

Extract:

Daniel Hell
Soul Hunger
The Feeling Human Being
and the Life Sciences



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p. 30/31, Chapter 1 **Homo Sentiens Newly Discovered**)

The significance of soulish experience in modern life becomes especially obvious in light of the growing culture of experience, in which the unemotional quality of even impressive technological “virtuality” is confronted by a hunger for more intense personal experience. A geometrically progressive increase in hazardous treks, extreme sports, stock market gambles, gambling itself, and talk shows that feature explosive emotions obviously expresses a universal longing for an intensification of experience. The modern world’s hunger for experience is often glibly called a symptom of superficial craving for “happy events.” However, this hunger also represents a powerful reaction against any process that reduces our society to the merely technical and rational, and thus can be viewed as a desperate attempt to amplify bodily experience rather than see oneself as a mechanistic unit that simply absorbs information.

(p. 46/47, Chapter 1 **Homo Sentiens Newly Discovered**)

One cannot expect that the soul can be caught like an image in a mirror. The long list of theological, psychological, psychoanalytic and neurobiological attempts to establish a reliable image of the soul can fairly be seen as fruitless. In effect, the positivistic mirror of the soul is shattered. Recognizing the failure to establish a dependable representation of the soul, we must resume the search at the point where the soulish manifests itself: in personal experience. However, one must not attempt to do this by positing the representation of the experience as something absolute, but rather by carefully avoiding the temptation to draw sharp lines, instead paying close attention to the boundaries in which the soulish shows itself in all its diversity. This manner of experiencing what makes each person unique and different should not be allowed to play a secondary role in psychology and psychiatry. It must not be swept under the carpet in favor of observable behavior and measurable organic change.

(p. 182/183, Chapter 4 **The Body of the Soul is Emotional – A Personal Concept of the Soul**)

Yet we speak of people's experience, feeling and acting, meaning the intangible beyond which one cannot probe, that which makes human beings Individuals. While their actions characterize individuals' ethics, it is their feelings that establish humans' orientation in the world. Perceiving and feeling are the very foundations of any manner of orientation.

There is good reason to place actions, and therefore ethics, in the center of our thinking about human beings, thereby developing a philosophical and religious image of the world similar to the one Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Lévinas formed so impressively. In the way they shape our inner orientation and influence our attitudes toward the external world, perception and feeling are in the foreground of medical and psychiatric questions. Psychiatric problems can develop whenever a person's perceptions and feelings collide with value systems that render one's experience questionable.

(p. 333-335, **Conclusion**)

Even though there are currently no doubts that human behavior is based on physicochemical processes in the brain, the question nevertheless remains whether it is sufficient in understanding human personal "soulful" experience to recognize neuronal processes, or if additional conditions of biological, psychological and social nature are required. One principal argument in favor of this wider inquiry comes from the field of brain research itself, because the development of the brain (within genetic limits) has been shown to depend on environmental influences and life experiences. The brain is in no way a static organ; it is an adaptable organ that accommodates its exquisite structure to outside influences. Thus it has been possible to show, first with apes, then with human beings, that persistent stimulation of the fingertips, or ongoing finger movements (such as playing the violin), leads within several weeks to the enlargement of those areas of the cortex that are responsible for movements of the fingers. Other studies have shown that damage to the speech centers in childhood can be partially compensated, as long as the speech functions of the damaged areas were not yet fixed.

We must remember that the sprouting and interconnecting of brain cells depends on biological developments and learning experiences, and that taxing environmental factors (such as stress) have an enormous influence on the microanatomy and neurophysiology of various brain-centers. Because of this, it would be premature to casually conclude that

mental illnesses are diseases of the brain, since the changes in the brain that produce illness could also be expressing the circumstances and experiences in the affected person's life.

Even more important than expanding the scope of the neuroscience to include environmental influences is the recognition that personal "soulful" experience cannot entirely be reduced to neurophysiological processes. Subjective experience contains an additional meaning, and this can be understood only by reflecting on the cultural background. As American philosopher Hilary Putnam puts it, "Meaning is not located inside the head." Meaning is contained in language, which comes from the relationship of people and the dialogue with their surroundings.

Psychological disorders have the unusual quality of being characterized mainly (sometimes exclusively) by subjective experience and the meaning given to it. They manifest as anxieties, compulsions, depressions, deceptive sense perceptions, confused speech, excitement and – more and more frequently – self-inflicted injuries or eating disorders. This is the kind of suffering that leads one to psychiatrists.