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Celestial Motion (I) _____
Robert A. Harman, M.D.

The Plasmatic System (I) _____
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Nature, Character, and Personality (I) _____
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The Sociology of the Controversy _____
Halton Arp

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The Relationship of Individual Character and Work Group Character¹

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Introduction

I approach the present topic from the standpoint of an organizational consultant, one who engages in the practice of organizational therapy, a comparatively new field.² The goal of my work is to help work groups and organizations function to their fullest. I do this by helping client groups clarify their wants and needs as well as face and work through what gets in the way, inhibits, and otherwise distorts productive, fulfilling work. Invariably, this leads to dealing with the attitudes and emotions that exist in the work group setting—individually and collectively. I help group members address problems in their working relationships with each other as well as face the feelings they have about their management and task work. While my consulting efforts entail considerable one-on-one work and the working through of individual thoughts and feelings, together with extensive group work, the essence is that I approach the situation from the standpoint of the group—from the standpoint of the group's work, character, and functioning.

The basis from which I address this topic is important because it differs from much of how the subject is traditionally approached. I will be presenting what I believe to be a new specific formulation to the problem of individual and group character, as well as the consulting case experiences out of which it grew. Additionally, I will offer preliminary hunches as to its functional basis, and will also venture some speculations as to some of the general implications for the development of both organizations and for individuals.

¹ Based on a paper presented at the Annual Scientific Meeting of the American College of Orgonomy, October 6, 1991.

² An introduction to the field can be found in Manfred F.R. Kets de Vries and Associates, Organizations on the Couch: Clinical Perspectives in Organizational Behavior and Change. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1991.

However, a discussion of some of the traditional approaches to the issue is first warranted because it helps to frame the central problem with which we are concerned.

Background to the Problem

Perhaps the most traditional view of the relationship of individual and group character holds that group phenomena is essentially a function of individual character and that interpersonal matters can effectively be reduced to, and explained by, what is happening in the individual realm—by reference to personality, character dynamics, individual motivations, and so on. This view is associated with many in the field of psychology and psychiatry.³ It is a view that is also subscribed to by many in the sister field of the management sciences, who stress how the personality and individual efforts of leaders influence group life and shape organizational work practices. In many ways, this is the popular view in the public at large, a view that interprets events on the social scene as a product of individual wills and regards leadership as heroism. While this view does express a partial truth, it misses a simple appreciation of social influences and of group phenomena per se. When birds fly in formation, when wolves travel in packs, when primates live and forage in social units, we are seeing group phenomena at work—occurrences that are all the more striking because they are part of the natural world, constituting what Reich called “biosocial” phenomena.

In contrast to the view that boils everything down to individuals, the classical field of organization development takes a wider, group view. It adopts what can be classified as a more sociological perspective and looks at group phenomena as a field of interpersonal action. In fact, at the extreme, some assert that individual personality or character really does not matter very much; that what counts are the structural, systemic, and dynamic cultural features of the group. The distortion in this view is that the underlying repository of energy in the group, the individual, is stripped away, and individual responsibility, initiative, and feelings are discounted. The power of group norms is held to be all-decisive. Of course, sometimes, as in the case of bureaucratized, chronically blocked groups, this seems all too true. This sociological perspective, too, finds popular expression in the folk wisdom that

³ There are exceptions here. Those affiliated with the Tavistock Institute in London and the A.K. Rice Institute in the United States have long explored the group dimensions of individual behavior.

“groups and nations frequently get the leaders they deserve.” This insight, in fact, was developed at some length by Reich, who perceived the character of leadership, in the last analysis, to be a function of a mass psychology. (1) Reich, at the same time, also saw the function of a more natural leader, who, operating out of the depths and in contact with the character and nature of those he leads, has the capacity to positively contribute to the world. Reich found these qualities to be especially embodied in those engaged in pioneering work as well as in what he described as “the new leader.” (2) Historically, great men such as Reich have been able to avoid the simple dichotomy, or polarization, between individual and group phenomena—avoiding the trap of making things either a matter of individual psychology or of group process. Reich was keenly aware that something deeper was at work. Although he did not go beyond sketching some of its main dimensions, he held great hope for an emergent field of social psychiatry, one that could have a truly beneficial impact on work hygiene and people’s lives within our culture at large.

