The Cartesian Chasm
Karl Stern's Understanding of the Roots of our Cultural Pathology

Donald L. Carveth, Emeritus Professor of Sociology and Social and Political Thought at York University, and Training and Supervising Analyst, Canadian Institute of Psychoanalysis, will be giving a lecture at 6pm on Friday October 9th in the Phenomenology Center

Sponsored by the McAnulty College and Graduate School of Liberal Arts, the Simon Silverman Phenomenology Center, and the Office of Mission and Identity at Duquesne University

Abstract

Like Freud who viewed personal development as a progression from narcissism to object love, holding that “… in the last resort we must begin to love in order not to fall ill, and we are bound to fall ill if, in consequence of frustration, we are unable to love,” Karl Stern conceived maturation as proceeding from lower to higher levels of union, from infantile oneness with the mother to, ideally, a fully mature capacity for self-dispossessing love of the other. In the history of the West, Stern traces an ever-deepening split in our souls grounded in the Cartesian chasm between res cogitans and res extensa, subject and object, psyche and soma, and the predominance in our materialistic, positivistic and technocratic culture of analytic/objective over poetic/intuitive ways of knowing. When valid knowledge is confined to objectivity it excludes what St. Thomas recognized as the knowledge by connaturality that enables us to empathize with others, a type of knowledge recovered in psychoanalysis, not least in its grasp of the psychosomatic, despite what Habermas, following Jaspers, recognized as its “scientistic self-misunderstanding.” When Manichaean devaluation of nature and the human body is overcome, we can experience a connatural sense of unity with other creatures and a feeling of the earth as our home—an attitude that, at least in the West, came, in Stern's view, to its greatest flowering in the Franciscan spirituality most recently celebrated by His Holiness, Pope Francis, in Laudato Si'. Although Stern's work suffers from a specious identification of the objective/analytic, dominating and activist orientation with masculinity and the empathic/intuitive, receptive and contemplative virtues with femininity, once freed from these outmoded gender equations his contribution to our understanding of the roots of our cultural pathology remains illuminating and timely, as do his reflections on the difference between conscience and the Freudian superego.

Dr. Carverth will also be doing a conversational seminar on atheism and belief in Karl Stern, Erik Erikson, and Erich Fromm on Saturday afternoon from 3-5. Both events will be in the Phenomenology Center and all are welcome.