



ABOUT OURSELVES

Psychology for Normal People

BY

H. A. OVERSTREET

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"Influencing Human Behavior"*



NEW YORK
W·W·NORTON & COMPANY, INC.
Publishers

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PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA
FOR THE PUBLISHERS BY THE VAIL-BALLOU PRESS

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FOREWORD

Is the reader hopelessly perfect? If so, let him close this book. It is not for him. Is he so mentally ill that he requires the careful attention of a psychiatrist? If so, again, let him close the book.

This book is for the rest of us, the in-betweens—the so-called “normals.” It is written out of the conviction that we normal persons need to know a good deal more about ourselves than we ordinarily do. If we are obviously not normal, we get well cared for. Our friends send us to physicians of one kind or another—physicians of the body and physicians of the mind; and if we are fairly lucky, we get patched up and have a blissful time thereafter boring our friends to death with tales of what the doctors did to us.

But if we are normal, no one notices us. And we are too busy at our jobs to notice ourselves. So we grow all kinds of queer malformations in our physical and psychological make-up, which, while they do not prevent us from selling goods over the counter or cooking dinners for the family, nevertheless do a fair amount of damage to ourselves and to those who have the questionable fortune of living with us.

It is the intention of this book to reveal ourselves to ourselves through some of the knowledge that has come to us out of the past fifty years or so of psychological research. Why do we need that knowledge? The question has only to be asked in order to answer itself. We need it because we cannot rightly get along without it.

Let us go back some twenty years. A clumsy looking airship runs along the ground for a few hundred yards; then rises with a heavy, reluctant clumsiness. It wobbles—dips, rights itself, wobbles some more. Then, with a crazy lurch, it swoops with a crash to the ground. Obviously that airship was the victim of inadequate knowledge. What it needed—and what, happily, its companion ships later received—was an intelligent re-shaping of its mechanism.

Are we human airships not a good deal like that? If we look about among us so-called normal people, do we find ourselves, one and all, rising strongly, smoothly, triumphantly on our full mental and emotional power, or are not many of us wobbling more or less precariously in the air? We are worrying ourselves about this, or having an inner conflict about that; we are fussy, or irritated, or gloomy, or disappointed, or frustrated, or prejudiced, or ridiculously conceited. Are we not, perhaps,—most of us—in need of a good deal of mental and emotional re-shaping?

Some of us are married. Do our friends look dolefully upon us and shake their heads? Do we look dolefully at ourselves, rattle our chains sardonically? Are we perhaps planning bigger and better novels on the disillusionments of sex? Some of us are parents. Do we feel altogether proud of the job we are doing? Are Thomas and Geraldine the sweet young things we expect them to be? Do we know what we expect them to be? Some of us are teachers. Do we know just what we are doing to those young victims in front of us? Have we solved our own inner problems previously to solving theirs? Some of us are ministers of religion. Do we know how subtly and bewilderingly the human being gets out of gear? Are we wholly in gear ourselves? Some of us are unmarried women, at an age when marriage should be

our portion. Have we, in the forced abnormality of our lives, found the way to a secure and creative happiness? Some of us, finally, are adolescents—college students, or young people in shop or industry. Do we have to be the restless and confused creatures the books and the elders seem to expect us to be? Can we get hold of ourselves and start going?

It is to answer some of these questions that the following pages are written. They promise no panacea. For this enterprise of casting out our human ills and building up our individual selves, there is no panacea. But human life, I am certain, can be immensely more alive, immensely more interesting, powerful and vital than it ordinarily is. How?

The difficulty with most of us is that we suffer from the familiarity which breeds a dulled awareness. Ourselves we have with us always—and in consequence we know least about ourselves. It is refreshing at times to break in upon this dullness with pictures of ourselves taken from a different angle and with a wider perspective. For by that means the dullness suddenly leaps into unexpected vividness. We are awakened to a different sense of ourselves. Our personal traits are then revealed as determining factors in our lives which are carrying us towards triumph or defeat. It is precisely such a revelatory awakening which the work of the more recent psychology has brought about and which these pages will, in a measure, carry over to the reader.

