

# **Authoritarianism, Cave Dwelling and the Contemporary Escape from Freedom**

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Just over a decade ago, Francis Fukuyama (2006), an astute observer of contemporary political systems and ideology, declared that we have arrived at “the end of history” – or at least the end of competing political ideologies. According to Fukuyama, liberal democracy had won the day. The new world is one in which the cold war has been replaced by competition between scientific progress, enlightened government and new ethical codes, on the one hand, and fundamentalist terrorism on the other hand.

I would suggest that Fukuyama was right in some ways but wrong in other ways. Today, we find many competing political ideologies in full flower around the world. And many of these ideologies are not only “trumping” liberal democracy but also throwing us back into an era of authoritarian rule. While the competition between rationality and irrational terrorism is clearly evident, it is not clear that the rational order is winning the day. Fundamentalist terrorism certainly continues to play a major role on the world stage. It exists alongside a new form of “terrorism”: the pandemic. The history of competing ideologies is clearly not at an end and challenges associated with terrorism and spreading viruses further complicate the picture.

The challenge to Fukuyama’s analysis was certainly evident in Eastern Europe during the early 1990s. The lingering ghost of authoritarianism in Eastern Europe that Berne Weiss and I identified during the early 1990s (Bergquist and Weiss, 1994) was tragically prescient. This ghost is still haunting many 21<sup>st</sup> Century countries throughout the world. We are finding the strains and often the profound, tangible presence of authoritarianism operating in Africa, the Mid-East, Asia, South America and even the United States. It has certainly not been confined just to Eastern Europe following the 1990s collapse of the Soviet Union.

Furthermore, today (during the third decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century) we are finding a powerful force moving many countries toward authoritarianism that is directly related to our current pandemic (COVID-19) and that portends an even greater threat of rampant authoritarianism with future global outbreaks of highly contagious viruses. In the current essay, I reflect on the

dynamics of authoritarianism and escaping from freedom, while in a subsequent essay I consider these dynamics as related to the current virus and future viruses.

## **The Scenarios of Escape**

In seeking out some answers to the question about the re-emergence of these ghosts and the potential escalation of authoritarianism in many societies, I turn first to the insights offer by Erich Fromm many years ago about authoritarianism and the escape from freedom. Erich Fromm suggested that "once the primary bonds which gave security to the individual are severed, once the individual faces the world outside of himself as a completely separate entity, two courses are open to him since he has to overcome the unbearable state of powerlessness and aloneness" (Fromm, 1941, pp. 140 - 141). The one course is what Fromm defined as the twofold process of discovering true freedom. One first experiences what he calls "negative freedom"; this being freedom from specific societal restrictions. The next step is "positive freedom," or the freedom to do something else and construct a new set of social institutions. These new institutions, in Fromm's utopian vision, offer greater economic and political equity while also encouraging creativity and community.

### **Freedom and the Numinous**

Experiencing the loss of constraint (negative freedom) and the challenge of making free choices (positive freedom) is frightening. In seeking to determine the nature and outcomes of this fear, we turn, briefly, to insights offered by another psychoanalytically trained social observer, Carl Jung. Borrowing from the work of Rudolph Otto, Jung (1948) describes the effect of unbounded freedom and the "awe-ful" nature of choice. In what some scholars identify as the first "psychological" analysis of religious experiences, Otto identified something he called the *numinous* experience.

In his now-classic book, *The Idea of the Holy*, Otto (1923) creates a new word, "numinous", combining the Latin words "numen" with the word, "ominous". Otto (1923, p. 11) writes about a powerful, enthralling experience that is "felt as objective and outside the self." His numinous experience is simultaneously awe-some and awe-full. We are enthralled and repelled. We feel powerless in the presence of the numinous – yet we seem to gain power ("inspiration") from participation in its wonderment.

