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# The God Complex in Western Wo/man

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by  
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*An extended review of "ALL MIGHTY. A Study of the God Complex in Western Man", by Horst E. Richter. Published by Hunter House, California.*

In this great book which won for its author the Theodor Heuss Prize for Outstanding Contributions to Society, Richter studies in great depth and detail the Western world.

Richter psychoanalyses some of the major Western philosophers of the last 300 years or so and shows up the latent patriarchal structure in their thinking. He is clearly on the side of feminism and I think feminists will appreciate him. The book is full of wisdom, and though complex and rich is easy to understand. Those who attempt to understand better how the inner life and the political life are one will benefit from reading it.

## The God Complex Defined

Richter's thesis is that there is a relationship between the West's historic and philosophical development and a certain phase of childhood. His publisher describes it thus:

"When children of a certain age begin to lose trust in their parents, the feeling that they can no longer

rely on parental care and protection often throws them into a panic. Driven by anxiety, they try to assume complete control of their own lives. They attempt to master their feelings of helplessness and to fulfil the same fantasy of omnipotence they earlier projected onto their parents. Generally they become increasingly inaccessible, hostile and rebellious, ever more driven, polarized, and unable to relate with trust to the ones they need and love".

The child compensates for repressed feelings of helplessness and impotence by consciously attempting to control his/her world in a fantasy of his/her own omnipotence and omniscience.

And the historical parallel: "Somewhere at the end of the middle ages, man lost the sense of himself as the protected child of a loving father God. He reacted, as a child might, with insecurity and distrust. Thus there evolved a cultural prototype that sought to overpower the chaos of emotion with reason, and completely dominate both inner

and outer Nature. This authoritarian compulsion of man to assume the omnipotence of his dethroned God is what Dr. Richter calls 'the God Complex' ".

Before the middle ages people did not feel so compelled to plan their lives beforehand. They just submitted to the will of God. But by the middle ages the feeling of being protected by God was steadily waning as the age of Reason and Science was being ushered in. Humans were forced to compensate by a narcissistic attempt to provide for their own security. But they felt guilty and afraid of usurping God's power in this way and had to rationalize away this fear. Basically this was done by conceiving of our newly found intellectual and scientific powers as expressions of God. The result was that God became equivalent to reason in philosophy, and to the ego in individual persons. The principle of Nature and the uncontrollable was left behind. Humans had thus achieved a total identification with the omniscience and omnipotence of God. And this God-Complex illusion is still with us today - - - the idea that our science and technology will once and for all abolish the limitations of human existence.

And we are totally incapable today of seeing the magical motivation underlying our creation of this fantasy illusion. The God-complex is about our repressed impotence and our conscious omnipotence fantasies. It is a reaction against fear of absolute dependency. It expresses itself in a need to eradicate emotion, tenderness, sympathy and passivity and doubt . .

And a compulsive tendency to try to control everything.

Thus humankind started controlling not only outer nature but their own inner nature as well, including their own being and their own body's bodies which were now objectivised and studied as things. The ego was attempting to control everything. The idealized figure of the parent (God) was replaced by the exaggerated self-regard of the individual ego. In philosophy the most bold rational expression of this underlying principle came from Descartes: "I think - - - therefore I am". It is not really a logical deduction at all. But it can be read as an intuitive expression of the Zeitgeist . . . a symbol of the evolving psyche.

This task of analysing, or rather psychoanalysing some of the major philosophers from Descartes to Freud and Marx and on to Marcuse is what Richter has done most admirably. Instead of reasoning about various philosophies he analyses them in terms of their underlying unconscious motivation. And he shows up the basically patriarchal structure of the philosophies of the last three hundred years.

II) The second way of avoiding suffering is by denying it, without necessarily projecting it outwards. The party-going cocktail culture demands that people 'be happy', be 'psychologically fit'. Suffering and misery must be kept invisible. Anyone who is unhappy must deal with it in the secrecy of the psychotherapist's or psychiatrist's office - - - where s/he must be

restored to 'normality', so that s/he can continue the round of 'happy' party going and having fun.

Another aspect of this denial mechanism involves the process of splitting. We avoid suffering ourselves by enjoying causing or seeing others suffer. This is sadism.

