

THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

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**OPENING ADDRESS IN
SYMPOSIUM ON PSYCHOLOGICAL STRESSES AND
COPING MECHANISMS OF THE MIDDLE CLASS FAM-
ILY IN THE 1980's
Part 1 of 2**

I. INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

- A. I hope that those who planned this symposium knew what they were doing when they invited a philosopher and a generalist to deliver the keynote address on the subject under consideration.
- B. And, may I quickly add, I hope they and you will not be disappointed by my conception of what is called for by the task assigned me—the task of taking an overview or—background-view of the specific problems to be discussed by the specialists to follow me.
 - 1. In the five Thursdays to follow this opening session, the speakers will, unlike me, be specialists—men who are specially qualified to deal with the specific problems of the middle class family in the decade ahead.
 - 2. They will do so from a number of different perspectives. They will deal with the changing character of the American family, with the special problems it will confront in the 80s, with the psychological stresses it will experience, and with the coping mechanisms that may help it to solve, or at least to adjust to, its problems.
 - 3. Since these matters, which lie beyond my competence, will be carefully considered by those who follow me, my contribution to this symposium must lie in another direction.

C. I would like to speak to you as a philosopher and a generalist about what I see as the root cause—or, at least, one of the most important causes—of the troubled and unquiet life of many middle class families in this century.

1. I say “in this century” because I do not think that the problem will be radically different in the 80s, though it may be intensified in certain respects.

2. Perhaps “this century” goes back too far. The problem, as I see it, has emerged in the last thirty to fifty years. It will be the same in the eighties, made more difficult and, perhaps, exacerbated by

-- galloping inflation

-- threatening unemployment and insecurity

-- a declining culture

-- an ever worsening system of public education

-- mounting indebtedness on all sides, both public and private

-- widening of the generation gap, accompanied by diminishing sympathy on both sides of it

-- the debilitating effects of television on family life

-- the disruptive intrusions of the drug culture into an ever increasing number of homes

-- the deadening influence of instant communication.

3. When I have identified what I think is the root cause of the troubled life of many middle class families in our time, I will offer one suggestion—the only one appropriate for a philosopher to make—about what might help such families to cope.

II. *THE SPECIAL PROBLEM OF THE MIDDLE CLASS FAMILY IN THE 20TH CENTURY*

- A. Middle class families did not always exist; or, at least, they did not, until this century or even more recently than that, constitute the preponderant portion of the population.
- B. In prior centuries, the predominant class division in our Western societies was the division of society into an upper and a lower class. If there were middle class families then, they existed as the upper fringe of the lower class and were quite distinct from the highly privileged upper class.
- C. To understand the special problem of the middle class family in our time, when it has become the numerically and politically predominant center of our society, I would like to spend a moment describing the condition of the two main classes of society in earlier centuries; and I would like to do so mainly in economic terms.
 - 1. The upper class families were the economic *haves*.
 - a. They possessed the economic perquisites for living well.
 - b. They had all the comforts and conveniences of life, including ample free time for play and for the self-cultivating pursuits of leisure.
 - c. They had a store of worldly goods that was seldom just enough to provide them with the conditions required for enjoying life and leading decent human lives. They usually had much more than enough.
 - d. They had all this without any need to engage in toil or even, to put it more mildly, to work for a living.
 - e. Their children were adequately schooled, and their schooling served the purpose of cultivating the mind of the individual and also the purpose of enabling the cultivated individual to contribute to the enrichment of culture. Their schooling was not for the purpose of preparing them to earn a living.
 - f. Having more than sufficient material possessions, and having them with a large measure of security, members of the upper class family were not motivated in the main by an incessant striving for more.

- g. The members of upper class families fell into two groups.
 - (1) On the one hand, they were, or turned out to be, human beings of good moral character, persons of moral virtue who made good use of their advantages for personal development, for political service, or for contributions to advances in the arts and sciences.
 - (2) On the other hand, among their members were individuals who were playboys, profligates, and wastrels, corrupt and even vicious human beings who squandered their ample resources, ruined their own lives and acted in a variety of ways detrimental to the well-being of their society.
- 2. The lower class families of previous centuries were economic *have-nots*.
 - a. All members of the lower class family (some at a very early age) engaged in the often-bitter and usually life-long struggle for subsistence—and bare subsistence at that.
 - b. They had little free time for play and certainly none for the self-cultivating pursuits of leisure.
 - c. In terms of material possessions, they seldom if ever had *enough*, where *enough* means no more than the bare minimum needed to provide the conditions of living well, or the most part, they had less than enough of the comforts and conveniences of life. They were *have-nots* in the sense that they were deprived of the conditions that enabled the virtuous members of upper class families to lead decent human lives,
 - d. Their children either received no schooling to speak of or the very minimum of schooling. What training they did receive, in sharp contrast to the schooling of the young of upper class families, was directed entirely to preparation for the life of toil of working for a living.

