William James – Healthy Mindedness and the Sick Soul

In his work ‘The Varieties of Religious Experience’ (1902), William James examined the reasons why some people seem to be happy all the time, even in the face of adversity, whilst others are always sad or melancholy, lacking a point or purpose for their lives: He wrote that there are: ‘...two different conceptions of the universe in our experience – healthy-mindedness and the sick soul.’

Healthy-mindedness

For James, healthy-mindedness is characterized by joy, optimism and an inability to feel evil. There are two types:

- Voluntary – seeing the good in something and making that the most important thing. Reality is always seen to be good and bad is ignored or excluded.
- Involuntary – feeling happy and positive about things without any prethought or intellectual evaluation of the circumstances. Everything is experienced as good in itself, not as being made good by refusing to acknowledge evil. ‘In many persons, happiness is congenital and irreclaimable...when unhappiness is offered or proposed to them, they positively refuse to feel it , as if it were something mean and wrong. We find such persons in every age, passionately flinging themselves upon their sense of the goodness of life...’

The healthy-minded tend to feel at one with the world and with the divine and take the view that if the world is good, then, as part of the world, they must be good also. The person sees themselves as being in union both with the world and with the divine in all things. James called such people the ‘once born’.

For Reflection: Do you agree with James’ view of healthy-mindedness? Why/why not? Can you make a list of real-life people who fit this category?

The Sick Soul

James said that the person with the sick soul maximises thoughts of the evil and ignores the existence of good, believing it to be unreal. For such people, he wrote: ‘The world now looks remote, strange, sinister and uncanny. Its colour is gone and its breath is cold...’

There are different levels within the sick soul. Some feel a loss of love for nature, then environment or the world, because they see it as outweighed by the problems of evil. Others feel despair, anguish and the complete lack of joy. Deeper sick soul feelings include loathing, suspicion, mistrust anxiety, fear and, sometimes, suicide.
'There are different levels of the morbid mind. There are people for whom evil means only a maladjustment with things, a wrong correspondence with one’s life with the environment. Such evil as this is curable upon the natural plane... but there are others for whom evil may be more radical and general, a wrongness or vice in his essential nature which no alteration in the environment can cure and which requires a supernatural remedy.'

James outlined the development of the sick soul as:

| 1. Loss of interest in the values of life |
| 2. The world seems strange and unwelcoming |
| 3. Nothing seems to make sense in the world anymore |
| 4. Questioning whether there is any point in anything |

For Reflection: Can you think of any real life or historical figures that fit the description of ‘sick souls’?

He argued that, although the healthy-minded are happier, nevertheless, sick souls have a greater insight into the human condition and are more connected to religion because, faced with the apparent meaninglessness of the world, they turn to religion to find an answer and a new way to view the world. – perhaps by seeing evil as a trick, concealed the real truth that existence has more to offer than the sick soul can see. He highlighted the very strong link between the sick soul and religious belief:

‘The most complete religions would therefore seem to be those in which the pessimistic elements are best developed. Buddhism, of course, and Christianity are the best known to us. They are essentially the religions of deliverance; the man must die to an unreal life before he can be born into the real life’.

For Reflection: Do you agree with James’ views? Is Christianity a religion aimed at ‘sick souls’? Why/ why not?

In fact, James identified much more with the sick souls than with healthymindedness because the former, he believed had greater and more profound insight into the reality of things: He claimed that the sick soul had insight that the healthy minded did not.

He identified three forms of consciousness:

1. Religious melancholy – ‘the world looks remote, sinister, strange, and uncanny.’
2. Melancholy – ‘...desperation absolute and complete.’
3. The abyss – a sense of great personal sin and guilt and the need to be saved. ‘Let us then turn our backs on the once born and their sky-blue optimistic gospel... let us see rather whether pity, pain and fear may not open a more profounder view..’
James believed that if a sick soul could come through these stages they would become ‘twice born’ – which is the deepest realisation of the heart and of religious faith. They have an experience of forgiveness, salvation and the ultimate triumph of goodness and an awareness of the truth of life: ‘...loss of all worry, the sense that all is ultimately well with one, peace and harmony...’

**Writing Task:**

(a) Explain William James’ notion of healthy-mindedness. (30)

(b) ‘The sick soul is closer to God than the healthy mind.’ Assess this view (20)