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Egocentrism

Is the American Character Changing?

IN THE LAST FIVE YEARS or so American social critics and commentators have noted what they regard as a dramatic growth of self-centredness, or narcissism, especially among our reasonably well-educated, affluent, and cosmopolitan young. "Young", in the American idiom, sometimes extends into a person's late thirties and forties. Because of the artificiality of this attenuation, some observers have talked of our affinity for a protracted adolescence. This protraction may tend to shield our pseudo-youths from obligations that were assumed by earlier generations at equivalent ages, such as making serious long-range commitments, or having appropriate regard for their obligations to the past and future.

Among the observers who have noted the trend, Peter Marin and Tom Wolfe have referred to our era as a "Me Decade." Psychoanalysts and other clinicians have displayed divided opinions about the nature of narcissism observed in their patients and in clinical work, and the extent to which pathological manifestations could be extrapolated to a wider population. Among academics and intellectuals, Christopher Lasch has been perhaps the most influential commentator in his best-selling book, *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations*. Richard Sennett, while not relying on the term "narcissism", has also written an influential discussion of the growth of privatism: *The Fall of Public Man: The Boundaries of Change* (1977).

THE CRITICAL ISSUE IS whether a substantial change has occurred in American national character. Before discussing this possibility, I would like to make clear the terms of my discourse.

"Egoism" would probably be technically preferable to "egocentrism." Egocentrism, in its technical psychological meaning, commonly refers to the cognitive psychology of Piaget and to a particular stage in the development of the child: the point where the child must learn to distinguish what is "out there" and not under his control from the child himself. "Egoism" would not have these technical connotations, but is a less common term; it should be clear that I am using "egocentrism" in its ordinary, non-technical sense. "Egocentrism" has the additional advantage for my purposes of reminding us of "ethnocentrism", where a group or nation sees everything from its own moral or strategic perspective. I avoid the old-fashioned synonym of "selfishness", because no one so far as I know praises selfishness. But egoism or egocentrism is now widely peddled as a therapeutic means to encourage self-assertion; and people buy books and attend seminars in which they are encouraged to discover and promote their own feelings and wishes—in some manuals and seminars almost as if this were an ideal or goal in life.

The term "narcissism" also has interesting parallels with egocentrism. Narcissism is derived from the Greek myth about the beautiful youth Narcissus, who spent his time staring at the image of himself in water, and eventually fell in and drowned. The classically educated Sigmund Freud liked to apply classical metaphors. He wrote one of his early essays on the origins and qualities of the narcissistic personality type. Freud noted that someone who had (like himself) been the family's oldest son and mother's favourite could possess a kind of self-confidence and even self-admiration which was appealing to others, but which could become pathological in extreme cases.

MEN WITH SUCH self-love and élan are not a novel phenomenon. They have figured prominently in the public life of my own lifetime. Two of our Presidents who attracted millions of followers outside as well as inside the United States exhibited narcissism which might be termed pathological.

19

For example, Theodore Roosevelt was a boy weakling who turned into a flamboyant "Rough Rider." He manifested an extraordinary degree of narcissism. Roosevelt was our first overseas imperialist: he wanted to strut on a world stage. Overestimating his very great appeal, he failed, after serving nearly two full terms as President, to compel his chosen successor, William Howard Taft, to do his bidding. He then failed in 1912, through the Bull Moose Party (notice the egocentric name!), to recapture the Presidency. The degree of narcissism of someone like Theodore Roosevelt is so great that no defeat or frustration can be accepted; and during the First World War he drifted into a bitter, chauvinistic old age.

Primarily because, in his vanity, Roosevelt split the Republican Party, the Presidency fell to an even more narcissistic man, Woodrow Wilson. Wilson had the dream—though he knew little of foreign affairs—that by entering the First World War on the side of the Allies, he could determine the shape of the post-War world and bring perpetual peace. This was a fantasy of omnipotence that his "courtiers" did not try to shake. The narcissist of Wilson's stripe is apt to think only of what he can do and not of what enemies (in Wilson's case, both domestic and foreign) are able to do.

Another example, General Douglas MacArthur, had similar qualities—energy, élan, and an insensitivity to the potential of enemies and critics. MacArthur, preoccupied with his own plans, found it hard to attend to the plans of his adversaries. As a result his bombers were caught on the ground at Clark Field after Pearl Harbour had already occurred, just as in Korea he refused to heed the warnings of the Chinese that they would enter the Korean War if he crossed the 38th parallel. Filled with self-confidence, admired by millions, he failed when dismissed by President Truman to arouse the country as he had hoped to do.