Freud’s views are also of interest as historical background to the problem of the relationship of individual and group character. As a pioneer in exploring deep intrapsychic phenomena, Freud is often wrongly viewed as reducing everything to individuals alone, a distortion that Reich himself decried. It is worth looking at Freud’s own words. His 1921 essay, “Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego,” begins:

The contrast between individual psychology and social or group psychology, which at a first glance may seem to be full of significance, loses a great deal of its sharpness when it is examined more closely. It is true that individual psychology is concerned with the individual man and explores the paths by which he seeks to find satisfaction for his instincts; but only rarely and under certain exceptional conditions is individual psychology in a position to disregard the relations of this individual to others. In the individual’s mental life someone else is invariably involved, as a model, as an object, as a helper, as an opponent, and so from the very first, individual psychology is at the same time social psychology as well...in this extended but entirely justifiable sense of the words. (3)

Reich, in his 1952 interview about Freud, remarked he was always amazed when he heard claims that Freud had neglected to account for the social factor. As Reich put it:

It's not an either libido or society. The libido is the energy which is molded by society. There's no contradiction there. I am always astonished when I listen to such things, or read them. It's either libido or sociology. Why, that's perfect nonsense.... The child brings with it a certain amount of energy. The world gets hold of it and shapes it. So you have sociology and biology, both, in one organism. (4)

The principle here is that both individual and social realms operate simultaneously. To put the proposition in either-or terms is theoretically confused and does not yield practical results. Thus, for our present purposes, the true task is not to determine if individual and group character are interrelated, but rather to understand how they are interconnected, to discover the limits of each and the specific ways they function together.

Definition of Terms

Before proceeding, some definition of terms is in order. The term "character" is used in its functional clinical sense. Reich postulated three layers to the human structure: the facade, the middle layer, and the core. Crist has clarified how the concept of "character" corresponds essentially to the middle layer, while a person's presenting personality refers to the facade, and his basic nature, the core. (5) Likewise, the term "group character" refers to the underlying attitudes and political behaviors within an organization that function beneath official pronouncement—which in turn bind expression of its members' core feelings about their work. These feelings pertain to working relationships and tasks, and run the gamut from anxiety, anger, fear, disappointment, and sadness to pleasure and excitement. (6)

Essential Finding

The basic formulation I have arrived at through my consulting work regarding the relationship of individual character and group character is that *in a work group or organizational setting, individual character functions as a mechanism in service of the group, or organizational, character.* I have found that group members do indeed respond to organizational events in terms of their individual characters, but, to the extent they do so, they function to express or carry out a specific character for the group overall.

Methodologically, this conceptualization was not evident from theoretical conjecture alone or purely formal analysis of the problem. In retrospect, this formulation seems logical and descriptively accurate, but it emerged gradually,

from a number of consulting case experiences.

