

SELF-ESTEEM IS IMPOTENT FOR SEX CONTROL

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"The lesson" for & from M.J. depends on one's own sexual anxieties, avoidances, awarenesses, ana-/cata-strophic anticipations, and history. Personally, the M.J. lesson may be improved perception of the creative/destructive **fantasyland** between the self-reality & the nonself-reality (= "the world" + the transcendent reality, ie God). Societally, the M.J. lesson one wants to teach the world depends on one's perception of actual/ideal roles of sex as a creative/destructive force in & shaper of society.

Depending on one's here-&-now perspective or peevee (point of view), the vector of one's project at the moment, the lesson may be quite other than at another moment with it's different angle of vision.

At this moment of beginning this Thinksheet, I see the M.J. lesson as exploding the **self-esteem** educational paradigm, the hottest thing since the limits of the values-clarification paradigm have become glaringly, painfully obvious. The current paradigm goes like this: "Children will exercise personal sex-control if they are taught to respect themselves, esteem themselves, for this is the ethical basis of responsible behavior vis-a-vis oneself & others."

FACT: During his pre-HIV/AIDS promiscuous life (laying "thousands" of women), M.J. had enormous, even radiant self-esteem. The self-esteem pushers, to deliver their salvific word from what they would call my base use of it, would have to narrow the word's meaning down to the point where they could claim it's something world-class loverboy M.J. didn't have. But any such definition would be idiosyncratic & patently fallacious.

1 The recent paradigmatic use of "self-esteem" is innocent of the term's ambivalence. Note the righthand column:

POSITIVE

NEGATIVE

WU2

The holding a good opinion of oneself; self respect.

Self-conceit.

RH2

A realistic respect for or favorable impression of oneself.

An inordinately or exaggeratedly favorable impression of oneself.

2 What weakness do "values-clarification" & "self-esteem" have in common as education paradigms? Radical **subjectivity**, the dogma of the omniscient self. Both teachings attempt to cancel the traditional conviction that (1) there are objective standards of behavior (morality, ethics) (2) rooted in religion. In public education, the pragmatic reason is to avoid religio-ethical sectarianism; but the ideological reason is to achieve, through antiobjectivism, a radically secular society.

3 Values-clarification failed because of its commitment to value-neutrality. In one 6th-grade class, nobody thought Shoa-Holocaust evil. The teacher thought it evil, but did not say so, for "I didn't want to disturb the process"! It's not surprising that nobody in that class thought that cheating is wrong. The erroneous assumption? Inherency, the notion that good/evil & right/wrong are inherent in the child, in every human being; & moral formation is the process of "educing" (thus, educ-ation) from latent to patent....Self-esteem education will fail because (1) it rests on the inherency illusion (that every child can be taught self-worth, & thus self-esteem, as the ultimate value), & (2) that the moral energy thus released will be adequate for optimal self-control, including sex control, the bridling of the raging hormones.

4 Traditionally, the raging hormones have been bridled by three grooms, viz divine control, social controls, & self-control--not always with complete success. How much less successful with only two grooms, less still with only one?

5 The American sports subculture has encouraged uncontrolled sex & provided

--along with other entertainment media--most of American children's heroes. M.J. is a hero for stopping doing what he never should have started doing, viz condomless sex (not to mention fornication); & for preaching condomed (less unsafe, which he wrongly calls "safe") sex instead of (safe) no-sex, abstinence.... This subculture, in addition to other forms of moral rot, provides the heroes with the self-esteem of sexual conquests, & the groupies with the derived self-esteem of getting themselves laid by heroes.

6 Self-worth, self-respect, self-esteem--as educators use the terms--are **effects** whose cause is autonomy (taking charge of yourself vis-a-vis your inherent value & virtue), heteronomy (conformity to group, as M.J. to the sports subculture), or theonomy (submission to God's will-law-covenant-grace), or a compound, however unstable, of two or all of them. Current and projected public-school experiments in "moral education" variously deal with "common values" ("virtues" is eschewed, as "moralistic") or "American [multicultural, not Eurocentric] values." On the model of "core curriculum," many of these experiments say they are based on core values, a hopeful phrase that defines the arena for discussion & decision. Will continence make it into this arena? On its side are religion, humanism, & health.

7 In our narcissistic society, **health** is a god/dess whose temple is the human body. (In ancient Greece, the health deities were worshiped in asklepieia [temples to the male health-god Asklepios] & hygieia [temples to the female health-goddess Hygieia]. Those temples were marble-covered; today's temple to health is skin-covered.) Merge health & the body, & you have body-worship, which turns the populace into hedonists (locating pleasure in the flesh, the skinbag) & hypochondriacs (forever worrying about the "medical" condition of the body). In his Corinthian correspondence, Paul uses the Stoic analogy of the human body as temple: 1.3.16f & 1.6.13-20 ("The body is not to be used for sexual immorality....your bodies are parts of the body of Christ...[not to be made] part of the body of a prostitute," which would be to "sin against one's own body...your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit....So use your bodies for God's glory."). But the metaphor may go back to Jesus, who spoke of his body as temple (Jn.2.21); then on to the church, "the body of Christ," as temple, & (Rev.21.22) the templeless City, templeless "because its temple is the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb."