My obligations in the writing of this book are many. They are chiefly to that fine band of pioneers, who, breaking away from old traditions of abstract thinking about human nature, have opened their eyes and given their help to the actual individuals in the world around them. Some of them are philosophers; others are psychologists and

physicians. I have made acknowledgment wherever possible. My thanks are due to them not only for what I have myself received, but for what this newly emerging enterprise of understanding human life has received through their efforts.

I wish particularly to thank Miss Anne Page for having been patient enough to read almost the entire manuscript. Many of her criticisms and suggestions have been of the greatest value. I must also thank my most persistent—oft-times devastating—critic. If a number of faults have been avoided in this book—as I hope they have—and if some of the ideas seem to possess a wisdom hardly attributable to mere masculinity, the reader must thank my wife.

I am happy in this, that the chapters which follow have all been tried out and seasoned with discussion. As in my former volume, "Influencing Human Behavior," a large group of business and professional men and women in the New School for Social Research in New York City suffered the onslaught of the lectures. Much of what appears here is the result of the suggestions and criticisms of these students; a number of the cases included are their contribution. My thanks are due to all of them, for they helped to make this course in adult education not one in which the lecturer was a little-tin-god-in-a-pulpit handing out predigested wisdom, but one in which the lecturer and the group were co-workers in a common enterprise of research and constructive clarification. It is the hope of the writer that this common enterprise may now, through the printed page, be carried on with far wider effect.

H. A. OVERSTREET.

INTRODUCTION

THE NEWER CLUES TO HUMAN
BEHAVIOR

The science of human behavior is a new science. It is only just beginning to be born. We have had sciences of mathematics, mechanics, physics, chemistry, biology. We have had more or less successful attempts at sciences of economics and politics. But we have never before, in any accurate sense, had a science of human behavior.

In the past, of course, a great deal was said about human behavior, much of it true and useful. But practically all of it suffered from the fact that it was merely assertive in character. It was in the form of maxims, prophetic utterances, philosophic dicta. Sometimes, when these utterances were the result of keen observation, they were all to the good, as one often finds in the case of such shrewd observers as Socrates, Confucius, Lao Tze, Jesus, Montaigne, Francis Bacon, and others. But when, as frequently happened, they were based upon false inferences, they did serious damage in turning mankind psychologically astray. Such, for example, was the belief that illness was due to possession by demons; or that deceased persons must have sons to perform ceremonial rites for them; or that the aged must be put away lest they be too infirm in the life hereafter; or that women could, as witches, have commerce with the devil. When men believed these things, they not only made mistakes, but they made mistakes which, in many a case, led to a tragic outcome.

A real science—as well as a real philosophy—of human nature could not be born until there were devised techniques of accurate observation and verified experiment. It is now only a little over fifty years—within the lifetime of a good many of us—since the first psychological laboratories were established, the first of them dating from the University of Leipzig in 1879. Now they mount into the hundreds. It is only a little over fifty years since the first psychological clinics were established, largely through the discoveries of Charcot in Paris, Freud and Adler in Vienna, and Jung in Zürich. Now they exist wherever medicine has reached the fruitful conclusion that a host of our diseases are psychological in origin.

The new science of human behavior roots in the study of concrete cases. It is out of such study, carried on in laboratory and clinic with increasingly adequate techniques of observation and experiment, that the newer clues are beginning to come. These newer clues, one suspects, are destined to cast out many old wives' superstitions about human nature, and to supply in their stead clearly verified knowledge which will, in the end, lead our much befuddled egos out of many of their unhappy jungles. The alert minded person of the future will know where to go for wisdom about human behavior. Precisely as he now goes to the laboratory physicist for authentic knowledge of electricity and radio, he will go to the laboratory and the clinical psychologist for knowledge about his psychological self and the psychological selves of his neighbors.

