The Heroism of Sensitivity

An Interview with Kazimierz Dabrowski

(In 1979 Kazimierz Dabrowski, the well-known Polish psychiatrist and psychologist, was interviewed in Warsaw by Zbigniew Bierzanaski. Dabrowski, most noted for his Theory of Positive Disintegration which focuses on the emotional aspects of personality development, was truly a social reformer. In this interview he specifies the value structure he deemed necessary for personal and societal advancement. The interview was published in Notes of the Group of Political Didactic in 1980 and has been translated for this journal by Ewa Hyzy-Strzelecka.)

ZB: You have said that you are not only an intellectual but also a reformer...

KD: I think it is all very connected. I don't see any possibility of separating the scientific from the reformative in my scientific and societal interests in human personality. One cannot enclose oneself within the limits of pure science. I must put into practice what I have considered, what I believe in, what I am convinced of, and what I have tested in my own experience many times. I am a reformer whose base rests on exact scientific observation and on some science-based intuition.

ZB: As a reformer, you are fighting for a chance for the "oppressed." Who are the oppressed you have in mind?

KD: They are the ones who are not shrewd, who are rather delicate, who aren't able to fight for their own interests, who aren't pushy or demanding, but who are industrious, have deep feelings, are often wise though unsophisticated. I think about those who don't press their claims, who aren't vulgar or aggressive, and who often suffer.

I have in mind another group of people too: neurotics and psychoneurotics, those who aren't mentally ill but are gentle, emotionally quite sensitive, who are never brutal but are often inhibited, who take things deeply into their hearts, and who withdraw into themselves rather than retaliate. I consider these people to be humiliated and harmed because nobody takes care of them, or, if anyone does, it is only because these unfortunates are deemed overexcitable, eccentric, and without resources. Not fending for oneself isn't necessarily a sign of lack of intelligence or ability to function, but very often is a sign of sensitivity and gentleness, which leads to the inability to contend with anybody about anything.

The correlation between the highly talented and psychoneurosis and neurosis is very high. Almost 97 percent of the highly creative suffer from different kinds of overexcitabilities, neuroses, and psychoneuroses. So, neurotics and psychoneurotics are a mine of social treasure. If their emotionality, talents, interests, and sensitivity

were discovered at an early age, society and science would profit. Meanwhile, under the influence of psychopaths, and the so-called "statistically normal" people eager to emulate the apparent efficiency of psychopaths, the sensitive and creative are put aside.

ZB: What kind of values should be propagated in society in order to give those with such overexcitabilities a chance? What values should all members of a social group have in common for the good of the individual group members and the group itself?

KD: I will present some of them:

- an empathetic attitude toward others
- tolerance (not aggression)
- responsibility for others and for self
- a just attitude (treating everybody by the same standards)
- helping each other
- giving thought to the harmed and humiliated, to invalids, to the sick, to the ineffectual and those devastated by their own loneliness
- truthfulness
- authenticity
- just social care

These are examples.

ZB: In what direction should we move as a society?

KD: It's important to guide society to the stage where it can:

- understand the multilevelness of instinctive and emotional functions
- reach something of a balance between the instinct of self-preservation and the consideration of others
- in the sexual area—we are not only animal but also human and our humanity is more important than our animal side
- in social attitude—be authentic and not give mere lip service to our principles
- be truthful out of inner necessity
- and even try to make our laughter more subtle, deeper, more reflective—laughter which becomes a smile

Briefly, those of our functions which are on the border between human and animal should be humanized and elevated to a higher level. This list is the hierarchy of values.

ZB: It's said that values can't be justified or "proved" but only chosen. You advocate the position of objectification of values. How can this be done? From what reality can they be derived? From human nature?

KD: Yes, from human nature, but only from **developing** human nature. If we accept the idea that the fundamental elements for development are derived from human nature, our choice must be that of both discovering and of building values. This can be accomplished by hard, empirical work, observation, experiences, faults, conflicts, pains, self-analysis, growth of awareness of one's own impulses, by autonomy and authenticity. In short, a choice of values, but values based on constantly developing human nature and broad, varied experience conducive to value discovery.

ZB: So we can discover, or rather, create values?

KD: We can do both. Creating new values is a fundamental part of development. When we grow, we start to have a different view of reality and that leads us to reorder our value system. We create values by our self-observation, by our thinking, and by putting our ideals into practice. Discovering in ourselves higher levels of development, higher tendencies, and sensitivities, we simultaneously create them.

