

Chapter 1

Prelude

THE PARADOX OF MATURITY

Western intellectual tradition has brought us a separation of two aspects of mind and self. On one hand, there is the realm of *logos* – the realm of logic and objectivity, of all that can be stated in terms of rational truths, of our hope that life can be reduced to laws that are mechanical and precise.¹ On the other hand, there is the realm of *mythos* – the realm of all that is felt and organic, of that which is private and imaginative, of all that appeals to the inner world of emotions, of our tendency to leap out of the constraints of analytical precision and to seize the novel.

Recognizing that basic duality, thinkers throughout the ages asked which one of these two ways of being was better. Which one is more worthy of our trust? Through which one do we gain access to true knowledge? Which one can lead us on the path to wisdom and enlightenment? Which one ought to describe the mature adult – indeed, human nature at its best?

The answer we inherited from the past is *logos*.² And in accordance with that answer, it has been usual to think of human nature and its development over the course of life in terms of one single theme. For the Greek philosophers and many of their descendants, the knife that would clear the forest of ignorance and expose the path to knowledge and enlightenment was sharpened through training in logic and mathematics. Mature adults were to leave behind the world of change and flux and to orient themselves to those universal

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Excerpt

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forms of thought in which our organic existence is eclipsed. Development, as a consequence, has been construed as a progressive movement; an onward rush; a heroic and energetic striving for ideals and for perfection; a triumph of conscious, abstract forms of thinking; a victory of a conscious ego over the unconscious and undesirable impulses of the id.

Development as ascent, aging as decent

The view of development as the ascent and onward rush of logos has been a useful and even powerful one when describing changes from birth to young adulthood. But when applied to the total of the human life course, it has created a paradox.³ When examined from the perspective of logos, later adulthood seems to be a dark period indeed. Yet perhaps it only appears so from a logos-oriented perspective. How are we to reconcile the disappointments of adulthood, the painful reminders of our organic limitations, with the view of an onward rush? How can we account for the second half of life by theories that celebrate the accomplishments of youth? Compared with the unfettered vigor and idealism of youth, adulthood often has been depicted as a problematic period. Indeed, it appeared to be no more than youth's negative: Rather than examining the gains and strengths unique to adulthood, adulthood often is merely examined from the perspective of the loss of youthful accomplishments. As a consequence, scientific descriptions of adulthood abound with accounts of the erosion of biological and intellectual capacities.

The origins of this book lie in my musings about the tendency to see only the failings of later life, not its fruits as well. I started to reflect on this problem some twenty years ago when I embarked on the study of adulthood and aging – that stepchild of the sciences, which may well reveal the deepest wisdom about human nature yet. In the still recent history of the study of developmental processes after adolescence, it has been usual to think of adulthood and aging as a period of loss and regression in biological adaptability and cognitive abilities.⁴ And indeed many features of the performance of older

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adults appeared to point to the conclusion that later adulthood is precarious, at best, as far as the maintenance of intellectual and biological self-regulation is concerned. In contrast to childhood, adulthood is seen as a period of deficiency and regression; indeed, the notion is prevalent that the aging of cognitive functioning reflects a reversal or mirror image of the process of development. Ribot's law of the aging of cognitive functioning states this principle of regression as follows:

Regression first affects more complex organizations. In mnemonic organization, the "new" dies prior to the "old," the complex before the simple. . . . Volitional control is lost first, the control of automatic action later. In this way cognitive organization follows the reverse order of its development through sequential stages.⁵

Aging and wisdom

Yet in my research with adult and aged participants, I soon found myself engaged in dialogues about our respective concepts of intelligence, memory, and so forth. On the one hand, it was true that many of these adults in their performance on cognitive tasks sometimes showed a concrete orientation often associated with the behavior of children. But on the other, they also showed features not so readily captured by the notion of a "return to the concrete." They often insisted that it was of no use to engage in tasks that had so little tie to the pragmatic constraints of their everyday lives; or, as appeared to happen more often, they simply refused to participate without volunteering any criticism.

