

The Ones say the Others must BUILD bombs. To survive . . .  
The Ones say the Others must BUY bombs. For survival . . .  
The Ones say the Others must USE bombs. For what ???  
The Ones say who the people are whom the Others must kill.  
And the Ones say how many of them must be destroyed,  
how much earth must be distraught.  
And if the Others still believe that they don't have a choice,  
then the women will cry, 'cause their men are dead,  
'cause they are dying themselves,  
and 'cause our Earth is dying.

Women,  
Your men play at war, 'cause they are afraid of you,  
afraid of you and your feelings.  
Women, don't be afraid of the power of your men - their power is fear.  
Don't be afraid of your own strength - your power is love of Life. Unite for  
this love of Life:  
against fear and order, against weapons, against war.  
For this love of life empower yourselves:  
towards courage and understanding, towards freedom and Peace.

Sabine Kurjo

---

Michael J. Apter and  
K.P.C. Smith

## EMPATHY AND MASTERY

Miss Smith, who is a secretary, is in a quandary. Mr. Brown, her boss, has just given her a bouquet of flowers, for the first time, and she does not know what this means. Is it in recognition of all the good work which she has done for him? If so, is it a symbol of genuine gratitude on his part, or a kind of perfunctory gesture to 'pay her off?' Is it a cynical way of encouraging her to work harder than most secretaries do, but for the same pay? Is it an attempt to make her feel grateful to, and dependent on, him? Or is he becoming fond of her, perhaps even a little bit in love? All these interpretations of this single act are possible, and as she thinks about them Miss Smith becomes increasingly confused.

What this example illustrates is a point which tends to be overlooked by many psychologists, especially experimental psychologists. This is that a given piece of behaviour can have many different meanings for the person who performs it, and can be performed in many different states of mind - and that unless this is taken into account any attempt to understand the behaviour will necessarily be inadequate. This point is one which is, however, fully recognised by most people in the course of everyday life.

All aspect of this state of affairs is that there may be said to be two levels of experience: that of the contents of experience, including one's own actions, and a 'meta-level' which consists of interpretations by oneself of the contents of one's experience. This is a '**meta-level**' because it takes the contents as its subject-matter: it is **about** them. Thus one can offer a visiting friend "just one more drink" in the hope that he will stay longer as a result, or in the hope that this will precipitate his imminent departure. The offer itself would be part of the content of experience, and the reason one gave oneself for making the offer would be part of the meta-level.

One of the most important features of someone's state of mind during an interaction will be the way he sees his **relationship** to the person with whom he is interacting, and it is this aspect of the experience of interactions which will be the focus of attention in this article.

What we wish to propose here is that there are in fact basically two different and alternative ways of interpreting one's relationship to another person at a given time: all the seemingly different ways of experiencing self-other relationships are really variants on, and elaborations of, these two fundamental forms. Since these two 'ways of being' are temporary and can change, even in the course of the same continuing interaction, it is suitable to think of them as states. And since they define something about the way in which the contents of experience are interpreted, i.e. they are at a meta-level with respect to these contents, they can be thought of as 'meta-states'. These two basic meta-states will, for the purposes of the present discussion, be labelled the 'empathy' and 'mastery' states respectively.

## Empathy and Mastery contrasted

Perhaps the most basic difference between these two states is that in the empathy state one is, in some sense, 'open' to the 'other' (i.e. the person who one is interacting with), seeing oneself as being in some way bounded up with this person in an 'us' relationship. In the mastery state one is 'closed' to the other, not in the sense that there

is no exchange of information, goods, etc, but in the sense that the other is excluded from one's own sense of selfhood. Another way of putting this is in terms of the conscious awareness which we all have at all times of some kind of boundary between self and not-self. In the empathy state the other is felt in some way to be on the self side of this boundary, whereas in the mastery state the other is seen as being firmly on the not-self side.

Each of these two states would appear to be associated with different social (or 'relational') needs. In the empathy state one feels a need to come as close as one can to the other, to be as intimate as possible. This could be described as a need for 'mergence' with the other. (The term 'mergence' is chosen here because it is neutral as to whether self, as it were, assimilates the other or is assimilated by the other - and also as to whether the other is a person or an event, situation, etc). Lack of mergence is felt as a form of loneliness. In the mastery state, as the name implies, the need is to master the other, to control, manipulate, or dominate. When this is achieved there is a feeling of power; and in its absence there is a feeling of weakness and subordination.

