

The Theme of Authenticity in World Literature

The theme of authenticity in human relationships comes to the forefront of world literature in the nineteenth century.

I am thinking of authors such as Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, Ibsen, Victor Hugo, Mark Twain, Ambrose Bierce, and of philosophers such as Kierkegaard. This theme seems to have emerged almost spontaneously in several different cultural milieux, as can be seen from the above short list of authors from Russia, Scandinavia, Europe, and America.

This literature presents a certain analysis of the human condition that rests upon the following two theses. (1) The true meaning of human existence consists in the establishment of authentic relationships between and among human beings. Everything else which has a value, has a value only insofar as it contributes to authenticity in human relationships. According to this view of the human condition, nothing else but the establishment of authentic interhuman relationships could possibly be the central meaning of human existence. (2) At the same time, the human condition is such that most people appear unable to sustain authentic relationships. For example, most people will, under certain circumstances, betray their friends and loved ones in order to save themselves.

By an authentic relationship between two people, we mean a totally reciprocal relationship based on the mutual recognition of the universal value which they each share as human beings and which is inherent in their essential nature. This value is their uniquely human capacities of consciousness, of intellect, of feeling (heart), and of will. The mark of authenticity in human relations is the presence of self-sacrificing (unconditional) love, or altruism.

This, of course, is lateral authenticity, i.e., authenticity in interhuman relationships. There is also vertical authenticity, i.e., authenticity in our relationship with God. Vertical authenticity is based on our conscious submission to God as a moral authority higher than ourselves. Ultimately, lateral authenticity depends on vertical authenticity because it is only in an authentic relationship with God that we acquire and develop the capacity for authentic relationships with our fellows.

There is a God-intended subtlety here. Our relationship with God is an unobservable, inner relationship, but the way we treat others is, for the most part, observable and constitutes the outer reflection of our inner relationship with God: lateral authenticity is the proof or evidence of vertical authenticity. In other words, lateral authenticity

consists in what we are and do, rather than in what we say, think, or feel about ourselves. If our actions towards others consistently betray cruel and selfish motives, it is quite useless for us to claim that, inside and underneath it all, we are really warm, loving, sincerely motivated individuals with an intense inner relationship with God.¹ Because lateral authenticity is largely observable, it has been the prime focus of the literary works generated by the authors listed above. However, the vertical dimension of authenticity is always present and, for authors such as Kierkegaard and Dostoevsky, becomes quite explicit at times.

The Frustration of the Will to Authenticity

If authenticity is the meaning of life and if humans generally fail in their attempts at authenticity, then it follows that most of us miss the central purpose of our existence. This is indeed a troubling proposition and one which should incite us to reflect deeply about human nature and human capacity. Let us call this view of the human condition the dilemma of authenticity. Simply stated, the dilemma of authenticity is that, on one hand, the deepest needs of our essential nature impel us towards authenticity but, on the other hand, certain limitations of this same nature prevent most of us from achieving authenticity. This unsatisfied hunger for authenticity creates what we might call the frustration of the will to authenticity. We now examine the thesis that the frustrated will to authenticity is the key to understanding the dynamics of the various ideological struggles which have dominated the twentieth century.

Cultural Solutions to the Dilemma of Authenticity

The history of the Russian people is fraught with sufferings, privations, and injustices. In the years before 1861, when Tsar Alexander II finally liberated the serfs from bondage, fully ninety percent of the population of Russia was in servitude. The other ten percent consisted primarily of intellectuals and aristocrats, mostly living in either Moscow or St. Petersburg. Within a generation of the liberation of the serfs, the Bolshevik revolution effectively re-enslaved the entire population, a condition from which Russia is just now barely emerging. There never has been in Russia a middle class comparable to that of the modern nation-states of Europe and North America. This history has forged in the Russian national psyche a quality of stoic endurance and survivalism that has few equals elsewhere: Russians generally do not expect life to be easy or fair, nor do they have illusions that lovers are always faithful or that friends never betray. Yet, their art and literature

consistently picture authentic human relations as the meaning and goal of existence.

Thus, the “classical” Russian view of the human condition is that we are condemned to the noble pursuit of an impossible goal. In this worldview, the meaning of life consists not in external success, which is largely considered to be impossible in any case, but rather, in the nobility and dignity with which we accept and respond to the sufferings and the injustices of life.

Further, in this view nothing in the material world is permanent. Permanence can only be obtained from that which transcends purely material limitations in some way—primarily art, literature, music, and dance. The truly wise do not waste efforts in a futile attempt to remodel the material world, because any material transformation will, sooner or later, regress and degenerate. Moreover, the material world is so unpredictable that we can never be certain of achieving any goal, no matter how intensely we pursue it. Society is thus not viewed as an arena where the individual acts freely in the pursuit of individual goals. The fundamental expression of human freedom lies not in the pursuit of success but in the care with which one chooses one’s friends, who are perceived as comrades-in-arms in the struggle against the sufferings of life.

In other words, the Russian solution to the dilemma of authenticity is to focus primarily on the process by which authenticity is pursued, over which we do have some significant degree of control, rather than on the results of the process (the degree of success we actually obtain), over which we have very little control. While being satisfactory on one level, this solution is profoundly unsatisfactory on another, and it gives rise to what we may call a thirst for absolutes—a longing that has become a significant characteristic of the Russian psyche. My thesis is that it is this thirst for absolutes that created the conditions for the Russian people to accept the absolutist doctrine of Communism, which seeks to establish an absolutely egalitarian society, and thus to establish authentic relations by social decree rather than through cumulative individual effort.

