A THEORETICAL AND EMPIRICAL APPROACH TO THE STUDY OF DEVELOPMENT*

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Foreword by Dr. K. Dabrowski ........................................... 233
Acknowledgments ................................................................... 238
Summary .............................................................................. 239
I. Introduction ...................................................................... 240
II. The conceptual structure of the theory of positive disintegration ................. 244
III. Methods and sources of data ............................................ 267
IV. Assessment of levels ...................................................... 277
V. Assessment of developmental potential ................................... 284
VI. Conclusion .................................................................... 293
References ........................................................................... 295

* Received in the Editorial Office, Provincetown, Massachusetts, on October 25, 1974. Copyright, 1975, by The Journal Press.
FOREWORD

I am grateful to the Editor for giving me the opportunity to express my thoughts on the origins and subsequent formation of the theory of positive disintegration from a perspective of 40 years.

It is perhaps true that new highly dynamic theories arise not only from observation and analysis but also from a highly charged experiential process leading to the birth and development of new conceptions. This is certainly true of the theory of positive disintegration.

As a rule I am reluctant to indulge in personal disclosures, but I feel I must make an exception here. To a large extent the conceptions of the theory grew out of events experienced in my adolescence and youth. Already then I had a distinct need to see values in a hierarchical order. In my psychological makeup I had heightened emotional, imaginative, and intellectual excitability. The specific developmental dynamics was based primarily on these three forms of psychic overexcitability, as they were called later, rather than on the psychomotor form which, nevertheless, was also present in my constitution. These overexcitabilities had the effect of making concrete stimuli more complex, enhancing their emotional content and amplifying every experience.

This was especially true in regard to the question of death, suffering, the meaning of human existence, and the destiny of man. Experiences related to these perpetual questions went along two lines. The first was in regard to the suffering, death, and injustice inflicted upon persons very close to me; the second was in regard to the suffering, imprisonment and death of great numbers of people. I remember a battle during the First World War. When the exchange of artillery fire ended, fighting went on with cold steel. When the battle was over, I saw several hundred young soldiers lying dead, their lives cut in a cruel and senseless manner. I witnessed masses of Jewish people being herded toward ghettos. On the way the weak, the invalid, the sick were killed ruthlessly. And then, many times, I myself and my close family and friends have been in the immediate danger of death. The juxtaposition of inhuman forces and inhuman humans with those who were sensitive, capable of sacrifice, courageous, gave a vivid panorama of a scale of values from the lowest to the highest.

I learned about death very early in my life. Death appeared to me not just as something threatening and incomprehensible, but also as something that one must experience emotionally and cognitively at a close range. When I was six my little three-year-old sister died of meningitis. When I was young I witnessed death again during the First World War, and as a
mature man during the Second World War. These events brought a great number of experiences which demanded an answer, but the answer had to be complex and multidimensional in view of the forms of overexcitability mentioned earlier, since it was due to them, to my enhanced imagination, activity of thought, and emotional involvement that the content of my observations and experiences was greatly amplified. From the events of those times came an unapproached need to deepen the attitude toward the death of others and toward my own, toward injustice and social cataclysms, toward the discrimination between truth and falsehood in human attitudes and behavior.

In face of these questions I often felt broken and afflicted by their number and overwhelming complexity. I felt that these questions demanded answers that would be universal and that would penetrate deep. This need to penetrate deep became more and more associated with an intuitive understanding of the multilevel nature of phenomena. Superficiality, vulgarity, absence of inner conflict, quick forgetting of grave experiences, became something repugnant to me. I searched for people and attitudes of a different kind, those that were authentically ideal, saturated with immutable values, those who represented “what ought to be” against “what is.” And it often turned out that among such persons the “what ought to be” was already there and at times in its noblest manifestations.

Experiencing the contradictions of values in everyday observations had its counterpart in extensive study and examination of conceptions and theories offered by Jackson, Janet, Freud, and others. In the development of my attitude toward these ideas, the discriminating criterion was the presence or absence of multilevel conceptions or at least some approximation to that. The presence of multilevel approaches in their theories made me receptive toward Jackson, Sherrington, Jung, and Rorschach, while the absence of multilevel components made incomprehensible to me psychoanalytic theories, Pavlov’s theory, behaviorism, or even some of Adler’s, ideas such as the assumption that there is no inheritance of psychological traits, or that there is only feeling of inferiority toward others but none toward oneself.

I could not agree with the idea of early childhood frustrations as an explanation for the origin and development of psychoneuroses when everyday observation and my clinical practice were demonstrating the link between psychoneurotic and creative processes. I could not accept the one-sided and unilevel transposition of experimental results with animals carried out by Pavlovians or behaviorists onto the complex, subtle and multilevel human mechanisms. I could not accept certain theories (Janet, Adler, and others) which associated human development with external conditions only and did not take into account the developmental potential of the inner psychic milieu.