All of these examples in the end met failure: narcissism was their weakness, as it was in the myth of Narcissus.

What Has Changed?

SELFISHNESS is as old as human history, and its extreme example in narcissism is evident in many noted American leaders, some of them of exceptional gift and distinction (Thomas Jefferson is a good illustration). What is it, then, that has led to the current preoccupation with the topic? Has anythihg really changed?

The preoccupation partly may be an illusion created by the mass media. We have become a much more national society in recent years, thanks to the mass media and to the far greater proportion of the population who have had some college education. Trends, or ephemeral fads, which are noted in California or in Eastern cosmopolitan centres, come to be regarded as norms for American life as a whole.

Our nationalised society—or many sectors of it—has become increasingly urbanised, secularised, transient, and liberated from traditional bondages and parochial or communal ties. These changes have made us prone to ignore those sectors of American life, in parts of the South, in rural areas, and elsewhere, where old-time evangelical religion is strong. Instead, we notice the new religious cults, often highly authoritarian, which fulfil for some empty people the needs for commitment and sense of community. Furthermore, since World War II we have become a more egalitarian society. Classes and groups formerly fatalistic, if not deferential— many Blacks, women not in the topmost aristocratic or bohemian strata—are all demanding the accoutrements which they see on television possessed by people like themselves but with more goods and leisure. These expanding aspirations do not help maintain a sense of rootedness. They both increase our vulnerability to media-based distortions, and stimulate our needs for recognition and dramatic gratification.

ANOTHER TECHNOLOGICAL development, namely the discovery and spread of relatively safe birth-control devices, loosened the previous generally prevailing tie between sex and parenthood. And this has raised levels of aspirations in many ways. In the past, many women in the working and middle classes worked in urban jobs—they have always worked on farms—but in an earlier day many of these activities were either temporary (school and college teachers, for example, until marriage) or part-time jobs in stores or offices.

Full-time jobs relegated their holders to spinsterhood—a condition made more tolerable for members of religious communities. What birth control has done has been to free some parents from having to make sacrifices to rear children, as well as allowing many to space the children they do have in an optimal way. For still other families, a conscious choice is made to relegate those children one has to concededly inadequate caretakers so that the parents can maintain their standard of living in the face of inflation, or even increase it.

Some of the ideology of the women's movement has encouraged both sexes to avoid choosing between adequate parental care for the younger children on the one hand, and a higher standard of living and occupational achievement on the other. This avoidance has made it necessary for many young males and females to engage in a process of elaborate and strenuous juggling of roles—as they try to determine a mix of career, marriage, and parenting that is appropriate for their lives. And, in this arduous process, they must simultaneously identify potential employers (or professions) and mates who will mesh smoothly with their goals. Unfortunately, in all likelihood the husbands will talk a better game of helping with care of the home and of children than in fact their future performance will justify. And not many men are able to tolerate spouses who achieve greater occupational success than they do (whatever their lip service to "liberation"). As a result, it is no wonder that in many of these instances the parents split. Hence the children are apt themselves to feel guilty for having caused or at least not prevented the split; and one or both parents feel guilty, especially after the custody battles that often ensue. It becomes important, in an era characterised by Philip Reiff as "the triumph of the therapeutic", for these guilt-ridden persons to discover consensual ways to excuse or alleviate their guilt.

HENCE THE TRULY DRAMATIC CHANGE has been, in my judgment, in the growth of many different forms of public approval for egocentric behaviour. While my conclusions in this particular are not infallible, I have lived a long life which has kept me in touch with many older and younger members of our upper-middle classes. In this era people boast about "*doing their own thing*", where once they might have been ashamed of such self-serving conduct and hidden it from others.

Egocentricity Versus Hypocrisy

IN MANY PARTS of our more visible social order, hypocrisy is now regarded as a worse vice than egocentricity.