Marx was, after all, a social determinist who believed, apparently sincerely, that appropriate social structures could completely determine individual human behavior. Like other materialists, Marx thought that humans are ineradicably selfish and egotistical. It is therefore utopian to hope that humans can be truly altruistic in their fundamental motivation. In Marx’s view, this was the basic error of religion—that it sought to change the

unchangeable and essentially selfish heart of man. But Marxists thought that one can, nevertheless, realistically hope to obtain altruistic behavior through the implementation of appropriate social structures (the socialization of the means of production), because under these conditions everyone will see that service to the collectivity is in his or her own self interest. In other words, within a socialist framework, the essentially selfish motivation of the individual and the interests of the collectivity would simply coincide.

Thus, the ethical thrust of Marxism is the notion that it is possible to obtain altruistic behavior in the absence of altruistic motivation. Let us designate this doctrine as the fundamental internal contradiction of Marxism.

To sum up, the Russian solution to the dilemma of authenticity involves the thirst for absolutes, the noble pursuit of an impossible goal, the value given to human relations as a solidarity in the struggle against the sufferings of life, and the value given to artistic expression as a collective experience of transcendence. And these very characteristics of the Russian solution formed the basis for the vast social experiment that was Bolshevism.²

Let us turn now to a consideration of the American solution to the dilemma of authenticity. In considering the genesis of contemporary American culture, we should realize that the authenticity dilemma was elucidated just

as forcefully in American literature as it was in the literature of Russia. For example, in Mark Twain's novel

Huckleberry Finn a young white boy (Huck Finn) aids an illiterate black man, Jim, to escape from slavery. As Finn muses on what he has done, he realizes that he has violated every norm of his society, including the moral and

spiritual norms of his church, which would say that he is going to everlasting hell for helping free Jim. He goes so

far as to compose a handwritten note denouncing Jim to the authorities but then is overcome by recollections of

Jim's kindness and humanity. He finally tears up the unsent note, saying, "All right, then, I'll go to hell" (Clemens

168). In this single powerful phrase, one of the more poignant moments in all literature, Twain affirms that the

authentic relationship between Huck and Jim is of greater spiritual value than all other moral and social norms, including eternal self-interest.

However, in spite of this and other clear presentations of the authenticity theme in American literature, the

dominant values of American culture have led to quite a different approach to these questions. America is an action-oriented, individualistic, pragmatic culture which has transformed a dense

wilderness into a highly urbanized society in the space of a few generations. This accomplishment has given many Americans the sense that the challenges of life are primarily material and that material problems can always be overcome if practically approached with sufficient energy and will power. From this point of view, the natural conditions of human existence do not have to be passively endured but can be transformed into artificially constructed conditions which serve as replacements or substitutes. Excellence or perfection is achieved not by working in and through natural conditions, but by overcoming or defeating natural conditions. Thus, generally speaking, the American response to the dilemma of authenticity is that we should dedicate ourselves to creating the best possible substitutes for authenticity. This quest gives rise to the fundamental internal contradiction of American society: the attempt to achieve the appearance of sincerity without the substance. As one observer of the American scene has expressed it: "To achieve success in America, the most important thing is sincerity. When you can fake that, you've got it made." So, starting with Hollywood movies in the beginning of this century, American culture has increasingly become a vast machine for the generation of illusions. Hollywood films portray a world where evil and suffering are nonexistent, or else where suffering is perpetrated on thoroughly innocent and wholesome victims (us) by totally evil and depraved forces that are always defeated in the end. This was epitomized by the Disney movies, the Disney view of life, and finally the creation of illusory environments—Disney worlds—from which all semblance of evil and suffering is banished. The same themes reappear in commercial television beginning in the 1950s, then in computer games, and finally in virtual reality and the Internet. All these products of popular culture generate increasingly sophisticated substitutes for authentic human interactions. They seek to give us the emotional feeling of authenticity without any real authentic engagement on our part. I stress here the attitudes towards pain, suffering, and evil because they are so central to authenticity. The struggle between good and evil lies within the heart of each individual human being since each of us has the capacity both for good and for evil. Indeed, this inner struggle is the very essence of life, and it is the central theme of all great literature. This struggle is totally trivialized by the popular American cultural myth that evil is the work

only of a minority of identifiably evil people.

Moreover, each of us is most vitally concerned with whatever causes pain in our lives. To have an authentic relationship with the other is to share the concerns of the other, and we therefore cannot do this without being genuinely open to sharing each other's pain. Thus, the popular American view that pain is unjust, unnatural, or abnormal is fundamentally anti-authentic. If we are willing to share with others only the pleasant, our relationship with them will be superficial because the deepest concerns each of us has about life come from that which gives us pain and suffering. The creation of substitutes for authenticity is an attempt to achieve the joyous feeling of authentic friendship but without the sharing of pain and suffering that is the essential condition for authentic relations.

Thus, the American solution to the dilemma of authenticity is virtually the antithesis of the Russian solution, which considers the sharing of pain in the face of the difficulties of life as the very meaning and basis of friendship. In the collective American self-image, the inauthenticity of the American solution is transformed into such "positive" values as the right and freedom of the individual to pursue happiness, unhampered by any commitment to society or responsibility for the suffering of others. Twentieth-century Europe has been caught between the Russian bear and the American eagle, and its dominant ideology has been fascism. Fascism combines the authoritarianism and absolutism of Stalinist communism with the elitism of American capitalist individualism. It is, so to speak, the worst of both worlds. Since the facts of this history are so well known, we will take them for granted in the ensuing exposition without any detailed discussion of them here.

Ideology and Authenticity

We now put forward the thesis that these ideological movements, which have largely determined the character of life in the twentieth century, have not been driven mainly by their abstract ideological content, which has been endlessly debated, but rather by the fact they are all just different expressions, however distorted, of the frustrated will to authenticity. In other words, these ideologies served as collective psychological defense mechanisms to avoid confronting the frustration of relational authenticity.

