

## O. Void

### DO YOU HAVE AN AUTHORITY PROBLEM?

*- Do you think that things work best if there is a definite structure where some command and some obey?*

*- Do you feel it is right for junior people to be pushed around a bit, because when they become senior, they will get a chance to push others around?*

*- Do you feel that if something is laid down by a properly constituted authority in a legitimate way, that it has probably been well thought out and should presumably be obeyed?*

*- Do you think that decision hierarchies will always arise in practice, so that we may as well get used to the idea of handling them?*

*- Do you feel that nothing ever gets done if everybody's opinion is taken into account?*

*- Do you believe that if it appears on television, it is probably true?*

If you answer 'yes' to any of these questions, you probably have an authority problem. The symptoms include a great need for structure (you feel lost unless there is a definite set of rules in any situation); a great desire for leadership (you feel unhappy in any situation where someone is not offering a definite lead of some kind); and a great respect for power (you are always looking, in any situation, for the person who actually wields the power).

In the world which is now emerging, these symptoms unfit people for any real participation or responsibility. Because of the speed of change, the kind of rigidity involved is maladaptive - it just does not work. We have to learn now how to work with very fluid, unstructured situations, because that is what the world is fast becoming. In a world where Rolls-Royce goes bust and the USA abandons the maintenance of the dollar, who can doubt this? Similarly with leadership and power - as soon as we think we have identified the right leader, he changes; as soon as we think we have identified the power centre, it shifts or disappears.

So we have to learn a new way, which is actually easier in some ways, and more difficult in others.

The new way is to rely upon our own perceptions, needs and wants much more. We try to be more alert and awake to what we prefer and what we wish to avoid in situations. This is interesting to learn, and very rewarding as one does it. It is a question of making our own definition of a situation, rather than spending all our energy on finding out someone else's definition.

This is actually the relatively easy part. Even this may be difficult at first, and it may be necessary to practise in specially encouraging circumstances to get it right, but basically it is fun. The difficult part comes when other people are involved. You want to do something which involves other people, and find that some of them don't want to do it at all, some of them want to do something different, and some of them don't know or won't say what they want. These problems are the problems of living, and there are no answers which can be given to them in the abstract. They have to be worked on with the people involved.

The point I want to make here is that the rigidities of the culture in which we live make it hard for any of these new adaptations to take place. Even the ability to know what we prefer is made hard for us.

In schools, in the workshop, in the office, in the mass media, in our leisure activities, we are continually pushed into situations where someone else decides what we shall do, have, experience, or be. And in many of these situations, fear is used to make things worse.

And so the authority problems are intensified. We are made to feel that this is the only way. The fact that it is a completely wrong adaptation to the new world in which we are now living seems to make no difference. The central problem is, of course, acquiescence in your own oppression, but it can take many and sometimes subtle forms. Nobody, I hope, really wants to be oppressed, but the methods we adopt to avoid oppression usually lead us straight into it. Here are five of the commonest methods:

1. *Non-commitment*. This is probably the most often used method of all. We join an organisation, but privately refuse to have any real involvement with it. We go, work as little as possible for them, as much as possible for ourselves, draw our money and save any real enthusiasm for our leisure time - if we have enough energy left for enthusiasms. Because we are not involved at work, we don't join the social club, or the union, or the works outing. As a method of avoiding oppression, this leads to the worst failure of all - we actually rob ourselves of all forms of satisfaction, personal, social and economic, by this approach.

2. *Commitment*. This is the 'career' method. The idea is to avoid oppression by systematically rising to a level where we are doing it to the others rather than having it done to us. After slaving away for a number of years, it gradually becomes clear that there are bloody few people getting to this level - the managing director is just as insecure and messed about as anyone else. One is still a cog - maybe a highly-paid cog - in someone else's machine. The oppression is not so dire as all that, but it is very real, and very galling to anyone who really thought he was going to escape it.

