THE PSYCHOLOGICAL REQUIREMENTS OF A FREE SOCIETY

by

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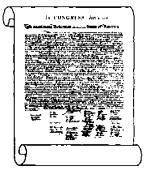

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The subject of my talk today is named in the title: the psychological requirements of a free society. This is a vast subject with many ramifications. In a broad survey such as this, I have time only to touch upon many topics that deserve full lectures of their own.

It is not necessary for me to explain to this audience what a free society is, or why it is desirable. I need only to emphasize that the government of such a society is limited to protecting the individual from the initiation of physical force. Economically it is, of course, a society of laissez-faire capitalism; the government leaves the individual free to pursue his own life and happiness.

From the point of view of the individual, this means that he alone has to make all the decisions concerning his life. He must choose and identify his values; he must make such decisions as what career he will choose, where he will live, what goods he will purchase, and so on—his life is not planned for him at all.

Thus, the essential psychological requirement of a free society is the willingness on the part of the individual to accept responsibility for his life.

Imagine, then, that you have explained to two people what a free, capitalist society is. You find that one person regards capitalism as a wonderful framework for his life—a society in which he can pursue his happiness without being obstructed by the government. The other person regards capitalism as a terrible threat, as a system imposing demands he cannot meet. He is frightened, for example, by the fact that under capitalism his job would not be guaranteed to him as a "right"; the prospect of losing a job, and perhaps having to learn a new skill to find employment, scares him. Having to make provision for periods of illness is equally frightening to him. He asks, "What will happen to me under capitalism if I get sick or disabled? What about my old age—who will provide for me?"

These opposite reactions to capitalism represent basically different reactions to the prospect of having to assume responsibility for one's life. If most people in a society are unwilling or afraid to accept this responsibility, a capitalist society cannot come into being—or, if somehow it did come into being, it will not last. People will simply not want it.

Now the question that I wish to address is: how does a person become self-responsible? And more precisely: how does he come to value and enjoy self-responsibility?

Many philosophical premises contribute to the development of self-responsibility in a person—such as the proper attitude toward reason, causality, free will, honesty, and so on. It is a long list. This speech focuses on only one requirement, a requirement that is particularly psychological: the individual's sense of personal identity.

I intend to show you that, in combination with the proper philosophical premises, a strong sense of personal identity leads to the individual becoming self-responsible, and that in turn increases the likelihood that he will want to live in a free society.

A person has a strong sense of identity when he knows what he thinks and values in the important areas of his life, and continues to pursue such values in action. One experiences a strong sense of identity as an emotional constant, which can be summed up in the feeling "I know who I am." A person who tells you that he has spent the last six months with a guru in India trying to find out who he is, is confessing that he does not know his values and does not have a strong sense—or perhaps any sense—of personal identity.

The key to personal identity is *values*. The more developed, integrated, and intensely held are a person's values, the stronger is his sense of identity.

No one is born with a strong sense of identity; it has to be developed. Such development can be observed most dramatically in the teenage period: teenagers are normally involved in an intense process of separating and individuating themselves from their parents, eagerly trying to find the values which will make them uniquely themselves. But the development actually starts much earlier and continues throughout life.

How does a strong sense of identity develop? I have been able to identify five general prerequisites for the development of a strong sense of identity—five factors which do not by themselves guarantee a strong sense of identity, but which are necessary conditions for its development.

The first prerequisite is a certain attitude toward oneself. It is a conscious or subconscious feeling which, if it could talk, would say, "I am worthy of happiness. I am worth all the trouble to find out what makes me happy and then to go achieve it." This serves as a "meta-value," a value without which you actually cannot go on to achieve your other values.

The second such factor is an attitude toward reality. A person has to be convinced that reality is comprehensible, that his mind can understand it, that life is not something to be feared and avoided, but rather something to be explored, understood, and conquered. This is a "sense-of-life" attitude, one which views this world as a place for adventure.

The third prerequisite is a benevolent attitude toward people. A person has to recognize that other people are not demons or some malevolent force out to destroy him, that the world is not filled with crooks and cheats who prey upon him. A benevolent attitude toward people involves respect for other people's rationality and decency.

The fourth prerequisite for building a sense of identity concerns one's attitude toward what I call the "locus of control" over one's life. A person must regard the locus of control over his life as being internal, not external. He must feel that *he* is basically in control of the course of his life. Concretely, this attitude can be expressed in such words as "I can bring about the results that I want." Or, "I am not stuck. I can change my job, I can get out of a relationship I don't like, I can change my profession, my friends—anything that does not make me happy, I can change."

The fifth requirement is the self-acceptance of one's uniqueness. One's attitude on this issue is perhaps most directly connected to one's sense of identity.

A person has a particular set of attributes that are part of his nature. For instance, he is, say, five feet six inches tall, has blue eyes, has a certain level of intelligence, a certain history, etc. If a person gets stuck in waging a war against the characteristics nature endowed him with, he immediately strikes a blow at the development of a strong sense of identity. If he is five feet six inches tall, he cannot spend the rest of his life worrying about why he isn't six feet tall. There are people—and I certainly have worked with many of them—who are at war with their height, their looks, their gender. In fact, the quality in himself that a person rejects need not be one that he evaluates as negative—some of my patients are at war with their positive qualities. One patient who is truly brilliant got into trouble because he could not accept the fact that he is so intelligent. Based on some experiences that happened to him in childhood, he felt, "If I allow myself to be brilliant, I can't have friends."

One's possession of one's own unique nature is something that one has to accept at some point.

Now I would like to return to the second person in my opening example—the person who is afraid of self-responsibility and therefore of a free society. What attitudes is he likely to have in the five areas that I have discussed? I am sorry to say that he will most likely be in serious trouble in each area.

What about the meta-value, his attitude toward himself? He feels self-doubtful and unworthy of happiness. His attitude toward reality is that it is incomprehensible. He is afraid of life. Emotionally his sense of life, if it could talk, would say, "The world is a dangerous place; disaster can strike you any minute."