Using more contemporary psychological terms, we propose that the boundaries between internal and external loci of control are shattered when one is enmeshed in a numinous experience. The outside enters the inside and the inside is drawn to the outside. In Jungian terms, our inner psyche is drawn outward by the numinous experience; it confiscates this experience and brings it back inside – where it becomes even more frightening and threatening to the ongoing integration of various parts of the psyche. It is through the numinous experiences that deeply embedded archetypes residing in our unconscious are activated.

In the case of freedom that is found after political revolution, these archetypes, on the positive side, might involve images of the great warrior or martyr. The images associated with these archetypes might interplay with images of nature and birth rights evoked by even more primitive archetypes of the sacred mother or images of kingdom and progeny evoked by an archetype of the all-powerful father. These archetypes might instead (or in addition) evoke images of a new utopia – a paradise on earth.

There are negative archetypes, residing in the shadow domain of our unconscious, that can be potentiated by politically activated freedom. The archetype of chaos is readily activated – and it evokes images of the inundating flood – leading to massive destruction. The complementary archetype of Satan evokes images of powerful evil forces that are sweeping in to fill the void (chaos) and take command – leading to Armageddon. These compelling positive and negative images swirl around one another, creating a confusing and ultimately quite frightening intrapsychic storm.

### **The Psychic Storm**

What does this psychic storm look like? We can get some sense of the storm's nature by looking at its more benevolent manifestation. Jung (and Otto) would suggest that the storm takes place when we are transported to another domain of experience while listening to a Bach mass or an opera by Mozart or Puccini (depending on our "taste," i.e. amenability). This type of psychic storm is a numinous-inducing experience. We view a miracle, in the form of a newborn child or the recovery of a loved one from a life-threatening disease. This leads us to a sense of the numinous.

The storm can be quite horrifying – yet still somehow enthralling. Horrible and dreadful images and pictures of gods in primitive cultures continue to attract us – think of the superhero movies that populate our movie theaters and cable channels. These competing images lead us to feelings of profound admiration or profound disgust – often both. This is the perfect psychic storm. Somehow, a power from outside time or space seems to intervene and lead us to an experience that penetrates and changes our inner psyche. And we don't know how this happens. It is beyond our control or true comprehension.

I suggest that true freedom evokes a psychic storm. It is a numinous experience. When we first encounter freedom it is both enthralling and frightening. We are drawn to freedom and simultaneously seek to escape it. I found that this ambivalence exists in abundance when interviewing the citizens of Estonia for the book I co-authored with Berne Weiss in 1994. There was the all-inspiring songfest when Estonians began to sing their national songs despite Soviet bans on this music. I suspect that these songs were just as much a numinous experience for those in attendance at the songfest as the performance of an oratorio by Bach, sung by a massive choral group and orchestra – in fact the Estonian singing was probable even more numinous – for it was saturated with not only the joy of once again singing (and listening to) an Estonian anthem, but also the fear, anger and pride associated with violating the Soviet regulations.

### **Escape and Neurosis**

We face the exhaustion and deep fear associated with new-found freedom. We want to run away and hide from the psychic storm. Erich Fromm speaks to this yearning for escape, as do Jung and Otto. We escape from freedom or we create or accept an illusion of freedom.

According to Fromm (1941), there is another course open to each of us. We can simply give up our freedom and then try to overcome the aloneness associated with personal constraint (lack of freedom) by eliminating the gap that has arisen between our individual self and the world. We submerge our own identify and even the identity of the collective. This alternative, neurotic course of escape, according to Fromm, is characterized by its compulsive character. This neurotic pathway resembles that taken when we are threatened and in a state of panic: we look around us for help and are willing to sacrifice our own individual integrity to become safe (or at least feel safe).

Living in the shadow of the numinous and our psychic storm, our behavior is characterized by Fromm as:

. . . the more or less complete surrender of individuality and the integrity of the self. Thus, it is not a solution which leads to happiness and positive freedom; it is, in principle, a solution which is to be found in all neurotic phenomena. It assuages an unbearable anxiety and makes life possible by avoiding panic; yet it does not solve the underlying problem and is paid for by a kind of life that often consists only of automatic or compulsive activities [Fromm, 1941, pp. 140-141].