To understand how and why ideology may come to play such a role, let us recall the fundamental thesis

that every single human being has the potential both for good and for evil. Cruel acts, such as murder, rape, and torture, which seek deliberately to harm others, are recognized as evil by the vast majority of human beings. Such acts involve a degree of intention—of conscious motivation—which obliges the perpetrators to confront their own lack of humanity in committing them. Under normal circumstances of everyday life, it appears that only an extreme minority of human beings are morally capable of such acts. Undoubtedly this is true because most of us have a self-image as moral (“good”) people, and we cannot maintain this image of ourselves if we knowingly commit an act we judge to be immoral. However, suppose we become convinced that certain ideas and doctrines are more important than human beings. It then becomes morally justifiable to sacrifice human beings, or authentic human relationships, if such sacrifice is judged necessary to the propagation or survival of these cherished ideals. In this case, the self-same acts which, under normal circumstances, were grossly immoral have now become heroic. We are not perpetrating deliberate cruelty on others, we are courageously defending higher values from their enemies. In other words, ideology gives moral justification to inauthentic behavior, even the deliberate perpetration of cruelty towards others. Therein lies both the attraction and the power of ideology. Belief in an ideology relieves us of the necessity of the disciplined pursuit of authentic relationships by authenticizing inauthentic behavior, including active cruelty and hatred towards certain appropriately defined others. Thus, the fact of inauthentic behavior is conjoined with a moral justification for that fact, thereby allowing “good people” to do truly bad things. Moreover, this mechanism obtains independently of the specific content of the ideology. For example, one could hardly find an ideal more exalted than the altruistic love taught by Jesus Christ. Yet, historians tell us that after his religion was transformed into an ideology at Nicea in 325 AD., more Christians were killed by fellow Christians in disputes over doctrine than were killed during three hundred years of persecution by the Roman State. A thousand years later, during the Inquisition in Europe, thousands of Christians were burnt to death because Church authorities considered them to hold heretical beliefs. One cannot derive any significant understanding of the Inquisition by a logical analysis of the doctrines that were deemed orthodox or heretical. It was the fact of holding some belief—any belief—superior to human beings that gave moral justification to cruelty.

Indeed, if we humans can murder each other in the name of a religion whose acknowledged fundamental principle is altruistic love, then we must accept that we all have within us the potential to conceive of an appropriate ideological justification for any cruelty whatsoever. In this perverted (ideo)logic, the more humanitarian the ideal, the more easy to justify cruelty in its defense.

In the same way, our thesis holds that one cannot derive any useful understanding of Russia or Russians by an intellectual analysis of Marxist theory. But when we understand the deep Russian thirst for absolute authenticity, we can begin to understand what made them willing to embark on the communist experiment on such a vast scale, and what made so many otherwise gentle and hospitable people participate in the vast Stalinist campaign of betrayal and slaughter of their fellow countrymen.

In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the whole of Europe was talking of socialism and the socialist movement. Yet Russia, virtually the only para-European country which had no genuine proletariat (or genuine bourgeoisie, for that matter), was the very society which actually implemented the radical changes suggested by Marxist theory. Lenin's oratory and public persona reflected a deep intuitive understanding of the Russian psyche and was clearly able to strike profound emotional chords to which Russians responded on a subrational level. Nevertheless, without the preexisting Russian thirst for authenticity, even Lenin probably could not have succeeded.

Hitler and Mussolini played similar roles in their respective societies. Certainly, no analysis of the trivial but pernicious doctrines of National Socialism can explain why, in only one generation, Hitler was able to lead the German people to overthrow all of the fundamental values enshrined in their philosophical and cultural tradition and to adopt instead the de facto values of the crudest elements of their society—people who were barely more than criminals and psychopaths. Let us recall that only a few generations intervened between Kant's categorical imperative and the Nazi death camps. But once put in the context of the immediately preceding history of German idealism and romanticism, with its yearning for authenticity, we can begin to understand how Hitler was able to convince the German people that his romantic supernationalism was the fulfillment of their deepest longings.

Similarly, we can understand America not in terms of the endless public prattle about democracy and

human rights, but by seeing American culture as primarily an expression of self-indulgent attempts to avoid even the minimal degree of pain and suffering necessary to the achievement of authenticity in human relationships. This latter view also explains the general insensitivity of Americans to the prevailing suffering that exists within their own society.

For example, according to official United States government statistics, fully one-fifth of the population lives below the poverty line, Many in this condition are single, Black mothers, and society in general seems to care very little about these people. Why? Because, again, there is the persistent myth that America is the land of opportunity where all are totally free to achieve whatever success they desire. This myth holds that there is no social injustice—people choose their destiny. If some have chosen to have babies out of wedlock instead of getting a good education and a good job, well, that's their free choice. The point is that the public discourse about individual rights and free choice serves as a defense mechanism against acknowledging the degree of inauthenticity represented by the general insensitivity to the serious social problems which exist in America and the sufferings that result from them.

Let us sum up. We are suggesting that the most fundamental problem of the contemporary world is the dilemma of authenticity. Rather than acknowledging this and facing it directly, the dominant cultures of the twentieth century have taken refuge in ideologies which attribute greater value to certain ideas than they do to human beings, thereby giving moral justification to inauthentic human relationships, and even to acts of extreme cruelty and depravity such as murder, rape, and torture. These ideologies allow us to be insensitive to the sufferings of others, and even actively cruel towards others, and, at the same time, to feel morally justified rather than guilty. Of course, we need ideals and doctrines, but ideals and doctrines should serve human beings rather than enslaving them. Shoghi Effendi affirms this idea as follows:

The call of Bahá'u'lláh is primarily directed against all forms of provincialism, all insularities and prejudices. If long-cherished ideals and time-honored institutions, if certain social assumptions and religious formulae have ceased to promote the welfare of the generality of mankind, if they no longer minister to the needs of a continually evolving humanity, let them be swept

away and relegated to the limbo of obsolescent and forgotten doctrines. . . For legal standards, political and economic theories are solely designed to safeguard the interests of humanity as a whole, and not humanity to be crucified for the preservation of the integrity of any particular law or doctrine. (World Order 42)

Powerseeking and Injustice

Not only the modern period, but the whole of human history is pervaded by cruelty and injustice. When I speak of historical injustice, I am not referring simply to sporadic unjust acts that individuals may perpetrate in their everyday relations with each other. Rather, I have in mind such systematic and persistent social injustices as slavery, economic exploitation, racism, and the oppression of women. The fundamental question we now ask is the following. If indeed we have so often failed to pursue relational authenticity, then what have we pursued in its stead? The answer Bahá'u'lláh gives to this question is straightforward and unequivocal: power. We have pursued power instead of authenticity.