The biblical understanding of the human body is triply different from our contemporary body-cult: (1) The body's resident-in-charge is not the self but God, whose temple it is; (2) The body's sacrality is not inherent but derivative from its dedication for holy purposes within the holiness of God; (3) The body's health & pleasures are to be sought not as ultimate goals, values in themselves, but only as proximate goals, means to the glory of God (above, "use your bodies for God's glory"). The body's center is not the self (individualism) or society (socialism) but God (theism). Unlike self-esteem, this God-esteem provides, beyond the resources of the self, a fulcrum & force sufficient for sex control in those who daily practice God-centering. (It was the life-thesis of Benj. Rush MD, a signer of the Declaration of Independence, that both private morality & public order become impossible whenever, wherever "the sense of Deity" subsides in the daily lives of the citizenry. Far from cultivating this sense, our public schools rule it out, with the result that in most children this sense functions neither positively (as incentive to achievement) nor negatively (as threat of divine disciplinary action). Reinstating this sense would be more salutary than distributing condoms. The former may look impossible, but the latter may prove out to be a cure worse than the disease.

8 In the condoms-in-schools debate across the country, I've observed that the pro-condom advocates (1) take the cynical view that the hormones are stronger than the kids & (2) that saving even one child from AIDS is worth making condoms available to all children. The first proposition is too low a view of the human potential for self-control, so low a view as to rob humanity of the dignity of self-determination & deferred gratification. Humanistic grounds should

be adequate to rejecting it, even without the higher appeals of biblical religion.

The second proposition illustrates what I've been berating above, viz the attribution of ultimate-sacred value to the embodied individual, the life of one skinbag. Here's part of a letter in a newspaper yesterday: "Even if the young people view its passage [ie, condoms in schools] as an endorsement for them to have intercourse, so the amount of sexual activity in a school increases, that should not weigh as much in the decision as the potential loss of one life due to the lack of protection against AIDS." To such a length of insanity does the idolatry of the individual skinbag lead! The human individual is both temple & god, so society should be willing to pay any price to achieve & secure the physical health of the individual. Thence comes the now often heard stupidity, "It's a matter of health, not morals or religion." In this sentiment & sentence, "health" coopts morality, ethics, & religion. And millions cannot feel the stupidity, because we are living in a **therapeutic society**....Opposition to capital punishment always adduces the horror that an innocent may be executed. Those fixated on this horror are--I've found time & again--unimpressed by the fact that the number of dead innocents is far greater when murderers pass through the revolving door & murder again, as they commonly do....Opponents of abortion are similarly myopic, their minds fixated on a single terminated pregnancy (the remains often placarded in full-color photos). They are right only if the embodied individual (in this case, the fetus) has ultimate-sacred value....Foes of death-choice (suicide & assisted suicide) rest their case on the same premise: human life is so precious that only "God" should put an end to it. (But in putting an end to somebody's life, is God not canceling the claim that the individual skinbag has ultimate-sacred value?)....Then there's the insane doctrine that "everything possible should be done for every AIDS sufferer." The (il)logic grounding this conviction is that every AIDS "victim"--"patient" has ultimate-sacred value, so billions should be spent to keep these terminally ill alive a little longer even though resources (= \$s) must be diverted from research & treatment of other diseases....In many societies, human life is officially cheap. In ours, it's too expensive: we deify the individual (this being the given for atheistic humanism, for secularism) & sacralize physical health & healing. Reverence for God & respect-responsibility for nature collapse into the human skinbag. Neither theism nor ecology can stomach this idolatry (somatolatry). But there's hope: God-believers & nature-lovers may form an alliance against this Enlightenment overvaluing of the individual & the species. An uphill fight, because what is needed is a redistribution of veneration, a transvaluing of current values, a relocating of the numinous--in short, a radical conversion, a redirecting of attention from the altar of the dead Enlightenment god to the altar of the living, life-giving God. Secular establishments are getting the message that nature has rights over against humanity: the goal of sustainability, of the vital balance of nature & humanity, requires deflation of our species; but not yet the message that humanity needs deflation also vis-a-vis the divine. Spiritually, financially, politically, we cannot afford to continue the present numinous priority of the individual above the species, above nature, above God.