- e. At a time when social mobility was the exception rather than the rule, they had little hope for improvement in their status or for getting ahead.
 - f. The tenor of their lives was not governed by rising expectations nor were they motivated by the lure of new entitlements.
 - g. Though their circumstances fell below the level of having enough of the material possessions needed for leading decent human lives, they were not stung by the pangs of deprivation into an incessant striving for more. Their major effort was to make do with the little they had.
3. In short, the lower class families of the past simply struggled to survive and did not aspire to better their lot, While the upper class families, having enough or more than enough for all the purposes of life, did not strive for more.
4. In the past hundred and fifty years—from the time when Alexis de Tocqueville first observed the tendency in America to move toward the alleviation of this chasm between upper and lower class families by gradually approaching a general equality of conditions, political and economic as well as social—an emerging middle class began to appear. But until very recently, it was still on the upper fringe of the lower class.
- a. These emergent middle class families were a little better off than the deprived lower class families below them, but they were still far from privileged.
 - b. They may have had enough to be regarded as *haves* rather than *have-nots*, but they had barely enough, and never without having to engage in labor to obtain and retain it.
 - c. This emergent middle class before the 1930s or the 1950s did not have the problems that confront the full-blown and predominant middle class of our day.
- D. Let me now turn to the great social and economic revolution of the 20th century, the revolution that produced the predominant middle class family and the one that suffers stresses peculiar to its condition in our time.

1. The revolution we have witnessed in this century has brought into existence a large and ever increasing middle class that is now affiliated with a diminishing upper class and is set against a residual lower class of deprived or *have-not* families.
2. The occurrence of this revolution constitutes what I regard as the great divide or watershed that separates the 20th century from all previous centuries.
 - a. In all earlier centuries, society consisted of a small privileged minority and a large, oppressed, and deprived majority—a minority of *haves* and an overwhelming majority of *have-nots*.
 - b. With the rise and spread of political democracy, which approached full realization only in this century, and with the gradual acceptance of socialist aims under the guise of social welfare programs (when we shy away from using the word “socialism”), we have seen a revolutionary reversal: we now live in a society that is comprised of a privileged majority and an oppressed, deprived minority,
 - c. That privileged majority is privileged in the sense of being *haves* rather than *have-nots*. They have either enough or more than enough of the material possessions and external goods needed for living decent human lives.
 - d. That privileged majority is, of course, still subdivided into two classes: an ever-diminishing upper class and an ever-increasing middle class.
 - e. The oppressed minority consists of what one hopes is also an ever-diminishing number of lower class families who are still the *have-nots*, those who have less than enough, those who are seriously deprived of the external conditions required for a decent human life.
3. We must now pay attention to the difference between the two classes that constitute the privileged majority the *haves*.
 - a. What distinguishes the small upper class is not their having an adequate or sufficient supply of external

goods, but their having more than enough, and having it without being compelled to engage in toil or working for a living, and having it with a high measure of security.

- b. In contrast, the middle class families are also *haves*, but many of them are *haves* who do not regard themselves *as ever having* enough, and do not have a hold on their material possessions without continuous engagement in work and with sufficient security to be relaxed about it.

(1) In these last two respects, they are still like the lower class from which they have emerged.

(2) And like the lower class from which they have emerged, these middle class families still regard the training of the young (now in extended years of public schooling) as mainly concerned with preparing them to earn a good living and to get ahead in the competitive race for success, rather than as an educational problem directed *solely* to the cultivation of the individual and to the advancement of learning itself.

- c. Let me summarize this by stressing the following points:

(1) The upper class in our time is still like the upper class of previous centuries: fully privileged *haves*, having more than enough and, when virtuos, using their advantages to good purpose and not devoting their energies mainly to striving for more.

(2) The lower class in our time is still like the lower class of previous centuries: seriously deprived *have-nots*, struggling to subsist, with little hope or opportunity for the improvement of their condition.

(3) The predominant middle class in our time is a relatively new phenomenon: privileged *haves* who, even when they do have enough, do not regard enough as sufficient and, in an environment of rising expectations and new entitlements, are

bent on the pursuit of more and more and more, for themselves and for their children.

- E. One further background explanation before I turn to what I would like to propose as the solution of the problem as I see it.
1. The dominant struggle of this century, not only in our own country, but also across the face of the globe, is the struggle to achieve the goal that Tocqueville described America as dedicated to, namely, the establishment of a truly classless society, one in which conditions prevails in all significant respects.
 2. An equality of conditions in all significant respects would prevail in all. families were *haves* in these respects, and none—none at all were *have-nots*.
 3. Properly understood, an equality of conditions is not an absolute leveling, not an absolute equality in the degree to which all enjoy the conditions in question.
 4. On the contrary, it would be chimerical to aim at an equality of conditions in which all not only are *haves* but none *has more* and *none less*.
 5. Hence, when the revolution that began in this century reaches its completion, when the age-old conflict between *haves* and *have-nots* is completely overcome because all will have become *haves*, another conflict will still persist, because it is economically irremediable.
 - a. That is the conflict or tension between the *have-mores* and the *have-lesses*—those *haves* who have more and those *haves* who have less.
 - b. Since this conflict or tension cannot be removed from the face of society, and since its fury is fueled by uncontrolled acquisitiveness, by avarice, and by covetousness, the only solution that can ameliorate the stresses resulting from it is essentially a moral one.
 - c. I must ask you, therefore, to consider with me now whether the conflict that I have said is economically irremediable can be softened, if not totally removed, by applying some basic ethical insights that we can learn from the moral wisdom of the ancient Greeks.



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