspection of secular accounts shows them in need of christian philosophy and theology; the inspection of the religious account shows it in search of temporal appearances. Each in its own way needs the other and complements it. Both are, in christian minds and hearts, to be married and not divorced.

Finally it may be recalled that, speaking of the human mind, St Thomas said that he thought this study was one of deep difficulty: *diligens et subtilis inquisitio*.[1] After him, others have gone further and even dared to say that it is harder to know the soul than to know God.[2] It cannot be supposed that the study of and search for human maturity in Christ is any easier. At the same time, the christian can be grateful also for the findings and the aspirations of contemporary psychology, especially when they lead him to a more profound enquiry into the treasures of what has been revealed.

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[1] *Summa Theologica* I, 87, 1.

[2] Julian of Norwich, *Revelations of divine love*, ed. J. Walsh, S.J., (London, 1961), ch. 56.