This analysis offered by Fromm (and augmented by Jung and Otto) leads us to consider one of the traditional avenues of escape and distortion: authoritarianism. This is not the only avenue of escape and distortion. In several subsequent essays, I consider a second avenue, nationalism, as well as two of the more personal modes of escape: ethnocentrism and excessive consumption. Right now, however, I turn to the powerful force of authoritarianism that operated in Estonia after the collapse of the Soviet Union – and that seems to be operating in many Eastern European countries today (long after the collapse of the Soviet Union) and in countries far removed from Eastern Europe.

### **Escape into Authoritarianism**

It is all too easy to frame authoritarianism as a personal trait to be found in individuals, rather than as a societal and cultural dynamic. While the work done by Theodore Adorno and his colleagues (Adorno, et al. 1950) regarding the authoritarian personality is filled with insights regarding the origins of authoritarian perspectives, it is important to recognize that authoritarian dynamics operate at many levels. Recognizing the multi-level nature of authoritarianism, I offer multiple perspectives on this dynamic. I once again turn to Fromm's analysis as a foundation. At the heart of authoritarianism, according to Fromm, there are four major elements. I offer a few expanded reflections on each of these four elements and suggest how these elements relate to the desire found in each of us to escape freedom when faced with a psychic storm.

### **Shifting to External Locus of Control**

First, there is the negation of one's own sense of self-effectiveness and control. Fromm suggests that we escape from the responsibilities of freedom by giving up the independence of our own individual selves. As I just noted regarding the dynamics of a numinous enthrallment, the external takes control of the internal. We are no longer the “masters of our own souls” but have instead assigned this responsibility to some other persona or agency. As Christopher Lasch (1984) would suggest, under these conditions we diminish our sense of self (soul and all). We become a “minimal” self with very little in the way of a personal sense of identity or worth. We are ripe for authoritarian rule by an external entity that we perceive as being much bigger and more powerful than we are (a *numinous authority*).

Returning to the concept of locus of control, we find a clear and profound shift from an internal locus to an external locus. There is often an almost mythic sense that some powerful force in the world (or outside the world) is now propelling our personal and collective fate. Jung’s archetypes come to play again. We are aligned with some primate image (archetype) to which we donate our personal agency and soul. In the loss of our sense of internal control, we are led to the diminution of our own sense of self and look instead for an externally-derived sense of a collective self—a widening of the pathway to authoritarianism.

### **Abandoning Individual Identity**

The second element leads directly from the first. As I just noted, there is the projection of one's own power onto another. Having abandoned our own individual identity, we fuse with the identity of a leader, a group, or an institution. This may be a church, an educational institution, a philosophy, a political party, or a national leader. During the early years of World War II, Fromm focuses, in *Escape from Freedom* (1941), primarily on the authoritarianism of Nazi Germany. His analysis was still appropriate in 1960, when Fromm (1960) was writing about American culture, and in the early 1990s, when considering the reformation of authoritarianism in Russia and many other countries following collapse of the Soviet Union.

In his later work, Fromm (1960) recognizes that the authoritarian dynamic is not restricted to right-wing politics—though he seems to have had something of a blind spot regarding the authoritarian orientation to be found in many socialist and communist regimes. The issue of political orientation and authoritarianism has been a source of considerable debate among social scientists since Fromm first described the authoritarian personality in 1941.

Theodore Adorno and his fellow authors of *The Authoritarian Personality* (Adorno, et al. 1950) focused, like Fromm, on the right-wing and, in particular, on antisemitism in the right-wing. Through their focus on right-wing politics, Fromm and Adorno both revealed their left-wing leanings (both were associated with the Frankfort Institute which sought to blend Freudian and Marxist perspective). Milton Rokeach (1960) led the way in trying to correct this bias. He was particularly concerned that the authoritarian mode of thinking and feeling (which he labeled "dogmatism") not be restricted to the right wing. Hoffer (1951) similarly thought that the authoritarian (the "true believer") is to be found at all points on the political spectrum.

