

## KAREN HORNEY AND PERSONAL VOCATION

---

*Eric Gudan*

*Institute for the Psychological Sciences*

*Karen Horney held that neurosis originates in emotional insecurity. The neurotic forms an unrealistic ideal of what the person should be which is separated from the actual innate capacities and the concrete circumstances of the person and traps the neurotic in an impossible task. While her theory lacks development regarding psychological health, a Christian ethics of motivation for action and personal vocation can enrich her understanding of how a psychologically healthy person proceeds. Germaine Grisez's concept of personal vocation outlines a framework whereby psychologically healthy persons act and realize their real capacities within particular circumstances. Morality serves as the foundation for self-fulfillment.*

Karen Horney, a German psychiatrist, broke with Freud's blindly biological drive system and posited that the person is motivated by a desire for self-fulfillment. She set forth a masterful analysis of neurosis as an alienation from self, due to emotional anxiety, in her *Neurosis and Human Growth* (1950). Her understanding of neurosis as the compulsion to pursue an idealized self to the detriment of the actual self can serve as a starting point for a discussion about psychological health by introducing the concept of personal vocation, understood by Germain Grisez. Horney took the self-fulfillment of the "real self" for granted, without providing a rationale for the process. I believe that personal vocation can afford a justification and description of the way the human person achieves self-fulfillment free from neurosis. Living one's personal vocation can be summarized as striving for the moral good within one's particular circumstances. This guiding principle, far from becoming a neurotic compulsion that restricts and entraps the person, integrates the person and expands the capacities for action. The Christian ethical framework of Germain Grisez can enrich Karen Horney's theory.

### **The Idealized Self and the Tyranny of the Shoulds**

Though Horney respected Sigmund Freud's theory of psychoanalysis, she rejected his drive theory that posited that the *libido* and the *thanatos* of the id determine human action. Horney (1950) argued that children are motivated by a desire for emotional security

rather than sex and death. Normally, children receive this security through contact with the family in a nurturing home environment. If the child perceives a lack of genuine love or care, due to indifference, favoritism, inconsistency, ridicule, etc., the result is emotional insecurity. Horney labeled this state basic anxiety and defined it as the “feeling of being isolated and helpless in a world conceived as potentially hostile” (p. 18).

Horney (1950) posited that these children unconsciously develop coping strategies to respond to this basic anxiety. Depending on their temperament or situation, children present a compliant, aggressive, or withdrawn stance. These children seek security by cooperating and ingratiating themselves with others, by becoming strong enough to avoid getting hurt, or by isolating themselves from others. They have judged themselves incapable of getting the love that they want. Who they actually are has been insufficient to meet their needs, so they respond by projecting idealized selves. A fundamental split exists between who the children are, their actual selves, and who the children present themselves as and want themselves to be, the “ideal self.”

Horney (1950) holds that adult neurotics have generalized this fundamental split into a dysfunctional dynamic in relating to themselves, the world, and others. Adult neurotics cycle among the compliant, aggressive, and withdrawn stances, unconsciously replaying the habitual mode of response from their childhood. The same pattern continues in the neurotic, perhaps because the emotional insecurity is still present and because the person simply does not know another way of responding.

Though these patterns of action become ingrained into the neurotic, actions and attitudes create a fundamental split within the neurotic toward reality. Horney (1950) uses the term “tyranny of the shoulds” to describe the tension between the “real self” and the “ideal self.” The real self is despised because it gave rise to basic anxiety. The person is disassociated from the possibilities and qualities of the “actual self” which comprise the person now and forces the idealized version of self, precluding the possibility to realize the potential of the real self. Neurotics are compulsively driven to be something they are not. They “should be this” and “should be that” to have emotional security. Anxiety and fear, rather than the attraction of the good, motivate their actions. These shoulds go beyond simple admonitions or suggests and become demands that dominate the decision-making process, effectively becoming a tyranny of the shoulds. The person’s anxiety forces the neurotic towards an ideal that has no correlation with actual abilities or circumstances. The idealized self sets an impossibly high standard for the neurotic:

He should be the utmost of honesty, generosity, considerateness, justice, dignity, courage, unselfishness. He should be the perfect lover, husband, teacher. He should be able to endure everything, should like everybody, should love his parents, his wife, his country; or, he should not be attached to anything or anybody, nothing should matter to him, he should never feel hurt, and he should always be serene and unruffled. (Horney, 1950, p. 65)

This obedience to the “tyranny of the shoulds” exhausts the neurotic’s resources for living. Persons do not have limitless energy and resources. The neurotic expends his effort in striving for an impossible goal, while ignoring who he actually is, the real self, and the genuine potentials possessed. He squanders his energy in striving for goals that he cannot reach. His failure only heightens his desire to reach the goal, but his energy and ability to achieve it has been lessened. The method that he employs to seek emotional security rob him of the possibility of attaining emotional security, a process that Horney terms a “vicious circle” (1950). The neurotic is engaged in a circular method of behavior, a dysfunctional pattern, in which the action proposed to solve the problem merely exacerbates the situation.