There is a sense in which these two states are not just different, but opposite ways in which one can see one's relationship to the other. Thus in the mastery state, the ideal is for self to be experienced as greater and stronger than the other, because in this way one feels powerful. In the empathy state the ideal is for the other to be greater than self, because if mergence takes place then self is enhanced by taking on some of the qualities of the other - as in hero-worship, for example. In this case, the greater the other the more expansive and uplifted one's feelings are when mergence with the other takes place.

The way in which the individual perceives the **transactions** which take place between self and other will also depend on which meta-state he or she is in. So these states determine not only the way the relationship with other is seen, but also the way in which the interactions which take place during the course of this relationship are seen. In the empathy state the attempt will be to interact in such a way as to enhance the other; and one's actions are likely to be perceived as involving care, or even love. Receiving care and love will also of course be enjoyed in this state since, among other things, feelings of intimacy will be increased as a consequence. In the mastery state, interactions will be perceived as representing the relative strengths of self and other in a struggle for power and dominance, and the attempt here will be to 'possess' the other or

to extract goods, or services from the other. This means that in the empathy state, transactions are felt to involve giving or being-given, in the mastery state as taking or having-taken-away. (It should be noticed, incidentally, that providing goods or services in the mastery state **can** be pleasant on condition that it is perceived as a symbol of power on the part of the provider.)

It should not be assumed that two people who are interacting at a given time are necessarily in the same state as each other at that time. Nor should it be assumed that when two people interact with each other on different occasions the state of mind of each is always the same on each occasion. Nor will any given type of relationship, e.g. marriage, the doctor-patient relationship, or the relationship of tutor and tutee, always involve in all cases and at all times the same conjunction of states of mind. Rather, change and variety would seem to be the essence of human relationships at the meta-level which is being addressed here. Even at a given time, during the course of a particular interaction episode, one would expect one or both of the people involved to switch from one state to the other, and perhaps to continue to fluctuate in their interpretation of their relationship to, and transactions with, the other during that period of time. For example, it may be that during a particular sexual encounter one or both partners switch back and forth between feelings of love and endearment (which are essentially empathic) and of lust (which is essentially about dominance over the other, and use of the other for one's own ends).

No claim is being made here for the innate superiority of one state or the other. Indeed, both seem to play an essential part in everyday life - sometimes assertiveness being necessary and at other times sympathy and understanding being more important. After all, the well-adjusted person is likely to be able to adopt the appropriate state of mind in the appropriate setting - feeling empathic in church, for example, or visiting a sick relative, but attempting mastery while engaged in pay negotiations with the boss, or refusing to accept sub-standard goods from a shop. Furthermore, in relation to another particular person, it may be necessary to switch between states at different times. For example, a surgeon may need to be in the mastery state in the theatre when operating on a patient, but should be in the empathy state when interviewing that patient in his consulting room.

So far these two states have been presented on the whole as if another **person** is always at the focus of attention in the individual's 'phenomenal field'. But of course one may at a particular time be centrally aware

of something else: an animal, a plant, an object, a situation. Since we suppose that either the empathy state or the mastery state is 'in control' of experience at all times, we must assume that whatever is at the focus of attention, whether a person or not, will also be experienced in one way or the other. And indeed, this does seem to be the case. For example, one either relates to an animal in an empathic way as a 'pet', or in a manipulative way as a commodity (food) or a tool (e.g. as a beast of burden). Consistent with this is the fact that all cultures tend to make a sharp distinction between animals which may be used as if they were objects (chickens in a battery farm, bulls in the bull ring, rats in the laboratory) and animals which must be treated in a humane fashion (e.g. cats and dogs).

Similarly, while going for a walk in the countryside, one can empathise with the surroundings, feeling part of them, and experiencing what some writers have described as an 'oceanic' feeling. But if one is a geologist looking for oil, or a developer considering a 'site', then one's feelings about the terrain are more likely most of the time to be of the manipulative mastery type.

This kind of distinction can even be made in respect of relationships which one might feel oneself to have to supernatural forces. Indeed, this is essentially the distinction between religion and magic. When one is experiencing genuinely religious feelings one feels love towards God and other people, and places oneself at the service of both. But if one is practising magic, then the attempt is to control supernatural forces for one's own selfish ends. A similar distinction can be made between meditation - one of the characteristic experiences of which is a feeling of mergence or 'oneness' with that which is meditated about - and, for example, the sort of thinking which a scientist often engages in, in which that which is thought about is objectified and distanced as far as possible so that it can be handled without misleading emotional involvement, and brought under control.