As Bahá'u'lláh explains, the root cause of all the major injustices of history has been the pursuit of power and dominance over others. Here is one passage where He clearly articulates this thesis:

And amongst the realms of unity is the unity of rank and station. It redoundeth to the exaltation of the Cause, glorifying it among all peoples. Ever since the seeking of preference and distinction came into play, the world hath been laid waste. It hath become desolate. Those who have quaffed from the ocean of divine utterance and fixed their gaze upon the Realm of Glory should regard themselves as being on the same level as the others and in the same station. Were this matter to be definitely established and conclusively demonstrated through the power and might of God, the world would become as the Abhá Paradise.

Indeed, man is noble, inasmuch as each one is a repository of the sign of God. Nevertheless, to regard oneself as superior in knowledge, learning or virtue, or to exalt oneself or seek preference, is a grievous transgression. Great is the blessedness of those who are adorned with the ornament of this unity and have been graciously confirmed by God. (Qtd. in Universal House of Justice, 206.3 a–b)

Notice that what is here deemed the cause of injustice is the seeking of power, not power itself. Without power we can do nothing, neither good nor evil. The error lies in pursuing power for its own sake—in making power an end in itself rather than the means to other ends that are moral and socially productive.

Indeed, as Bahá'u'lláh explicitly acknowledges, each of us possesses a certain degree of power in the form of autonomy, i.e., the development of our God-given capacities of mind, heart, and will. But to use that power to establish our dominance over others constitutes a moral and spiritual error. To pursue power is to misuse power.

We may of course misuse power without pursuing power. For example, we may harm someone by the exercise of our power even though we sincerely intend to do good (e.g., a surgeon who sincerely tries to heal but makes a professional mistake). Such misuses of power are an inevitable part of the process of learning how to use power appropriately. But the pursuit of power for its own sake is always wrong because the very intention is itself immoral, regardless of the external consequences.

Notice that Bahá'u'lláh does not deny that there can be people superior to others in knowledge, learning, or virtue. Rather, he makes it clear that these superior people, whoever they may be, are definitely not those who think of themselves as superior. In other words, the very fact of considering yourself superior to another person makes you morally inferior to that person.

But what does it really mean to pursue power? We have power to the extent that we have control over the material and human resources of society. To pursue power is thus to seek to increase our control over others. This negative notion of power must be logically separated from the positive notion of power as autonomy or self-development, which means increasing our control over ourselves. Indeed, the pursuit of self-development and self-control is an important component of the pursuit of authentic relations with others: the greater our self-development, the more we have to give others and to share with them.

Henceforth, whenever we speak of power or the pursuit of power, we will presume, unless explicitly stated otherwise, the connotation of power in the negative sense of dominance and control over others.

Power over others can be pursued in many ways besides outright physical dominance. For example, we may seek to occupy those societal roles to which the collectivity has attributed power or status. Playing a powerful

social role will provide us with many social situations in which we can easily dominate others if we choose to do so.³ Also, we have the illusion that the status of such a role actually changes or augments our intrinsic status as human beings—as if the fact of playing the role of doctor or politician actually changes what we are.

Recall that authentic relationships are totally reciprocal relationships based on the mutual recognition of universal and intrinsic value. Such relationships are therefore completely symmetric. However, power-based relationships are essentially asymmetrical and therefore inauthentic. Indeed, it is logically impossible for me to hold power over you and you to hold power over me at the same time and in the same way. Thus, the pursuit of power leads unavoidably to asymmetrical, inauthentic relationships.

Another prevalent means of seeking power is competition, in which we each seek to outperform the other in some manner. Since it is logically impossible for me to outperform you and you to outperform me at the same time and in the same way, competition likewise undermines the symmetry of authenticity. Notice that a simple comparison between our two performances does not in itself constitute competition. Competition is striving to outperform the other with the goal of attributing to oneself a higher value than to the other.

It is most important to distinguish competition from the pursuit of excellence. To strive for excellence is to seek to improve our performance over time. It is a vertical comparison between two different performances of the same individual at different times. Competition is the lateral comparison of performances by two different individuals at the same time. These are different pursuits.

However, it is sometimes said that, even though different from the pursuit of excellence, competition is nevertheless necessary as a stimulus to the former. Let us examine this more closely.

Suppose I am striving to outperform you in some task (say, playing the violin). What strategies can I deploy to achieve this goal? One possible strategy is to improve my performance over time (pursue excellence) so that I can eventually outperform you. But what if you are also striving to improve your performance? No matter how much progress I make, I have no guarantee that you will not make equal or greater progress and that I will ever be successful in outperforming you.