But hypocrisy is, essentially, a private wrong. It describes our concealed failures to live up to our professed aspirations. Egocentricity, more often, is a public act—it involves the conspicuous pursuit of self-gratification, usually at the evident expense of others. Thus, we will chastise the "hypocrite", who

goes through the form of living out a loveless marriage or holds an unsatisfying job for the sake of the children, and admire the egotist who skips his (or her) responsibilities in pursuit of self-fulfilment. Similarly, many sexually active boys and men are egocentric enough to fail to consider the consequences for women, especially teenage girls, of possible pregnancy; indeed, the women's liberation movement has made some men conclude that taking care against pregnancy is only the woman's affair. We have entered an era in which the cult of what is supposed to be candour is widely prevalent: in other words, "*let it all hang out.*" But what often emerges in encounter groups and similar settings is encouragement to display a lowest-common-denominator level of selfishness, sexual aggression, and verbal abuse. This is supposedly "*the real me.*"

Before the 1960s, when privacy and more humane codes of social conduct were in force, hypocrisy had certain benevolent uses. People were protected from "temptation" by codes that were reinforced by refinement of feelings and discrimination in taste. But now such behaviour would be considered élitist and false and the result of class privilege.

THIS CHANGE in what is openly avowed, and what is repressed, affects and reinforces conduct itself. Words have power. Thus, if we are continuously told that everyone else is out for Number One, we begin to believe it. Then, we will be prepared to behave similarly—something one can observe in the way people drive in cities like Boston where, expecting aggression from the other driver, civility actually becomes hazardous. Moreover, when egocentric behaviour is not repressed but paraded, those tempted by it will follow suit; and the conduct will become more widespread.

At the same time, one can predict that general resistance to these destructive trends will begin to appear. The very discussion of the issue in the writings I referred to at the outset suggests that counter-movements may be under way. Still, the egocentricity of the present era, in terms of under-socialised and neglected children growing into adult and wilful people, will have long-term consequences.

The Law as an Example

AS A former practising lawyer. I can buttress this pessimistic generalisation with a concrete

example. Lawyers have always played a large role in shaping the history of our American society. John Adams, Hamilton, Jefferson, Madison, and Monroe were all lawyers. However, our Founding Fathers, despite their legal training, were sensitive to the importance of civic virtue, and of the centrality of values such as self-restraint, compromise, and cooperative action. Plutarch's *Lives*, with its stress on discipline and the virtues of tradition, was one of their favourite works.

Unfortunately, it seems fair to say that in general in the contemporary era we have created an imperial bar. These practitioners have identified and cultivated a number of courts and judges who are susceptible to sharing their ideologies and egocentrism. As a result, these courts exercise a form of omnicompetent arrogance, and they decide the most complex "cost benefit trade-offs" on the basis of what lawyers (and their occasional social-science witnesses) tell them in briefs and oral arguments. When my collaborators and I wrote *The Lonely Crowd* (1950) we expressed concern about the role of "veto groups." But we were not then thinking about the enormous enhancement—still in the future—of legislation which permitted litigants (even minorities of one) to stop large projects and to foster a climate of vicious litigiousness. Our legislatures (largely composed of lawyers) and our courts have constantly widened the circle of those entitled to sue anybody for anything, either on a contingent fee basis or by securing some Ralph Naderite lawyer or law firm (often assisted by public funds). To be sure, the public interest is sometimes served. But, in my opinion, these developments have generally been socially unproductive.[1]

THE DEFICIENCIES of the heightening of an already litigious and adversarial process become more apparent if one compares the United States with a non-litigious and non-adversarial culture, such as Japan, or one, such as the United Kingdom, which keeps courtroom lawyers (and their egos) under strict control. These comparisons demonstrate the degree to which recent American developments have supplied plaintiffs, counsels, and judges with powerful egocentric reinforcement. And, furthermore, one can also recognise that the developments, themselves, have been partly triggered by the desires of certain social classes to change public policies so as to increase their opportunities to engage in the gratification of their egos. It is true that the vehicle of the lawsuit is more civilised than the duel, but its outcome is more rationalised than rational.

I would be happier if similar aggressive energies could be directed toward entrepreneurship, into starting things, even risky and potentially hazardous ones, rather than stopping or slowing them down, or tying them up in regulations so costly as to inhibit all but the most well-heeled. Unfortunately, encouraging and engaging in creative entrepreneurship takes higher levels of psychic strength and general talent than are possessed by many egocentric litigators.

In sum, the mind-set of a society usually has an effect visible in its day-to-day life. The virus of egocentrism has aggravated many of the worst tendencies in the legal profession, and has increased the social and economic burdens on all of us.

Evidence of Change

IN A COUNTRY as large and diverse as the United States, many contradictory tendencies may be under way simultaneously. However, one can still draw some conclusions as to behaviour, if not always as to motives, from aggregate statistics. Edward A. Wynne has collected data indicating a lessened willingness on the part of students to make sacrifices for one another, and a general increase in inconsiderate behaviour *vis-à-vis* peers.