Consulting Case Experiences

One of the organizations I consult with—a large, regional insurance corporation—has an organizational character equivalent to a paranoid schizophrenic, a group character I have previously designated as the aggressive, vision-blocked organization. (6) The structure of the firm is such that the top of the organization—the head of the organization—functions in a way that is disconnected and isolated from the bottom, the body of the organization. This collective structure is embedded in interpersonal behavior and action. Example: In the facade of the organization there is an expression, “T.I.E.,” which stands for “Today is Everything.” As an organizational motto, it is intended to convey a sense of urgency to employees—the importance of responding to customers, business opportunities, and problems in a timely way. The attitude espoused here is, “We really need to deal with things. We don’t want to be bureaucratic like other insurance firms. Let’s go out and get it done.” Now, while these thoughts are expressed, the attitude it thinly masks is, “Don’t be thinking about what we need to do tomorrow, just let’s get on with things today. Just do it, and stop asking any questions.” The problem, of course, is that tasks which require thinking things through, planning, and coordination are not adequately performed. The character attitude inhibits the more natural way employees approach their work, which is to say, employees have a need to look at what they are doing. In certain critical management tasks, such as strategic planning, this need is vital. It follows that the goal-setting process in such an organization is fragmentary and poor. A great deal of confusion, in-fighting, fantasy, and suspicion are present, as priorities shift rapidly and unexpectedly. In short, the firm is highly action-oriented and blind. The top and bottom of the organization are effectively cut off from one another in their communication channels and information loops. This leads to heavy distortion in the way internal and external events are interpreted as well as poorly integrated and aligned organizational arrangements and processes.

This firm, as other organizations, has many subunits, i.e. different departments, branches, committee functions, and so on. In fact, in my work with organizations, I have generally found that these subunits—to the extent they are not healthy—begin to take on the disordered character of the organization as a whole. They lose their individual distinctiveness and, over time, take on

a structure that resembles the pathology of the system as a whole. This was the case with the organization described above. I found that one department frequently had the same character as other departments. This often held true even for new, start-up units. They each sooner or later began to function in a way in which the head of the group was disconnected from the body of the workers, thus replicating the structure of the firm as a whole. This has been a striking phenomena to observe.⁴ Below are three examples of subunits within this organization reflecting this dynamic out of which my understanding of the relationship between individual and group character grew.

Case I: Jon, one of the managers in the firm who runs a specialized product group responsible for sales and underwriting, called for a consultation. He told me his unit was having some trouble meeting certain production goals and that members of his ten-person department were not getting along. My impression on first hearing him was that he feared losing control of his group. He asked if I would sit in on one of his staff meetings, make some observations, and follow up with some recommendations. Following a series of interviews and conferences with him and his staff, I found his group to indeed replicate the character structure of the organization as a whole. There was no clear congruence of goals at the top, and he, as the manager, was disconnected from the sentiments and activities of the rest of his unit. His major communications to the group consisted of infrequent and inconsistently scheduled staff meetings, which, in any case, fell flat in terms of group discussion. As a rule, he could be found cloistered in his office doing his own production work. Thus, since he did not perform governing work for the department, the rest of the members were confused as to direction, processes, etc. In-fighting, both suppressed and expressed, was also evident. He also had his own variant of the organizational expression "Today is Everything." Jon would tell his people they needed to be very responsive to customers, but when push came to shove, he would emphasize production—the need to get sales up. In practice, this meant if time was needed to unravel a problem with a customer, it could not be taken, because he and his employees were too busy serving the next customer. Relations with customers—as well as those within the group—thus remained confused but action-oriented, reflecting the aggressive, vision-blocked character of the group.

⁴ Within this same organizational setting, I have also seen some units retain their vitality and function effectively. This whole phenomena resembles the tendency toward loss of differentiation in an individual organism that has been functioning with a chronic, rigid character.

In my one-on-one work with Jon, I noted a manner of expression and motivation that struck me as compulsive and rather affect-blocked—a flat, almost emotionless quality. He was quite conscientious, worrisome, and tended to doubt his own and others' actions. He was very concerned that if he spent too much time with the "people side of things" he would lose control over his employees and "create a mess." He "just couldn't get into that." I also found him quite compliant in his dealings with me, readily accepting suggestions I would make. For example, when I pointed out how he tended to lose sight of the big picture of his job as manager, he quickly agreed. He had very little fight on the surface, but I sensed a stubborn hanging on. I thus deemed his own structure to be that of a compulsive, or that of an individual with heavy compulsive features.

