

# Why Focus on Authoritarianism

## Introduction to *The Guru Papers: Masks of Authoritarian Power*

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We are not alone in being disturbed by the present course of humanity. Why, we asked ourselves, has a species that displays the kind of almost magical intelligence that can come up with the microchip thus far ostensibly proven incapable of constructing viable ways of interacting with each other and the planet as a whole? What makes us so obtuse and seemingly uncaring in these domains? The more pessimistic answers include seeing it as a victory of evil over good, or as a fatal flaw in the human makeup that renders us incapable of acting beyond limited, short-term self-interest.

Our perspective is more sanguine, offering new grounds for hope. We view the authoritarian ideologies and practices so deeply rooted in the ways things are thought about and done as what keep the world stuck in old ways of doing things that no longer work. They are a major hindrance to the necessary kind of creative problem-solving now needed to deal with the crises that threaten basic survival. Creativity comes from self-trust, which authoritarian beliefs squelch.

A friend stated what seemed upon hearing it a truism: "If you're really interested in change, then optimism is the best strategy." If one's viewpoint is mainly historical, optimism is difficult to muster, because history has not shown the human species capable of intelligently handling the power and problems created by its technological cleverness. Technology has obviously accelerated far beyond the capacity of societies to integrate it. What has not been sufficiently seen are the reasons for this gap. In our opinion, the past does not

hold the key to closing the gap because the social structures and worldviews of the past could not even imagine the current state of the world. This is why many who are searching for a way out of contemporary dilemmas are talking about the necessity of a new model or framework, which really amounts to a new worldview--what is now being called a basic "paradigm shift."

Optimism that is not to some extent grounded in the human experience risks being a mere flight of fancy that crashes to pessimism or cynicism. Consequently, many who seek new paradigms are doing so within developmental or evolutionary frameworks. This enables keeping the thread of history, while allowing for transformational possibilities. What is clearly seen here is that if a framework is truly new, it must transform the arena where human possibility plays itself out. We view ourselves aligned with this direction, as it is a place where reasonable optimism and hope are possible. The question then becomes not only what is to be the nature of this shift, but how is it to be arrived upon?

Authoritarianism lies at the root of the old paradigms worldwide. It easily remains hidden because it is often not apparent in the specific content of a given structure, institution, ethic, or worldview. Authoritarianism rather exhibits itself in the process of how these human constructions maintain power. This includes the ways control over people's minds is obtained and maintained.

Whatever form a new worldview takes, whatever its content and values, if the process of creating or maintaining it is

authoritarian, it will not be really new. It will merely be the old in disguise. Whatever else a new paradigm is about, it must gain the allegiance of people through consensus, not fiat. It must be a framework open to challenge and self-correction via the experiences of living people. This also means it is essential for it to promote people trusting themselves sufficiently to value their own experiences, instead of accepting unexamined assumptions and values. Thus any new system of values cannot hold tradition and the past more sacred than the living present, which includes the implications for the future contained within the present.

So often ideologies, worldviews, and other systems of establishing what is considered knowledge attempt to capture minds by “proving” their content right, or more right, than others. Yet in some of the most important issues of life and death, there has not been, and perhaps cannot be, a consensus as to what constitutes either proof or rightness. The emphasis of *The Guru Papers* is to unmask and decipher authoritarianism in the ways people are trained and conditioned to construct and maintain their views of reality. Many ideologies and worldviews on the planet today are sufficiently adept at justifying themselves to hold belief. The problem with belief is that it so often stems from preference and self-interest. People can argue endlessly about which worldview has a better or truer content, without being able to marshal sufficient proof to convince non-believers. What can be shown, however, truth or falsity aside, is whether the basis for belief is authoritarian, and whether it is masking the self-interest of those who use it to maintain control.

Our focus is not on the more obvious manifestations of authoritarianism displayed in political (or other) systems that utilize physical threat and coercion as their main mechanism for control. These have been

widely studied, and to our minds are but the tip of the iceberg of authoritarianism. Instead, we are interested in unmasking the more hidden and pervasive mechanisms of authoritarian control that work by being implanted in the mentalities, beliefs, emotions, and aspirations of even modern people via ideologies that breed self-mistrust. Once people do not trust themselves, they are subject to easy manipulation.