Or we pacify our inner suffering through substitute gratification . . . the typical Western culture way. We think we can cover up all our suffering by the gratification brought on by "a higher standard of living". We have fun, we consume, we swallow, we have compulsive sex.

We also have techniques of social camouflage of suffering. For example, we think that to treat hospital patients physically we must totally forget that they are human beings suffering. We must not get emotionally involved. And the patients' emotional side of his or her illness gets reduced to a private matter which is regarded as superfluous to all the accoutrements which measure their insides and show up as data. It is all linked up to the modern view that suffering ought to remain invisible. We wrap up misery, ours and others, in a pretty package.

III) The third way to hide suffering is by contemptuousness. We suppress the pain by militant self-conquest. The archetype of this is Stoicism . . . the attaining of self-repose by reason and discipline to suppress the suffering of passions or affects.

### **Part Three. Overcoming the Psychical and Social Split**

Again, there is so much wisdom in this section. Richter starts with an analysis of the alternative youth counterculture - - - the new representatives of the socially repressed. They articulate the repressed suffering of the well-adjusted . . . hence are the counterpart of an interlocking puzzle. Richter argues for the importance of getting these adversaries together to work out their differences.

He speaks about the 'liberation of corrupted love'. He shows us how our patriarchal concept of love has been based on a relation of the symbolic ego with its anti-type . . . that is to say of a relationship of the powerful to the powerless, of men as parents trying to control their women as children. He argues for a more equal mode of love. (Modern feminists have probably given us a more in-depth view of this issue. Nevertheless it is gratifying to get it from a man, and a psychoanalyst at that.)

Richter then implores us to find the mean between omnipotence and impotence. He discusses our denial of death . . . as symbolic of our general fear of impotence about life. Associated with this is our fear of aging . . . which brings with it the notion of a time of life called the "prime of life". He tells us to regard every period of our life as the 'prime of life'.

## Part One: The Myth of Omnipotence

Richter shows up the various philosophies as rationalizations of unconscious processes . . . usually guided by a typically male schizoid intellectualist mode of being. This is represented by reason, (rather than emotion), by egotism and egocentrism, love of power, competitiveness, isolation and alienation, love of control, fear of dependence etc.

For instance, Richter shows us how Kant's incessant invective against instinct and his overemphasis on duty, constraint, discipline reveals the joylessness of a typical obsessive-compulsive neurotic character.

Descartes, who gave us all the mind-body-split language which we still use today, regarded the emotions as too vague and imprecise to illuminate our knowledge. Spinoza followed in his footsteps and actively taught us how to control these emotions. The male psychological state was being projected onto all their philosophies.

Thus Leibniz' monads were seen as separate, isolated, non-cooperating units or atoms of consciousness. And the writings of Bacon and Hobbes and Nietzsche all boil down to a "dog eats dog" type of egotism.

Perhaps the supreme archetype of this male spirit comes out in Nietzsche's idea of the Superman. Unlike the earlier philosophers, Nietzsche glorifies in man's usurpation of God's powers through identification: "God is dead. Long live the Superman". (We all know

that God is now saying: "Nietzsche is dead"). The Superman is striving to enhance his own power, and truth or love do not come into the matter. The Superman is beyond chance and vicissitude. He is contemptuous of weakness. He feels no guilt. Richter alludes to all this as . . . " . . . a violent supermasculinity, a crass machismo . . . which clearly reveals his dread of the opposite traits, the dread of being pitiable, helpless and forlorn". And Richter proves it by showing us Nietzsche's pathos - ridden poetry.

It made me think about our modern version of Superman. At least he has a gentle, vulnerable, Clark Kent hidden inside him, who needs his Lois . . . even though his two parts are totally split from each other. Nietzsche's Superman did not even need the nurturance of a woman.

It also made me think of the writings of Ayn Rand, who is definitely our modern Nietzsche. She too represents a male cluster of values like reason (as opposed to faith), power and competitiveness, technological development raping the earth. Her book "Fountainhead" starts with the rape of the heroine by the hero, supposedly representing the ultimate state of love . . . a selfish egotistical grabbing. Her chief concept is the "virtue of selfishness").