This remarkable refusal to sever cognition from its application also displayed features, I felt, that were entirely different from the concrete thinking of the young child. Not only did it reflect a conception of the role of the participant vis-à-vis the experimenter that is entirely more dialogic and autonomous than that found in children and even college students; but it also showed a much more conscious, reflective awareness that the goal of cognition must be that of structuring self-chosen goals and the actions that lead to them. "Have you ever con-

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sidered," one elderly woman (I shall call her Eliza) once asked me, "that there is no point in remembering just *anything*? That we have to make choices about what is *worth* remembering?"

Eliza was born and raised in what then was the mecca of music and logical positivism, Vienna. The daughter of a gifted woman pianist, she still loves classical music, but she has made a clean break from logical positivism. Once, when reading a paper in which I had quoted the early Wittgenstein as saying that there are no surprises in logic,⁶ Eliza imperially disagreed with the implication that logic and subjectivity belonged to different realms of experience. "Logic is completely subjective!" she asserted, tossing aside centuries of intellectual history with such certainty as only springs from ignorance or wisdom.

Like many thinkers of this century, Eliza asserted that at the root of any theory of thought and its development must be a conception of the subjective self, a realization that, ultimately, the impersonal laws of logic must be grounded in what is felt to be true and relevant subjectively. Not all older adults, of course, thus dare raise themselves into the ranks of our most celebrated thinkers. Still, numerous dialogues with research participants throughout the years gradually matured my conviction that something important indeed was contained in what these adults had to say. However disturbing it was for a neophyte scientist embarking on her career, it also had a timely ring. The message was, quite simply, that our scientific concepts of the nature of reason and emotion, the objective and subjective, of thinking and acting were slanted, and we had better spend some time setting them aright.

What makes these elders speak with such authority? Were it not for the fact that philosophy and psychology alike have started to reevaluate the relationship between the realms of "objective" reason and "subjective" feelings, we might explain such opinionated self-assurance as nothing more than the arrogance born of rigidity – the onset, even, of senility. And indeed, this is still one of the favored interpretations of the course of later life.

And yet, I was persistently haunted by a question. Could

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these adults' advanced age not have put them at an advantage of wisdom over most of us – scientists or not – who are younger and ponder these very same issues? When they insisted that my notions of the rational cannot be divorced from richly felt experience, could they be expressing some deep philosophical wisdom? Thus an intriguing hypothesis was born. Had we, in our own denial of aging and yearning for eternal youth, perhaps scaled our models of human adaptation uniquely toward the *young* adult? Could it be that the powers of logical thought and cognitive analysis typical of adolescents and youth were supplanted, in mature adulthood at its best, by a new language – one that was not deficient at all, but in effect more integrated, broader, more abstract? Yet even though that language seemed more abstract, it was a kind of abstractness gracefully free of the tension between the theoretical and the applied so typical of youthful thinking. Perhaps this was a way of thinking that achieved what Piaget has claimed truly marks the achievement of wisdom and maturity – the reuniting of “intelligence and affectivity,”⁷ the marriage of logos and mythos.

THE LOST DIMENSIONS OF
DEVELOPMENT

My dialogues with Eliza and others suggested a view of mature and later adulthood that could not be accommodated very well by most available models of development over the life span. As pointed out elsewhere,⁸ these models are usually framed in terms of growth and gain, of “ascending” and “becoming better.” Yet it is a popular adage that in order to gain consciousness, we not only experience gain but also give up a sense of innocence and wholeness. My early experience with adult research participants underscored that adage: In order to adjust to the tasks of adulthood, these individuals felt that they had sacrificed a connectedness to the concrete and organic. Mature adulthood for them became an occasion to reclaim that wholeness. Thus, rather than experiencing their advancing

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age in terms of decline, many of these individuals appeared to experience a rebirth of a sense of organic and connected self that they earlier had surrendered to the demands of growing up.

