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Source: *The American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 49, No. 5 (Mar., 1944), pp. 465-469

Published by: The University of Chicago Press

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2770483>

Accessed: 19/08/2010 03:41

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A WORLD WITHOUT PSYCHIC FRUSTRATION

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ABSTRACT

Frustration and gratification are functions of each other. Frustration has a useful role to play as part of the developmental process of adaptation. Only those frustrations which leave no hope of solution and are therefore wholly destructive in effect can and should be eliminated.

The editor's request to write about a world without frustration is an embarrassing one for a psychiatrist, because one of the most outstanding phenomena with which he deals in his daily practice is frustration. When he turns from mental sufferers to what is supposed to be the normal man, frustration as a central phenomenon still glares into his eyes as a universal experience. To him, a world from which frustration is banished appears a fantastic utopia. He knows that the Garden of Eden, the Golden Age—whether projected into the past or, as the millennium, into the future—is a wishful fantasy. Frustration as a psychological experience is such a fundamental aspect of life that he is inclined to question the desirability of a world without it. He would even doubt whether life, as a biological phenomenon, would be possible in a universe where frustration has been fully eliminated.

The emotional experience which we call frustration is an essential part of life. It appears in the consciousness as a state of unfulfilment, discomfort, lack of satisfaction. It stimulates the organism to new attempts at gratifying the need or desire which has been thwarted, to try out new methods and make new experiments. It is theoretically conceivable to eliminate all frustrations from the life of a person by controlling the conditions upon which the gratification of all subjective needs and drives depends—a spoiled child comes nearest to this theoretical assumption; but the most common argument against spoiling a child is that later, when the child grows up, he will be unprepared to face the unavoidable frustrations

of life. Under actual conditions everyone—even a spoiled child—is exposed intermittently to frustrations which prompt the organism to undertake groping efforts at their elimination.

As soon as a correct behavior pattern is found suitable for the elimination of a certain type of frustration, it is repeated whenever the same frustrating condition arises. As a result of repetitions, the behavior pattern becomes automatic and is carried out with a minimum expenditure of energy. In this way the organism gradually learns to master a great number of frustrating situations, particularly those which occur frequently during everyday life. Since there are always new situations which the organism has not yet encountered and to which, therefore, it is not adjusted, frustration is an ever recurring experience. Situations with which the organism is unable to cope because of their suddenness or unfamiliarity are called "traumata." When exposed to a trauma, the organism makes unsuccessful attempts to get rid of the excessive excitation caused either by an impact of external violent stimuli or by an excess of frustration caused by unsatisfied needs.

The phenomenology of psychic frustration covers a great variety of experiences: Unsuccessful attempts at the satisfaction of hunger or thirst and the avoidance of exposure to cold; the more complex emotional states, such as thwarted longing for love, futile seeking of recognition or self-expression, all forms of unavailing ambition to achievement; the inability to satisfy a desire for revenge, competition or the domination of others—all belong to the same category

and may create the sensation of frustration. Thus frustration is shown to be an ever present part of the emotional life. In fact, a wish is a wish only as long as it is unfulfilled.

Biology also seems to justify the thesis that struggle against frustrating conditions is an essential part of life. A great part of the anatomical and physiological equipment of the organism serves to master obstacles which interfere with the satisfaction of basic needs. Biologists define life as "a state of dynamic equilibrium," which means that the life-process consists of expenditure of energy which the organism must replace from the environment if life is to be continued; the expenditure and replacement of energy must be in permanent equilibrium to preserve the continuity of life. The process of life itself creates permanent needs for replacement of energy and substance expended. Since this replacement of energy must be obtained from an environment which virtually always contains obstacles, temporary, recurring frustrations are unavoidable.

Theoretically, however, a life without frustration would appear possible when there have been removed from the environment all those obstacles which have to be overcome for the gratification of those needs which the life-process, in constantly using up energy, itself creates.

These obstacles can be divided into two categories—physical obstacles and human obstacles, the latter a result of the competition among men for the resources of life. As to the physical obstacles, we may grant the possibility that further technical advancement and the exploitation of all sources of energy, including the almost unlimited intra-atomic sources, could eventually lead to conditions in which all the basic needs of the human race would be satisfied smoothly, with a minimum of effort. As to the human obstacles also, we may assume that progress in the field of the social sciences and education may gradually lead to a world from which the competition of man against man for the gratification of the basic needs will be eliminated and replaced by mutual

aid and co-operation. It is certain that, in such a planned world, the size of the global population would have to be controlled, since the existing resources necessary for the maintenance of life, although vast, are not infinite on this planet.