For example, there has been a trememdous increase in youth homicide among both white and black males; in addition to the rise in teenage pregnancies already referred to, there has been a rise in venereal disease despite available medical remedies (indicative of the willingness of partners to infect each other); there has also been a very large rise— and of course I am talking here about rates, not absolute figures—in suicides among young men, and increasingly, among young women—a rise which Wynne interprets as reflecting the situation of people who are neither being cared for nor have responsibilities or care for others. He has also noted time-series data from such selective colleges as Haverford, indicating less willingness on the part of students at least to declare that they would be

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[1] There is irony here in the fact that a number of the lawyers who believe themselves devoted to the public interest, or what lawyers call *cui bono* practice, would be astonished to be considered egocentric. They see themselves as fighting on behalf of "powerless people" against an "entrenched bureaucracy" or "corporate system." For one of the best illustrations of how these motives operate in practice, with the lawyers seeking the *réclame* that comes from a successful class action suit, see Harry Brill, *Why Organizers Fail* (1971).

willing to accept blame in order to protect fellow students.

Lansing Lamont in his book, *Campus Shock*, recounts what students, faculty, and administrators in cosmopolitan residential colleges already know: in the unchaperoned dormitories, students commonly treat one another with indifference, at best, and at worst, victimise each other through vandalism and theft. Hi-fi sets may be played around the clock. Students with roommates will bring their lovers to bed with them, leaving the unaffiliated room-mate to sleep on the couch and accept the situation with as good grace as possible. (The room-mate discomfited by such behaviour is unlikely to complain, for fear of being thought prudish, "uptight", or lacking in tolerance.) Meanwhile the "responsible" adults (faculty and administrators), who were at first driven out by protesting students demanding liberation in the 1960s, have in many instances made a tacit treaty with the student avant-garde. The treaty commits the adults to practise non-benign neglect towards their confused charges. In exchange, the faculty members also can do *their* own thing. Indeed, in some cases the faculty's thing consists of sexual relations with students, now sometimes flagrant rather than secret.

THESE CONCLUSIONS of Lamont, and my own personal observations, are supported by the findings of a 1978 survey of recently graduated post-graduate psychology students (reported in *The American Psychologist*) and similar students who received their degrees 21 or more years ago. 25% of the recent female graduates reported having had sexual contact with their male advisers during their schooling; the comparable figure for the older graduates was 5%. We should keep in mind that these "advisers" have a great deal of say in determining the academic success of their graduate students.

THE BABY BOOM crowded colleges and universities with students who had to compete with each other intensely. This heightened competition led students to develop predictably egocentric behaviour. This behaviour also deprived adults of belief in the legitimacy of their authority. Indeed, parents and teachers alike feared that to stand in the way of the youthful peer groups would cut them off completely from their children or students. Furthermore, in some cases, the adults secretly envied the seeming freedom of the young—and I say "seeming

freedom" because the young often concluded that they had little real freedom to behave in ways other than the visible fashion prevailing among their fellows.

AN UNOBTRUSIVE (and unintrusive) measure of the degree to which individuals have turned inward upon themselves, rather than taking part in the civic life around them, may be found in the figures on voter turnout. (Philip Converse of the Survey Research Center of the University of Michigan and Walter Dean Burnham of the Political Science Department of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology have commented on this development.) The results emphasise the significance of the decline in party identification among those who consider themselves, if voters at all, "independent" voters. Despite the intellectual prestige attached to such independence, these citizens are generally *less* politically knowledgeable and *less* committed to representative democracy than party members.

It is widely known that in no other democratic country is voter turnout so low as it is in the United States. In 1976, Jimmy Carter won the votes of about one-fourth of the eligible electorate; only 54% went to the polls. Turnouts in off-year congressional, state, and local elections are even lower. Although it has been traditional in America for the young to vote less frequently than their elders, it was a disappointment to many who had campaigned for the 18-year-old franchise that there was extremely limited responsiveness particularly among college students, for whom arrangements had been made to register and vote at their academic institutions.

