

## LESBIANISM

Psychological reflection on the subject of homosexuality and, consequently, on that of lesbianism, tends immediately to encounter the clinical problem in which two opposite positions confront one another. One denies the pathological aspect, claims that homosexuality is an expression of normality, and stresses the greater or lesser degree of social acceptance as the only source of tension. The other considers the phenomenon indicative of a pathological condition for which there is frequently no foreseeable positive solution.

In this article, before examining more directly the subject in question, we wish to offer an interpretation differing from the clinical by setting our analysis in an anthropological and developmental framework. By doing so, we do not mean to say that the problem does not exist and become champions of homosexuality as a normal condition. Too many suffer from their difference and not only, as some tend to assert, because the majority fails to accept the rights of a long suppressed minority. Rather, it is a matter of asking some basic questions, of which the most important concerns the homosexual person's human developmental process and the adequacy or inadequacy of his or her maturity. This question, in addition to offering useful interpretive criteria, also allows us to identify some of the possible causes of the phenomenon.

By studying human development in various areas (intellectual, moral, emotional), developmental psychology has emphasized its harmony and identified the presence of laws regulating the growth process. It is precisely some of these laws that will now offer us a key to interpreting the phenomenon in question.

In his interesting studies on intelligence, the psychologist J. Piaget often stressed how every individual's maturation consists in a passing from subjectivism to perspectivism. At the beginning of life, the child puts himself or herself at the center of his or her universe while, as his or her capacities develop, he or she learns to adopt different perspectives. From the affective standpoint, the same dynamic also occurs. Thus, human development can be described as a process of decentralization, as a *growth in transcendence*, using the term in the psychological sense. Transcendence, in this case, simply means *reaching out toward otherness*, toward what is outside the ego. Growing up or maturing, therefore, means overcoming the initial narcissism that tends toward self-concentration to meet the other in knowledge and love.

Another law of human development, which can offer us further points for reflection, is that of *differentiation* and *hierarchical integration*. Every person's development actually proceeds from the global and undifferentiated to the differentiated and hierarchically integrated. To grow up means to distinguish oneself within a totality and to be able to arrange the different constitutive elements of one's own personality according to their degree of importance.

This brief analysis of human development is a key to interpreting lesbianism and presents

it as a symptom of an incomplete development of the *encounter with otherness* (transcendence) and the *individuation of one's own personality* (differentiation and hierarchical integration).

Our method will, of course, be psychological. In fact, we consider lesbianism a psychic phenomenon, without innate or hereditary biological bases. Furthermore, we do not share the idea of a universal bisexuality, which holds that every human being has the possibility of developing as either heterosexual or homosexual. This theory has been amply refuted by interesting scientific studies that show that the male and female brains represent different variants, which can be attributed to particular embryonic hormonal processes of an identical reality. Some of these cerebral structures probably constitute the biological basis from which the psychological differences between man and woman derive.

We, therefore, believe that this phenomenon can be described as the person's incomplete emotional maturation, according to the parameters indicated above: an inadequate response to the three basic developmental tasks that every woman must carry out to reach complete psychosexual development. These tasks can be outlined as follows:

### **Separation From The Maternal Figure**

The laws of development described above help us understand how adequate maturation involves overcoming two initial phases of development. The first, defined as *symbiotic*, describes the stage when the child, only physically separated, still considers himself or herself part of a totality. However, this process of decentralization and differentiation, which enables the individual ego to recognize the other as *different from itself*, nevertheless demands a subsequent change. For sexual identity to reach sufficient maturity, it is not enough for the child to perceive himself or herself as *separate from the maternal figure*. He or she must also be able to live in affective independence from his or her mother and other possible figures who, later, could unconsciously play the same role symbolically. In the individual's development, the symbiotic stage is succeeded by that of narcissistic dependence on a human object - perceived as different but sought for functional reasons - with which the child establishes an absorbing, clinging relationship. This developmental phase, through which every person has to pass, must still be overcome in order to allow an adequate individualization of the subject, who can then perceive himself or herself as a separate and autonomous entity capable of living his or her own life independently.

Thus, every woman can call herself and fully feel like a woman only when, after relinquishing her mother as an object of love, she is able to accept herself as different from her and capable of autonomy or independence.

### **Positive Sexual Identity**

The second task to be completed in a woman's psychosexual development involves the acquisition of a positive attitude to her being a woman and to her sexual role. In this

case, the problem no longer depends on her relationship with others but on *identity*, her self-perception.