ZB: According to you, what is the role of values in individual life and in society? Is a hierarchy of values necessary? What might produce a lack of such a hierarchy? You assume that it is necessary to develop toward higher levels of feelings, imagination, and intellect. How can you justify this kind of development? And, if we do not develop in this way, what might be the consequences?

KD: Our World War II experience showed us how dangerous the lack of a hierarchy of values is. Take, for example, the behavior of the guards in the concentration camps. Throughout history, we have had constant barbarism, constant wars, and annihilation—protection of ourselves and destruction of others, both mentally and physically. It's well known that people at a low developmental level, after giving vent to their basic instincts, experience an inner emptiness, which can be replaced—and often is—by aggression. People, depending on whether or not they have a hierarchy of values, behave in different ways; ranging from brutality to refined gentleness, from misunderstanding to understanding, from almost inhuman to truly human responses. Someone who is more aware of higher levels of human behavior will act very differently toward others than will a lower-level person. The hierarchy of values is indispensable. It's the first order of a harmonious social life. Let's say we grow in only one direction, only technologically, and we don't develop a whole human personality. In that way we could all be destroyed, as is quite possible right now. We have the development of technology and experimental projects for various types of weapons—and what next? Those one-dimensional skills and abilities may override the whole sphere of human values. We are condemned to development—universal and multidimensional, development through personal values.

ZB: If I understand you, this kind of development is necessary in the situation we now face as a civilization, with all our possibilities. It is necessary on an individual and a social level to create some kind of control over those tendencies we spoke of, which are a necessary part of society with their roots in human nature, but which, without control, could lead to degeneration and destruction, even on a global scale.

KD: Yes, of course, And here those sensitive individuals I referred to could help us. Who are they? They are the ones who can't indifferently pass by human misery, humiliation, harm, sickness, loneliness, inhumanity, and barbarism. To correct the

errors I speak of, it is necessary to have many varied experiences: to see, to observe, to conclude, and to develop a hierarchy of values.

ZB: But these people are put aside, destroyed...

KD: Not all of them. Some have such strong developmental potential that they won't allow themselves to submit to a low (animalistic) value system. Someone with such potential, encompassing all human dynamisms, empathy, and responsibility, would rather die than accept life in a brutal, primitive world. It is to those that we need to look for the repair of the world. But those individuals need to be gathered together; they are rather isolated.

ZB: Previously you justified the necessity of advocating humanistic values. It seems to be a valid observation that, in their daily lives, many people don't follow humanistic values; on the contrary, they endeavor to arrange a good life for themselves—often at whatever cost, including the destruction of others. Development is understood by many in the narrow sense of just increased passive consumption. This can even reach the point where, according to the popular appraisal of the humanistic position, it appears nonsensical, impossible—a futile fantasy of eccentrics, or simply a puffery of egotistic individualists.

KD: It is threatening that those kinds of postures exist—that we haven't, for the most part, developed a positive, humanistic value system but have in some way allowed and agreed to the development of a negative, inhuman hierarchy of values.

ZB: Would you, please, at this point characterize modern civilization, and particularly modern industrial societies, from a psychiatrist's and psychologist's point of view?

KD: A fundamental phenomenon is that humanistic values are given low priority. Living through World War II made a big impact on the psyche. People had been so close to cruelty and callousness. Right in front of their eyes a tragedy occurred that devastated millions and people didn't have enough energy to resist. Something collapsed in the outlook of the broad mass of people. The most sensitive died out; they couldn't handle those experiences [Several Polish artists—Miciński, Witkacy, and Lechón—are named as examples]. Camus said that after the First World War the stone of our culture, which individual Sisyphuses struggled to raise, fell down. Yet, still the effort was made to raise it again—and it was raised. But after the Second World War, it fell so low that no effort could possibly budge it. After these terrible disasters people decided to live according to the principle of *carpe diem:* to be wealthy, to have good cars, to travel, to eat well, to use others as tools, and to compete. It happened everywhere, excluding a few small groups. We forgot about the road of developing humanity. Today we are ruled by the self-protective instinct of sexual enjoyment, of jockeying for social position, power, and wealth.

If we don't begin, even slowly, to bring humanistic changes into our lives, we will become like wild animals and think only about fulfilling our own instincts. Now, truly, people are at each others' throats. Already they have each other under their thumbs.

ZB: And what about the incidence of psychopathological occurrences, neuroses, and psychoneuroses?