Of course, if excellence is our goal, there is no problem. The world will be better off with two excellent

performers instead of two mediocre performers where one is recognizably better than the other. But if winning the mutual competition is my goal, then I will not be content with striving for excellence year after year only to see you continue to outperform me (because your performance is also improving). Thus, the pursuit of excellence is not the optimal strategy for winning a competition. What better strategy is there? The answer is sabotage. Sabotaging my opponent's performance (and preventing him or her from sabotaging mine) will be a superior strategy for winning the competition. It takes much less energy than the pursuit of excellence and the outcome is quicker and surer. Sabotage is always a viable strategy and often the preferred strategy for winning a competition, but under no circumstances can sabotage lead to an increase in excellence for either the saboteur or the sabotee. Thus, we achieve excellence by pursuing excellence, not by pursuing competitive strategies towards others. The pursuit of excellence and competition are two fundamentally different undertakings.⁴

The Logic of Powerseeking

The prevalence of powerseeking behavior in our history explains the prevalence of injustice in our history.

However, there still remains the question of why we so often seek power instead of authentic relationships.

Fundamentally, there are two possible answers to this question.

The first answer is the one given by materialists, who say that we seek power because we are condemned

by our nature to do so—we literally cannot do otherwise. This is the well-known view that people are just animals,

aggressive and egotistical by nature. In this view, the superior intelligence of humans over "other animals" only

serves to make human powerseeking more effective and more subtle.

We reject this view because it is unscientific. It does not explain the observable facts of history. It explains

the injustice and cruelty but not the altruism, the love, and the

self-sacrifice. Any satisfactory explanation of human

nature must account for the whole spectrum of human behavior, and this spectrum shows clearly that humans are

capable both of extreme altruism and extreme cruelty. If our natures inclined us only to evil, then our history should

contain nothing else but evil and cruelty, which is demonstrably not the case.⁵

If we reject the materialist view, then we can no longer simply explain away human cruelty as a

spontaneous expression of human nature. Because people are free to do otherwise, cruelty is a choice they make. It

is not enough to say that we are all influenced by society and that good people

are led into cruelty by an influential minority of truly evil people. If we have learned anything about human behavior it is that our actions are goal directed, purposeful, logically motivated. There are reasons and causes for the way we act. What, then, is the logic of powerseeking? What do we seek to achieve by struggling to dominate and control others?

We, of course, seek happiness. Nothing could be more logical than the fact that everyone prefers happiness over unhappiness. Whenever we perceive that our happiness lies in a certain direction, it is only logical that we will pursue that course. The only alternative would be deliberately to choose unhappiness over happiness, which would be the very essence of irrationality (or else a deep pathology such as masochistic self-hatred).

We all begin life as helpless and needful infants. We cannot survive unless our needs are satisfied by autonomous (powerful) caregivers. This initial experience leads us spontaneously and uncritically to identify need-satisfaction with happiness or contentment. As we grow towards adulthood, we ourselves become more autonomous, and we also understand that the adult world is unlike the world of childhood. Now, the rule is that we cannot survive unless we act to satisfy our needs, and it appears to us that the more power we have, the more certainly our needs will be satisfied, and therefore the happier we will be.

The following logical chain thus appears reasonable from the point of view of the individual. The goal of life is to be happy. I cannot be happy unless my needs are satisfied. The satisfaction of my needs is my personal responsibility—a responsibility that no one else is going to assume. The more control I have over material and human resources, the more effectively I can act to satisfy my needs and thus the happier I will be. In particular, the greater my power over others, the more certainly I can compel them to recognize my value and satisfy my needs. In the final analysis, it is all very clear and simple. The goal and purpose of life is to be happy, and the more power I have over others, the happier I am likely to be.

We thus pursue power in the name of happiness. Indeed, in the end we equate an increase in power with an increase in happiness: power = happiness, so we assume. Yet, our previous analysis has already established that the pursuit of power is the root cause of injustice, and injustice the root cause of massive unhappiness. What, then, is wrong with the above argument?

The fatal error in this otherwise sound argument lies in the

presumption/assumption that all human needs can be satisfied by an appropriate exercise of power over others. Indeed, there is one universal human need—the most fundamental of all—which no amount of power can satisfy. This is the need to love and be loved. The very nature of love is that it cannot be compelled. Suppose for example that I am granted absolute power over you. Such power is exercised through the threat of suffering and/or the promise of rewards. By these means I can dictate and manipulate your every action. I can enslave you; I can force you to do my bidding under all circumstances. Yet, the one thing that I cannot do is force you to love me. In fact, the more I exercise my power over you, the less inclined you will be to love me. Love has to be invited. It comes only when certain necessary conditions are established. These conditions are what we call justice. Justice constitutes those conditions under which love is born and flourishes. Thus, what we have done in the past is to pursue power and to sacrifice justice and thus love in the process. What we should have done is to pursue love by using (sacrificing) our power to establish justice. The establishment of justice is, therefore, the authentic use or exercise of power.

The Nature of Love

Love is the only interhuman transaction that is experienced positively both by giver and receiver: it feels good to love and it feels good to be loved. For other transactions, such as pure justice, we may recognize intellectually their positive value without experiencing them positively. Love is the archetypical “win-win” transaction where there is no trade-off: both parties benefit. Although we do have a need to love and be loved, the happiness brought by love goes beyond mere need-satisfaction. It is intrinsic in the very experience of love itself. Indeed, as ‘Abdu’l-Bahá makes clear, love is the only basis of an enduring happiness:

Know thou of a certainty that Love is the secret of Gods holy Dispensation, the manifestation of the All-Merciful, the fountain of spiritual outpourings. Love is heaven’s kindly light, the Holy Spirit’s eternal breath that vivifieth the human soul. Love is the cause of God’s revelation unto man, the vital bond inherent, in accordance with the divine creation, in the realities of things. Love is the one means that ensureth true felicity both in this world and the next. (Selections 12.1)

Love arises from the recognition or perception of value. We love that which we perceive as valuable. Such a perception may arise spontaneously or else may result from a process of search and discovery. Love is thus based on a certain kind of knowledge—the knowledge of value—and it is the implementation of this knowledge that constitutes justice, i.e., the conditions under which love is born and flourishes. Justice is, in a certain sense, the underlying or latent cognitive component of love. The emotional component of love generates within us the desire to approach the beloved object and to establish an intimate, harmonious relationship with it. If we love an object of art, we would like to possess it; if we love a pet animal, then we want to possess it and take care of it; if we love another human being, then we want to establish an intimate and harmonious relationship with that person. The voluntary component of love is represented by all the actions we take in response to the perception of and attachment to the perceived value of the beloved object.

