

INTRODUCTORY NOTE: Willard Gaylin (1925-) is professor of clinical psychology at Columbia University. In the following passage, he argues against the way some people use the insights that psychoanalysis provides. The Father Edward Flanagan Gaylin refers to in the first paragraph founded and raised funds for Boys Town, a Nebraska community for homeless boys.

What You See Is the Real You

It was, I believe, the distinguished Nebraska financier Father Edward J. Flanagan who professed to having "never met a bad boy." Having, myself, met a remarkable number of bad boys, it might seem that either our experiences were drastically different or we were using the word "bad" differently. I suspect neither is true, but rather that the Father was appraising the "inner man," while I, in fact, do not acknowledge the existence of inner people.

Since we psychoanalysts have unwittingly contributed to this confusion, let one, at least, attempt a small rectifying effort. Psychoanalytic data--which should be viewed as supplementary information--is, unfortunately, often viewed as alternative (and superior) explanation. This has led to the prevalent tendency to think of the "inner" man as the real man and the outer man as an illusion or pretender.

While psychoanalysis supplies us with an incredibly useful tool for explaining the motives and purposes underlying human behavior, most of this has little bearing on the moral nature of that behavior. Like roentgenology, psychoanalysis is a fascinating, but relatively new, means of illuminating the person. But few of us are prepared to substitute an X-ray of Grandfather's head for the portrait that hangs in the parlor. The inside of the man represents another view, not a truer one.

A man may not always be what he appears to be, but what he appears to be is always a significant part of what he is. A man is the sum total of all his behavior. To probe for unconscious determinants of behavior and then define him in their terms exclusively, ignoring his overt behavior altogether, is a greater distortion than ignoring the unconscious completely.

Kurt Vonnegut has said, "You are what you pretend to be," which is simply another way of saying, you are what we (all of us) perceive you to be, not what you think you are. Consider for a moment the case of the ninety-year-old man on his deathbed joyous and relieved over the success of his deception.

For ninety years he has shielded his evil nature from public observation For ninety years he has affected courtesy, kindness, and generosity--suppressing all the malice he knew was within him while he calculatedly and artificially substituted grace and charity. All his life he had been fooling the world into believing he was a good man. This "evil" man will, I predict, be welcomed into the Kingdom of Heaven.

Similarly, I will not be told that the young man who earns his pocket money by mugging old ladies is "really" a good boy. Even my generous and expansive definition of goodness will not accommodate that particular form of self-advancement. It does not count that beneath the rough exterior he has a heart--or, for that matter, an entire innards--of purest gold, locked away from human perception. You are for the most part what you seem to be, not what you would wish to be, nor, indeed, what you believe yourself to be.

Spare me, therefore, your good intentions, your inner sensitivities, your unarticulated and unexpressed love. And spare me also those tedious psychohistories which--by exposing the goodness inside the bad man, and the evil in the good--invariably establish a vulgar and perverse egalitarianism, as if the arrangement of what is outside and what inside makes no moral difference. Saint Francis may, in his unconscious, indeed have been compensating for, and denying, destructive, unconscious Oedipal impulses identical to those which Attila projected and acted on. But the similarity of the unconscious constellations in the two men matters precious little if it does not distinguish between them. I do not care to learn that Hitler's heart was in the right place. A knowledge of the unconscious life of the man may be a adjunct to understanding his behavior. It is not a substitute for his behavior in describing him.

The inner man is a fantasy. If it helps you to identify with one, by all means, do so; preserve it, cherish it, embrace it, but do not present it to others for evaluation or consideration, for excuse or exculpation, or, for that matter, for punishment or disapproval. Like any fantasy, it serves your purposes alone. It has no standing in the real world which we share with each other. Those character traits, those attitudes, that behavior--that strange and alien stuff sticking out all over you--that's the real you!

TOPIC:

Explain briefly what Gaylin thinks constitutes the real self and what role he thinks intentions play in constructing it, and explain why you find these ideas convincing or not. Cite specific examples to make your own ideas convincing.