

Symbol Systems & Power

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“In the beginning was the Word.” It is in the spreading of “the Word,” or words, that religion gains power. What has given humanity its evolutionary advantage is using its complex brain to think, remember, and project into the future. Thinking is done in symbols (words), which through rules of combination (grammar) bring forth language. The capacity to think in symbols and communicate symbolically with others was the evolutionary watershed that made humans human.

Knowledge is power, but even more basic, language is power. It is through words that

culture is created, maintained, and transmitted; so words are what create the mental alignment that defines a culture’s perception of reality. But more, words move people, igniting emotion with a vision of possibility. The movement of human history is always preceded by new ideas, which are new constructions within language. Human behavior is not separable from the symbols making up the worldview that is its cultural context. The great diversity of human social systems compared to those of other social animals is made possible only through language.

Abstractions and Power

Deeply interwoven in the power of language is the ability to abstract. Considerations of the mental capacity to abstract could easily appear remote and largely irrelevant. But abstractions not only affect daily life, they are one of the great sources of power. Every worldview contains its unique abstractions that define it and not incidentally are used to control people. Religions have created the planet’s most

powerful, pervasive, and enduring systems of abstraction—systems still at the foundation of the moral systems of even secularized societies. This chapter shows how the evolution of abstraction enabled religions to increase control through creating more abstract moralities, and then suggests ways of changing the symbol system to foster a non-authoritarian approach to morality.

Symbol Systems and Power

Power within a culture is directly related to who creates and controls its symbol systems. Throughout history abstractions have been consciously or unconsciously used by those who created them to support their self-interest and justify their privileges. Although killing and physical coercion are the base line of power of political hierarchies, their threat is not enough for long-term continuity. Using fear and punishment

alone limit the effectiveness and productivity of people, who will work to the level of fear abatement and no more. Also, such systems are susceptible to being taken over. If actual rewards are slim, there must be belief in some future reward. Authoritarian hierarchies that have lasted constructed symbol systems that used religious authority to justify power and give people hope after death. Also, this mollifies those on top who

usually prefer not to face, or be reminded, that those below are being used arbitrarily.

Renunciate moralities that glorify spirit make easy the use and abuse of anything merely worldly (including life itself) for the sake of so-called higher concerns. This is done through the creation, elevation, celebration, and sacralization of a key abstraction—sacrifice. Early sacrifice was concrete, involving material objects such as food, animals, and even people. Just as purity was made abstract, so too was sacrifice. It changed from a way of appeasing the gods to a moral imperative which boiled down to self-sacrifice. This in turn expanded the moral system from specific rules, such as the Ten Commandments, to an overall prioritizing of renunciation, instilling a new mentality. Self-sacrifice is abstract because what is involved is not any specific act of sacrifice, but rather a generalized way to be. Renunciate moralities lend themselves admirably to authoritarian social hierarchies that leverage power by sacrificing those lower on the hierarchy. Whenever possible this is done by getting people to sacrifice themselves voluntarily through inculcating the authoritarian virtues of unquestioning duty, loyalty, and obedience. These virtues are also made abstract, as it is not a specific duty that is lauded, but duty in general.

Our survival as a species now depends on our using what we have (including ourselves and each other) more awarely and care-fully. The symbol systems of the renunciate moralities that hierarchically leveraged human power through turning “difference” into institutionalized dominance and subordination are no longer viable in dealing with a world of limit. The sacrifice of the many to the few that accumulation cultures have required is now counter-productive. This because the hierarchical, authoritarian moralities that demand sacrifice can do so only by blocking the intelligence, self-trust, and care needed for

survival. This is historically new because technology has leveraged human power beyond planetary ecosystems’ inherent ability to correct human abuse.

If it is inherent in the scheme of things that human beings need to have a moral order based on authoritarian beliefs that use fear of retribution as the basic reason for treating others with decency, our chances for survival are slim. If promulgating self-mistrust is necessary to hold the destructive aspects of self-centeredness in check, as authoritarian moralities all do, then we will remain children, unable to handle intelligently the power that our cleverness has given us.

The old symbol systems that are still operative were constructed when humanity moved into its accumulation stage, when unlimited resources were a given. There seemed to be no end to what could be accumulated. Authoritarian hierarchies and the renunciate moralities that propped them up were part of the old control mechanisms that could build pyramids and complex civilizations, and support leaders whose accumulating ambitions were so large that they wanted to rule the world. Hitler was just the most recent example of this.

Technology has brought about a basic shift to where resources are limited, killing at every level is easy, and the symbol systems that held violence somewhat in check are increasingly harder to believe. This is a shift from a planet of abundance to one of limit, which includes the limit of the planet itself to tolerate the pollutions from unchecked accumulation. It is this watershed change that has brought about the necessity of some kind of paradigm shift, which really means a shift in the symbol system and its relation to power. Whatever form the new symbol system takes, it must include a shift from accumulation to preservation, from exploitation to care, and from otherworldly hope to hope in this world.