As the consultation proceeded and my own assessments solidified, it dawned on me that it was through Jon's own character that the group character manifested: Jon, in effect, distanced himself from his group through his motivation to avoid messes. Thus, here was the individual compulsive character functioning as a mechanism in service of the organizational character, which disconnected the manager from the group. With this, there were numerous distortions associated with the visual function of the manager—the oversight or supervision function—which simply was not performed.⁵ Jon's own motivations, his own character, hooked into this group process.

To reiterate: It was the *organizational* function of supervision which was not discharged—not simply a personal function of Jon's. However, it did break down at the point of Jon's own character—in his motivation to avoid messes. In working with Jon, as I linked up how this attitude distorted the discharging of his supervisory function, he developed more clarity about his needed organizational role, and many of the problems that initially presented began to abate. In retrospect, I attribute this success to the linkage between the individual and group aspects, though at the time I was not conscious of its significance. Jon has remained connected to his managerial role and to his

⁵ One of the operating functions of the top manager of a group or of a whole organization is, in fact, this oversight function. The word supervision is visual, denoting clarity and perspective from above. This was all locked up in Jon's organization. Indeed, when vision becomes isolated it takes on a grandiose and fantasy-like quality—just the opposite of its natural, clarifying function. This is no less true of organizations as with individuals. The "Today is Everything" motto represents a modest example of this kind of organizational delusion. A more pathological variant can be found in Gerald H. Langer's description of problems encountered at Mentor Graphics Corporation in "The Vision Trap," *Harvard Business Review*, March-April, 1992, pp. 46-55.

group, despite turnover and other organizational stressors, for the two years since working with him.

Case II: An Executive Vice President of the organization, Michael, presented to me as a chronic depressive character. A member of the top management team I had worked with on a number of assignments over the years, Michael generally was hard-driving but at the same time expressed a lingering sense of hopelessness about the organization and the need to simply carry on. He was Lincolnesque in stature, had a strong sense of irony and moralism, and had a definite tendency to be hard on himself. This latter quality particularly surfaced when a substantial operating loss occurred in one of the organizational divisions that fell within his scope of authority. His first reaction was to start blaming himself. Michael told me he had missed things in that division—that he should have been monitoring events more closely, rather than relying on the division's senior manager, Phillip, who reported to him. What was underneath this reaction was his upset and anger at Phillip, who was immediately accountable for the operating loss. In fact, Phillip had created the problem in a way that would have been very difficult for Michael to have discovered on his own for a host of significant organizational reasons.⁶

In my work with Michael, I found it necessary to help him stop blaming himself, *for it was the blame itself that prevented him from looking squarely at the situation. The blame, as it were, served to obscure and distort the management review function, including the disciplinary and remedial actions that were needed.* Here, too, the individual character structure—chronic depression—served as a mechanism in service of the organizational character, effectively distorting the required oversight. What is particularly striking about this case is how the organizational character was at the center of the financial bleeding of the corporation. In the first place, the operating loss itself occurred as a direct result of the organizational character: Harmful action was taken because a blind eye was turned toward published data. In the second place, in its reaction to the problem—*even when faced with a significant revenue loss*—the company could not look objectively at what was occurring. Indeed, Michael was not alone in his difficulty at looking at the issue: The rest of top management did not look at what systems, expectations, and impulses had combined to lead to the loss in the first place.

⁶ In essence, Phillip had precipitated the loss by instructing his own subordinates to ignore serious warning signals contained in published operating reports and to push on with an unwise transaction.

Case III: Susan, a field office manager, found it very hard to be tough with her employees and coworkers when the situation called for it. She could function as a cheerleader with her staff—encouraging them on—but when clear limits were needed to be set and enforced, she just could not do it. She could not say, “Here are the boundaries,” and exercise muscle. Instead, she would run away from the task. Indeed, she did not even see it. In my consultation with her, she would go on and on about peripheral aspects of the problem and never zero in on the need to assert managerial authority. My diagnostic picture was that of a hysteric. *Her running served as an avoidance of the management function—again, disconnecting the head from the body of the group—resulting in in-fighting, morale, and productivity problems she could not get a handle on.*

Discussion

The three cases reflect a replication of structure. Despite differences in individual motivations, a larger organizational function was carried out. In all three instances, individual character dynamics functioned in the service of common group dynamics, with individual characters functioning as mechanisms serving the group character. What is important to note from the standpoint of organizational theory is that mechanism and function are each present, as in any living or nonliving system.