My temporary diversion into the issue of ideological bias was taken because it is very hard not to take a biased position when analyzing the nature and dynamics of authoritarianism. I would propose that the politics of psychology might be just as important to explore as the psychology of politics. In many ways, political psychology (along with the psychology of money) is the "third rail" in the discipline of psychology – there is very little written explicitly about political psychology and that which is written tends to come saturated with specific biases.

Many of the social observers I am referencing in this series of essays on freedom come to their observation with a strong political bias – often left-wing. While it is understandable that their political leaning has often been a primary motivator for them to do their analysis, it is important that we take their leaning into account when assessing the validity of their observations – as well as the validity of my own work (with my own left-leaning biases).

### **Declaring Unswerving Loyalty**

I will now return to Fromm's identification of the major elements of authoritarianism (keeping in mind the particular left-leaning perspective from which Fromm is viewing this important social/political phenomenon). He suggests that this third element is centered on the declaration of unswerving loyalty to a specific leader or agency. This third element, once again, builds directly off the first two elements. Having disowned our own personal power, as well as identity, we now rely on and are absolutely dependent upon the person, group, or institution in which we have invested all authority and power. As I noted earlier, the leader can become a numinous experience for us – being both compelling and a bit frightening.

It is a matter of shifting power to the leader as a way of displaying one's own power onto someone else. The loyalist finds their own power to be scary. With power comes responsibility. Responsibility, in turn, requires free-will and a hint of freedom. As we have already seen, the freedom is not always desired. Thus, the loyalist denies that this power is ultimately their own. Members of an authoritarian group will transfer their personal power onto the leader and hold this person responsible for the enactment of roles and behaviors that they are themselves unwilling to perform for fear of failure, embarrassment, or even success.

The key ingredient in this authoritarian dynamic is the psychological process called projection. This is the process of displacement of power onto another person (or institution) that I just described. Fromm speaks of the power of projection in the establishment of authority in groups. He notes (Fromm, 1941, p. 174) that authority is often vested in the "magic helper," a person who is conceived by the group "as God, as a principle, or as real persons such as one's parents, husband, wife, or superior." Jung's archetypes come into play here. The group members, in essence, "fall in love" with the group leader and invest this person with miraculous and numinous powers.

The psychodynamic theorist, Wilfred Bion (1961), would identify these powers as being of one or more of three types. First there is the power of *wisdom*. There is a shared assumption of dependency on the part of group members. Only the leader has sufficient experience and proven success to direct our future actions. A second Bionian source of power is *courage*. This source is based on an assumption that there is an enemy against which we must defend ourselves. Only the leader has sufficient commitment and strength to successfully defeat this threatening outside force. The third source of power from a leader, according to Bion, is *vision*. The dominant assumption is that only the leader has a compelling narrative to share regarding where we can find an ideal state – a new Jerusalem from which flows all healing and beneficent waters.

We project our own wisdom, courage and vision onto the leader because these personal sources of power (and responsibility) are much too frightening. They are ingredients of a psychic storm. Furthermore, with the assignment of power to the leader, we avoid the process that Bion (and his fellow object-relations based psychoanalysts) call the process of *metabolism*. This somewhat



obscure term is used to label the psychological dynamics associated with making more manageable the anxiety associated with what I am calling the psychic storm.

We collectively metabolize the stress and fear created by a society in transition (such as found in 1990s Estonia) by offering both an explanation (this is why the transition is occurring) and hope (this is how we will successfully manage the transition). Our leader resides at the center of this metabolism. Successful metabolism often is beholden to collective myths regarding a social system's past history, present resources and future outcomes. Leaders are the ultimate guardians and transmitters of these myths. Wisdom, courage and vision reside at the heart of these myths and these myths enable the leader to retain and gain even more power.