3. *Commitment to one's mates*. One feels that through the union, the staff association, the professional organisation or whatever, one is going to avoid oppression oneself, and also help others to avoid it, too. What one finds is that this organisation of one's mates becomes just as oppressive as the organisation it was intended to combat. The same hierarchical structure is

used, the same apathy reigns. Calling people brothers and sisters is not sufficient to hide the realities of an oppressive structure.

4. *Being your own boss.* Perhaps the biggest illusion of the lot. Either one finds some backwater where one is completely isolated and neutralised, or else one finds oneself in the jungle of commerce, where he who has the longest fangs and the sharpest claws wins the battle - for the moment. In either case the oppression goes on unabated.

5. *Political parties.* Perhaps one adopts at last a political perspective, that if there are oppressive structures in society, one must organise to change them directly. Political parties, however, have exactly the same hierarchical structure as the organisations they are trying to overthrow! And when such a party gains power, it simply renames the structures. When the French Revolution renamed Brumaire, it still remained the same old February.

So these are the five commonest ways in which people try, and fail, to remove their oppression. They fail because they do not take account of the problem of authority, which is close to the heart of oppression.

We run into these inadequate ways of avoiding oppression because we do not realise that we are suffering from an authority problem. Some questions were given at the head of this article to help us to recognise such a problem within ourselves. Now here are some exercises to help in loosening up the power of this malady.

**EXERCISE A:** Look at a bookshelf of books on your favourite subject, and say to yourself - 'Ninety percent of this is bullshit.'

**EXERCISE B:** Look at your favourite newspaper, and say to yourself - 'Most of this is lies.'

**EXERCISE C:** Listen to someone lecturing, and say to yourself - 'He's actually experienced a tiny bit of this, and all the rest of it is waffle.'

**EXERCISE D:** Watch yourself as you ask someone to do something. Are you relying on an established role structure which puts the other person at a disadvantage, or are you speaking as one person to another? (Hint: Try to look at the situation through the other person's eyes.)

**EXERCISE E:** If somebody asks you to do something in such a way that it relies on a role structure which puts you at a disadvantage, try saying 'NO'. See what it feels like. It can feel very good. Explain that you said 'No' because you want to be treated like a real person, not just a position-filler.

If you persevere with these and similar exercises, you will run into certain new problems. Some educated idiot will come up to you and say - (You obviously have an authority problem!) To which the appropriate answer is - 'No, I am just against authority'.

But the answer will need some elaboration, because it will sound too sweeping. We are using *authority* in a specific sense, the sense in which it means one person having

authority over another person, and wielding power over that person. That is what we are opposed to.

What we are not opposed to is one person having power *with* another person. We have no objection to following someone else's suggestions if some common endeavour needs that to happen. But this has to be a reciprocal thing - he has to be willing to follow our suggestions if they are better adapted to the real situation, or to listen to our suggestions in order to arrive at some solution which is superior to either of the original ideas. And in groups and organisations there has to be a real respect for the other person's praxis.

In this way we can solve our authority problem, and become real persons, interacting with other real people, to help the new society emerge. And where the rigidities of the existing system get in the way of this, we shall have to find ways of bypassing, undermining, seducing or overthrowing them. It depends how they react to us.

This article was written by a male and addressed primarily to male readers. Women have already been writing this kind of message to each other for some time.

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## Letter to the editor

Dear Sir

I don't know how many copies of *Self & Society* have been read by people who have had very little to do with humanistic psychology, or who have never been to an encounter group, but here are the thoughts of one such person.

Your ideas are interesting, but surely your magazine is not getting to the audience who would most benefit from it. What are you doing in fact to try to appeal to people who are not aware of what it is to be self aware?

You have only to walk about the streets of any town outside the trendy areas of London, either shopping, or to see people going about their business, and judging by the expressions on their faces, their minds appear to be a complete blank.

Have you ever watched women shop? Have you longed to know what enters their thoughts? Are they really just thinking about the price of food and its spiral? Are they really aware of the