In addition to the formulation described above, there is another dimension in which a relationship between individual and group character exists: A group’s character emerges in part from the interaction with the character of its founder. (7) In this respect, the individual founder’s character represents a precipitating mechanism in behalf of the developing group character. In the instance of the insurance organization, the founder did not have a paranoid schizophrenic structure. The “Today is Everything” motto, which he coined, expressed for me his own tendency to simply push and get things moving, reflecting a simple phallic structure. My hunch is that the organization developed its aggressive, vision-blocked structure in its infancy, in interaction with this character type (together with other environmental influences). This is a matter where fundamental organizational research is needed, but my sense is that the founder’s character frustrated the group at the earliest stage of development—the visioning stage—when the group needed to orient itself and develop initial clarity about its position in the marketplace.(6) Its vision and identity did not fully solidify. The founder’s anxiety to move on frustrated the group at this moment of development, thus causing the split that

subsequently took on more major proportions. To the extent such a dynamic operated, the individual character served as a precipitating mechanism in the development of the group character.

Beyond Organizational Character

In fact, groups and organizations do develop and evolve beyond the constraints of organizational character. This phenomena is evident to those who have experienced membership in organizations that have moved significantly beyond their earlier levels of functioning. Such movement can happen of its own accord, spontaneously and naturally through the interactions of leaders and members, and can also happen as a result of therapeutic intervention. The key factor seems to lie in the distinction between character and nature (5), between character attitudes and true contact. The leader in touch with his own nature has good contact with his work and its implications. This necessarily means he is also in contact with the sentiments and thoughts of others in the group. Thus, if other members are unable to do their work because they are bogged down in problems of group dynamics, then the leader with good contact will see the issues clearly. He will function with few illusions, fantasies, or other ideologies to protect him from his anxieties. Tough workplace issues are not easy to deal with in organizations; just seeing them causes pain and difficulties. Still, the leader in touch with them is the only one in a position to move the group forward. Here, too, the capacity to perform in this manner lies in the leader's own visual ability. In the long run, one cannot solve problems that are not seen clearly.

Such leadership is not just limited to individuals higher up in the hierarchy of organizations. People throughout an organization can have proportional effect, providing the group is open to it. Again, such individual effect is based on the extent that individuals operate out of their core. To the extent they operate out of their individual characters, they are going to get caught—and this is the rub: *It is as if an individual's work energy and feelings are shut off in blocked work group situations, making even comparatively healthy individuals act out of their armor.* To repeat: This does not seem to be simply a matter of being relatively healthy. The blocked social reality—the blocked group character—pulls out the neurotic character in the individual. Perhaps the basis for this is that the energy and armor are stimulated, so individual character dynamics are called forth as a means of coping with it. When this happens, it is very easy for group members to blame each other personally for the

problem, because, in a very real way, this is precisely what is happening, as a mechanism.

Lastly, it appears that the dynamics can run the other way. If the group functions relatively fully out of its nature—i.e. if the group is relatively clear about its tasks, roles, and authentic about its working relationships—then members will tend to operate out of their own cores. When such a healthy work group is joined by a new member—say, the average neurotic—energy will start to be pulled from his core. The social situation requires this if the person is to function. Here, one effect of the group on the individual is to drain energy away from his own neuroses. What is not known is the extent and duration of such effects on individual character structure and development. This is a matter for future research and consideration.

Conclusion

We are just beginning to understand the relationship between individual development and group process. The broader issues at stake are certainly in their infancy. That there is a profound connection between individual and social process, however, cannot be doubted—the clues to which lie in an energetic understanding of life.

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