It is important to turn to Bion's even further insights regarding these dynamics of leadership. He suggests that members of a group (or other social system) collude to ensure that only the leader has sufficient wisdom. If the leader ends up not being super-smart or if someone else exhibits superior wisdom, then the system is in crisis. Similarly, if members of the system can't collectively identify a viable enemy (that is strong and ever-present but not too powerful or overwhelming), then there is less need for the leader's courage.

Thus, it is important for a social system oriented toward battle and courage to always have a viable enemy. Finally, a social system that is pulled toward the priority of a compelling vision must always collude to be sure that this vision is never actualized. A realized vision is often anticlimactic—and ultimately not an answer to anything. Without a vision of the future, the social system lacks sufficient motivation and in little need of a visionary leader.

In returning to Erich Fromm's insights, we find that:

. . . the intensity of the relatedness to the magic helper is in reverse proportion to the ability to express spontaneously one's own intellectual, emotional, and sensuous potentialities. In other words, one hopes to get everything one expects from life, from the magic helper, instead of by one's own actions. The question is no longer how to live one self, but how to manipulate 'him' [the magic helper] in order not to lose him and how to make him do what one wants, even to make him responsible for what one is responsible oneself." (Fromm, 1940, p. 176).

A leader may use this authority and the power of wisdom, courage or vision to achieve good for the group and for society. Alternatively, the leader can use this power to satisfy needs for personal ego-gratification and/or acquisition of financial or physical resources. If the latter is the case, then neither the group nor society will be well served by this leader. The subordination of self to an external power leads to a loss of self-esteem and to further tendencies to debase oneself. "The courage of the authoritarian character," according to Fromm, "is essentially a courage to suffer what fate or its personal representative or 'leader' may have destined him for" (Fromm, 1941, p. 172).

The loyalist, an authoritarian character, is expected to suffer without complaining, to comply without questioning, to love without considering the source and basis for this love. Fromm suggests that the most important thing we sacrifice in moving to authoritarianism and to the projection of our power onto an outside authority is our genuine love for other people and, even more importantly, love for ourselves. Fromm takes a step further in his analysis of this unswerving loyalty. He describes this loyalty as a "masochistic" (self-punishing) tendency in the authoritarian character. It is also a collective regression for all those who declare this loyalty.

The individual and collective cognitive functioning of the loyalists becomes more primitive. The social system regresses to one or more of the assumptive states identified by Bion. Myths rather than reality prevail. Habitual thinking (what the behavioral economists call simplistic "heuristics") become dominant. Slow, reflective thinking is replaced by fast thinking (Kahneman, 2011), with the loyalists accepting the "truths" offered by the leader in an uncritical manner. Reality is being constructed by the revered leader, rather than through the processes of collective higher-order dialogue. (Berger and Luchmann, 1966; Gergen and Gergen, 2004). As I will note when turning to a new fifth element, there is now only one centralized reality and very little room for consideration of alternative perspectives on reality. The state is the provider not just of control, but also a collectively shared and reinforced version of the truth.

As we put together Fromm's masochism with the dynamics of collective projection and regression, we find that the loyalists are not only accepting the truths offered by the leader--but are diminishing the credibility of their own ability to formulate and test reality. They self-punish by declaring themselves as unworthy (supposedly) of the attention being devoted to

them by their beloved leader. Their leader deserves the unswerving devotion precisely because they pale, as followers by comparison to their leader.

We can bring Jung and Otto back into our analysis. As I noted above, the power (wisdom, courage, vision) manifest by their leader becomes a numinous experience. At a very deep, unconscious level, the numinous experience is founded in a primitive archetype that leaves the loyalist's own personal psyche self-wounded and shrunk in size – creating the minimal self (Lasch, 1984) I mentioned above. Any kind of appreciative perspective regarding self is lost in the self-appraisal of deficiency. We are only saved, as unworthy recipient of forgiveness (for our sinful self), by the grace offered by the esteemed (and self-sacrificing) leader.