Maturing into later life, then, often was experienced as the healing of a split, the resumption of an abandoned dialogue. But if adulthood thus revealed its lighter side, earlier development also showed its darker side. Growing up brought not only progression and ascent but also was experienced as the disruption of a sense of unity, a surrendering of organic wholeness, and a resulting feeling of fragmentation. Gradually, my conviction matured that a theory dealing with adult life needed to concern itself with the ups and downs of that dialogue over the life course, rather than merely celebrating a single way of being. Rather than describing development as the ascent and victory of logos, it was necessary to describe development as a tandem progression between logos and mythos. In that dual progression, the two modes might have somewhat different ascendancies, indeed often an antagonistic relationship.

The loss of mythos

In attempting to trace that tandem progression, I soon found myself led back to some of the “grand” theories of development, especially those of Piaget and Freud. Indeed, an analysis of features of those two theories forms a part of my argument throughout this book, but especially in Chapter 3. My extensive discussion of these two theories requires some explanation. Some readers may feel that by focusing on these men, I have erected straw men in order to support my argument; certainly, the work of both theorists has been extensively critiqued and updated. In choosing to discuss the work of Freud and Piaget, however, I am not alone. Several authors also have found it necessary to reevaluate part of these theorists’ work.⁹ I believe there are cogent reasons for such a reevaluation, since the theories of both of these giants have created a kind of prototypical supratheoretical framework many individuals

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are attempting to transcend. But, in that attempt to transcend a broad framework, it is often useful to distill clearly those features one is attempting to correct and transform.

What is notable about the theories of Freud and Piaget is that both assert that development is, in fact, based on a dialectic between two modes of knowing. For Freud, for example, development is based on the tension between two modes of being and of defining reality. One is primary process, a mode in which an inner world of desires and wishes prevails. The other is secondary process, a mode no longer directed by the inner reality of wish fulfillment and fantasy. Rather, this mode strives to find out what is objectively true, what holds in the outer world. And it is the developing individual's task to strike a relatively harmonious balance between these two forms of relating to the world.

Piaget, too, proposes that the reality to which we adapt is not merely an external given, an objective world "out there." What we come to understand as "reality" is based on the organismic ground of our biological and psychological being. Hence to develop successfully, individuals must not merely internalize the conditions of outer reality, they also must find outward expression for their inner biological needs and desires and creative tendencies. Piaget explicitly proposes, in fact, that successful development requires that these two movements – inward and outward – form a balance or dialogue: If one pole predominates, adaptation remains disturbed.

By emphasizing such a balance, both theorists were instrumental in transforming the pervasive rationalist bias of classical philosophies of the mind and human nature. That bias dealt with the individual primarily in terms of logos, whereas the processes related to mythos were seen mainly in pejorative terms. As the philosopher Susanne Langer states, mythos, according to rationalist theories, is inferior, not adaptive in its own right. Thus "everything that falls outside of the domain of analytical, propositional, and formal thought is merely classed as emotive, irrational, and animalian. . . . All other things our minds do are dismissed as irrelevant to intellectual progress;

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they are residues, emotional disturbances, or throwbacks to animal estate" and indicate "regression to a pre-logical state."¹⁰ Thus, mythos is often defined in terms that imply that it is a merely infantile or pathological way of functioning.

Freud and Piaget begin their work with a radical rejection of that rationalist bias. Both authors maintained that the study of human adaptation must be based, first and foremost, in acknowledging the organismic reality of persons. Paradoxically, however, neither carries that notion to its logical conclusion. Freud's theory, for example, is less aimed at a harmonious balance between inner and outer reality, but more at a fairly complete victory of the secondary-process over the primary-process principle. Indeed, the former is called "reality principle," whereas the latter is termed "pleasure principle." Thus, Freud defines education "as an incitement to the conquest of the pleasure principle, and to its replacement by the reality-principle."¹¹ Similarly, the ideal of the adapted individual is the scientist who "comes nearest to this conquest."¹² Piaget's theory, too, maintains that rationalist bias. Piaget's writings show that he tends to equate development with a loss of organismic and imaginative relatedness, emphasizing instead the rise of objective, abstract structures of relating to the world.