Richter analyses too the male philosophers who laid stress on the 'feminine' side of our natures . . . like Pascal, Rousseau, and Schopenhauer. Pascal introduced the "logique du coeur" . . . the logic of the heart, and said: "The heart has its reasons that the reason knows not of".

These philosophers perceived that women held some of the finer aspects of our natures, aspects which needed refining and developing. But then what they did was try to usurp these qualities and bring them into the male domain. Males were thus seen as the goal of evolution. Women remained secondary citizens half way between children and men . . . seen as incapable of reason and thus incapable of moral action. Thus men continued to oppress actual women whilst creating in art, sculpture and fantasy, celestially radiant mother figures.

At least Marx and Freud had no illusions about human omnipotence. Both started from the assumption that the individual was a suffering, oppressed person who needed help and change. Richter shows us how the concept of penis envy is not natural to women but comes about precisely as a result of the patriarchal structure of society.

The humanization of our society depends, says Richter, on our ability to feminize it.

## **Part Two : The Avoidance of Suffering**

Ultimately, what our flight into narcissistic omnipotence involves is an attempt to avoid suffering. Here Richter analyzes the whole process. There are basically three ways we avoid acknowledging our suffering:

1) We project the cause of it outward and fight it at its projected "evil source" . . . which is to say we turn suffering, which would normally teach us compassion, into

hatred of others. Richter leads us in an excursion into witch-hunts, racism, anti-communist paranoia; the medical war on germs and dirt, etc. He gives us an analysis of the German people in the post-Nazi era; he looks at the modern geneticists and animal behaviourists who want to create modern versions of aryanism; and he analyzes courage and daring as avoidances of suffering.

Lastly, he expounds his thesis that there exists in man a 'primary phenomenon of sympathy', and he presents this as his, modern 'logique du coeur' (logic of the emotions). We all have a direct 'hot line' to other people's suffering and pain. He shows up some of the ways in which this very primary phenomenon gets distorted. He carefully distinguishes it from vicarious identification - - a kind of narcissistic emotionalism in which we may be led to charitable behaviour towards the socially disadvantaged providing we keep them in a state of dependency. We then feel threatened if we really allow them to find their own independence. He analyses how the church has turned the phenomenon into a commandment and thus distorted it. He also carefully distinguishes it from Erik Erikson's concept of basic trust and basic mistrust, stating that 'in no way is this really a basic, 'primary' phenomenon'. Sympathy is a primary phenomenon, whereas trust is something which must be earned. In general, Richter shows us how to use this primary phenomenon to overcome the split between our illusions of omnipotence and our repressed feelings of impotence.

## Conclusion

Richter gives us a modus operandi by which we can steadily and patiently work towards a better society. He does not offer us instant hope, nor infinite hope for the future. He does not think, as the title of one modern book will have it, that "suffering is optional". He affirmed me in my intuitive feeling that there is strength in weakness; that those who suffer openly are brave; that those 'brave' people with hard hearts are cowards; that I must do what I can, and that the reward for my actions must be in the actions themselves, not necessarily in their outcomes.

It's interesting to me that this book was published in California. There has been a steady stream of mini-gurus from California selling us infinite hope and total omnipotence,

teaching us we can totally control the world by our thought processes. These ideas smack somewhat of primary narcissism. I think the "thought is creative" school needs to look seriously at the motivation underlying the idea that we can magically control the world by our thought processes. I think it is the moral duty of those who sell infinite potency and hope to fully understand certain unconscious processes. If they do not, they are unwittingly exploiting people's unconscious childhood needs for their own gain.

This is a great book by a writer who has written widely on socio-psychiatry, family therapy and philosophy and who is as well known in Germany as Rollo May and Abram Maslow are in the English speaking world. I recommend it very highly.

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*The book "All Mighty", and the book "Couples in Collusion", by Jurg Willi, are both being advertised in fliers accompanying this issue of Self and Society. Both are available in England and obtainable directly from MOMENTA PUBLISHER, 27 Glendale Drive, Wimbledon SW19. Tel:(01) 879 3387. Prices: All Mighty 14.95 Couples in Collusion 12.00*

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