### **Identifying the Other**

I turn now to Fromm's fourth element: we escape into authoritarianism by distinguishing ourselves from people who are devoted to different ideologies or agencies or are in some other way different from oneself. We typically exhibit hostility toward these other people (the "sadistic" tendency in the authoritarian character) and often project negative aspects of ourselves (or our own group or leader) onto them, using them as scapegoats and passive victims of our own personal self-hatred.

Barry Oshry (2018) has recently offered important insights regarding the identification of the "other" in authoritarian societies. Aligning with Thomas Friedman's (2007) description of the "flat world", Oshry notes many of us are being exposed every day to many cultures that may look strange to us. Furthermore, many of these cultures do not look strange to the "others". Conversely, our own culture may look strange to the "others" but not to us. It gets particularly challenging if our life is filled with diffuse anxiety and uncertainty – and if our own culture seems to be under attack. Many other cultures are likely to seem strange if our own culture is being challenged and our own version of reality is no longer the only viable alternative. As the postmodernists have noted, the grand narrative (Western version of reality) is now collapsing. These are ideal conditions for an authoritarian differentiation of and discrimination against anyone viewed as the "other" and any culture that is home to the "other."

I noted above that under these conditions, we desperately want the social constructions offered by our revered leader to be accepted as reality. Under conditions of uncertainty and anxiety, we want to feel, as Oshry suggested, "that our culture is simply the way things have been, are, and

ought to be.” We want our leader to provide us with the assurance that our own social construction is now and will always be dominant.

Oshry offers the obvious (but often ignored) observation that both we and the “others” were not born with the rules of our cultures; we first learned these rules from parents and elders, teachers, and peers. Later we learn from our devoted leaders – and increasingly from media:

Over time, we and the “others” learn our rules so well that we no longer experience them as rules. They become the lenses through which we view the world. Except we don’t see our lens and how it shapes what we see. Instead, we believe we see the world as it really is. Neither we nor the “others” experience our culture as an option, as one of many possibilities.

Thus, it is not just our emotional projection of courage, wisdom and vision onto our beloved leader, it is also the uncritical acceptance of specific narratives offered by the leader – narratives that tell us why we are right and the “others” are wrong. Authoritarianism thus controls both the internal life of our emotions and the external life regarding our perceptions of the external world.

### **The Disguise of Authoritarianism**

All of Fromm’s elements have been prevalent and are readily apparent in many societies when and where threat and the swirling of chaos are rampant. I suggest that Fromm’s analysis is applicable to the Estonian society in which I was temporarily working during the early 1990s. Furthermore, I have been making the case in this essay that these four elements are to be found in many 21<sup>st</sup> Century societies. As already mentioned, I want to go beyond Fromm’s four elements. There is an element that I am calling the *disguise of authoritarianism*. This element is often less apparent than the other four, though just as powerful and pernicious.

I propose that an authoritarian state of affairs is disguised in what I identified earlier as the control of truth and reality by those in power. In his highly controversial 1980s critique of American society, Bertrand Gross (1980) identified what he calls the threat of *friendly fascism*. His disturbing analysis rings painfully true when applied to not only contemporary American society, but also societies operation in many other 21<sup>st</sup> Century countries. At the heart of friendly fascism, according to Gross, is the control of media by large corporate interests. There

is no “neutral” press or mode of communication that is owned in any manner by the general public. The truths being conveyed by the media are based on several prevalent myths that are never tested and rarely are aligned with public interest.