In this regard, psychologists tend to stress two distinct elements: the first comes from *sexual identity*, which consists of the inner and constant conviction that one is male or female. In a girl, this sense of identity develops in a stable and less traumatic way since it originates in identification with the maternal figure, a female image in which she will also continue to see herself once she has passed through the symbiotic stage. In a boy, on the other hand, this process is usually more complex because it involves his separation from the maternal figure and identification with the father figure. It is precisely because of this delicate transition that the male's sense of identity is more often threatened than the female's.

Yet, one's self-image as a man or woman is not limited to this aspect. In fact, it is necessary to develop what is called *gender identity*, which consists in the maturation of all the typical characteristics of masculinity or femininity that allow the person to feel truly at ease as a man or woman. It is possible to reach adequate sexual identity, to continually perceive oneself as male or female, and yet to experience deep discomfort with one's masculinity or femininity and an intense rejection of its characteristic ways and attitudes.

### **Trusting Men**

The third task required of a woman is to create a satisfactory relationship of trust with males insofar as they differ from her.

The problem of trust is at the root of every process of human growth, and its solution is crucial to providing a positive outcome for the individual's maturation. Next to the establishment of what psychologists call *basic trust*, an experience that enables the child to overcome the perception of initial threat and to face reality with confidence, there are other forms of trust, such as that related to the possibility of establishing a positive relationship with oneself, with important figures, with authority, and with persons of the opposite sex. In woman, this involves the ability to trust men, not to perceive them as aggressors, as violent, dominant, superior, or as someone to be feared.

The fulfillment of these three tasks is sometimes incomplete. In fact, a girl can fail to give up her mother as an object of love, be uncomfortable with her feminine identity, or fear an encounter with the opposite sex, which she sees as hostile and threatening. The effect of this incomplete development may then be expressed in *lesbianism*, a response that is not fully equal to the difficult task of self-individuation as a subject and of reaching out to otherness. It is a response that, even before it points to an anomaly, indicates suffering and a fear of diversity, difficulty in accepting the difference and of making it a source of love and joy.

The other, as Michael de Certeau writes, the one "without whom living is no longer

living," is, in the homosexual's experience, not so much the *one different from me* as the threat, the danger, the cause of suffering and fear. Lesbianism, then, is seen as denying and avoiding the difference, maintaining dependency with an equal in a prolonged childhood that, through relationships with feminine surrogates for the mother figure, allows one to avoid the painful separation from one's *like* and therefore averts feared encounter with the otherness.

The cause of this phenomenon is often to be sought in the family situation, not so much as a *fault* of the parents as an *educational style* that hinders those processes of transcendence and differentiation mentioned earlier. The family situation often includes a mother figure who tends to dominate. Hostile and competitive, the mother underrates her daughter, especially her femininity, and interferes in her relationship with her father, often an insignificant figure, subdued and disparaged by his wife, with whom an affectionate and tranquil relationship is prevented. At other times, the mother, frustrated in her role as wife, is inclined to make a partner of her daughter and to interfere in the healthy development of her heterosexuality with the unconscious aim of keeping her for herself.

As you can see, the maternal figure plays a much more important role than is generally thought. The fear of masculinity, as we have already emphasized, is not the sole and principal cause of lesbianism. A mother who encourages the femininity of her daughter does not create problems of sexual identity since she fosters a proper sense of security in her and the ability, within her world of relationships, to differentiate between hostile male figures and those who are mature.

The last problem to be addressed concerns the possibility of change, which many doubt. Recent research, however, shows how lesbianism can be overcome through psychotherapy. However, the success of this method depends on many things: first of all, personal factors such as the subject's motivation, the greater or lesser weakness of her ego, and how firmly her sexual identity has been established. The therapist's skill and ability to interpret the problem of lesbianism properly are also important. Those who think they can cure their patients by reinforcing their concept of normality in relation to the lesbian condition or, in the opposite direction, by fostering their adoption of attitudes typical of the feminine role by learning conditioned responses, will certainly not encourage these women to reach a state of serenity and peace.

Instead, help must aim at growth in emotional maturity by searching for those unconscious meanings inherent in lesbianism, urging the person to overcome that fear of difference that prevents the encounter with the other and, unconsciously and compulsively, tends to equate what is *different* with something to be *feared*.

The psychologist must also adopt a flexible criterion of success that allows for a *gradualness* in the results achieved. In fact, a radical change of identity cannot always be achieved. Mature acceptance of one's personal situation without aggressive claims - such as recognition of the rights of lesbian couples, artificial insemination to avoid giving up motherhood - of humiliating self-perceptions, in many cases can achieve the most

beneficial results to which therapeutic work should aspire.

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