

# MAN FOR HIMSELF

AN INQUIRY INTO  
THE PSYCHOLOGY  
■ OF ETHICS ■

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## CHAPTER IV

*Problems of Humanistic Ethics*

The most obvious argument against the principle of humanistic ethics—that virtue is the same as the pursuit of man's obligations toward himself, and vice the same as self-mutilation—is that we make egotism or selfishness the norm of human conduct when actually the aim of ethics should be its defeat, and, further, that we overlook man's innate evilness which can be curbed only by his fear of sanctions and awe of authorities. Or, if man is not innately bad, the argument may run, is he not constantly seeking for pleasure, and is not pleasure itself against, or at least indifferent to, the principles of ethics? Is not conscience the only effective agent in man causing him to act virtuously, and has not conscience lost its place in humanistic ethics? There seems to be no place for faith either; yet is not faith a necessary basis of ethical behavior?

These questions imply certain assumptions about human nature and become a challenge to any psychologist who is concerned with the achievement of man's happiness and growth, and consequently with moral norms conducive to this aim. In this chapter I shall attempt to deal with these problems in the light of the psychoanalytic data the theoretical foundation for which was laid in the chapter entitled *Human Nature and Character*.

1. *Selfishness, Self-Love, and Self-Interest*<sup>1</sup>

Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself.  
—Bible

Modern culture is pervaded by a tabu on selfishness. We are taught that to be selfish is sinful and that to love others is virtuous. To be sure, this doctrine is in flagrant contradiction to the practice of modern society, which holds the doctrine that the most powerful and legitimate drive in man is selfishness and that by following this imperative drive the individual makes his best contribution to the common good. But the doctrine which declares selfishness to be the arch evil and love for others to be the greatest virtue is still powerful. Selfishness is used here almost synonymously with self-love. The alternative is to love others, which is a virtue, or to love oneself, which is a sin.

This principle has found its classic expression in Calvin's theology, according to which man is essentially evil and powerless. Man can achieve absolutely nothing that is good on the basis of his own strength or merit. "We are not our own," says Calvin. "Therefore neither our reason nor our will should predominate in our deliberations and actions. We are not our own; therefore let us not propose it as our end to seek what may be expedient for us according to the flesh. We are not our own; therefore, let us, as far as possible, forget ourselves and all things that are ours. On the

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Erich Fromm, "Selfishness and Self-Love," *Psychiatry* (November, 1939). The following discussion of selfishness and self-love is a partial repetition of the earlier paper.

contrary, we are God's; for Him, therefore, let us live and die. For, as it is the most devastating pestilence which ruins people if they obey themselves, it is the only haven of salvation not to know or to want anything by oneself but to be guided by God Who walks before us."<sup>2</sup> Man should have not only the conviction of his absolute nothingness but he should do everything to humiliate himself. "For I do not call it humility if you suppose that we have anything left . . . we cannot think of ourselves as we ought to think without utterly despising everything that may be supposed an excellence in us. This humility is unfeigned submission of a mind overwhelmed with a weighty sense of its own misery and poverty; for such is the uniform description of it in the word of God."<sup>3</sup>

This emphasis on the nothingness and wickedness of the individual implies that there is nothing he should like and respect about himself. The doctrine is rooted in self-contempt and self-hatred. Calvin makes this point very clear: he speaks of self-love as "a pest."<sup>4</sup> If the individual finds something "on the strength of which he finds pleasure in himself," he betrays this sinful self-love. This fondness for himself will make him sit in judgment over others and despise them. Therefore, to be fond of oneself or to like anything in oneself is one of the greatest sins. It is supposed

<sup>2</sup> Johannes Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. by John Allen (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Christian Education, 1928), in particular Book III, Chap. 7, p. 619. From "For, as it is . . ." the translation is mine from the Latin original (Johannes Calvini. *Institutio Christianae Religionis*. Editionem curavit, A. Tholuk, Berolini, 1935, par. 1, p. 445).