We speak here of the perceived value of the beloved object to allow for the possibility that we may misperceive and therefore love falsely. Indeed, a fundamental truth of human nature is that our behavior is determined not by reality itself but by our perception of reality. Of course, to the degree that our perceptions are accurate, we are responding to reality, but in all cases the quality of our response will be a function of the inner model we have built out of our subjective experience of the reality in question. For example, we all know the phenomenon of falling in love with the image that we have ourselves projected onto another person.

Thus, authentic justice is accurate knowledge of the intrinsic (real) value of the other, coupled with implementation of this knowledge in our relationship with the other. Authentic love is based on authentic justice.

The intrinsic value of human beings is precisely the God-given, innate, spiritual capacities of consciousness, mind, heart, and will. It is what ‘Abdu’l-Bahá calls the “image of God” within the soul of the individual (Promulgation 69–70). When we truly perceive this God-created value of the other, then we see a beauty which attracts us spontaneously: we love it. Thus, authentic love is not a loving in spite of the faults and limitations of the other but a love because of the true inner value of the other. Any attempt to love the other in the absence of knowledge of the reality of the other will lead either to frustration or to

hypocrisy.

Authentic love has two components: an active component, which we call concern, and a passive

component, which we designate as acceptance. In concern, we mobilize our inner resources towards the

enhancement of the wellbeing of the other. In acceptance, we put no

preconditions on our concern. We do not

require that the other change in order to merit our love. Authentic or

altruistic love is thus unconditional. Concern

without acceptance is conditional love, and acceptance without concern is

tolerance. Tolerance is “live and let live”:

we accept the other’s right to be what he or she chooses, but we are

indifferent to the well-being of the other.

Parental love is sometimes conditional. The parents are genuinely concerned for the well-being of their

child and make many sacrifices in that regard. However, they may, at the same

time, have great difficulty in

accepting some of their child’s limitations (perhaps because they see these

limitations as a reflection of their own).

Accurate perception of the other’s reality is the basis of both acceptance

and concern. When we know others, we

know both their value (what they are) and their limits (what they are not).

Knowledge of limits is just as important

as knowledge of value, because it enables us to have realistic and fair

expectations towards the other. This means

that we do not burden others by projecting onto them our expectations of what

they should be.

Since intrinsic value is universal, it is shared by all, including ourselves.

Thus, recognizing our own

intrinsic value is an essential aspect of justice, of learning to love

authentically. When we are secure in the

knowledge of our own capacities and limitations, then we can love and accept

ourselves for what we are. We then

no longer seek to get our value from others through such strategies as

competition and powerseeking. We are freed

from the power imperative.

Thus, altruistic love is a force of attraction between two human beings based

on the recognition of intrinsic

value, both in the self and in the other. Therefore, replacing the pursuit of

power by the pursuit of love means

exchanging the vicious cycle of increasing power and diminishing happiness, for

the virtuous cycle of a decreasing

need for power and an increase in autonomy and wellbeing (authentic happiness).

Renouncing Powerseeking

It is hard at first to understand why the change from a power orientation to a

love orientation in our relations with

others is so difficult, Once we see intellectually that love is the source of authentic happiness and that powerseeking leads us astray, why can we not achieve happiness by a simple act of will? The answer is that we are extremely adept at hiding—from others but from ourselves as well—the subtle ways we seek power. To renounce powerseeking we must have a clarity of self-insight that is not casually achieved.

In the light of our foregoing analysis of the dynamics of powerseeking, let us examine further some of its intricacies.

We have seen above that the basis of authentic interhuman relationships is altruistic love, and the basis of altruistic love is the awareness of the intrinsic and universal value inherent in each individual soul. Therefore, powerseeking can arise only in the context of a relative unawareness of intrinsic and universal values.

Suppose, for example, that we negate intrinsicality. We then obtain the collectivist view that individuals have no value in and of themselves. All value resides in the collectivity. Individuals are therefore impelled to seek power by occupying those societal roles to which the collectivity attributes a value. This was the underlying dynamic of powerseeking in collectivist societies such as communist Russia.

Suppose, now, that we negate universality. In this context, we may well recognize individual value, but it will consist of those characteristics or abilities which specialize individuals—which differentiate and separate us from each other—rather than those capacities which we share. This supervaluation of the special is the basic value context in highly individualistic and competitive societies such as North America today.

The moral error involved in supervaluing the special lies not in the simple recognition of individually differentiated abilities. Michael Jordan is in fact an extraordinary basketball player; he can indeed put balls through hoops better than anyone else. Wayne Gretzky is an exceptionally skilled player of ice hockey; he knocks pucks into nets much better than you or I. The error lies in the exaggerated importance given to these special abilities, especially as compared with universal and intrinsically valuable functions such as motherhood.

Indeed, motherhood is clearly the most fundamental role in society. In most cases, from the moment a child is born until it becomes an autonomous adult, the child's mother will give priority to the needs of her child over her own needs. This represents a high degree of self-sacrifice—of altruism—and very few children would survive infancy without this perennial sacrifice by mothers. Indeed, if only one

generation of women all over the world refused to play this role, it would be the end of the human race, forever. But society could clearly survive quite well if professional sports ceased to exist altogether. Yet, our individualistic society disdains motherhood as “ordinary” (any female can be a mother) but considers successful sportsmen as heroes, worthy of the immense social and material resources that are laid at their feet.