Horney’s response to ameliorate the neurotic’s dysfunctional beliefs and pattern of behavior was a therapeutic process to place the neurotic in touch with the person’s real capacity for development. In her words, “the therapeutic value of the disillusioning process lies in the possibility that, with the weakening of the obstructive forces, the constructive forces of the real self have a chance to grow” (1950, p. 348). It is crucial to help the patient reenter into reality: The person must see himself as he truly is to be able to grow. Goals, instead of being driven by anxiety, can be truly chosen. The person is able to begin effectively and finally to take charge of life instead of compulsively reacting to circumstances and striving for an unattainable goal. Far from a Freudian resolution of merely resolving fixations so that the person is driven by the superego and id with reduced inner conflict, Horney aims to help each client “assume the direction of his life in accordance with his true wishes and beliefs” (p. 375).

### **Healthy Psychology**

Horney, however, lacks a developed understanding of how a psychologically healthy person would act. A method for distinguishing “his true wishes and beliefs” is not specified. While she sees creativity

and love as positive forces within the person on the journey to self-realization, it is unclear what separates these positive forces from “shoulds.” While Horney provides insight into how the healthy person would act in a non-neurotic way, the principle by which the healthy person lives out life is not specified.

Indeed, she seems to imply that normal maturity will develop in the person unless basic anxiety causes neurosis. Horney (1950) outlines this vision of the person at the outset of her work. She compares the human individual growing and maturing with an acorn growing into an oak. The person will grow toward this self-realization on his or her own, freely and healthily developing the “real self as that central inner force, common to all human beings and yet unique in each, which is the deep source of growth” (p. 17). The healthy person is in touch with the actual self and is in the process of realizing the real self. The non-neurotic chooses a direction in life, rather than being driven by internal forces that are not understood or known. The non-neurotic person is solidly grounded in reality and leads a healthy life of creativity and love.

The psychological view of the human person is limited if it can only describe the healthy person as lacking neurosis. Although neurosis can be seen as a moderately pervasive spectrum disorder, this caveat still does not resolve the issue. Though most persons may have some dichotomy between the real selves towards which they strive and the idealized self foisted upon them by their anxieties, the constitutive principle by which a person can be judged to be non-neurotic remains unclear. Furthermore, it seems too optimistic simply to hope that the neurotic person will develop towards self-realization virtually automatically, once the neurotic coping mechanisms are removed.

Simply leading the neurotic out of neurosis without a clear goal, or at least a method of attaining one, leaves the psychologist with a risky task. Though the psychologist can help the neurotic to adjust certain symptoms of the dysfunctional attitudes and actions of neurosis, the lack of a better framework of vital and flourishing coping mechanisms may allow a recrudescence of neurosis and incomplete mental health. A more explicit understanding of how a healthy person lives could be very beneficial for a psychologist in helping the ex-neurotic avoid relapse and stagnation. A psychologist should have a clear understanding of how a healthy person evaluates the “actual self” to determine the “real self” that the person can become. In other words, a psychologist should have a grasp of the motivational structure of a healthy person as that person realizes his or her potential. A vision of an unfettered and emotionally integrated process to live the good life will make it easier to break through the emotional baggage inherent in dysfunctional behavior patterns carried since childhood.

Germain Grisez draws upon the rich Christian tradition of what it means to live a fulfilled, good life. The psychologically healthy person proceeds in a fulfilled life by living in accord with the good. Karen Horney did not develop a coherent plan of action for how the healthy person should engage in life; she did not advocate a clearly articulated ethical system. This omission appears to leave her system incomplete. I hope that grafting Grisez's understanding of motivation and vocation can flesh out and expand upon her theory. A psychologist who understands the guiding principles behind living the good life is able to conduct therapy with an implicit teleology that it would not otherwise have.

In combining the two systems, vocational fulfillment, as understood by Grisez, supersedes Horney's self-fulfillment. Self-fulfillment for Horney was the natural unfolding of the real self that takes place in non-neurotics (1950). I believe that self-fulfillment can be better expressed by living the good life and achieving one's personal vocation, rather than adopting any connotations of self-actualization, a concept later developed by Carl Rogers and Abraham Maslow. Along with Paul Vitz, I reject self-actualization because self-actualization is an unsupported construct: a justification is never given for its prescription (Vitz, 1994). Achieving self-actualization is simply assumed to be good, without proffering an argument for its universal application and desirability. Self-actualization is an optimistic vision without a necessary link to being good for—and fulfilling—every person.