Are there clues that are already available for our use? In what follows we shall confine ourselves largely to what has come out of the clinic. We do this for two reasons. In the first place, the clinician has dealt with the more urgent prob-

lems of human behavior, those arising out of some regrettable defect of functioning. In the second place, the study of these very problems of defective functioning has proved unexpectedly illuminating for an understanding of our so-called normal processes.

I say unexpectedly; and yet this is precisely what we ought to have expected. It is when a smooth-running machine gets out of order that we usually learn most about it. Your particular substitute for a Ford gives a sickening series of thuds, staggers on a few yards, then stops dead. If you have never looked into a gasoline engine before, your education begins at that trying moment when you lift the hood and seek to probe into the mysteries of your ailing motor.

A noteworthy example of the unexpected light cast by the study of abnormal functioning is found in the achievements of Dr. Ovide Decroly of Brussels. Dr. Decroly, in his young medical days, was faced by the pathetic problem of sub-normal children. His interest soon went beyond that of an ordinary physician. It turned from the mere care of their bodies to the development of their minds. The general opinion at that time was that for these poor mental defectives there was no real hope. The most that could be done was to feed and clothe them, and, if you were the parent, to bow humbly before this visitation of an inscrutable God. Decroly surmised differently. He decided to try the unusual experiment of educating them. So he took a number of them to his home, lived with them, studied them, experimented with them. Watching their slow mental processes, he gradually succeeded in working out all kinds of new devices which helped them to learn. And he finally brought them to a condition far in advance of their original, pitiable defectiveness.

But something even more important resulted. Watching, day by day, the slow-moving processes of these mental defectives, as one watches a slowed-up motion picture, Decroly was able to note how the human mind went about its business of learning. The defective child fumbled in the process, dragged his mental feet, went with pathetic slowness; but the way he went about it all was, nevertheless, in essence the normal human way. Decroly was swift to see the significance of this. The education of normal children was notoriously bad—had been bad for generations. Why? Because no one had as yet been able adequately to discover how the child learns. The slowed-up pictures gave Decroly the clues. As a result, patterning upon his experiments with sub-normal children, he began to work out new techniques for the education of normal children. He established a school in which to try out his experiments. That little school in Brussels has since become one of the most illuminating centers in the new movement of education.

I should like in this book to follow much the same method; at any rate, to start off with it and see where it leads. A vast amount of work has been done studying abnormal psychological states. For the most part, the work stops there: it is applied only to the treatment of abnormals. I suspect, however, that if we examine this work shrewdly, we shall find many a clue to the understanding and reshaping of our normal experience.

But is there actually such a thing as a normal person? Many psychologists say no. Every person, they say, is in some respect off the normal. That, of course, is true, if we mean by normal "perfectly functioning." But if we mean by normal the average—the fairly healthy in body and mind—we shall have no great difficulty in using the word.

The average person is not noticeably defective. He would not be instantly classed as neurotic or insane. Nevertheless, as the reader well knows in regard to himself, he is far from being a perfectly functioning creature. It is here that the chief problem of many of us lies. Our maladjustments are not serious enough to make us out as interesting "cases" and to secure for us the best psychological treatment; nevertheless they are there, real enough and persistent enough to diminish our effective energizing and to bring about a good deal of real unhappiness in our lives.

It may help us, then, to see our smaller ills projected on to the larger silver sheet of abnormal behavior. The behaviorists in psychology have pointed out that introspection is often not only a most misleading but a most difficult process. Let the reader sit down quietly in his room and try to think out the defects in his own character or personality. He will find it a distressingly vague process that will probably come to very little. But let him see his own behavior strutting about in the person of someone in whom it is exaggerated into an abnormality, and he will doubtless receive a flash of self-illumination hardly possible in any other way. "To see ourselves as others see us" is hardly within the scope of such ego-centered creatures as we are. But to see ourselves reflected *in* others—as when a father finds a persistent trait exaggerated in his son—can carry a conviction that is instant and curative.

I do not wish to discourage the reader at the outset. But is he willing to see himself "in the large"? Perhaps it may hearten him, if it is suggested to him that in all likelihood he will also, among the pictures presented, discover a good many of his friends.

