

The new narcissism:

Where to begin a piece like this? Its original subject was ostensibly an Esalen conference on "spiritual tyranny." But that was for me merely a way of getting at a more general subject: the trend in therapy toward a deification of the isolated self. And that subject was in turn a part of an even more general concern: the ways in which selfishness and moral blindness now assert themselves in the larger culture as enlightenment and psychic health. A broad-based retrenchment is going on, a pervasive and perhaps unconscious shift in value—not only on a national level but in the moral definitions and judgments we make as individuals.

I think offhandedly as I write of several recent conversations I have had with friends or students, of what I have heard proclaimed from lecture platforms or seen on television and in the popular journals. I am, for instance, dining with a close friend in a New York restaurant, and as we eat our steaks and drink our brandy and smoke our fat cigars he explains to me that the world is obviously overpopulated, and that somebody must starve, and that we, as a nation, must decide who it will be, and that it might as well those who already suffer from protein deficiency, for they are already "useless."

Or I finish a lecture to the members of the American Association for Humanistic Psychology, and a therapist rushes up to me afterward and asks me whether or not I believe in the "ethics of the lifeboat" and when I tell her that I don't know why we are in the lifeboat while others are drowning, she whispers knowingly to me: "We have a higher consciousness." Or I am invited to meet with a well-meaning California legislator who is beginning a political movement based on the therapeutic values of "authenticity" and "warmth," and he draws for me on a napkin the button he has designed: the single letter *I* on a blank white background.

Or I attend a dinner sponsored by the Population Institute at the Century Plaza in Los Angeles, where Paul Ehrlich addresses a thousand well-heeled about the "coming end of affluence," and when I leaf through a copy of his book given away for free I see that he recommends filling the cellar with food and buying a gun and relying on neither friends nor neighbors but only on oneself.

Or, finally, I listen for two hours in a graduate seminar to two women therapists explaining to me how we are all entirely responsible for our destinies, and how the Jews must have wanted to be burned by the Germans, and that those who starve in the Sahel must want it to happen, and when I ask them whether there is anything we owe to others, say, to a child starving in the desert, one of them snaps at me angrily: "What can I do if a child is determined to starve?"

That precisely, is what I am talking about here: the growing solipsism and desperation of a beleaguered class, the world view emerging among us centered solely on the self and with individual survival as its sole good. It is a world view present not only in everything we say and do, but as an ambience, a feeling in the air, a general cast of perception and attitude: a retreat from the worlds of morality and history, an unembarrassed denial of human reciprocity and community.

A few months ago, I went to dinner at the house of a woman who had just been through a weekend of *est* (Erhard Seminar Training), the latest and most popular new therapeutic enthusiasm. The training is designed to provide its participants with a new sense of fulfillment and competence, and it seemed to have worked with my hostess, for she assured me that her life had radically changed, that she felt different about herself, that she was happier and more

efficient, and that she kept her house much cleaner than before.

Nothing in that is very startling or distressing, but in the course of the evening she also added that because of the training she now understood: (1) that the individual will is all-powerful and totally determines one's fate; (2) that she felt neither guilt nor shame about anyone's fate and that those who were poor and hungry must have wished it on themselves; (3) that the North Vietnamese must have wanted to be bombed, or else it could not have happened to them; (4) that a friend of hers who had been raped and murdered in San Francisco was to be pitied for having willed it to occur; (5) that in her weekend at *est* she had attained full enlightenment; (6) that she was God; (7) that whatever one thought to be true was true beyond all argument; (8) that I was also God, and that my ideas were also true, but not as true as hers because I had not had the training; and (9) that my use of logic to criticize her beliefs was unfair, because reason was "irrational," though she could not tell me why.

There is no telling whether or not this is precisely what she learned at *est*, and no doubt other adherents would deny it, but I have by now talked to at least a dozen of its enthusiasts, and each one of them has blankly recited to me, word for word, the same ill-taught and ignorant catechism. No doubt they were happier for the teaching; invariably they expressed complete satisfaction with their newfound philosophy. Like my hostess, they had learned it all in a kind of manufactured daze at a weekend which cost them \$250, in the company of hundreds of others. By now more than 50,000 people have "taken" the training, which was developed by Werner Erhard, who was once known simply as Jack Rosenberg, and who was a trainer for a short time with Mind Dynamics, a franchise operation that trained businessmen in humane managerial techniques. *Est* itself is a step past all that. It is a mixture of ideas and techniques borrowed from the behavioral sciences, Eastern philosophy, the traditional American classroom, Marine boot camp, and modern brainwashing methods. Participants at the weekend workshops are bombarded from the lectern with simplistic credulity while being simultaneously bullied and soothed by an army of attendants. They are prevented from leaving their seats to stretch or eat or go to the bathroom, and if—as sometimes happens—they throw up in their places or urinate on themselves, well, that is all part of the training.

It is not hard to understand how it all works, and one need only read the first few pages of Freud's *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* to see what intelligent use Erhard makes of individual confusion. He has managed to compress into one activity half a dozen techniques for creating power over others: the need for simple order; the strangeness and power of the extraordinary situation; the gradual befuddlement of the senses; the combined effects of repetition and fatigue; the crudity of others near you; the manufactured impotence of the audience; the masochistic relief that results from placing oneself in the hands of a man to whom one has granted omnipotence.