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, Chap. 12, par. 6, p. 681.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, Chap. 7, par. 4, p. 622.

to exclude love for others<sup>5</sup> and to be identical with selfishness.<sup>6</sup>

The view of man held by Calvin and Luther has been of tremendous influence on the development of modern Western society. They laid the foundations for an attitude in which man's own happiness was not considered to be the aim of life but where he became a means, an adjunct, to ends beyond him, of an all-powerful God, or of the not less powerful secularized authorities and norms, the state, business, success. Kant, who, with regard to the idea that man should be an end in himself and never a means only, was perhaps the most influential ethical thinker of the Enlightenment period, nevertheless had the same condemnation for self-love. According to him, it is a virtue to want happiness for others, but to want one's own happiness is ethically indifferent, since it is something for which the nature of man is striving, and since a natural striving cannot have a positive ethical value.<sup>7</sup> Kant admits that one must not give up one's claims to happiness; under certain circumstances it may even be a duty to be concerned with it, partly because health, wealth, and the like may be means

<sup>5</sup> It should be noted, however, that even love for one's neighbor, while it is one of the fundamental doctrines of the New Testament, has not been given a corresponding weight by Calvin. In blatant contradiction to the New Testament, Calvin says: "For what the schoolmen advance concerning the priority of charity to faith and hope, is a mere reverie of a distempered imagination . . ."—Chap. 24, par. 1, p. 531.

<sup>6</sup> Despite Luther's emphasis on the spiritual freedom of the individual, his theology, different as it is in many ways from Calvin's, is pervaded by the same conviction of man's basic powerlessness and nothingness.

<sup>7</sup> Compare Immanuel Kant, *Kant's Critique of Practical Reason and Other Works on the Theory of Ethics*, trans. by Thomas Kingsmill Abbott (New York: Longmans, Green & Co., 1909), Part I, Book I, Chap. I, par. VIII, Remark II, p. 126.

necessary for the fulfillment of one's duty, partly because the lack of happiness—poverty—can prevent one from fulfilling his duty.<sup>8</sup> But love for oneself, striving for one's own happiness, can never be a virtue. As an ethical principle, the striving for one's own happiness "is the most objectionable one, not merely because it is false . . . but because the springs it provides for morality are such as rather to undermine it and destroy its sublimity . . ." <sup>9</sup>

Kant differentiates egotism, self-love, *philautia*—a benevolence for oneself—and arrogance, the pleasure in oneself. But even "rational self-love" must be restricted by ethical principles, the pleasure in oneself must be battered down, and the individual must come to feel humiliated in comparing himself with the sanctity of moral laws.<sup>10</sup> The individual should find supreme happiness in the fulfillment of his duty. The realization of the moral principle—and, therefore, of the individual's happiness—is only possible in the general whole, the nation, the state. But "the welfare of the state"—and *salus rei publicae suprema lex est*—is not identical with the welfare of the citizens and their happiness.<sup>11</sup>

In spite of the fact that Kant shows a greater respect for the integrity of the individual than did Calvin or Luther, he denies the individual's right to rebel even under the most tyrannical government; the rebel must be punished with no less than death if he threatens the sovereign.<sup>12</sup> Kant empha-

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, in particular Part I, Book I, Chap. III, p. 186.

<sup>9</sup> *Loc. cit.*, *Fundamental Principles of the Metaphysics of Morals*; second section, p. 61.

<sup>10</sup> *Loc. cit.*, Part I, Book I, Ch. III, p. 165.

<sup>11</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Immanuel Kant's Werke* (Berlin: Cassierer), in particular "Der Rechtslehre Zweiter Teil" I. Abschnitt, par. 49, p. 124. I translate from the German text, since this part is omitted in the English translation of *The Metaphysics of Ethics* by I. W. Semple (Edinburgh: 1871).

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 126.

sizes the native propensity for evil in the nature of man,<sup>13</sup> for the suppression of which the moral law, the categorical imperative, is essential lest man should become a beast and human society end in wild anarchy.

In the philosophy of the Enlightenment period the individual's claims to happiness have been emphasized much more strongly by others than by Kant, for instance, by Helvetius. This trend in modern philosophy has found its most radical expression in Stirner and Nietzsche.<sup>14</sup> But while they take the opposite position to that of Calvin and Kant with regard to the value of selfishness, they agree with them in the assumption that love for others and love for oneself are alternatives. They denounce love for others as weakness and self-sacrifice and postulate egotism, selfishness, and self-love—they too confuse the issue by not clearly differentiating between these last—as virtue. Thus Stirner says: "Here, egoism, selfishness must decide, not the principle of love, not love motives like mercy, gentleness, good-nature, or even justice and equity—for *iustitia* too is a phenomenon of love, a product of love; love knows only sacrifice and demands self-sacrifice."<sup>15</sup>

The kind of love denounced by Stirner is the masochistic dependence by which the individual makes himself a means for achieving the purposes of somebody or something outside himself. Opposing this concept of love, he did not avoid a formulation, which, highly polemical, overstates the

<sup>13</sup> Compare Immanuel Kant, *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*, trans. by T. M. Greene and H. H. Hudson (Chicago: Open Court, 1934), Book I.

