



GEOFFREY MOSS

students, if they are learning anything at all, no doubt believe that they are being taught something of real value. The entire process is mechanical and self-perpetuating. If you think I am exaggerating, consider that any high school teacher who dared to portray Marxism in a realistic way or showed art films featuring sexual intercourse would soon be out of a job, if not thrown in jail or run out of town.

We must overcome social conditioning if we are to remain politically and intellectually free human beings and citizens. There are ways of undermining our programming without doing ourselves irreparable psychological damage, disrupting our most intimate personal relationships or destroying the social order which civilization probably needs to exist.

The first step in the deprogramming process will require us to take a revolutionary approach towards both language and learning. We must learn to assume an attitude of open skepticism and objective detachment towards everything we have been taught and experienced, and in particular our values, goals and purposes. We must learn to be active participants in the language process, concept builders, rather than passive recipients of readymade systems of language. We must learn to think for ourselves and reject any ideology that demands acceptance purely on faith. In short, we must embrace the attitude of that venerable philosopher Socrates, who regarded the unexamined life as not worth living.

We must relearn the ancient art of language, which is based on the notion that all words, concepts and ideologies associated with language were created by human beings. The art of language shifts the widely prevalent idea that humans were somehow born for and should be controlled by language, by rigid

systematic belief systems which magically appeared independently of humanity, to the more rational view that we created and are responsible for the language systems which regulate our lives. In the past humanity has been subjugated by language. In the future we must learn to shape and bend language to our individual and collective wills, creating in the process conscious and flexible ideological constructs which will enable us to live together peacefully.

I am not advocating the abandonment of all religious, political and economic ideologies or the wholesale elimination of ethnic traditions and social customs. Nor am I promoting anarchy or irrationalism. I am saying that we should recognize and acknowledge the subjective/relative nature of ideology, that each and every systematic conceptual approach to organizing human experience and relationships is only partially true. I am suggesting that it would be useful to view all of our verbal constructs as works of art. I am saying that the traditional distinction between fiction and non-fiction, between absolute (moral) values and relative (aesthetic/artistic) values is both spurious and arbitrary and that the elimination of this false dichotomy would do much to help resolve conflict between those with differing world views.

Political, religious and scientific believers in fundamentalist empiricisms will no doubt resist having their most cherished assumptions reduced to the status of verbal artifacts. Scientific dogmas to describe the universe no more closely approximate absolute truth than do evangelical proclamations of salvation. Words are not the same as the things they describe and no series of words will ever come close to replacing the object of description. To argue otherwise is to make the truly ludicrous suggestion that if we managed to put the right combination of words together we could produce something that more accurately represented the object of description than itself.

In making words more important than that which they usually inaccurately describe, we are making a serious error which is at the very heart of the most persistent problems which bedevil humanity. To do so is to mythologize language, to make false idols and graven images out of the products of the art of language, and to make people less important than the concepts and ideologies which control them. What all true believers miss is the simple fact that language is a craft, a form of art, a way of depicting, articulating, organizing and manipulating the human experience. Just as an artist paints a picture or a musician performs, so those who weave words into pictures of potential human relationships, into political, religious and economic ideologies, are fashioning artifacts, those very important verbal artifacts which determine the types, patterns and qualities of our interactions with each other. When human beings mature to the point where we can discuss those verbal artifacts we arbitrarily classify as non-fiction with the same detached, admittedly subjective attitude usually accorded to other literature, poetry, music and painting, we will be well on our way to a saner, more peaceful existence.

In denying the legitimacy of absolute moral judgements I am not saying that there is no such thing as truth. Absolute truth, if there is any such thing, exists far beyond the confines of contemporary human language. Truth, like beauty, is largely in the eye of the beholder: there is truth in Don Quixote, the Mona Lisa and Beethoven's Fifth Symphony in much the same way there is truth in the Bible and the Bhagavad Gita, Das Capital and the U.S. Constitution. Harmonious human relationships and harmonious music are remarkably similar: those who have been hypnotized by the mythological use of language are responsible for most of the violence and stupidity on the planet.

Real change in the human condition will come about when individuals begin to take responsibility for the way things are and begin to change those characteristics in themselves which are contributing to our most pressing problems. The first step is recognizing that a problem exists, that most of what we say, do and think is strictly programmed mechanical behavior, and making a decision to change. There is no right or wrong way to proceed. Simply observing and reflecting on the ramifications of one's daily behavior is as good a place as any to start. Once we begin to observe ourselves, the remarkable activities that take place within our brains and the inconsistencies between our self-images, thoughts and actions, the possibility of real change arises of itself. When we have seen for ourselves that what we really are is not just a bunch of concepts and beliefs computed into us, we will be well on the way to learning the art of language. There are numerous approaches and much has been written on the subject of freeing ourselves from the tyranny of the mind and the conceptual superstructures that strangle the possibility of real creativity and peace of mind. All that is best in art, literature, philosophy, psychology and religion is aimed at precisely the same goal — freeing the mind and awakening the individual to the reality of that which exists both before and beyond language.

Carl Lyle Jenkins is a writer, poet and publisher and lives in Astoria.

GIVE PEACE A CHANCE

The Declaration of Seville, which condemns as "scientifically incorrect" the assertion that "we have inherited a tendency to make war from our animal ancestors," has been endorsed by the national Steering Committee of Psychologists for Social Responsibility.

The declaration, promulgated last May by some fifty scientists, was the outcome of the Sixth International Colloquium on Brain and Aggression, organized by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), held in Seville, Spain. An attack on "behavioral determinism," it singled out five current contentions as having no scientific basis: that we have an inherited tendency to make war; that we are genetically programmed for war or other violence; that there has been more evolutionary selection for aggressive behavior; that we have a "violent brain"; and that war is instinctive.

"We conclude," the declaration said, "that biology does not condemn humanity to war, and that humanity can be freed from the bondage of biological pessimism and empowered with confidence to undertake the transformative tasks needed this International Year of Peace (1986) and in the years to come. Although these tasks are mainly institutional and collective, they also rest upon the consciousness of individual participants for whom pessimism and optimism are crucial factors. Just as 'wars begin in the minds of men,' peace also begins in our minds. The same species who invented war is capable of inventing peace. The responsibility lies with each of us."

— KERMIT J. ROHDE, Ph.D

Kermit J. Rohde lives in Corvallis. He is a member of Psychologists for Social Responsibility.



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