Unquestionably, our present technical civilization has brought the fantasy of Aladdin's lamp nearer than ever to its realization. A large portion of our population visualizes the future as a world in which physical comfort is the supreme value; it is inclined to consider as progress everything which brings us nearer to its ideal of a push-button civilization, a mechanical "*Schlaffaffenland*," in which all our wants and needs will be satisfied, with a minimum expenditure of energy, by the help of clever mechanical devices calculated to satisfy all our needs—shelter, hygienic food, and swift, safe, comfortable locomotion. The scientific counterpart of this popular outlook is the materialistic economic theory which considers the problems of social life solved when all the basic needs of man are satisfied with as little effort as possible. True, if the strivings of the human race consisted in nothing else but the satisfaction of these basic biological needs, such a mechanical push-button civilization, ruled by equalitarian justice, would mean the end of development, and a static world order would ensue.

It belongs to one of those dialectical contradictions of history that this great emphasis upon the economic bases of social life has become so paramount in our era—an era in which the technical mastery of the resources of life has reached unparalleled perfection. Economic insecurity, in this era, has become the central theme which animates the masses, influences the internal and external politics of nations, and finds expression in materialistic political theories.

There were periods in our Western civilization, before the great technical advancement took place, in which the maintenance of life was a routine matter; the economic and social functions of everyone were well defined, and the satisfaction of these needs

better insured; economic security was taken more for granted than in our industrial era. There are also contemporary, so-called "primitive" societies of similar structure. In such a society man can emancipate himself from the relentless concern and anxiety for the morrow and turn his energies toward the less material aspects of life. Then the creative functions of the mind become activated in the forms of folk art and in those customs and rituals of everyday life which elevate human existence above mere vegetation.

It is not a mere coincidence that there has been scarcely any period of human history in which popular art—creative expression of the masses—has been at a lower ebb than in our contemporary industrial cities. A mathematically conceived standard of living has taken the place of such unscientific concepts as human happiness. Technical advancement has obviously achieved the opposite of its goal; although it raised the standard of living, it at the same time introduced a far greater amount of that sense of insecurity which drags man down to exclusive concern with the basic needs of existence and absorbs all his energies. The creative aspects of life, of necessity, must recede into the background because they are the expressions of that surplus energy which is liberated from the struggle to maintain vegetative existence. The most grotesque feature of this picture is that the possession of those technical facilities, which should make the vegetative foundations of life easier, has become an all-absorbing goal in itself; for the majority of the population, the essence of life consists in a yearly turning-in of gadgets of lower quality for those of higher quality. The possession of an automobile is no longer subordinated to the purpose of locomotion but becomes a cherished goal in itself. The tourist, rushing blindly from place to place and bringing home nothing but the memory of daily accomplishment measured in miles, bears out the validity of this contention.

All this is not intended as a jeremiad against our technical civilization. I wish only to point out that paradoxical feature

of our culture—that the machine, because of our failure to use it in a socially reasonable fashion, instead of minimizing the basic problems of vegetative existence, has increased the sense of insecurity and brought concern for the basic needs into the foreground.

The scientific counterpart of this emotional orientation is the growing emphasis upon the adaptive aspects of life—on the gratification of needs with minimum expenditure of energy, on security and stability—and a neglect of all other aspects of life, such as creativeness, wish for adventure, longing for the challenge of obstacles, all of which are manifestations of surplus energy. This all-pervading sense of insecurity explains the high premium currently set on organization and stability; it explains also the fear of initiative, of chance and frustration.

However, elimination of frustration from human experience can be neither a realistic nor a desirable goal. In fact, frustration and gratification belong together; gratification without some antecedent frustration is hardly conceivable. This principle is instinctively known to every woman who keeps her suitor in suspense; to every mother who playfully teases her baby by now showing, now hiding, the desired object; and to every author who piques his reader's curiosity by withholding the clue to the crime, by making him participate in all the harassing vicissitudes of the hero.