<sup>14</sup> In order not to make this chapter too long I discuss only the modern philosophical development. The student of philosophy will know that Aristotle's and Spinoza's ethics consider self-love a virtue, not a vice, in striking contrast to Calvin's standpoint.

<sup>15</sup> Max Stirner, *The Ego and His Own*, trans. by S. T. Byington (London: A. C. Fifield, 1912), p. 339.

point. The positive principle with which Stirner was concerned<sup>16</sup> was opposed to an attitude which had been that of Christian theology for centuries—and which was vivid in the German idealism prevalent in his time; namely, to bend the individual so that he submits to, and finds his center in, a power and a principle outside himself. Stirner was not a philosopher of the stature of Kant or Hegel, but he had the courage to rebel radically against that side of idealistic philosophy which negated the concrete individual and thus helped the absolute state to retain its oppressive power over him.

In spite of many differences between Nietzsche and Stirner, their ideas in this respect are very much the same. Nietzsche too denounces love and altruism as expressions of weakness and self-negation. For Nietzsche, the quest for love is typical of slaves unable to fight for what they want and who therefore try to get it through love. Altruism and love for mankind thus have become a sign of degeneration.<sup>17</sup> For Nietzsche it is the essence of a good and healthy aristocracy that it is ready to sacrifice countless people for its interests without having a guilty conscience. Society should be a "foundation and scaffolding by means of which a select class of beings may be able to elevate themselves to their

<sup>16</sup> One of his positive formulations, for example, is: "But how does one use life? In using it up like the candle one burns. . . . Enjoyment of life is using life up." F. Engels has clearly seen the one-sidedness of Stirner's formulations and has attempted to overcome the false alternative between love for oneself and love for others. In a letter to Marx in which he discusses Stirner's book, Engels writes: "If, however, the concrete and real individual is the true basis for our 'human' man, it is self-evident that egotism—of course not only Stirner's egotism of reason, but also the egotism of the heart—is the basis for our love of man."—*Marx-Engels Gesamtausgabe* (Berlin: Marx-Engels Verlag, 1929), p. 6.

<sup>17</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, trans. by Anthony M. Ludovici (Edinburgh and London: T. N. Foulis, 1910), stanzas 246, 326, 369, 373, and 728.

higher duties, and in general to a higher existence."<sup>18</sup> Many quotations could be added to document this spirit of contempt and egotism. These ideas have often been understood as the philosophy of Nietzsche. However, they do not represent the true core of his philosophy.<sup>19</sup>

There are various reasons why Nietzsche expressed himself in the sense noted above. First of all, as with Stirner, his philosophy is a reaction—a rebellion—against the philosophical tradition of subordinating the empirical individual to powers and principles outside himself. His tendency to overstatement shows this reactive quality. Second, there were, in Nietzsche's personality, feelings of insecurity and anxiety that made him emphasize the "strong man" as a reaction formation. Finally, Nietzsche was impressed by the theory of evolution and its emphasis on the "survival of the fittest." This interpretation does not alter the fact that Nietzsche believed that there is a contradiction between love for others and love for oneself; yet his views contain the nucleus from which this false dichotomy can be overcome. The "love" which he attacks is rooted not in one's own strength, but in one's own weakness. "Your neighbor-love is your bad love of yourselves. Ye flee unto your neighbor from yourselves and would fain make a virtue thereof! But I fathom your 'unselfishness.'" He states explicitly, "You cannot stand yourselves and you do not love yourselves sufficiently."<sup>20</sup> For Nietzsche the individual has "an enormously great significance."<sup>21</sup> The "strong" individual

<sup>18</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. by Helen Zimmer (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1907), stanza 258.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. G. A. Morgan, *What Nietzsche Means* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1943).

<sup>20</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, trans. by Thomas Common (New York: Modern Library), p. 75.

<sup>21</sup> *The Will to Power*, stanza 785.

is the one who has "true kindness, nobility, greatness of soul, which does not give in order to take, which does not want to excel by being kind;—'waste' as type of true kindness, wealth of the person as a premise."<sup>22</sup> He expresses the same thought also in *Thus Spake Zarathustra*: "The one goeth to his neighbor because he seeketh himself, and the other because he would fain lose himself."<sup>23</sup>

The essence of this view is this: Love is a phenomenon of abundance; its premise is the strength of the individual who can give. Love is affirmation and productiveness, "It seeketh to create what is loved!"<sup>24</sup> To love another person is only a virtue if it springs from this inner strength, but it is a vice if it is the expression of the basic inability to be oneself.<sup>25</sup> However, the fact remains that Nietzsche left the problem of the relationship between self-love and love for others as an unsolved antinomy.

