

On Sin And Sinners

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For many years I have been interested in the problem of sin from a point of view other than moral or theological. Particularly I have been struck by the notion of Original Sin and the extraordinary hold that this view has exerted on Western man.

I wrote a paper about this a long time ago entitled "The Concept of Existential Guilt". There I maintained that there is a kind of guilt in the human psyche which has nothing to do with individual deeds. This kind of guilt is integral to the social nature of man and is not subject to treatment or healing. It is, presumably, existential and universal and can only be recognized and accepted.

I do not go into this here.

This evening I want to share some other ideas which occurred to me recently and which have total bearing on the issues we have been exploring.

These ideas rest on an underlying assumption I make about human motivation. I believe that fundamentally every person has one underlying motive. This can be said in deistic terms or in non-deistic terms.

In deistic terms we may speak of finding God, or achieving union with God or letting God into one's heart.

In non-deistic terms we may speak of achieving harmony with self and other. The common term for this is: to find inner peace. Edgar Allen Poe used the lovely phrase "surcease of sorrow".

The words that occurred to Steve on the occasion of his insight were "the truth of my Being".

Let us note that the goals of psychotherapy have been relatively modest along these lines. Both Freud and Jung were in essential agreement that their psychological treatments were aimed at relieving the patient of neurotic unhappiness so that he could endure ordinary unhappiness. Freud was convinced this was all there was, while Jung felt deeply that a "spiritual" search might go further. The profound states of peace referred to by mystics both ancient and modern as "Satchidananda" or Cosmic Consciousness are certainly not envisioned by psychotherapists. Only recently some therapists have begun to explore so-called transpersonal therapy.

As for "ordinary unhappiness", Buddha is evidently pointing to this same gray phenomenon when he says that all life is suffering.

This universal human ~~human~~ un-ease is dramatically depicted in the biblical myth of the Fall of Man or the expulsion from Paradise. Adam and Eve had it made. They had no cares; all needs were met. They disobeyed instructions and had to be punished. The punishment for their sins was to be for the rest of their lives and for all their descendants until the end of time.

It is a safe bet that no one in this room even remotely takes this fable seriously. And yet I think we sense that this ~~story~~ powerful myth is accurately pointing to elements in the human soul. What are these elements?

1. We yearn for a better state.
2. There is a deep and nagging feeling of wrongness -- of being at odds even with one's very own self.

3. This pervasive division is commonly accompanied by an

attitude of self-accusation of self-criticism.

Now the fact that we have developed ideas of morality and therefore inevitably the concepts of sin and sinners -- this seems no great mystery. It is integral to social living. But I think it IS a mystery that there is a belief that IN ESSENCE we are wrongdoers and that ~~being~~ being wrong or sinful is so deeply entrenched that only divine intervention can save us. "Christ died for our sins". Much of religion revolves around the entreaty: "Lord forgive me, a miserable sinner".

Is it possible that man has indeed sinned, i.e., taken a turn which is at the root of all the anguish?

Surprisingly perhaps, my answer is YES. But we have here not a moral transgression, but a tragic misconception. Just as the Buddhists prefer to speak of ignorance as the root of all trouble, I propose that of a basic misconception.

So-- cognitively-- my proposed answer to the painful phenomenon of sinfulness is simple. Our basic "sin" or error is that we have lost sight of the "truth of our being". We have lost sight of who we truly are. In order to function in society, we have constructed a 'personality', an image. We identify with this image so utterly profoundly (in these evening discussions we refer to "the constructed self").....so utterly profoundly.... that we simply cannot conceive of any other mode of being.

(I want to share with the group a most interesting irony. Even though Steve and I have been using the term "constructed self" ^{for years}, and even tho I co-created this term with Steve, it is only comparatively recently that I have begun to grasp...and still dimly.... how it is possible to DISIDENTIFY with this aspect of self.)

It now flows from this misconception of "the truth of our ~~being~~ being" that a "sin" or error is anything which interferes with

regaining our true nature. Thus any act, any perception, any personality trait which leads us away from our true nature produces a kind of glitch or disharmony which is experienced as a non-honesty and is easily moralized as sinful, or bad. It is highly analogous to the Freudian notion that the repression of sex or aggression can give an individual such a guilt complex that he can be persuaded to feel guilty about countless elements in his life. And since ego, or preoccupation with image, is present with almost every breath we take, we can begin to appreciate the power and pervasiveness of these "interferences". It is then a small step to conclude that there is something fundamentally wrong, out of kilter, SINFUL, about our individual selves and mankind in general. Hence the feeling that no matter what, there is something wrong with me, with life.

There is a Jewish saying, "No matter how you turn, your ass is showing". We truly have cause to weep and wail, gnash our teeth and beg forgiveness.

To repeat, the answer to our dilemma is to recognize the truth of our being. But not simply to recognize intellectually, but to feel it so deeply and thoroughly that it is lived.

Many of us in this room have observed that this task itself is Herculean. Have we merely shifted the location of the impossible struggle? Once again, there is efforting, sweating, pounding at doors that give no heed.

However a spark of recognition might be kindled. We might begin to understand that this is not something we can do; it is something that might happen. In the words of my teacher, there might come the "intuitive apperception", and with this apperception the experiencing of one's self as a happening,

an unfolding process. It is sometimes referred to as "non-volitional living". Preparation, devotion, patience -- they do matter.

As is said of Zen, "If you try to get it, you cant get it; if you dont try to get it, you cant get it."

Have a good day.