

## Book Reviews

*The Mantle of Maturity. A History of Ideas about Character Development* by Christie W. Kiefer, Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 1988, 243 pp., hardcover. (ISBN 088706-821-9 hc)

The Words "mature" and "maturity" are often used by parents, educators and mental health specialists with great authority as though everyone knew exactly what is meant by these words. Christie Kiefer's book *The Mantle of Maturity* examines the concept of maturity as it has been understood throughout history with particular application to modern times. Kiefer explains the relativistic nature of the idea of maturity and challenges reductionistic interpretations of it.

Christie Kiefer is Associate Professor of Anthropology at the University of California, San Francisco, and has taught his subject matter from a variety of viewpoints including the psychoanalytic, learning theory, and the humanistic perspective which form the three main bodies of psychological theory and practice. Kiefer initially makes few assumptions about the core meaning of maturity while he examines ideas, primitive and contemporary, about character development. Instead, he examines a cross section of the literature pertaining to his subject with the goal of raising his readers' level of awareness. His analysis is a sociology-of-knowledge approach and is an attempt to demonstrate, within a skein of philosophical and psychological ideas, the various roles that concepts about the maturation process play in societies, ancient and modern.

In reading the *Mantle of Maturity*, one becomes aware that maturity as a concept emerges from a context of socially defined values and goals. Maturity is not a thing in itself but is a distillation of many forces—historical, biological and psychological. Power and knowledge are intertwined, and the achievement of orthodox goals and values is frequently identified with "maturity" in ways that sometimes escape scrutiny.

The author appropriately points out that there is a disconcerting lack of correlation between the sophistication of modern psychological theory and practice and improvements in social and moral life. The quest for prediction and control in contemporary science sometimes obscures a deeper understanding and interpretation of events in a broader moral

and philosophical context. While modern therapies aim toward increasing maturity, there is good evidence that, as a cultural phenomenon, they have not actually done so. The historical roots of ideas and concepts are too often lost or ignored when technology becomes results-oriented. The presence of morally superior persons among us, persons whose presence exudes an unmistakable quality of maturity, must still be explained and has not yet been adequately explained by theories concerning character development in the social sciences.

The author reminds us that maturity is not equated with survival or adaptation. If this were the case, James Bond would constitute the epitome of maturity as he hurls his assailant from a rooftop and states dispassionately, "I guess he fell for that one." Maturity is elusive because there are different notions of the developmental process and different values placed on end states. Maturity is the fulfillment of a potential, just as an apple is the mature product of an apple tree's development. But unless we adopt a biological notion of unfolding stages as did Freud and his followers, we are hard pressed to say what path a person must take who aspires to become mature.

*The Mantle of Maturity* is an odyssey through Medieval and Renaissance concepts culminating in an examination of contemporary constructs within schools of empirical psychology. Kiefer dwells at length in his final chapters on the Indestructible Four-Stage Legacy of Plato found in *The Symposium*. These progressive stages—self-centeredness, erotic love, honor, and wisdom—constitute for Kiefer a template on which he superimposes a number of newer ideas and finds an interesting fit. Thus he draws some intriguing parallels between Plato's stages and the work of Saint Bernard, Dante, James Joyce, and even Freud with his progression of psychosexual development rooted in biologically determined stages. The connection of the four stages with later ideas about maturation in more modern writers and theorists is held by Kiefer to be a product of an historical connection rather than repeated independent discoveries of universal truths.

The focus of the last chapters of this book is on stage four, or wisdom as viewed by contemporary theorists like Abraham Maslow and Eric Erickson. One of the best parts of this work is the discussion of how wisdom and the other three stages in Plato's paradigm weave in and out of current social trends and institutions.

*The Mantle of Maturity* is a well-constructed, thoughtful analysis of the maturing process as contemplated throughout history. One needs to have considerable sophistication in modern psychology to fully appreciate the nuances of these contributions to the concept of maturity made by contemporary theorists, but this should not deter anyone interested in the subject from reading this fascinating work.

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#### *Erata*

An important reference was omitted from Erik E. Sandstrom, "Borlung: the Rainbow Serpent," 91:4 (Oct.-Dec. 1988): 661-667. Add to the bibliography the following: Noonuccal, Oodgeroo and Kabul Oodgeroo. *The Rainbow Serpent*. Brisbane: World Expo, 1988.