Clearly Erhard has a genius—not only for the efficiency with which his program is organized and sold, but also for the accuracy with which he tells his audience what it wants to hear. It is the latter which binds them to him. The world is perfect, each of us is all-powerful, shame and guilt are merely arbitrary notions, truth is identical to belief, suffering is merely the result of imperfect consciousness—how like manna all of this must seem to hungry souls. For if we are each totally responsi-

ble for our fate, then all the others in the world are responsible for *their* fate, and, if that is so, why should we worry about them?

Narcissism as a state of grace

It is all so simple and straightforward. It has the terrifying simplicity of the lobotomized mind: all complexity gone, and in its place the warm wind of forced simplicity blowing away the tag ends of conscience and shame. It offers the kind of Orwellian enlightenment an age like ours is bound to produce, but I do not spell it out in detail or mock its enthusiasts for that reason alone, or even because it marks the dead end of human desire or generosity. *Est* is, after all, only a bit worse than our other popular enthusiasms, and it is interesting in part because it makes clear so much of what is hidden in them. It is in many ways the logical extension of the whole human potential movement of the past decade. The refusal to consider moral complexities, the denial of history and a larger community, the disappearance of the Other, the exaggerations of the will, the reduction of all experience to a set of platitudes—all of that is to be found in embryonic form in almost all modern therapy.

Yet compared to *est* the older therapies (such as Gestalt therapy or Abraham Maslow's self-actualization or Rogerian encounter groups) had a kind of innocence to them. They were, at their worst, merely boring or silly. The people drawn to them were obviously moved by a simple yearning for what was missing from their lives, and if that yearning took sometimes puerile forms or excluded moral concerns or genuine passion, that seemed excusable—like the play of children. But our newer therapies take upon themselves a new burden. Whereas the older therapies merely ignored moral and historical concerns, the new ones destroy or replace them. They become not only a way of protecting or changing the self, but of assessing the needs of others and one's responsibilities to them—a way of defining history and determining morality.

Why that happens is not difficult to understand. It reveals the impulse behind much of what we do these days: the desire to defend ourselves against the demands of conscience and the world through an ethic designed to defuse them both. Most of us realize at one level of consciousness or another that we inhabit an age of catastrophe—if not for ourselves then for countless others. Try as we do, we cannot ignore the routine inequities of consumption and distribution which benefit us and condemn others to misery. Each of us must feel a kind of generalized shame, an unanswerable sense of guilt. So we struggle mightily to convince ourselves that our privilege is earned or deserved, rather than (as we must often feel unconsciously) a form of murder or theft. Our therapies become a way of hiding from the world, a way of easing our troubled conscience. What lies behind the form they now take is neither simple greed nor moral blindness; it is, instead, the unrealized shame of having failed the world and not knowing what to do about it. Like humiliated lovers who have betrayed what they love, we turn our faces from the world, if only (in Paul Goodman's phrase) "just to live on a while."

That is what makes our new therapies so distressing. They provide their adherents with a way to avoid the demands of the world, to smother the tug of conscience. They allow them to remain who and what they are, to accept the structured world as it is—but with a new sense of justice and justification, with the assurance that it all accords with cosmic law. We are in our proper place; the others are in theirs; we may

indeed bemoan their fate or even, if we are so moved, do something to change it, but in essence it has nothing to do with us.

What disappears in this view of things is the ground of community, the felt sense of collective responsibility for the fate of each separate other. What takes its place is a moral vacuum in which others are trapped forever in "private" destiny, doomed to whatever befalls them. In that void the traditional measures of justice or good vanish completely. The self replaces community, relation, neighbor, chance, or God. Looming larger every moment, obliterates everything around it that might have offered it a way out of pain.

The end result of this retreat from the complexities of the world is a kind of soft fascism: the denial, in the name of a higher truth, of the claims of others upon the self. Our deification of the self becomes equal in effect and human cost to what Nietzsche long ago called "idolatry of the state." Just as persons once set aside the possibilities of their own humanity and turned instead to the state for a sense of power and identity longer theirs, so we now turn to the giving to it the power and importance of a god. In the worship of the state, we give way to an abstraction, to the submission of individual will. In the worship of the self, life also gives way to an abstraction, in this case to an exaggeration of the will. The result in both cases is the same. What is lost is the immense middle ground of human community. The web of reciprocity and relation is broken. The world diminishes. The felt presence of the other disappears, and with it a part of our own existence.

The real horror of our present condition is not merely the absence of community or the isolation of the self. Those, after all, have been part of the American condition for a long time. What is missing, the diminishment of our vision of what is humanly possible and desirable. In our new myths we begin to deny once and for all the existence of what we once believed both possible and good. We proclaim our grief-stricken narcissism to be a form of liberation, we define as enlightenment our broken faith with the world. Already forgetful of what it means to be fully human, we sip again from Lethe, the river of forgetfulness, hoping to erase even the memory of pain. Lethe, lethargy—all of those words suggest a kind of death, one that in religious usage is sometimes called *accide*. It is a condition one can find in many places and in many ages, but only in America and only recently, have we begun to confuse it with a state of grace.

Hopeless questions

It is in this context that the Esalen conference on Spiritual Tyranny becomes significant. It was called two years ago in San Francisco by the Esalen staff as a response to the movement that had helped to start.

What apparently bothered the