The doctrine that selfishness is the arch-evil and that to love oneself excludes loving others is by no means restricted to theology and philosophy, but it became one of the stock ideas promulgated in home, school, motion pictures, books; indeed in all instruments of social suggestion as well. "Don't be selfish" is a sentence which has been impressed upon millions of children, generation after generation. Its meaning is somewhat vague. Most people would say that it means not to be egotistical, inconsiderate, without any concern for others. Actually, it generally means more than that. Not to be selfish implies not to do what one wishes, to give up

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, stanza 935.

<sup>23</sup> *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, p. 76.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 102.

<sup>25</sup> See Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Twilight of Idols*, trans. by A. M. Ludovici (Edinburgh: T. N. Foulis, 1911), stanza 35; *Ecce Homo*, trans. by A. M. Ludovici (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1911), stanza 2; *Nachlass. Nietzsches Werke* (Leipzig: A. Kroener), pp. 63-64.

one's own wishes for the sake of those in authority. "Don't be selfish," in the last analysis, has the same ambiguity that it has in Calvinism. Aside from its obvious implication, it means, "don't love yourself," "don't be yourself," but submit yourself to something more important than yourself, to an outside power or its internalization, "duty." "Don't be selfish" becomes one of the most powerful ideological tools in suppressing spontaneity and the free development of personality. Under the pressure of this slogan one is asked for every sacrifice and for complete submission: only those acts are "unselfish" which do not serve the individual but somebody or something outside himself.

This picture, we must repeat, is in a certain sense one-sided. For besides the doctrine that one should not be selfish, the opposite is also propagandized in modern society: keep your own advantage in mind, act according to what is best for you; by so doing you will also be acting for the greatest advantage of all others. As a matter of fact, the idea that egotism is the basis of the general welfare is the principle on which competitive society has been built. It is puzzling that two such seemingly contradictory principles could be taught side by side in one culture; of the fact, however, there is no doubt. One result of this contradiction is confusion in the individual. Torn between the two doctrines, he is seriously blocked in the process of integrating his personality. This confusion is one of the most significant sources of the bewilderment and helplessness of modern man.<sup>26</sup>

The doctrine that love for oneself is identical with "self-

<sup>26</sup> This point has been emphasized by Karen Horney, *The Neurotic Personality of Our Time* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1937), and by Robert S. Lynd, *Knowledge for What?* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1939).

ishness" and an alternative to love for others has pervaded theology, philosophy, and popular thought; the same doctrine has been rationalized in scientific language in Freud's theory of narcissism. Freud's concept presupposes a fixed amount of libido. In the infant, all of the libido has the child's own person as its objective, the stage of "primary narcissism," as Freud calls it. During the individual's development, the libido is shifted from one's own person toward other objects. If a person is blocked in his "object-relationships," the libido is withdrawn from the objects and returned to his own person; this is called "secondary narcissism." According to Freud, the more love I turn toward the outside world the less love is left for myself, and vice versa. He thus describes the phenomenon of love as an impoverishment of one's self-love because all libido is turned to an object outside oneself.

These questions arise: Does psychological observation support the thesis that there is a basic contradiction and a state of alternation between love for oneself and love for others? Is love for oneself the same phenomenon as selfishness, or are they opposites? Furthermore, is the selfishness of modern man really a concern for himself as an individual, with all his intellectual, emotional, and sensual potentialities? Has "he" not become an appendage of his socioeconomic role? *Is his selfishness identical with self-love or is it not caused by the very lack of it?*

Before we start the discussion of the psychological aspect of selfishness and self-love, the logical fallacy in the notion that love for others and love for oneself are mutually exclusive should be stressed. If it is a virtue to love my neighbor as a human being, it must be a virtue—and not a vice—to love myself since I am a human being too. There is no

concept of man in which I myself am not included. A doctrine which proclaims such an exclusion proves itself to be intrinsically contradictory. The idea expressed in the Biblical "Love thy neighbor as thyself!" implies that respect for one's own integrity and uniqueness, love for and understanding of one's own self, can not be separated from respect for and love and understanding of another individual. The love for my own self is inseparably connected with the love for any other self.