Living the good life, being a morally good person, does fulfill the person and is self-fulfillment in the most basic sense. Fulfillment may be said in many different ways, depending on the context and scope of the fulfillment. A basketball player who scores many points and cooperates with the team to win a championship is indubitably a fulfilled, good basketball player. A good, fulfilled student learns and receives good grades. A fulfilled thief, however, is one that successfully performed an impressive heist. A good, fulfilled person, simply speaking, is a morally good person. As a person, not just as a basketball player, a student, or a thief, a person is good insofar as that person has a will in conformity with the good. Morality is that by which a person is good or bad (Grisez, 1983).

While being morally good does not coincide with psychological health, it seems to be a necessary component. The psychologically healthy person, consonant with Horney's views, lives in accord with reality and is not motivated by anxieties. Persons who act in accord with the good are responding honestly to reality in achieving their personal vocations. I propose that persons who use moral principles within unique circumstances achieve self-fulfillment by living out their personal vocation and are psychologically healthy.

## **Towards Personal Vocation**

An understanding of the fundamental principle of ethics provides the principles by which healthy individuals organize their lives. A neurotic's life is organized around apparent goods because of a fundamental dichotomy between the idealized self and the real self. The healthy person, in organizing a life goal, seeks to organize life around real goods, which becomes a fundamental principle for acting well. Germain Grisez formulates the fundamental principle of morality in the following words: "In voluntarily acting for human goods and avoiding what is opposed to them, one ought to choose and otherwise will those and only those possibilities whose willing is compatible with a will toward integral human fulfillment" (1983, p. 184). Out of respect for the good, the good person seeks the good without ever choosing to do evil.

Horney conceived of emotional security as the good sought unconsciously by the child, the privation of which causes neurosis (1950). While this is, indeed, an important value for normal human development and growth, I do not think it is the only good which can motivate human action. In other words, it is not necessary to trace all the actions of healthy individuals back to a desire for emotional security. The lack of emotional security creates an obsession to achieve it, with the resulting neurotic complexes, but the healthy individual acts to achieve any of a variety of goods, depending on the circumstances. The person always wants the fullness of goods and is unsatisfied when goods are not realized. A starving person strives mightily to obtain food, while a student, who already has enough to eat, is much more preoccupied with earning good grades. A person, however, may be quite willing to starve, if the alternative means betrayal.

Grisez (1983) speaks of the incommensurability and multiplicity of goods as basic human motivations in Chapter 5 of *Christian Moral Principles*. To paraphrase his list, the person desires to stay alive, learn the truth, appreciate beauty, engage in friendship, develop talents skillfully, achieve authenticity, and maintain self-integrity. The multiplicity of desirable goods results in a dilemma: in choosing one good, some other goods are not being chosen. Because the person cannot actualize all goods with each action, he or she must choose to realize some goods, even though that means that other goods cannot be realized. The good person, in fulfilling his or her personal vocation, discerns between goods and organizes life around the selection of some goods, while never choosing evil.

The process of living grounded in reality, as one develops the "actual self" into the "real self," requires decisions made to achieve

certain goals. Certain choices bear more weight upon future options and circumstances by requiring a commitment. Grisez calls the more fundamental choices vocational choices. For him, “Vocational choices that organize our lives (as does a choice of life or profession) are commitments. More than being choices to do one thing or another, they are far-reaching decisions to be this or that and accept the consequences of that choice” (Grisez and Shaw, 2003, p. 87). Good is no longer contemplated in the abstract but incarnated in the person’s life. The healthy person commits to a good, such as that of marriage, and then incarnates the good inherent in being a person who realizes that good. Choice brings the fundamental principle of morality out of the abstract and into concrete reality.

Each choice is made by a particular human person with unique talents and circumstances. Each person is an unrepeatable individual, and the process of selecting one option out of the many available is a daunting but necessary task. The healthy person must make fundamental decisions, as Horney reminded us, according to “true wishes and beliefs.” Considering concrete circumstances, the person chooses certain goals and makes some commitments that shape future choices. Our contingent nature prohibits the realization of all possibilities and the selection of some choices necessarily precludes other options.

Personal circumstances narrow the person’s real range of possibilities. The vast majority of humanity should not choose to be professional basketball players because they lack the set of natural talents or the competitive drive necessary to compete on the professional level. To choose to dedicate one’s entire life to basketball when the person is of short stature and with unenviable reflexes is incongruous with real possibilities and circumstances. The complexity of making a commitment in cases where the alternatives are not as clear or obvious demands more careful discernment.

Discernment, for Grisez and Shaw, requires “a realistic inventory of the opportunities for service and the threats and challenges they face, along with their own particular gifts and limitations” (2003, p. 101). The process of discernment allows the person to know the particular circumstances and real possibilities within which the person chooses to incarnate the good. The person matches the opportunities and challenges of circumstances with personal gifts and limitations. In Grisez’s view, discernment should create a harmony of emotions in seeking a goal. From all the attractive possibilities, the person organizes decisions around a life goal in respect to personal circumstances, what Grisez names living one’s personal vocation.

