



CLAWING OUR WAY BACK; TOWARDS AN EVER-DEEPER INTERVENTION

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Introduction

'Intervention' is a term used in psychological circles for a treatment modality where a family member's behavior has become sufficiently a matter of concern – either harmful, dangerous, or shameful, and over a sufficiently long period of time during which other traditional, more modest or conventional modes of correction have been tried, but without success. What is distinctive about an intervention is that there is typically a distortion of vision in the individual engaging in misconduct such that he/she can justify the questionable behavior by mis-describing it as less serious than it might appear to another. This strategy of escape or evasion is taken away by having multiple family members or friends around the individual at the meeting such that they may correct him/her by saying, 'No, I was there, and at that time you did such-and-such,' or 'you said such-and-such', such that there is no possibility of denying it. There is typically an element of arrogance or denial in the individual whose behavior is under scrutiny, and this correction by a family member or friend who cannot be intimidated into silence, collusion or cowardice constitutes a second painful experience of having his/her self-serving excuse or distortion of their behavior trampled, torn away and exposed as a self-serving lie by an individual who would prefer to pass himself off as an honest and possibly superior person. The mood and spirit of the meeting remains calm; no one raises their voice. But the individual at the center has no place to hide; his/her behavior is exposed to their entire family group and becomes a subject matter that can be discussed by all. No one is 'in charge' or passes final judgment. There is no single 'authority figure' against whose concluding evaluation the individual might rail in objection. The element of shame or embarrassment is an attack upon this second character flaw of mistaken or misplaced pride, a hidden or deeper attitude that, it is implied, should change along with the external behavior that is the surface or initial object of comment. It thus takes psychic strength, or requires psychic growth, to undergo an 'intervention'. Indeed, that is its purpose.

Consequences of bullying, inappropriate treatment, insult or injury by another are complex, but not difficult to disentangle.

When we feel we have become an innocent victim to someone else's aggression or excessive use of power – and that this is more than a 'one-off' incident, but now more like a permanent aspect of our situation or characteristic of our condition that we cannot change – we not infrequently attempt to re-achieve or restore a sense of power or agency by finding a victim whom WE can bully, beat up or demean in our turn. Although such behavior is as unjust and inappropriate as in the first instance, it brings about an at least partial restoration of our self-esteem because we thereby demonstrate there is at least one person over whom we DO have power. We are thus not *only* a victim or powerless, but equally powerful, or a bully in our turn. Although this may not be the best way of dealing with the psychological discomfort caused by the first situation – perhaps by confronting the bully threatening us and making him back down or modify his behavior – it *does* achieve partial restoration of status, agency and respect. We have at least taken our place in the 'pecking order', rather than lying prostrate and embarrassed at the bottom.

An 'equality' of justice – or rather, 'injustice' - is thereby re-established, spread down the line, so that all are treated equally badly. However, everyone also has at least some partial or minimal 'victory'. This may be the best way of dealing with a bad situation - where there is no 'just' authority at the top, whom we may appeal to. We may have to accept this until something better comes along.

However, when we are honest we must admit that society itself is injured by such a 'solution', since the fellow-feeling and camaraderie we should feel towards everyone in our society is broken; instead, we evaluate each other coldly as potential victims. Habitual criminals in the lower socio-economic echelons have achieved a near-complete detachment from the people around them - including family members and neighbors - everyone they do not fear as more 'powerful' than themselves. However, the aim of socialization should be to strengthen and extend the bonds of fellow-feeling and concern, rather than reduce these to almost nothing. In a society where there are more than one social or ethnic group, not infrequently one or the other feels themselves to be 'second-class' citizens and improperly deprived of the 'fellow-

feeling' of others – and that they have a right to reciprocate.