## Relevance to psychotherapy

It was suggested above that the well-adjusted person will be able to experience both empathy and mastery at different times, and under appropriate conditions. Some problems which confront the therapist or counsellor, therefore, may require help in this respect. Often this problem will have emerged in the context of family relationships: for example, husband and wife trying to dominate each other, rather than empathising with each other's needs. Furthermore, some problems may derive from or be exacerbated by, a misunderstanding by one person of the state of mind of the other person with whom he or she

is interacting. For example, nurturance may be misperceived as control and resented for this reason. Or control may be misperceived as care, allowing one person to take advantage of the other and to act as a kind of 'confidence trickster' in the relationship.

The relationship between therapist and client, too, may be one in which the therapist is in either the mastery or the empathy state. It is notable in this respect that different therapeutic systems tend to emphasise one or other type of relationship during therapy. Thus behaviour modification, being derived from Behaviourism, with its overriding concern for prediction and control, encourages the mastery state of mind in the therapist by its very nature. Similarly, orthodox Freudians see their function to be that of objective analysis of the patient and, although transference by the patient is seen as an essential part of treatment, countertransference on the part of the therapist is regarded as leading to distortion in the analysis and therefore to be avoided at all costs. Humanistic approaches to therapy, on the other hand, are clearly of a type which encourages, and even insists on, empathy on the part of the therapist. The approach of Carl Rogers is a classic example in this respect.

## Extending reversal theory

The reader may recall that an earlier edition of *Self and Society* (September/October, 1981) was devoted to a new theory in psychology known as the theory of psychological reversals, and that one of the central tenets of this theory was that there existed a number of pairs of alternative ways of interpreting one or another aspect of motivation. These were defined as metamotivational states. For example, it was argued that arousal could be interpreted in opposite ways, in one case high arousal being pleasant (excitement) and in the other, high arousal being unpleasant (anxiety). In one metamotivational state, therefore, the individual would behave in such a way as to increase his felt level of arousal up to a pleasantly high level, and in the other state to reduce it down to a pleasantly low level. (The theory is described and in detail in Apter, 1982).

It was noted earlier in this article that the empathy and mastery states are 'meta-states', consisting as they do of alternative ways of interpreting some of the contents of experience. It has also become apparent that they have a motivational component, since implicit in each way of interpreting self-other relationships and interactions is a way of seeing "what one is up to". In other words, each state has its own goals and satisfactions. These two states, therefore, can be regarded, among other things, as metamotivational states. Furthermore, since each state is opposite to the other in the ways

indicated, the two taken together may be said to constitute another pair of metamotivational states, with switches between them being reversals. In this respect, therefore, what is being suggested here is an extension of the theory of psychological reversals into a dimension of experience not previously dealt with in the theory.

The words 'empathy' and 'mastery' have been used here because they indicate in a broadly intuitive way the essence of the distinction which is being made. There are, however, some problems with these widely used everyday words because they can be used in ways which would be at variance with our intentions. For example, 'empathy' can be used to mean that one is sensitive to, or good at identifying, the emotions of the other and clearly one may be good at such identifications in the mastery state - a sadistic psychopath, for example, may in this sense empathise with a victim while dominating him or her. But this would not be empathy in the sense intended here. In the future, therefore, we may have to coin some new words to depict these two states.

All this is, of course, just the beginning of the story. The full nature of these two states, the factors which induce one state or the other in different circumstances, and the way in which these states combine with other states identified in reversal theory - all these are themes which we look forward to developing in future publications.

## Reference

Apter, M.J. (1982) **The Experience of Motivation: The Theory of Psychological Reversals.** London: Academic Press.

---

## THE LONG WORD

In the beginning was the word - the POTENTIAL  
and the potential was with God - with LOVE  
And the potential was Love.  
In love was light  
And light is Life  
And Life shines in the darkness of Un-Life -  
In the darkness of the secret, the unknown, the unborn.

The creative act is the uniting of opposites,  
An act which must perpetually renew itself  
That the word may become flesh,  
That the potential may be revealed.

Greta Palmer