Discernment becomes the nexus point between Grisez's personal vocation and Horney's real self. The healthy person is authentic, acting according to his actual self and working towards the real self. This person achieves self-integration through attainable, personal goals discovered through discernment. The healthy person considers possible goods, all of which are attractive, but commits through choice to the one which best instantiates the real self that the person is able and desires to become. This is in contrast to the neurotic's tyranny of the shoulds which drives the person to seek mutually exclusive goals simultaneously, e.g., "he should be spontaneous; he should always control his feelings" (Horney, 1950, p. 65). Personal vocation is the practical living out of the fundamental principle of morality, a selection of the good from within the particular circumstances of the individual. Personal vocation is the means by which a person best realizes individual potential.

Lest the individual become too atomized, it is good to recall the importance of community in discerning a vocation. The human person, in Horney's view, is naturally communal and made for love. Neurosis, in a sense, is the result of the breakdown of community. "The focus was decidedly on interpersonal factors. To me neurosis was still essentially a disturbance in human relationships" (Horney, 1950, p. 367). Community is a fundamental condition for the real self to actualize itself, to grow from acorn to oak. Others give the child basic emotional security: in community the person develops inner strength. "If he can thus grow with others, in love and in friction, he will also grow in accordance with his real self" (p. 18). The goods which motivate an individual, those that become most attractive and present in the mind, are determined largely by the society around the person. The community both shapes the individual's views and offers opportunities for action. An individual never chooses to live out a personal vocation alone, but rather always in community. Persons living out their personal vocations are non-neurotic, what Horney would term as self-fulfilled.

### **The Richness of Personal Vocation**

Grisez (1983) explains how fulfilling one's personal vocation opens more possibilities for the person. Though the person is restricted by previous commitments and the necessity always to do the good, this conformity to the good expands the person. Basic human goods, those which motivate action, fulfill basic human needs. These basic needs spring from the nature of the person. Just as a plant needs water, nutrients, sun, and air to live and thrive, the person has a list of needs,

such as emotional security. That which is good for the person helps the person to flourish. Conforming to nature and choosing the good, rather than being restrictive, guide the person to greater possibilities. The psychologically healthy person experiences a widening of possibilities while living out the personal vocation.

The growing capacity for the good through conformity to the good is like training for a marathon. Most individuals are not capable of running one six-minute mile, much less 26 of them in a row. Running a marathon is not a real possibility for most people. Once a person takes on the commitment to run a marathon, however, the runner embraces a training regimen to work towards that goal. Regular practice runs and stretching fill the marathoner's schedule. Due to the commitment that she has made, the runner cannot stay out late several nights a week because of her early morning runs. The runner adopts dietary restrictions so that her body is able to run for three continuous hours. After weeks of practice, the runner has built up the physical stamina and conditioning necessary for the marathon. The feat of running the marathon, which was impossible for the uncommitted individual, becomes a real possibility for the trained runner.

As a Christian, Grisez (2003) believes that personal vocation possesses another level of meaning. Personal vocation is a gift from the Creator, who has bestowed each person with particular gifts and circumstances in His Divine Providence. As each person searches for this individual vocation, that role exists to be found, a part offered by God in extending the Divine Kingdom. The individual experiences God's invitation to cooperate in a particular role partially through pious emotions and ideals. A large part of discernment for Grisez lies in harmonizing two disparate emotions, those that arise from appealing options and those that are inspired by pious activities and spiritual ideals. Respect for the beliefs of the client may restrain the psychologist from referring explicitly to the spiritual aspects of this view of vocation, but the Christian conception of vocation proposes a coherent system of selecting a possibility amidst concrete circumstances and various emotions.

Though not everyone chooses to become a good runner or a good Christian, everyone should aim at living out one's personal vocation. Achieving psychological health and self-fulfillment are too important to take for granted. A definite methodology for realizing the real self should be developed. The person should strive for real goods, not imaginary ones. Since not every good can be realized, the person must select those that are best in harmony with particular gifts and circumstances. Though some goods cannot be chosen, a good should

never be violated: evil cannot be chosen. In choosing a goal, a person becomes the kind of person who achieves that goal. Although fulfilling chosen commitments restrict certain possibilities, conformity to past decisions also expands possibilities for human fulfillment.

## References

Grisez, G. (1983). *Christian Moral Principles*. Quincy, IL: Franciscan Press.

Grisez, G. & Shaw, R. (2003). *Personal Vocation: God Calls Everyone by Name*. Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor Publishing Division.

Horney, K. (1950). *Neurosis and Human Growth*. New York: Norton and Co.

Vitz, P. (1994) *Psychology as Religion*. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.