We have come now to the basic psychological premises on which the conclusions of our argument are built. Generally, these premises are as follows: not only others, but we ourselves are the "object" of our feelings and attitudes; the attitudes toward others and toward ourselves, far from being contradictory, are basically *conjunctive*. With regard to the problem under discussion this means: Love of others and love of ourselves are not alternatives. On the contrary, an attitude of love toward themselves will be found in all those who are capable of loving others. Love, in principle, is *indivisible* as far as the connection between "objects" and one's own self is concerned. Genuine love is an expression of productiveness and implies care, respect, responsibility, and knowledge. It is not an "affect" in the sense of being affected by somebody, but an active striving for the growth and happiness of the loved person, rooted in one's own capacity to love.

To love is an expression of one's power to love, and to love somebody is the actualization and concentration of this power with regard to one person. It is not true, as the idea of romantic love would have it, that there is only *the* one person in the world whom one could love and that it is the great chance of one's life to find that one person. Nor is it

true, if that person be found that love for him (or her) results in a withdrawal of love from others. Love which can only be experienced with regard to one person demonstrates by this very fact that it is not love, but a symbiotic attachment. The basic affirmation contained in love is directed toward the beloved person as an incarnation of essentially human qualities. Love of one person implies love of man as such. The kind of "division of labor" as William James calls it, by which one loves one's family but is without feeling for the "stranger," is a sign of a basic inability to love. Love of man is not, as is frequently supposed, an abstraction coming after the love for a specific person, but it is its premise, although, genetically, it is acquired in loving specific individuals.

From this it follows that my own self, in principle, must be as much an object of my love as another person. The affirmation of one's own life, happiness, growth, freedom, is rooted in one's capacity to love, i.e., in care, respect, responsibility, and knowledge. If an individual is able to love productively, he loves himself too; if he can love only others, he can not love at all.

Granted that love for oneself and for others in principle is conjunctive, how do we explain selfishness, which obviously excludes any genuine concern for others? The selfish person is interested only in himself, wants everything for himself, feels no pleasure in giving, but only in taking. The world outside is looked at only from the standpoint of what he can get out of it; he lacks interest in the needs of others, and respect for their dignity and integrity. He can see nothing but himself; he judges everyone and everything from its usefulness to him; he is basically unable to love. Does not this prove that concern for others and concern

for oneself are unavoidable alternatives? This would be so if selfishness and self-love were identical. But that assumption is the very fallacy which has led to so many mistaken conclusions concerning our problem. *Selfishness and self-love, far from being identical, are actually opposites.* The selfish person does not love himself too much but too little; in fact he hates himself. This lack of fondness and care for himself, which is only one expression of his lack of productivity, leaves him empty and frustrated. He is necessarily unhappy and anxiously concerned to snatch from life the satisfactions which he blocks himself from attaining. He seems to care too much for himself but actually he only makes an unsuccessful attempt to cover up and compensate for his failure to care for his real self. Freud holds that the selfish person is narcissistic, as if he had withdrawn his love from others and turned it toward his own person. *It is true that selfish persons are incapable of loving others, but they are not capable of loving themselves either.*

It is easier to understand selfishness by comparing it with greedy concern for others, as we find it, for instance, in an oversolicitous, dominating mother. While she consciously believes that she is particularly fond of her child, she has actually a deeply repressed hostility toward the object of her concern. She is overconcerned not because she loves the child too much, but because she has to compensate for her lack of capacity to love him at all.

This theory of the nature of selfishness is borne out by psychoanalytic experience with neurotic "unselfishness," a symptom of neurosis observed in not a few people who usually are troubled not by this symptom but by others connected with it, like depression, tiredness, inability to work, failure in love relationships, and so on. Not only is unself-



ishness not felt as a "symptom"; it is often the one redeeming character trait on which such people pride themselves. The "unselfish" person "does not want anything for himself"; he "lives only for others," is proud that he does not consider himself important. He is puzzled to find that in spite of his unselfishness he is unhappy, and that his relationships to those closest to him are unsatisfactory. He wants to have what he considers are his symptoms removed—but not his unselfishness. Analytic work shows that his unselfishness is not something apart from his other symptoms but one of them; in fact often the most important one; that he is paralyzed in his capacity to love or to enjoy anything; that he is pervaded by hostility against life and that behind the façade of unselfishness a subtle but not less intense self-centeredness is hidden. This person can be cured only if his unselfishness too is interpreted as a symptom along with the others so that his lack of productiveness, which is at the root of both his unselfishness and his other troubles, can be corrected.