Yet here also it is necessary to take note of countervailing instances of youth engagement and commitment. Our recognition of this theme could begin with the Southern segregationist youth who vocally supported George Wallace and engaged in civil disobedience against efforts to integrate schools and colleges. These activities were followed in turn by youthful civil rights (and later by anti-Viet Nam) activists. And there were also young people who campaigned actively for Eugene McCarthy and, briefly, Robert Kennedy in 1968. The belief prevails today that the college students are almost entirely inactive politically and communally, except when it comes to protests against increases in tuition or overcrowding in dormitories or monotonous food services. But in the selective colleges there remains a group of white as well as Black students who can be mobilised in support of South African divestiture or any other issue involv-

ing race. There is also a strong movement for environmental protection, notably in the anti-nuclear power demonstrations and sit-ins—an unconscious kind of social-class combat with the less well-to-do, who would also like amenities and protection against hazards, but for whom jobs and standard consumer goods, taken for granted by the affluent, are a first priority.

Furthermore, on some of the most sophisticated campuses, one finds students active in social service work, in mental hospitals, or in tutoring handicapped or semi-literate children or fellow-students. And, of course, one finds evangelists for various traditional religions as well as for cults who are seeking to save not only their own souls but those of others. Finally, there are still many cohesive liberal arts colleges, especially evangelical ones, where students do not conform to the self-serving behaviour advocated by the "therapeutic" books and workshops. In most parts of the country, egalitarianism has virtually eliminated deference, while egocentrism has tended to erode civility as well. But in a few enclaves, civility certainly survives and, at least in formal terms, a moderate deference *vis-à-vis* authority.

Distinguishing Individualism from Egocentrism

IN ORDER TO COMPREHEND what changes in American values are ephemeral and what may be more permanent, it is necessary to consider characteristic American values in historical perspective. From the Puritan divines of New England to the great religious revivals of the 18th and early 19th centuries, we Americans have charged each other with "materialism" and "greed"; and all but the most penetrating observers from abroad have also frequently levelled this accusation at Americans. (In some instances, this is a demonstration of envy—a virtually worldwide trait that sometimes plays upon our seemingly endemic supply of guilt.) But in comparison with peasants and merchants in most of the world, with Italian industrialists or Spanish-American tin barons, Americans of comparable rank have been considerably less greedy, less "materialistic" than many of their accusers.

Once Americans have reached a certain plateau of affluence, the hunger for further material acquisition is muted by our pervasive egalitarianism. The egalitarianism allows virtually eveyone in the society to seek affluence, rather than to restrict the search by fatalism or the feeling that one must "keep one's place." It is from among the scions of the already well-to-do that have come some of the sharpest attacks against materialism—indeed, against America itself. In recent decades, as already suggested, it is from these affluent anti-materialists that the devotees of limits to growth, the environmentalists, and those whose desire it is to travel without cumbersome possessions are recruited.

TOCQUEVILLE, coming to America in 1831, demonstrated the acuity of his vision by observing that Americans were not unusually materialistic. He coined the term "*individualism*" to characterise what he saw as a calm spirit of individual enterprise, which was at the same time capable of collective action. He carefully distinguished individualism from egoism, noting that individualism was not necessarily greedy. More important, he saw that Americans, though individualistic in many private pursuits, were remarkably capable of combining in voluntary associations to pursue collective interests, including such reforms as the temperance movements, prison reform, and the anti-slavery movements.

These voluntary institutions filled a vital need in the post-feudal and expanding American society, where European· entities such as parishes and responsible and identifiable ruling groups did not exist. This ability to form voluntary associations, which Tocqueville so admired, was seen by him as providing intermediary units between the isolated individualist and the potentially tyrannical majority in an otherwise levelled and egalitarian society. In other words, without this associative tendency, Americans would be either a collection of unrelated anomic persons, or a homogeneous and demagogically controlled superstate.

In Tocqueville's day, America was still over-whelmingly rural. Most farmers lived, not in European-style villages, but on free-standing farms. The most extreme individualists among them could "light out for the Territory" when they felt crowded, or, as in the famous case of Thoreau, make a living by the craft of land surveying, and write their own declarations of independence. The gradual development of large-scale industrialisation and the growing local, state, and eventually federal bureaucracies (a term I do not use pejoratively) lessened the possibility of self-employment. But the tendency to form volunteer associations was stimulated not only by the needs of frontier life. Later immigrant groups arrived in a country where

the land had already been occupied, and had to take their places in the developing cities. There, they followed the American pattern of voluntary self-help organisations among their fellow countrymen or *Landsleute*, thus limiting egoism by recognising the collective need of the group to survive. Here again, in recent decades, affluence has freed the children and grandchildren of these immigrants from such familistic and communal restraints.