In these searches I tried to base myself on broad comprehensive experiments and studies. On the basis of these studies and conceptions in which I perceived outlines of a hierarchy of values, I felt the need to create such a hierarchy of values which would be described with precision, empirically developed, and objectively testable.

One more remark. The recognition of the importance of multilevelness required that one looked for its elements and manifestations in all areas of human process and experimentation: that is, in neurophysiology, psychiatry, psychology, sociology, and education. The complexity of the phenomena of human life, as well as their multilevelness, could not be understood without the investigation of links, aggregations, and interactions of factors operating in the external environment, as well as, and foremost, of those operating in the inner psychic milieu.

Psychological and educational experiments enabled me to see the multilevelness of phenomena also in the area of education. A sensitive, capable, introverted child is often given negative evaluation because of his shyness and lack of self-confidence. How often does one see how psychoneurotics are pushed out to the margin, while society yields to the influence of psychopaths—individuals who act without inhibition, without scruples, without emotional responsiveness: that is, individuals who are deficient in the constituting elements of the inner psychic milieu.

The world of external and internal phenomena began to form itself in my experience as a world of values arranged in a hierarchy of levels. Values appeared to represent different levels. The span between the levels of a given phenomenon became by far more significant than the content of the term defining the phenomenon. Each level covered a distinctly different range of a given phenomenon. Thus empathy appeared as something different from primitive sympathy, primitive immobilizing fear as something totally different from and unrelated to existential fear, brutal and wild laughter as something different from and unrelated to a subtle smile manifesting depth of inner experience in respect to others and to oneself. It was striking that these disparate manifestations of behavior never coexisted in the same individual. Existential fears, obsessions, and depressions turned out to be unrelated to egocentric fears, obsessions, and depressions. The first were the result of excessive sensitivity, disappointments, sadness, and suffering;
the second were most often the result of lack of success in life, thwarted ambition, material losses—in short, of primitive egocentrism shaped by external stimuli.

In numerous mental disorders, and especially in psychoneuroses, I found again and again great creative and developmental richness. Such patients, not reconciled to their concrete reality but rather opposed to it, were undergoing psychoneurotic processes generated by the multileimensionality of their experiencing. They manifested trends and efforts in search of a reality of higher level. And often they were able to find it unaided.

The label “dégénérate supérieur,” applied to such individuals, became for me the very representation of an artificial solution to the truth that many mental disorders do not manifest degeneration but, on the contrary, a high level of overall mental development. On the basis of detailed biographical studies I saw that geniuses of mankind and saints manifested psychoneurotic processes, even borderline of psychosis, combined with the highest level of experience, as well as of understanding and attaining the highest levels of reality.

In relation to social structures these experiences led me to distinguish three groups composed of (a) primitive and brutal elements, acting toward their own advantage and often determining the course of events, (b) so-called normal individuals subordinated to the primitive ones, and (c) nervous individuals and psychoneurotics characterized by enhanced psychic excitability, mainly emotional, imaginational, and intellectual, who are pushed out to the margin and yet who create the highest and the most lasting values. These three groups formed themselves in my mind in a “natural” manner, with the first having the greatest a developmental advantage, showing the greatest aggressiveness but no scruples, the second at a developmental disadvantage, and the third—developmentally the richest—being forced out. The third group is the most vulnerable in terms of individual and social development.

These three types of groups can be observed with some variation almost anywhere in social structures: in the family, school, administration, industry, higher education, international relations. Here again appeared the problem of multilevelness of social groups and of multilevelness of social values. The distinction of levels, their organization and development became for me the key to the answer I sought.

The definition of five levels of development of emotional and instinctive functions, their detailed description and elaboration of methods of their diagnosis, brought the concept of multilevelness to the realm of objective operations, similar to those employed in the study of human intelligence. This, in turn, allowed me gradually to elaborate philosophical ideas in regard to the problem of values. The distinction of levels of values is more meaningful and more crucial than the distinction of kinds of values. This introduces into axiology in place of relativism of values their hierarchization.

In conclusion I would like to say that perhaps it was a certain amount of cognitive, as well as experiential, potential that enabled me to reach to a multidimensional and multilevel reality and establish some of its dimensions. The consequences of such an approach are rather obvious for philosophy of education and for creating educational models, for diagnosis and therapy of mental disorders, especially of psychoneuroses, for comprehensive multilevel and multidimensional psychology, and for philosophy which in my approach represents an objective protest against the hegemony of positivism.

Finally, I would like to express my profound appreciation and affection for my young friend Dr. M. M. Piechowski, for his original and creative approach to the theory of positive disintegration, for his numerous conceptions enriching the fundamental structure of the theory and also those going beyond the present scope of problems encompassed by the theory.

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April 1974

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