The nature of unselfishness becomes particularly apparent in its effect on others and most frequently, in our culture, in the effect the "unselfish" mother has on her children. She believes that by her unselfishness her children will experience what it means to be loved and to learn, in turn, what it means to love. The effect of her unselfishness, however, does not at all correspond to her expectations. The children do not show the happiness of persons who are convinced that they are loved; they are anxious, tense, afraid of the mother's disapproval and anxious to live up to her expectations. Usually, they are affected by their mother's hidden hostility against life, which they sense rather than recognize, and eventually become imbued with it them-

selves. Altogether, the effect of the "unselfish" mother is not too different from that of the selfish one; indeed, it is often worse because the mother's unselfishness prevents the children from criticizing her. They are put under the obligation not to disappoint her; they are taught, under the mask of virtue, dislike for life. If one has a chance to study the effect of a mother with genuine self-love, one can see that there is nothing more conducive to giving a child the experience of what love, joy, and happiness are than being loved by a mother who loves herself.

Having analyzed selfishness and self-love we can now proceed to discuss the concept of *self-interest*, which has become one of the key symbols in modern society. It is even more ambiguous than selfishness or self-love, and this ambiguity can be fully understood only by taking into account the historical development of the concept of self-interest. The problem is what is considered to constitute self-interest and how it can be determined.

There are two fundamentally different approaches to this problem. One is the objectivistic approach most clearly formulated by Spinoza. To him self-interest or the interest "to seek one's profit" is identical with virtue. "The more," he says, "each person strives and is able to seek his profit, that is to say, to preserve his being, the more virtue does he possess; on the other hand, in so far as each person neglects his own profit he is impotent."<sup>27</sup> According to this view, the interest of man is to preserve his existence, which is the same as realizing his inherent potentialities. This concept of self-interest is objectivistic inasmuch as "interest" is not conceived in terms of the subjective feeling of what one's interest is but in terms of what the nature of man is, ob-

<sup>27</sup> Spinoza, *Ethics*, IV, Prop. 20.

jectively. Man has only one real interest and that is the full development of his potentialities, of himself as a human being. Just as one has to know another person and his real needs in order to love him, one has to know one's own self in order to understand what the interests of this self are and how they can be served. It follows that man can deceive himself about his real self-interest if he is ignorant of his self and its real needs and that the science of man is the basis for determining what constitutes man's self-interest.

In the last three hundred years the concept of self-interest has increasingly been narrowed until it has assumed almost the opposite meaning which it has in Spinoza's thinking. It has become identical with selfishness, with interest in material gains, power, and success; and instead of its being synonymous with virtue, its conquest has become an ethical commandment.

This deterioration was made possible by the change from the objectivistic into the erroneously subjectivistic approach to self-interest. Self-interest was no longer to be determined by the nature of man and his needs; correspondingly, the notion that one could be mistaken about it was relinquished and replaced by the idea that what a person *felt* represented the interest of his self was necessarily his true self-interest.

The modern concept of self-interest is a strange blend of two contradictory concepts: that of Calvin and Luther on the one hand, and on the other, that of the progressive thinkers since Spinoza. Calvin and Luther had taught that man must suppress his self-interest and consider himself only an instrument for God's purposes. Progressive thinkers, on the contrary, have taught that man ought to be only an end for himself and not a means for any purpose tran-

scending him. What happened was that man has accepted the contents of the Calvinistic doctrine while rejecting its religious formulation. He has made himself an instrument, not of God's will but of the economic machine or the state. He has accepted the role of a tool, not for God but for industrial progress; he has worked and amassed money but essentially not for the pleasure of spending it and of enjoying life but in order to save, to invest, to be successful. Monastic asceticism has been, as Max Weber has pointed out, replaced by an *inner-worldly asceticism* where personal happiness and enjoyment are no longer the real aims of life. But this attitude was increasingly divorced from the one expressed in Calvin's concept and blended with that expressed in the progressive concept of self-interest, which taught that man had the right—and the obligation—to make the pursuit of his self-interest the supreme norm of life. The result is that modern man *lives* according to the principles of self-denial and *thinks* in terms of self-interest. He believes that he is acting in behalf of *his* interest when actually his paramount concern is money and success; he deceives himself about the fact that his most important human potentialities remain unfulfilled and that he loses himself in the process of seeking what is supposed to be best for him.