KD: It's hard to say how large a percentage of the population suffers from mental disturbances. As far as I know, 12 to 15 percent do so. Within this group 65 percent of the problems are nervous disorders and psychoneuroses, and a small percent are psychopathologies. Psychopaths—people whose intelligence is ruled by primitive instincts, people without empathy—can become idols for "normal people" (those with rather uncomplicated instincts). As a consequence, these people then may start to show psychopathological symptoms.

The most common neuroses and psychoneuroses are anxiety, depression, and other kinds of nervous disorders, e.g., overexcitability of the imagination, which may cause escape from reality and life into a fantasy world; overexcitability of the emotions—in current situations leading even to fatal functioning of emotionality. Emotionally excitable people often react with depression, become impetuous, or even attempt suicide. There is also overexcitability of intelligence, perhaps the healthiest form of overexcitability, which may cause a meandering among problems that can't now or ever be solved. However, it is not these sensitive ones that become models for society, but rather the psychopaths and semi-psychopaths, because they are strong, they don't consider others, and they don't have any inhibitions. This is a broad sketch but probably true.

ZB: So?

KD: When we see that there is so much evil in the world, so much injustice, so many harmed and humiliated, we cannot wait any longer. It's time to find not only theoretical justification of humanization but also practical projects of reform which can gradually be introduced into society.

Here is a principle: We can't force reforms on the basis of any kind of rigid regulations. We should rather, looking at the person as a multilevel, many-sided individual, educate people. We can't force narrow, formal patterns and rules. We can educate through diagnosing the levels of development; through examples; through creating social conditions conducive to development by stressing thinking; and through the development of the inner psychic milieu [internal environment]. We can educate through "positive mental contagion." Everything must be based on deep, many-sided analysis, on a deep understanding of things. Those who reform on the basis of a lack of knowledge create more harm and devastation than benefit.

ZB: In your opinion, are we prepared for practical action? Do we know why recent forms of social life became dehumanized, why relationships between people have become depersonalized, why certain phenomena in people's lives have become so unacceptable that we'd like to put a stop to them? Is our knowledge regarding the causes of the recent situation sufficient to take action? And, if we do act, do we have the chance to act effectively?

KD: We are not prepared for deep, extensive reforms, but we are prepared for partial reform which could awaken the interest of broad groups of people, leading them onward to further theoretical research and to broader, practical changes. Working

out theoretical problems is very helpful, but it seems to me that some groups of people intuitively, by experience, by their own inner values, have enough knowledge to take practical action, action which is necessary right now to stop the advance of moral degeneration.

It is necessary to solve simultaneously many problems which require scientific scrutiny. For example, the issue of positive maladjustment, or the necessity of creating new terminology. But I need to repeat: We have moved to the point of partial reform, which can be the beginning of fundamental, sweeping reform.

ZB: So, what do you propose?

KD: First of all, the introduction to comprehensive education—from the family to colleges, work places, administration—of a clear, understandable hierarchy of values, not only promulgated but integrated into daily life. We need to create a hierarchy of cultural needs and subordinate to them the so-called basic needs and to gradually be governed by this perspective. Introducing the objectified hierarchy of values—this is the most important thing.

ZB: More particularly, how can we create and propagate empathetic attitudes?

KD: These attitudes should be awakened in children and youth, depending on their potential for development, by using examples and demonstrations. For example, it shouldn't be done like this: Because life is so awful, I will teach my child to be almost brutal so as not to let life destroy him [*sic*]. The training ought to proceed in a different way: My child has to be strong enough to survive, but he [*sic*] should also be able to care for a weaker friend. Movies and theater, along with the home and school atmosphere, could be helpful in this project, to put it briefly.

ZB: An example of practical action on behalf of the changes you postulate is the mental hygiene movement. What is its primary, specific purpose?

KD: Mental hygiene combines developmental and educational psychology, pedagogy, sociology, law, philosophy, psychopathology, and psychiatry. At its base lies a multilevel attitude toward people. And because of this attitude, it can play a primary role in the humanization of our lives. The fundamental goal of the movement of mental hygiene is to transform our attitude toward versatile humanism, to introduce to various institutions—hospitals, schools, even to society as a whole—ideas, plans of action, and people capable of versatile educational influence, who can model multilevel, empathetic, and responsible attitudes towards others.

ZB: And, finally, how should sensitive people behave in the company of those who are insensitive?

KD: They have to combine sensitivity with moral courage. They have to work out a way to combine their own sensitivity, their gentleness, sacrificial nature, and empathy—with *heroism!*