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„Dianetics“ – For Seekers of Prefabricated Happiness

Erich Fromm
1950b-e

This is a review of L. Ron Hubbard's *Dianetics* with which Hubbard founded his Scientology-Church. The review originally was published in *The New York Herald Tribune Book Review* of September 3, 1950, p. 7. – Reprint in: *Fromm-Forum*, (Engl. version) Tuebingen, No. 2 / 1998 (ISSN 1437-1189), pp. 7-8.

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Never have people been more interested in psychology and the art of living than today. The appeal which books dealing with these subjects have is a symptom of a serious concern with the human rather than with the material aspects of living. But among these books are some which satisfy the need for rational guidance and others appealing to readers who look for prefabricated happiness and miracle cures. *Dianetics* is the latest in this series of books and the author uses all ingredients of the success formula with a remarkable lack of embarrassment. „The creation of *Dianetics* is a milestone for Man comparable to his discovery of fire and superior to his inventions of the wheel and the arch.“ The author claims to have discovered not only the „single source for every kind of neurosis, psychosis, criminality and psychosomatic illness“ but also a therapy which cures all these ills. „*Dianetics* cures and cures without failure.“

The author presents first a general theory of the structure of the mind, then builds upon these premises a theory of mental disturbances and a technique for their cure. „Man is motivated only by survival.“ He is surviving for self, sex, group and mankind and each of these „purpose divisions of the entire dynamic principle“ is called a „dynamic.“ He distinguishes between the „analytical mind,“ „which perceives and retains experience data to compose and revolve problems and direct the organism along the four dynamics,“ and the „reactive mind,“ „which files and retains physical pain and painful emotion and seeks to direct the organism solely on a stimulus response basis.“ While the analytical mind which is compared to an exceptionally magnificent calculating machine thinks in differences and similarities, the reactive mind thinks only in identities.

The concept of the reactive mind is the basis of the author's theory of mental illness and its cure. During moments of intense physical or emotional pain the analytical mind is suspended and the words spoken in the presence of the „unconscious“ person are stored as „engrams.“ These engrams are not accessible to the normal process of recall. Without being aware of it the person is determined by the contents of these engrams similar to a person whose behavior, posthypnotically is motivated by suggestions given during the hypnosis. „If there ever was a devil, he designed the reactive mind. ... It does anything and everything that can be found in any list of mental ills: psychoses, neuroses, compulsions, repressions. ... It can give a man arthritis, bursitis, asthma ... and so on



down the whole catalogue of psychosomatic ills. ... The engram is the single and sole source of aberration and psychosomatic illness.“

Dianetic therapy follows from these premises. The patient („preclear“) is ill because the engrams make him so. When all important engrams, particularly those of the prenatal period are recalled („returned“), the patient is free forever („cleared“) from all „aberrations“ and superior in intelligence to the average person. The therapist („auditor“) brings about this „return“ of the engram by putting the patient in a state of „reverie.“ „When I count from one to seven your eyes will close. You will remain aware of everything that goes on.“ Then the auditor counts „slowly, soothingly“ until the patient closes his eyes. During the following period of reverie the patient is told to „return“ to earlier periods of his life as far back as conception and at the end of the session he is brought back to the present. The engram must be recounted many times until they are completely „erased.“

In spite of the authors fantastic claims there is hardly anything original in his theories except new words for a mixture of misunderstood and undigested Freudianism and hypnotic age regression experiments. Some notions which are truly „original“ are startling indeed. Thus we hear the patient report the words spoken by the doctor to his pregnant mother, or by the father to his wife shortly after conception. This reviewer when reading these case histories was tempted to wonder whether the author had intended to write a witty parody on certain psychiatric theories and the credulity of the public.

Hubbard's book can hardly be taken seriously as a scientific contribution to the science of Man but it must be taken seriously as a symptom of a dangerous trend. Were it only an oversimplified popularization of early Freudian theories it would be harmless. But Dianetics is expressive of a spirit which is exactly the opposite of Freud's teachings. Freud's aim was to help the patient to understand the complexity of his mind, and his therapy was based on the concept that by understanding one's self one can free one's self from the bondage to irrational forces which cause unhappiness and mental illness. This notion is part of the great Eastern and Western tradition from Buddha and Socrates to Spinoza and Freud. Dianetics has no respect for and no understanding of the complexities of personality. Man is a machine and rationality, value judgements, mental health, happiness are achieved by an engineering job. „In an engineering science like Dianetics we can work on a push-button basis.“ There is nothing man has to know or to understand except to apply Hubbard's engram theory. If he does not accept this theory he must have ulterior motives or be possessed by a „denyer“ which is „any engram command which makes the patient believe that the engram does not exist.“ Everything is exceedingly simple. If you have read Hubbard's book you know all there is to know about man and society because you know which buttons to push.

Problems of values and conscience do not exist. If the engrams are erased you have no conflicts. All great philosophical and religious teachers wasted their efforts. There is no problem which does not result from engram command and there is no point to their thinking since they did not know Hubbard's discovery. Although the author says that „the ancient Hindu“ writings, the work of the „early Greeks and Romans“ including Lucretius, the labors of Francis Bacon, the researches of Darwin and some of the thoughts of Herbert Spencer compose the bulk of „the philosophical background“ of his work it is hard to believe: certainly Dianetics does not show the fruits of such concern. The dis-



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covery „that survival is the single and sole purpose of life“ is certainly not the expression of the spirit of the „ancient Hindus“ or the „early Greeks“ but that of a crude biologism for which ethical values are subordinated to the urge for survival - if there is any place for them at all.

But perhaps the most unfortunate element in Dianetics is the way it is written. The mixture of some oversimplified truths, half truths and plain absurdities, the propagandistic technique of impressing the reader with the greatness, infallibility and newness of the author's system, the promise of unheard of results attained by the simple means of following Dianetics is a technique which has had most unfortunate results in the fields of patent medicines and politics; applied to psychology and psychiatry it will not be less harmful.

This negative view on Dianetics does not result from this reviewer's belief that present-day methods of psychiatry are satisfactory; they are in need of new ideas and experiments indeed. Fortunately, many psychiatrists and psychologists are aware of this need and in search for more effective methods of approaching the unconscious level (like, for instance, the Slesinger „Looking-in“ test). But the premise must be the strengthening of the patient's responsibility, critical ability and insight.