In folklore and fable the most common motif is a frustrating situation. In order to deserve the princess, the hero has to conquer the villain, the seven-headed hydra, the sorcerer, the tyrant; or he must first accomplish some great creative task. This shows only too clearly that, when man is following freely the course of his imagination, frustrating obstacles to be conquered belong to the steady repertoire of desires. Even Aladdin's lamp allows him the gratification of only three wishes and not a continuous indulgence of all his momentary desires. Such a super-Aladdin-lamp, indeed, would not appeal to our imagination; life

under such conditions would become utter boredom.

It seems, then, that only the poltroon would dream of an existence from which frustration is fully eliminated and in which all wishes are satisfied without expenditure of effort. In fact, one would be inclined to diagnose this type of fantasy in the case of an individual as a sign of infantilism and regression and, in the case of a nation, as a sign of decadence.

That life and struggle are inseparable is the thesis of the Hungarian dramatist Emmerich Madach in his *Tragedy of Man*. Lucifer exposes to Adam the future of the human race—the tyranny of the Egyptian pharaohs, the collapse of the Roman Empire, the Dark Ages, the French Revolution, Fourier's phalanster state leading up to a new Ice Age in which there will be too many Eskimos and too few sea lions. Discouraged, Adam challenges God: "What is the sense of life if it always leads to frustration?" The drama ends with God's voice to Adam: "Man, struggle and trust."

The intuition of the poet here anticipated scientific insight. Frustration *with* hope is a constructive factor of life; *without* hope, it is destructive. Continuous frustrating conditions which do not allow any hope for their mastery lead to defeatism and neurotic failure. Not the elimination of frustration, but the elimination of *hopeless* frustration alone, must be the aim of the social reformer.

There seems to be little doubt that in organic development—both phylogenetic and ontogenetic—frustration is one of the great driving factors. Whenever conditions which the organism has learned to master in the past change, frustration sets in and lasts until the organism learns to master the new situation. Frustration is the sign of a failure in mastery and in the motivation for achieving new mastery.

Where there is change, there is also frustration. Every living organism grows; and the process of growth is nothing but a series of modifications in the structure and size of the organism. Every new phase of the

growth process involves frustrations requiring new adjustments. Not only the structure of the organism is altered but also the external conditions. Stable conditions are not an attribute of the physical universe as we know it. Because of organic growth and changing external conditions, frustration is an integral part of life.

The opposite of frustration is adaptation. Whenever an organism is adapted to its external and internal environment, frustration is temporarily absent. However, every adaptation is only temporary, because the organism as well as the environment is constantly changing. Adaptation saves expenditure of energy because adapted behavior tends to become automatic and to require a minimum expenditure of energy.

One of the most fundamental but neglected facts of biology and psychology is that the surplus energy saved by adaptive behavior is expended in growth and play by the young organism, and in reproduction by the mature organism. Eros is the god of both play and love. In play activities the young organism exercises those faculties which later will be utilized for survival. Reproduction on the biological level, social productivity on the social level, are manifestations of surplus in the mature organism.

Both in play and in creation, expenditure of surplus energy becomes an aim in itself. In play, obstacles are sought by the organism for the sole purpose of overcoming them, thus giving opportunity for the victorious feeling of mastery. In all creative activities the organism sets a goal outside its own self—a goal which is not subordinated to anything but is an aim in itself.

The propensity of the living organism to utilize surplus energy in a creative way makes those arguments pointless which warn us that universal social security would terminate human progress. It is true that if our technical mastery of nature were utilized in a socially reasonable manner, it would increase the general security and reduce the expenditure of energy necessary for the maintenance of life. However, there is no need to fear that this would lead to

lack of initiative and thus to social stagnation. On the contrary—the energy saved by a socially just utilization of the machine would be used for creative purposes and thus for new progress.

One thing must not be forgotten, however. While biological propagation is an inherited drive, social productivity has to be learned. In a society in which the machine and its comforts are aims in themselves there is no hope for real productivity, and the surplus energies saved by the machine will, through lack of constructive

goals, be used for mutual destruction. The raising of the standard of living cannot remain an aim in itself but must be subordinated to the creative use of surplus energies.

If this industrial civilization is to survive, the sound economic understructure of society must be considered merely a means to an end. It is not further technical discoveries but education in the creative use of the energies which have been saved by technological knowledge that is the pressing need of the coming era.