The deterioration of the meaning of the concept of self-interest is closely related to the change in the concept of self. In the Middle Ages man felt himself to be an intrinsic part of the social and religious community in reference to which he conceived his own self when he as an individual had not yet fully emerged from his group. Since the beginning of the modern era, when man as an individual was faced with the task of experiencing himself as an independ-

ent entity, his own identity became a problem. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries the concept of self was narrowed down increasingly; the self was felt to be constituted by the property one had. The formula for this concept of self was no longer "I am what I think" but "I am what I have," "what I possess."<sup>28</sup>

In the last few generations, under the growing influence of the market, the concept of self has shifted from meaning "I am what I possess" to meaning "I am as you desire me."<sup>29</sup> Man, living in a market economy, feels himself to be a commodity. He is divorced from himself, as the seller of a commodity is divorced from what he wants to sell. To be sure, he is interested in himself, immensely interested in

<sup>28</sup> William James expressed this concept very clearly. "To have," he says, "a self that I can care for, Nature must first present me with some object interesting enough to make me instinctively wish to appropriate it for its own sake. . . . My own body and what ministers to its needs are thus the primitive object, instinctively determined, of my egoistic interests. Other objects may become interesting derivatively, through association with any of these things, either as means or as habitual concomitants; and so, in a thousand ways, the primitive sphere of the egoistic emotions may enlarge and change its boundaries. This sort of interest is really the meaning of the word mine. Whatever has it, is, eo ipso, a part of me!" —*Principles of Psychology* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2 vols., 1896), I, 319, 324. Elsewhere James writes: "It is clear that between what a man calls me and what he simply calls mine, the line is difficult to draw. We feel and act about certain things that are ours very much as we feel and act about ourselves. Our fame, our children, the work of our hands, may be as dear to us as our bodies are, and arouse the same feelings and the same acts of reprisal if attacked. . . . In its widest possible sense, however, a man's Self is the sum-total of all that he can call his, not only his body, and his psychic powers, but his clothes and his house, his wife and children, his ancestors and friends, his reputation and works, his land and horses and yacht and bank account. All these things give him the same emotions. If they wax or prosper, he feels triumphant, if they dwindle and die away, he feels cast down—not necessarily in the same degree for each thing, but in much the same way for all."—*Ibid.*, I, 291-292.

<sup>29</sup> Pirandello in his plays has expressed this concept of self and the self-doubt resulting from it.

his success on the market, but "he" is the manager, the employer, the seller—and the commodity. His self-interest turns out to be the interest of "him" as the subject who employs "himself," as the commodity which should obtain the optimal price on the personality market.

The "fallacy of self-interest" in modern man has never been described better than by Ibsen in *Peer Gynt*. Peer Gynt believes that his whole life is devoted to the attainment of the interests of his self. He describes this self as:

"The Gyntian Self!

—An army, that, of wishes, appetites, desires!

The Gyntian Self!

It is a sea of fancies, claims and aspirations;

In fact, it's all that swells within my breast

And makes it come about that I am I and live as such."<sup>30</sup>

At the end of his life he recognizes that he had deceived himself; that while following the principle of "self-interest" he had failed to recognize what the interests of his real self were, and had lost the very self he sought to preserve. He is told that he never had been himself and that therefore he is to be thrown back into the melting pot to be dealt with as raw material. He discovers that he has lived according to the Troll principle: "To thyself be enough"—which is the opposite of the human principle: "To thyself be true." He is seized by the horror of nothingness to which he, who has no self, can not help succumbing when the props of pseudo self, success, and possessions are taken away or seriously questioned. He is forced to recognize that in trying to gain all the wealth of the world, in relentlessly pursuing what

<sup>30</sup> *Loc. cit.*, Act V. Scene I.

seemed to be his interest, he had lost his soul—or, as I would rather say, his self.

The deteriorated meaning of the concept of self-interest which pervades modern society has given rise to attacks on democracy from the various types of totalitarian ideologies. These claim that capitalism is morally wrong because it is governed by the principle of selfishness, and commend the moral superiority of their own systems by pointing to their principle of the unselfish subordination of the individual to the "higher" purposes of the state, the "race," or the "socialist fatherland." They impress not a few with this criticism because many people feel that there is no happiness in the pursuit of selfish interest, and are imbued with a striving, vague though it may be, for a greater solidarity and mutual responsibility among men.