What we have, here, is a confusion between the merely ordinary or general, on one hand, and the universal, on the other. Sickness is an example of something that is ordinary without being universal. Motherhood is universal, and not just general, because it is an expression of the universal, intrinsic capacities of the human being: the capacity for love, for self-sacrifice, for action dedicated to the good of others. Our society’s devaluation of the role of motherhood amounts to treating childbearing as if it were in fact an illness to be cured.

Let us consider this dialectic between the universal and the special in a more general context. Any two entities in existence may be compared according to their degree of similarity or their degree of difference. Moreover, any two existents share at least some things in common (if nothing else, the fact that they both exist). Yet, no matter how similar, any two existents must differ in some respects (otherwise there would only be the one identical existent and not two, and thus nothing to compare in the first place).

Not only is there the question of the objective degree of similarity or difference between two existents, there is also the subjective question of what one chooses to emphasize when articulating a given comparison. In particular, for any mutual encounter between two human beings, the two parties involved always have a choice of whether to focus on their differences or on their similarities.

The Bahá’í oneness principle—unity in diversity—yields a derivative similarity principle: that which any two human beings have in common is greater and more important than whatever differentiates them. In other words, close your eyes and pick any two human beings anywhere on earth. What they have in common—their essential human nature—is far more important than whatever separates them, whether cultural, physical, psychological, social, or religious. The basis of the oneness principle, and its derivative, the similarity principle, is the intrinsic and universal human nature created by God.

Notice that the similarity principle does not hold generally for larger categories of existents. There are both

similarities and differences between you and a dog. However, in most contexts, the differences between you and the dog (that you have a conscious rational soul and the dog doesn't) are more important than the similarities.

We have already seen that power-based relationships are necessarily asymmetrical. The pursuit of power leads to the exaggeration of differences, to the supervaluation of the special. In other words, our history is a history of injustice arising from the pursuit of power, and therefore a history in which we have explored exhaustively all the ways that humans can be differentiated one from the other. It is a history of differences.

Men and women share a preexisting humanness in the identity of the human soul and its essential capacities, which are the same whether the given soul happens to be linked to a male or a female body.⁶ In the light of this overwhelming similarity between men and women, the purely physical gender differences appear rather unimportant. Yet these physical differences, more particularly the generally greater physical strength of men, have been made into the prime determinant of the relationship between men and women in every society from the beginning of time until the present day. That is an example of the supervaluation of the special.

Similarly, all men share the same common humanity that is shared by men and women. Yet, the fact remains that those men with great physical strength and aggressiveness have influenced the course of history and the structure of society to a far greater extent than their less aggressive brothers, whatever qualities of mind, heart, and spirit these latter may have possessed. The physically strong have enslaved the physically weaker, again giving disproportionate value to the quality of purely physical strength.

It is important to see that these historical configurations were deliberate moral choices. The fact that man can dominate woman is not a moral imperative for him to do so. He could have chosen instead to enter into a truly reciprocal relationship with woman, and even used his greater strength to protect and care for her rather than subdue her. The fact that a militarily superior race could dominate and enslave another race is not a moral imperative to do so. The militarily superior nation could use its strength to establish harmonious relationships with its neighbors.

Our previous discussion has already dealt with the false assumption that powerseeking and the supervaluation of the special are unavoidable, intrinsic aspects of human nature. The anthropologist Richard Leakey

has pointed out that the human propensity for cooperation was more important even than intelligence in allowing primitive humans to prevail over animals who were physically superior in virtually every respect (fleetness of foot, keenness of sense, physical strength, etc.). Moreover, Leakey points out that any species which was genetically programmed for intraspecific aggression would have been eliminated by natural selection within a few generations. Indeed one can hardly imagine a more negatively selective gene than one that inclines anyone who carries it to destroy everybody else who carries it.⁷

Thus, from the beginning and throughout the whole history of social development, humans have demonstrated that they possess the capacity for cooperation and altruism. That we, and our ancestors, have so consistently fallen under the spell of powerseeking indicates only that experience alone is not a sufficient moral teacher. Even though we have experienced the disastrous results of powerseeking in the twentieth century perhaps more than any other century of history, we still doggedly pursue power in our relations with each other, and we do so in the name of the pursuit of a happiness that never comes, because it cannot ever come from powerseeking.⁸

We cannot change the past. For all eternity it will be true that men have oppressed women throughout our history and that whites have subjected blacks to brutal enslavement. No act of atonement on the part of men towards women or whites towards blacks can ever alter these facts. We also have very little control over the future. We can of course plan, but unforeseen circumstances can always frustrate even the most careful plans. Indeed, we have significant control only over the present and, more particularly, over our own actions in the present. Nothing is clearer than the fact that if we continue to act in the present the way we have acted in the past, then our future will be just like our past.

Or turn it the other way around. Only by acting in the present differently from the way we acted in the past can we have a better future. Our past has been a history of powerseeking, injustice, and the exploration of differences. If we want a future that is more just and more unified than the past, then we have only one choice: we must replace the pursuit of power by the pursuit of authenticity and we must deliberately reconfigure our society and its underlying value system by putting greater emphasis on what is universal and less emphasis on what is particular, which does not mean suppressing the particular. Indeed, one of the fundamental

characteristics of true universality is its respect for and appreciation of diversity. Suppression of the particular leads not to unity but to uniformity, which is grossly inauthentic.⁹ It is within the scope of each individual will to choose to renounce power in relationships with others. This is a choice we can make whether or not others choose to make it. The fact that others continue to seek power over us and to compete with us does not constitute a moral imperative for us to act in the same way. By becoming conscious of the ways we pursue power and then by deliberately renouncing these powerseeking strategies, we can begin immediately the process of effecting significant change in the moral quality of our lives. This does not mean that we allow ourselves to be victims of others' injustice. It means rather that we use our power to seek justice rather than to wreak revenge. In other words, our future happiness is largely in our own hands at every instant. This indeed is part of divine justice, that, in the last analysis, our happiness does not depend so much on the external circumstances of our lives but rather on the way we choose to respond to those circumstances.