At certain pivotal points in history, the foundations of social cohesion break down because what has made them successful in the past becomes dysfunctional. We and many others view the present as such a time. Consequently, the most basic assumptions of every culture need to be examined, for in our view basic problems are tied into basic assumptions. What is basic in any social order is how control is maintained within it. No society can maintain control long-term through physical coercion alone, but must promulgate values that are internalized and transmitted to the next generation.

Morality—that is, the set of values that is internalized and, to some degree at least, acted upon—is the glue holding a social order together. A morality cannot be seen as merely arbitrary, nor can it have any force in isolation. So it is always embedded in a worldview that both constructs and justifies it. To date, the socialization process has largely been authoritarian, instilling self-mistrust because it was the easiest, most efficient way of controlling people.

Historically, the worldviews of all the planet’s civilizations have been authoritarian, presenting “truth,” especially moral truth, as essentially unchallengeable. This aims at bringing moral certainty, which in turn justifies control. A primary function of moral certainty is that it gives one (or the group as a whole) the right to tell people what to do. It is also used as the basis of self-control. This is why certainty, particularly moral certainty, along with the

social and internal controls it brings, have greater emotional appeal than the specific beliefs in which the certainty is grounded. But the beliefs are necessary to maintain certainty. Consequently, such beliefs are very resistant to change no matter the power of differing arguments and evidence.

Certainty is a psychological state. When it is protected by beliefs that are unchallengeable (that is, authoritarian), both the beliefs and the controls justified by the beliefs harden in the face of change. When the changes are so great that what is needed is a shift in values and in the worldview that stands behind the values, such hardening no longer serves the well-being of the individual or society. In our view, these are such times. Now the traditional, often hidden authoritarian modes of transmitting and protecting information are leading humanity toward its own demise. We view the degree to which a culture is authoritarian as a barometer of its dysfunctionality.

All ideological authoritarianism, including its relation to power and control, has a similar structure no matter what its content. This is masked by the often pristine ideals of the content. One such universal found in all forms of authoritarian worldviews are mechanisms to instill self-mistrust. There are others. A major concern of this book is to decipher the code that masks authoritarian power.

These writings do have a viewpoint that can be gleaned, often in the background, which is evolutionary and dialectical. It is evolutionary in that it sees humanity as engaged in a process forcing it to evolve in the way it relates to itself, other species, and the planet's ecosystems. Confronting its no longer viable, destructive habits is part of that engagement. Our perspective is dialectical in the sense that it sees traditional categories of opposition, such as competition/cooperation and egoism/altruism, as embedded in each other. This view is fleshed out throughout the book. It is

not necessary, however, to agree with this aspect of our thought to catch our main intent, which is to show the pervasiveness, workings, and peril of authoritarian control.

The needed change cannot come from a person (or group) claiming to have special access to the truth, as this is the very mode that needs to be changed. Neither do we think the new can emerge until the limits of both old forms and old processes are seen clearly. Authoritarianism is hidden in the fabric of much that is taken for granted, often including what is held by some to be sacred. Unmasking authoritarianism in a given context does not necessarily negate the content. But it does increase the likelihood that what is involved is far more arbitrary and more a function of vested interest than meets the eye.

The world's complex cultures, no matter how seemingly diverse, have in common the utilization of authoritarian control to maintain power. Simpler tribal cultures are not exempt from such control, though it tends more to lie in the group rather than in a specific institution or person. Democracies are now struggling with not only their authoritarian elements, but with the resurgence of authoritarian factions.

It is vital to understand the dynamics, appeal, and scope of this aspect of our human heritage. Only by unlocking the bonds of authoritarianism--not merely in social structures, but in our own psyches--can humanity find the key to meeting the evolutionary challenge our authoritarian past presents us. Just as no one could have foreseen the present results of technology, there is no way to envision all the results that a true shift in basic values would bring. Authoritarianism is the element the old paradigms share, and so there is no way to know what human possibility would be without it. Forging non-authoritarian frameworks is not only the new frontier, it is where hope lies.