Thus both theories continued to be faithful to a profound rationalist legacy in which development was equated with the ascent of the rational principle of logos. In contrast, the nonrational principle of mythos continued to occupy a highly problematic status and, indeed, became successively displaced and degraded. This rationalist degradation and fragmentation of mythos has been widely deplored. By classing mythos as an immature form of thought, we deny that mythos, too, can have an important function in development, and one that is not at all characteristic of the primitive and the childlike only, but continues well into adulthood. Since the romantic movement,¹³ many thinkers – foremost among them perhaps Rousseau and Nietzsche – have lamented how logos deals mythos a blow of death, and argued for an emancipation of mythos as a worthwhile adult mode. As Thomas Mann claimed in his famed lecture on "Freud and the Future,"¹⁴ most of the lasting

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mythos products of culture are uniquely *adult* accomplishments, and the emancipation of mythos may be a unique triumph of *mature adulthood* rather than a mere remnant of immature childish ways of being. Thus, mythos provides a separate language, one that is not necessarily inferior, though it is qualitatively different. It is a language in which knowledge is presented in personified images and narratives rather than in analytical and propositional form.

Mythos and development

At this juncture, I became intrigued with what seemed uncanny parallels between the more logos-oriented accounts of development such as those of Freud and Piaget and a more mythos-based one such as has been offered by the theory of Carl Jung.¹⁵ Although I shared with many of my colleagues from academia a deep reservation toward the mystical excesses of Jung's work, I found in his theory the most significant attempt thus far to deal with development not as the single progression of one mode of knowing, but rather as an interweaving of two modes. Specifically concerned with the split between the two modes that had been instituted in Western philosophy and that pervaded the theory of Freud, Jung felt that it was one of the special challenges of an adult's later life to heal that split. Thus, Jung saw the period after about the middle of life as an opportunity to bridge the multiple dualisms between the subjective and the objective, between mind and body, between reason and instinct, between masculine and feminine.

Jung¹⁶ proposed (though that proposal was not systematically explicated by him) that development can not only be seen in terms of the rational structures that theoreticians such as Freud and Piaget had proposed, but that the development of those structures is paralleled by a developmental line of mythos, in which developmental progressions are expressed in terms of symbolic and narrative themes. Unlike the development of logos structures, however, that of mythos structures reveals not a single theme, but rather two separate

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though complementary ones. One of those themes follows the structure of the hero myth;¹⁷ development is depicted as heroic ascent, the courageous victory of reason over the unruly life of instincts. But in the account of the second type of theme or narrative, a darker, less glorious image of the process of development emerges. Those accounts take, as it were, the perspective of the subdued life of the instincts, showing the resulting degradation and devaluation of mythos. In the concrete imagery of mythos, the metaphors are shocking indeed: Violence, rape, death, and dismemberment are symbols that over and over again speak of the destruction of mythos.

One well-known myth, for example, is that of the marriage between Isis and Osiris. Twin children of Nut, the goddess of heaven, they are engaged in loving embrace in their mother's womb. As adults, they work together in harmony and bring writing, agriculture, and other gifts of culture to their people. But their brother Set is overcome with envy and hate at Osiris' fame and virtue and devises a ruse to destroy him. He has a magnificent wooden coffin made according to the measurements of Osiris' body. He then arranges a feast and announces that the person who can fit into the coffin may keep it as a present. When Osiris steps into the coffin, Set shuts it, takes off with it, and has Osiris' body torn to pieces and scattered over the land. Isis then embarks on a long journey to piece Osiris' body together, and eventually, Osiris is reborn each year as nature abounding with new life and vegetation.

In this myth, early development is depicted as a fall from wholeness, a loss of unity. That very loss, however, sets up a tension that ultimately turns into a positive force. The longing to recollect the lost parts of our selves – if we can only sustain that longing – eventually leads to a rebirth and a new sense of life and vitality. It is that mature vitality that many myths celebrate as the pinnacle of mature being – a vitality that, like that of Osiris, emerges from the surrender to suffering.

The importance of the duality and tension between different aspects or parts of ourselves is also dealt with in Plato's widely quoted story of the origins and healing of fragmentation. In the *Symposium*, Plato relates a mythic account of the origin of