The Social Dimension

We have established that the central challenge of the modern world is to replace the pursuit of power-based, asymmetrical relations with the pursuit of authentic relations based on altruistic love. On the personal level, such a choice is within the scope of the will of each individual. Indeed, it is for this very purpose that God has endowed us with our intrinsic spiritual capacities. But what of the collectivity? What are we to do about those who refuse to make the choice of renouncing the pursuit of power? Bahá'u'lláh's answer to this question is his Covenant: he has constructed an ingenious system for the administration of human affairs in which it is literally impossible to succeed in pursuing power. Some of the salient features of this system are the collective exercise of decision-making authority, the electoral process without nomination of candidates, novel social and administrative structures (e.g., profit-sharing in economic enterprises) which reduce or eliminate conflicts of interest, and the minimum of outer rewards for service on public institutions, which diminishes the tendency for the egotistic individual to seek such offices or to survive in them if he does succeed. However, the ultimate and complete guarantee against powerseeking is, and can

only be, the spiritual authority Bahá'u'lláh has conferred upon the Universal House of Justice. This alone is our assurance that no one will or can ever succeed in the pursuit of power in the Bahá'í Order. As the influence of this Order spreads in the world, so will the pursuit of power be defeated. The Covenant of Bahá'u'lláh, and in particular the spiritual authority of the House of Justice, is the rock on which the ship of the pursuit of power will ultimately founder and destroy itself. The Covenant of Bahá'u'lláh is that divine barrier which alone will separate forever the age of injustice and powerseeking from the age of justice, of love, and of true and enduring unity.

Notes

1. The fundamentally internal nature of our relationship with God is affirmed by Shoghi Effendi in statements such as the following: “. . . the core of religious faith is that mystic feeling which unites man with God. This state of spiritual communion can be brought about and maintained by means of meditation and prayer. . . The Bahá'í Faith, like all other Divine Religions, is thus fundamentally mystic in character” (Directives 86–87).

2. Initially, the juxtaposition of Marxist materialism with the longing for transcendence may appear contradictory. However, this paradox is relieved when we recall that Marxism was not materialism in practice but, on the contrary, a collective sacrifice for a materialistic ideal. This interpretation of the Russian experience is borne out by the incredible material sacrifices that the Russians did in fact make in the name of Marxism during the Soviet period.

3. Choosing to relate authentically does not mean renouncing or abolishing differentiated social roles (this is one of the mistakes of radical egalitarianism). It means that we do not use such roles to justify inauthentic behavior. Suppose I am a doctor and you are a patient. The fact that you are sick, weak, vulnerable, and frightened gives me the opportunity to dominate you, but it does not oblige me to do so. I can instead choose to use my skills (self-development) to uplift you as a loving friend. Thus, the temporary asymmetry in our social roles does not necessitate a relational asymmetry in which I am perceived as superior to you.

4. In passing, a word should be said regarding the several passages from the Bahá'í writings in which believers are urged to “vie with one another” in the path of God, thus (by implication) to “compete spiritually” with each

other. Some may feel that these passages validate the moral authenticity of competition, thus contradicting my strong contention that competition is spiritually inauthentic. The answer is that the competition being urged in the Bahá'í writings is a competition of service towards others, not a competition of dominance or superiority. This is clear when, for example, 'Abdu'l-Bahá says, "Happy the soul that shall forget his own good, and like the chosen ones of God, vie with his fellows in service to the good of all (Secret 116). This "vying in service to the good of all" is really cooperation and humility, not powerseeking.

5. For a more complete and detailed refutation of the materialist view, see Hatcher, *Love, Power, and Justice* 70–72.

6. In numerous places, the Bahá'í writings make it quite clear that every human soul, whether attached to a male or a female body, has the capacity to reflect all of the attributes of God. For example, Bahá'u'lláh writes: "Upon the inmost reality of each and every created thing He [God] hath shed the light of one of His names, and made it a recipient of the glory of one of His attributes. Upon the reality of man, however, He hath focused the radiance of all of His names and attributes, and made it a mirror of His own Self. Alone of all created things man hath been singled out for so great a favor, so enduring a bounty" (64–65). The "reality of man" referred to in this passage is clearly the generic human soul.

7. See Leakey and Lewin, *People of the Lake*.

8. In *Love, Power, and Justice*, we also advance the thesis that the misapplication of modern economic theories to human relations has contributed to the supervaluation of the special in human affairs (see 31–34). Because material values are diminished when shared, the basis of economics is held to be competition for rarity (the special). But spiritual values such as love or knowledge are enhanced, not diminished, when shared. (For example, if I share my love with you, then the sum total of love is increased, not decreased, because love calls forth love.) The thesis is that we have uncritically transferred the logic of material values to the realm of spiritual values, where that logic no longer applies. We therefore conceive of such values as love or knowledge as perishable goods for which we must compete, rather than eternal values which we must share. The true logic of spiritual values is thus cooperation for the universal rather than competition for the special.

9. The question naturally arises as to whether there has been any significant change towards authenticity in the modern period, say the last 150 years. There does seem to have been some change in the way we talk about the future. During most of history, the presumption was that the future would and should be a continuation of the past. Public consciousness about fundamental issues of human rights and injustice seem now to have created an ethos in which the majority of people anticipate a future that will be significantly more just than (and thus different from) the past. In other words, we have succeeded in changing the way we talk about the future. Though this is undoubtedly a positive development in itself, it can also help foster the complacent illusion that we can change the future just by changing the way we talk about it, avoiding thereby the inexorable logic that demands a radical change in our present behavior.

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