IT IS COMMON TO BECOME nostalgic about early American history. As a result, we may assume that in the Puritan era and even down until the Civil War, there was a golden age of youth/adult relations. In this mythic period, American young people were relatively obedient, lived in extended families in which they had daily chores and responsibilities for younger siblings, and obeyed religious mandates and moral codes. It is true that these children were often nourished on fairy tales and on stories of great heroes such as George Washington, and on the belief that effort and courage would be rewarded by both approval and adequate material success. Certainly those who did exert effort and courage felt that they had social support. But detailed historical studies indicate what Tocqueville and Frances Trollope also observed: namely, that American children were not by European standards obedient.

Tocqueville was astonished by the young American girl who, prior to marriage, was permitted without a chaperone to go around on her own, and in some measure to lead her own life. However, most observers and historians also agree that the independence and assertiveness of young Americans in the past was typically coupled with a significant level of responsibility. When a young person, in disregard of parental or community norms, set off on his own, he was expected to accept the consequences of his potential failure. Furthermore, when parents found the rebelliousness of their children too troubling, the norms authorised them to disown them or expel them from the household. In other words, independence and assertiveness may have been appropriate values for young people who had to make their way in an unstable environment. But young persons who did not learn to exercise such freedom judiciously were quickly brought either to acceptance of responsibility or to bankruptcy and ruin by the exigencies of an unforgiving physical and social environment.

BUT EXCESSIVE EGOISM AND GREED—in contrast to independence—were characteristic of one group of people, the stock speculators. These were prominent in our society from Andrew Jackson's day onward. They were manipulators rather than craftsmen. Their conduct led to much waste and corruption as practised by persons like Jay Gould and Commodore Vanderbilt. It is, in my judgment, unfortunate that men like John D. Rockefeller and Andrew Carnegie were lumped as "robber barons" under the same rubric as more rapacious and unproductive men. These organisers of large-scale industry rationalised production and organised business efficiently, and no more rapaciously than those whose small enterprises they bought out or swallowed up. They also often generously bequeathed their fortunes to philanthropy, while the manipulators were more inclined to spend their speculative fortunes on mansions in Newport and efforts to buy their daughters European titles through marriage. By no means did all men who were church adherents practise restraint; but it does seem significant to me that John D. Rockefeller and his immediate descendants were devout Baptists.

From "Robber Baron" to "Organization Man"

E VENTUALLY the creative founders and 'robber barons" gave way, in the large organisations they built, to corporate civil servants—in many cases rather timid men, dependent on the skilled and individualistic work of craftsmen and engineers. Still, other solo entrepreneurs continued to come up, whether in the film industry or in oil or real estate. The late Howard Hughes would be an almost classic case of this type, going beyond individualism to egocentrism. However, by the 1950s, social critics were more concerned about preventing excessive conformity to social norms than restraining the ruthless men (termed "jungle fighters" in Michael Maccoby's *The Gamesman*) who in any case seldom rose to head large corporations. For example, William Whyte Jr's *The Organization Man* (1956), with its critical portraits of conformist executives and their compliant wives, was a best-seller.

The late Erich Fromm in his *Escape from Freedom* (1941) expressed the fear that Americans would submerge their independence in mass movements. The submergence might eventually produce an apparent solution, with submission to a totali-

tarian mass movement. However, it was more likely to lead to a less catastrophic outcome: the loneliness and anxiety created by fear of freedom, combined with unwillingness to take responsibility and maintain sufficient respect for one's own life. And, in *Man for Himself*, Fromm criticised Americans for lacking sufficient self-love to be capable of loving others.[2]

This brief review of the literature emphasises that our current outburst of egocentrism was preceded by a body of serious writings and by institutional developments, both of which signified the decline of certain traditional modes of American individualism. It is understandable that these developments might create a climate in which people were disposed to sympathise with efforts to revive earlier patterns. But, as Tocqueville emphasised, our earlier individuation was coupled with a commitment to vital voluntary associations. And it was moderated by the practical inhibitions generated by an environment of comparative scarcity. Perhaps one way of characterising our current destructive dedication to egocentrism is to say that we do not understand the way in which the individualism of our past was tempered by social controls and voluntary associations.

Private Interests & Egocentrism

IT SHOULD BE CLEAR that someone is not automatically egocentric just because he does not go outside the circle of his own immediate interests, or fails to become socially or politically active. Anyone who has a passionate and disciplined interest in nature, for example, or in the cultural environment—in music or history, theology, poetry or astronomy—is clearly not confined to what Quentin Anderson termed *The Imperial Self*. There are many ways of relating to the world outside oneself: to the human and the inanimate; to the past, the present, and the future—and there are many such modes that have not yet been invented. (For example, the beauty of mountains was, in the West, the invention of 19th-

century Romantics.) But all such relationships, if they are significant, require some element of sublimation.