We need not waste much time arguing against the totalitarian claims. In the first place, they are insincere since they only disguise the extreme selfishness of an "elite" that wishes to conquer and retain power over the majority of the population. Their ideology of unselfishness has the purpose of deceiving those subject to the control of the elite and of facilitating their exploitation and manipulation. Furthermore, the totalitarian ideologies confuse the issue by making it appear that they represent the principle of unselfishness when they apply to the state as a whole the principle of ruthless pursuit of selfishness. Each citizen ought to be devoted to the common welfare, but the state is permitted to pursue its own interest without regard to the welfare of other nations. But quite aside from the fact that the doctrines of totalitarianism are disguises for the most extreme selfishness, they are a revival—in secular language—of the religious idea of intrinsic human powerlessness and impo-

tence and the resulting need for submission, to overcome which was the essence of modern spiritual and political progress. Not only do the authoritarian ideologies threaten the most precious achievement of Western culture, the respect for the uniqueness and dignity of the individual; they also tend to block the way to constructive criticism of modern society, and thereby to necessary changes. The failure of modern culture lies not in its principle of individualism, not in the idea that moral virtue is the same as the pursuit of self-interest, but in the deterioration of the meaning of self-interest; not in the fact that people are too much concerned with *their self-interest*, but that they are *not concerned enough with the interest of their real self; not in the fact that they are too selfish, but that they do not love themselves.*

If the causes for persevering in the pursuit of a fictitious idea of self-interest are as deeply rooted in the contemporary social structure as indicated above, the chances for a change in the meaning of self-interest would seem to be remote indeed, unless one can point to specific factors operating in the direction of change.

Perhaps the most important factor is the inner dissatisfaction of modern man with the results of his pursuit of "self-interest." The religion of success is crumbling and becoming a façade itself. The social "open spaces" grow narrower; the failure of the hopes for a better world after the First World War, the depression at the end of the twenties, the threat of a new and immensely destructive war so shortly after the Second World War, and the boundless insecurity resulting from this threat, shake the faith in the pursuit of this form of self-interest. Aside from these factors, the worship of success itself has failed to satisfy man's

ineradicable striving to be himself. Like so many fantasies and daydreams, this one too fulfilled its function only for a time, as long as it was new, as long as the excitement connected with it was strong enough to keep man from considering it soberly. There is an increasing number of people to whom everything they are doing seems futile. They are still under the spell of the slogans which preach faith in the secular paradise of success and glamour. But doubt, the fertile condition of all progress, has begun to beset them and has made them ready to ask what their real self-interest as human beings is.

This inner disillusionment and the readiness for a revaluation of self-interest could hardly become effective unless the economic conditions of our culture permitted it. I have pointed out that while the canalizing of all human energy into work and the striving for success was one of the indispensable conditions of the enormous achievement of modern capitalism, a stage has been reached where the problem of production has been virtually solved and where the problem of the organization of social life has become the paramount task of mankind. Man has created such sources of mechanical energy that he has freed himself from the task of putting all his human energy into work in order to produce the material conditions for living. He could spend a considerable part of his energy on the task of living itself.

Only if these two conditions, the subjective dissatisfaction with a culturally patterned aim and the socioeconomic basis for a change, are present, can an indispensable third factor, rational insight, become effective. This holds true as a principle of social and psychological change in general and of the change in the meaning of self-interest in particular. The time has come when the anesthetized striving for

the pursuit of man's real interest is coming to life again. Once man knows what his self-interest is, the first, and the most difficult, step to its realization has been taken.

## 2 Conscience, Man's Recall to Himself

Whoever talks about and reflects upon an evil thing he has done, is thinking the vileness he has perpetrated, and what one thinks, therein is one caught—with one's whole soul one is caught utterly in what one thinks, and so he is still caught in vileness. And he will surely not be able to turn, for his spirit will coarsen and his heart rot, and besides this, a sad mood may come upon him. What would you? Stir filth this way or that, and it is still filth. To have sinned or not to have sinned—what does it profit us in heaven? In the time I am brooding on this, I could be stringing pearls for the joy of heaven. That is why it is written: "Depart from evil, and do good"—turn wholly from evil, do not brood in its way, and do good. You have done wrong? Then balance it by doing right.

Isaac Meier of Ger<sup>81</sup>

There is no prouder statement man can make than to say: "I shall act according to my conscience." Throughout history men have upheld the principles of justice, love, and truth against every kind of pressure brought to bear upon them in order to make them relinquish what they knew and believed. The prophets acted according to their conscience when they denounced their country and predicted its downfall because of its corruption and injustice. Socrates preferred death to a course in which he would have betrayed his conscience by compromising with the truth. Without

<sup>81</sup> *In Time and Eternity*, ed. by N. N. Glatzer (New York: Schocken Books, 1946).