It is thus not uncommon for entire cultures to engage in such distortions and consequent behavior, when they find themselves in a permanently inferior or subordinate position with regard to another culture and with no possibility of reversing or evening the relationship. For example, through modern biblical criticism many scholars have come to the conclusion that Israel found itself in such a position with regard to the dominant cultures surrounding them that had the advantage of more substantial or impressive natural resources, chiefly Egypt and Babylon. Exposed to Hellenistic culture after the foundation of the city of Alexandria just beyond its southern border, Jews could not escape exposure to the cultural riches in history, literature, drama, and philosophy that Greek education afforded, and in particular to the 'national epic', in which the gods themselves participated, that produced Greek identity and its Hellenistic mentality, cultivated by esteemed poets and presented on musical evenings by noble hosts for honored guests, as with Homer's *Aeneid* and *Odyssey*. Inevitably the question of a reciprocal Jewish 'national epic' sprang up, and here Jews were expeditious in filling the vacuum. They had ample material on hand – scribal histories from the northern and southern kingdoms, records and teachings of various prophetic schools who had ministered to and encouraged Israel after the surprising destruction of Solomon's Temple and the beginning of the 'Babylonian Exile', folk tales from the earlier 'judges', etc. This 'national epic' became the 'Old Testament' for Christians – but it requires some corrections. First of all, Abraham and Moses were legendary fictions, necessary to account for movements of the Jews into Canaan, and between Egypt and Canaan, when in fact such large movements never took place. Secondly, the monotheist Jewish theology came late, possibly in Babylon or as a borrowing from the Egyptian pharaoh Akhenaten, or even as an early reaction within Neo-Platonism, as a way of increasing the ethereal, asexual 'spirituality' of their God over material divinities. As the Israeli archaeologist Zeev Herzog has set this challenge: '(T)he Israelites were never in Egypt, did not wander in the desert, did not conquer the land in a military campaign, and did not pass it on to the twelve tribes of Israel. Perhaps even harder to swallow is the fact that the united monarchy of David and Solomon, which is described by the Bible as a regional power, was at most a small tribal kingdom. And it will come as an unpleasant shock to many that the God of Israel, Jehovah, had a female consort and that the early Israelite religion adopted monotheism only in the waning period of the monarchy and not at Mount Sinai.' (quoted in *The Jews and the Bible*, by Jean-Christophe Attias, Stanford UP, 2014, pp. 149-50) If you cannot raise the bridge, lower the river. If you don't dare insult the gods of your masters, praise the 'spirituality' of your own god and criticize others for not living up to an equal standard. Monotheism came at the end of Jewish development, not at its beginning. It barely preceded Jesus.

Another factor inhibiting correct appraisal of a person or institution we cannot escape is an attitude of approval, affection or respect that has been inculcated over centuries and been culturally mandatory as long as anyone can remember. In such circumstances, critical examination or the discarding of such an attitude can lead to considerable psychological upheaval and even social disorder. An inhibiting factor in the latter situation is the unpopularity with which we expect our modification to be

received. A recent example is the reaction of some political analysts and historical scholars to the official charge that Lee Harvey Oswald was the lone gunman of President John F. Kennedy in 1963. To oppose this 'official' interpretation, one must be willing to entertain the hypothesis of a deep and widespread conspiracy, made up not just of the F.B.I. who investigated the killing on site, but J. Edgar Hoover as its head, the C. I. A., military chiefs together with the new president Lyndon Johnson, and the members of the Warren Commission who later investigated the assassination. Nevertheless, a not-inconsiderable number of professional investigators and scholars who have come at this tragedy with an open mind have discovered a surprising number of anomalies in the official transcription of the attack and handling of the resulting corpse. The supposition is that Kennedy was not as ideologically rigid or intellectually committed to a strict anti-communism as others in the U. S. military and government establishment. He was 'soft' on Fidel Castro in Cuba and looking for a way to free the United States from the conflict in Vietnam that looked more like a cultural liberation movement. Supposedly Kennedy's critics wanted a return to a post-World War II cold-war opposition. They were not ready to 'move on' to a more flexible discussion.

To entertain this hypothesis, however, one must be psychologically ready to reconsider one's opinion not only of J. Edgar Hoover and the other leaders of government, but also of the history and integrity of the basic institutions of American government, against which such an accusation had never before been laid. Whatever the logical 'weight' of the contrary evidence, the psychological habit of loyalty to the elected regime coming out of the Second World War was such as to make it difficult to take this proposal seriously. The debate broke into a scattered discussion by acknowledged 'hot-heads' and government apologists that left the basic issues unresolved and the general public at sea as to what intelligently could be said at this comparatively late date on the affair. Thus the matter rests.

A similar confused scholarly opinion today attends the historical reliability of the Jewish scriptures or the attempt to take them 'literally'. Can they be trusted to say what they appear to say, or are they rather a late composition trying to cobble together a 'national epic' that could stand with and compete against such compositions as the 'great nations' of the region told about themselves, and paraded before the 'outside' world as well? What scholarly attitude should the intelligent reader take towards this body of texts, about which the received attitude is now divided even among professionals?

In this situation, 'intervention' may offer us a way to get a handle on prayer. Prayer may be looked upon as a way of doing an 'intervention' for and on yourself – with yourself taking all the roles! The ground for this is that intervention as a psychological device concerns rooting out self-deception – self-deception is impossible in authentic prayer. Prayer is thus the search for a deeper intervention than we normally pursue or aim at. We can call ourselves out, because we know the ways by which we typically shield ourselves from a deeper responsibility; we can also comfort ourselves when we need help and aid from this other direction. All this is in support of the fundamental human project of living closer to – what? Why, simply to the most important thing about which we could call an 'intervention'!