What is characteristic of the egocentric person is the lack of a sense of curiosity and wonder about the world. Instead, among the upper- and upper-middle-class people who have reached sufficient affluence, the desire to acquire material possessions diminishes, and is replaced with a hunger for what are often fleeting "experiences" (including other people who are exploited as forms of such experience).

Although these experiences, by definition, are often ephemeral, they are "consumer goods"; they are usually costly, and they are bought and sold. They include services such as tourism to other countries in whose cultures no real investment is made, or the "experience" of being seen at the most fashionable discos or avant-garde exhibits. These experienced consumers have acquired no historical ballast against which to weigh the novelties sold them by often cynical contemporary artists. The encounter groups which people enter can, in this light, be seen as another form of shopping for experiences, a commitment rapidly terminated—like many casual love affairs—by pre-agreement at the outset. In the 1960s and early 1970s (more than at present) students from this social class in more or less experimental colleges could proceed without any curricular constraint, sampling "experiences" without sufficient effort to determine whether or not one could find real pleasure in more diligent and sustained effort.

RESPONDING TO SUCH apparent extravagances of choice, many contemporary conservatives have been demanding for example, that schools "go back to basics." They fail to appreciate at least two factors in their own romantic view of the past and their over-jaundiced view of the present:

1. In the past—an era of scarce resources—much apparently "voluntary" behaviour was in fact constrained because no other alternatives were available. If we wish to recreate some of the patterns of the past that seem attractive, we will have to engage in more compulsion than was practised in the past, since many of the previous constraints were only the incidental products of an environment of scarcity. In some instances, this misunderstanding leads such conservatives to glorify forms of personal freedom, as in old-style robber baron buccaneering, or behaviour of the sort advocated

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[2] A book today with the title *Man for Himself* would simply be added to the shelf of books on self-realisation by self-aggrandisement which Lasch discusses in *The Culture of Narcissism*. But Fromm was writing at a time when "private" or particularistic individual interests appeared popularly suspect, because they did not seem to advance the interests of the group or the nation-state.

See also my article "The Uncommitted Generation" in ENCOUNTER, November 1960.

by Ayn Rand. However, such conduct never existed in any large measure in earlier eras, where social norms—hardly less powerful than in European countries—and, certainly, religious norms had greater force.

2. The critics fail to see what has been achieved and would be lost if education were confined to the so-called basics: namely, the tremendous efflorescence of interest in the arts among Americans today, so that the strictures of H. L. Mencken against the "booboisie" appear quaint when almost every community of any size has its own art museum, theatre, library, symphony orchestra, chamber orchestra, and sports activities. Moreover, the "basics" excluded a great deal of both the American and non-American worlds: within the United States, focusing on political history to the exclusion of the history of labour, of women, of Blacks and other oppressed minorities, while regarding the rest of the planet—as many Americans still ethnocentrically do—with ignorant self-righteousness.

NOT EVERYONE IS CAPABLE OF achieving the heights of thought, nor of making valuable social contributions. But the emphasis on personal experience is like the emphasis on feelings—everyone can have experiences and everyone has feelings. As Lasch has written:

> "... 'I feel' has displaced 'I think' as the prelude even to statements which purport to describe objective reality. Statements about reality thus dissolve into opinions, and finally into mere expressions of personal feeling .... All feelings are treated as equally legitimate. In the very act of upholding the importance of feeling, the modern sensibility denies its importance by treating feelings as harmless and allowing them unlimited expression."

But it is a mistake to conclude that all feelings or experiences are in fact equal. Some feelings are shallow and trivial, and perhaps avowed only for the sake of believing oneself part of the egalitarian group. Similarly, experiences differ in quality as do thoughts themselves. This inequality of feelings and experiences gives them their potential for great significance. Inequality invites us to identify excellences—and deficiencies—and to encourage those with inadequate feelings and experiences to strive to deepen their awareness of their own feelings, the long-term significance of their experiences, and to exercise greater discrimination in their assessments of themselves and others.

Will the Trend toward Egocentrism Continue?