9 In NYC last week, a seminary executive described my Thinksheets as so many efforts to answer the question *How does everything & anything look in the light of the biblical God?* True enough. This one condemns as feeble failures all efforts to replace the biblical God as a factor in sex control, both personal & societal. Amos Wilder's doctrine of "latent continuity"--that forgotten elements in a culture's spirituality reappear when the need for them becomes urgent--comes to our aid here. Whatever we may have to say about the biblical God & other cultures, in Western civilization the biblical God is a patent or latent presence, an essential ingredient in personal & communal health-happiness-wholeness-hope.

10 The AIDS bomb is a stimulus to old-think & new-think, with the biblical God a component in both. Yet I hear "God doesn't have anything to do with AIDS"--from the same folk who say "Condoms in schools is not a moral or religious issue, only a health issue." Reminds me of Freud's "Denken ist proben

Arbeit" (Thinking is probing, testing, work). And of Fritz Perls' "Thinking is rehearsing for the future." The psychohormone now stimulating thought about AIDS is a fortiori anxiety: if AIDS is bad now, in our country & the world, what will we do when, soon, there will be 10x the present number of victims-patients? (Anxiety is the tension between a bad now & a [supposedly] worse later.)

11 All STDs (sexually transmitted diseases), including HIV/AIDS, are misery-making happiness-killers. Since the biblical God is an enemy of happiness in order to be a friend of joy, must we not conclude that AIDS, like syphilis before it, is a divine disincentive, a negative sanction for sex control & in this sense a punishment from God?

The exception "proves" (ie, tests) the rule, the proposition. Is it not a moral travesty to say that God killed Kimberly Bergalis, a virgin AIDS-dead at 23? Was she not "innocent," having acquired AIDS through dentistry? (1) Claiming that all who acquire AIDS are innocent, none are guilty--none are self-victims, all are non-responsible victims--AIDS groups are enraged at the use of the word "innocent" for AIDS babies & other virgins. Nor do they like the less accusative antonyms active/passive victims. "Morality has nothing to do with it," they say. (2) One dimension of sin is that it often brings down wrath upon the heads of innocents. In Pentagonese, that's "collateral damage," civilian pains never entirely avoidable in war. (3) Consider the theological price to be paid if one agrees that "God has nothing to do with AIDS except to move humanity to care-giving to the victims." The phrase "God has nothing to do with...." is essentially deist, antitheist. (5) Providence, biblical faith in the biblical God, cannot partake of the intellectual luxury of the sunshine God, the God who has no role in darkness other than compassion. The Bible's radical intellectual challenge asks *Why did God bring this darkness on me/us/him-her/them?* Our answer to the question must often be cautious, tentative, "probing" (to use Freud's word); but for us theists, it cannot be a non-question. (6) Providence, the mystery of good, does not rule out tragedy, the mystery of guiltless evil. But we must be even more cautious about the latter hermeneutic category than of the former: self-exculpation ("I'm not guilty") as a self-justifying habit blocks both self-interrogation ("Am I guilty?") & repentance ("I'm guilty"). (7) To us of biblical commitment, the category of nonculpable tragedy must remain ethically marginal. The ancient Greek tragedies interwove human culpability (somebody did something wrong) & fate (Moirai laid down a doom process nothing can stop). But Israel's prophets, not resorting to the tragic dimension for explanation, were radically monotheist ("We/you/they must have been doing something wrong, & we'd better find out what it is & repent of it, or even greater wrath will descend upon us"). Jewish history's greatest test of this radical doctrine of providence is Shoa-Holocaust, & I know of no Jewish theologian who has applied that doctrine to this case.

12 Theological reflection on AIDS has been all over the religiomoral map, but few have taken the risk of enumerating the actual & potential human benefits from the disease. One good thing is that Magic Johnson got it: he himself says it's good, because it gives him a pulpit for preaching the gospel of "safe sex." Another good is that it has set millions to thinking about "good" sex (not "good sex," ie orgasmic satisfaction) & "clean" sex (not biologically or morally dirty sex) & "faithful" sex (vs promiscuity, casual sex, recreational sex, sex without commitment, no-fault sex, no-consequences sex). Further, since the pill removed much of the fear of pregnancy, we've been in need of a barrier against promiscuity, & AIDS is it, substituting for the fear of pregnancy the fear of death. Again, AIDS is a blessing in providing a question-breeding frustration: is sex worth the risks? what are the nonphysical effects (eg, on personal identity, self-image, self-worth, self-discipline, self-control, family relations, friendship, spirituality) of free sex (ironic word "free," since irresponsible, noncommittal sex is, in so many ways, binding)? what are the roles of religion & of government in sex? what is "responsible sex," & how promote it? how can public education come unstuck from the present value-free "sex ed"? what sex-control measures should society institute for the common good?AIDS is a coolant in our superheated sex society.