A STRONG INTELLECTUAL COUNTER-ATTACK is now under way against the encroachments of egocentrism. This includes attempts to understand the origins of egocentrism in its specifically contemporary American forms. The modern forms of egocentrism rarely assume the dramatic shape of the 19th-century Faustian strivings to simply reach out and seize happiness directly. Such blunt—and daring—ventures are more characteristic of an earlier era of scarce resources and religious prohibitions. In that earlier era, the assumption was that there was some simple and concrete network of prohibitions that should—and might—be shattered by an awe-inspiring or demoniacal feat. This Faustian vision undoubtedly had its deficiencies. However, it at least had the virtue of warning those who were tempted (or who yielded) that the role of shatterer of prohibitions was painful as well as glamorous. At this time, the popular presumption is that the constraining network can be eroded by the cumulative effect of numerous displays of post-adolescent petulance, and by the effort at easy reassurance provided by the assertion of a vague medley of claims and rights.

There are some psychoanalytically oriented clinicians who have been studying narcissistic personalities who express egocentrism in pathological forms. These physicians have readily concluded that a life devoted to the gratification of impulse and to the expression of a supposedly *authentic self* is often empty.

A number of non-clinical writers are advocating, as a counter to egocentrism, the creation or the renovation of neighbourhoods, sometimes based on ethnic cohesion (emphasised by such Catholic communalists as Andrew Greeley and Michael Novak), sometimes on physical proximity. In many colleges and universities, there is an effort under way to restore some sense of curricular cohesion, in contrast to the "*anything goes*" programme of the last ten years. It has become clear that by no means are all students enamoured of what in a study of higher education I have termed the "over-optioned life."

I believe that another constructive change in US higher education might be stimulated if trustees and board members—especially in residential institutions—required administrators and faculty to assume more serious responsibilities toward the students who are in their charge. Concrete steps in this direction are extremely difficult. One measure would be for the boards to ask everybody to

adopt and widely publish clear codes of faculty and student interpersonal ethics. The codes should include both enforcement systems with teeth and frank statements to potential students (and their parents) of the implications of the codes. Unfortunately, I fear that, in many cases, such codes will be banal, and their enforcement provisions unrealistic and cumbersome. These problems in draftsmanship will be due not to the drafters' lack of literacy, but to the reluctance of many (currently irresponsible) persons to acquiesce to legitimate authority. Still, perhaps some firm and persistent trustees can eventually wring useful products from their charges—just as many Greek heroes eventually overcame their monstrous mythic enemies by pursuing them through numerous transformations.

OF COURSE, EVEN A GOOD CODE will not solve everything; faculty support would still be very important. Today, only a very few institutions, such as the University of Virginia, maintain an Honour Code in which expulsion is the penalty for violation. Among other things, a code should make it wholly clear to students that plagiarism is a form of stealing from each other, not to be tolerated either by them or by faculty—the latter often intimidated by fear of elaborate grievance procedures and the students resort to litigation. Such codes are often jeopardised by condescension towards students from deprived backgrounds, on the ground that their "subculture" has no such regulations, and that, therefore, they cannot be expected to abide by those of the academic institution. Such treatment only invites the cultivation of "hustling" and is no service to the previously deprived.

At lower-school levels, both in a few exceptional state schools and in parochial and other independent schools, efforts are under way to increase possibilities for students to participate in significant collective activities—for example, in tutoring younger and less advantaged students—and, generally, to intensify their commitment to a complex social life which transcends the easy temptations of popular culture.

MANY OF OUR MOST THOUGHTFUL social critics, such as Kenneth Boulding, have for years emphasised the growing interdependence created by modern technology in a world that Buckminster Fuller has called "Spaceship Earth." In all industrial countries, we have become increasingly aware of the need for diligent cooperation among individuals, ethnic groups, the two sexes, and—most visionary of all—the warlike nation-states. We have come to recognise that it is costly to indulge the excesses of the egocentric person who rides Spaceship Earth as if he or she were the only passenger.

National Gallery

See him arrested innocently
before a portrait, not his
but related to him by marriage
of their reciprocated blindness.

He gazes. It gazes back,
mindlessly interrogating
his silence. What brought him
in? Privilege of a free country

saw to it he was ingested
smoothly by those revolving
doors to prove the deficiency
of his schooling. Here, but for

a change of clothing, is a replica
of his person, but how much more
richly framed. Baffled, he takes
its dimensions: the long eyebrows,

the longer nose; the frosty
collar, remaining in that high temperature
unthawed; the unthinkableness of the distance
lying between finger and wrist.

Ah, the vernacular of art!
An Englishman speaks to an Englishman
over the centuries in human
terms, and he is unable to hear him.

R. S. Thomas