One set of myths identified by Gross (1980, pp. 28-29) concerns the distribution of power. This myth suggests that a free and nonrestricted marketplace of ideas is alive and well in some (if not all) societies. There is no centralized or coordinated control over production or distribution. I suggest that Thomas Friedman’s (2007) flat world in some ways supports this myth – though he is a very discerning observer of contemporary life and would certainly be critical of certain aspects of this myth. As Friedman has noted, there seems to be an open and immediate distribution of information and many digital forums for deliberation and debate about alternative world perspectives and ideologies. Gross would caution Friedman and those accepting Friedman’s premise that the Internet and related enterprises might not be all that open and free. I suspect that Friedman would at least partially agree with Gross.

A second accompanying myth concerns the appearance of a great leader who represents and fights from the interests of the common people. He (or, rarely, she) is not beholding to the collective corporate interests. The third myth is a real doozy: if there is inequity in the distribution of wealth, privilege and power, then the “little people” will eventually rise up and secure their proper role in the governance of their communities and nation. This myth has a way of distracting us from the power of the first two myths. The hope embedded in the third myth “trumps” the threat inherent in Gross’ first two myths.

The three myths would all be applaudable and worthy of commemoration – if true.

Unfortunately, these (and other) myths are being perpetuated by those who benefit most from ensuring that none of these conditions ever takes place in the society they control. While Karl Marx suggested that religion is the opiate of the masses, we might find today that these three myths (and others like them) are now the true opiate of the masses (as are the real-life opioids). Our 21<sup>st</sup> Century societies are likely to remain saturated with complacency and the absence of true freedom while myths such as these remain prominent and unchallenged. In the United States (and many other countries, including Estonian), we are truly threatened by an impending state of friendly fascism. Other countries might already be fully engulfed in this form of fascistic authoritarianism.

In his description of the current state of the media, Gross (1980, p. 204) references George Orwell's description of "doublespeak" in his dystopian novel, *1984*. Gross suggests that there is now *triplespeak* which incorporates jargon (that can't be understood except by a small cluster of "experts") and the language of progress and prosperity (bolstering the three shared myths). Furthermore, *triplespeak* involves the continuing promulgation of untruths (lies) and alternative or optional "realities." In sum, "the more [that] lies are told, the more important it becomes for the liars to justify themselves by deep moral commitments to high-sounding objectives that mask the pursuit of money and power [the disguise of authoritarianism.]" (Gross, 1980, p. 265)

There is one other important insight offered by Gross (1980, p. 267). He suggests that the second myth is particularly misleading – because the "great leader" doesn't exist. Rather, the "friendly" leader will primarily be the dispenser of and reinforcer of the myths:

Friendly fascism in the United States [and elsewhere in the world] would not need a charismatic, apparently all-powerful leader such as Mussolini or Hitler. . . The chief executive, rather, becomes the nominal head of a network that not only serves as a linchpin to help hold the Establishment together but also provides it with a sanctimonious aura of legitimacy through the imagery of the presidential person, his family, his associates, and their doings. The chief executive is already a TV performer, and his official residence is indeed "an awesome pulpit" form which he and his entire production staff can wield a potent "magic wand."

Such is the portrayal of the friendly fascist leader.

## **Dwelling in the Cave**

While Fromm and Gross offered their critiques from the perspective of 20<sup>th</sup> Century European and American societies, there is a much earlier source: the voice of Socrates as heard through the writing of Plato. Socrates (Plato) offered an allegory of a cave and those who dwell in the cave. Let's briefly visit this cave. It is filled with people who have lived all their lives chained to a wall in the cave. These people watch shadows projected on the wall in front of them. The shadows are being projected on the wall from things passing in front of a fire that remains lit behind them. The cave dwellers believe the shadows are reality.

What about 21<sup>st</sup> life and “friendly” authoritarian rule? Are we all living in a cave? Do we never gain a clear view of reality, but instead view only the shadows that are projected on the walls of our cave? Do we live with an image of reality (shadows on the wall of the cave) rather than with reality itself? Plato concluded that we have no basis for knowing whether we are seeing the shadow or seeing reality, given that we have always lived in the cave.

What about the cave in which our Estonian colleagues were living in the 1990s – and what about the cave in which they are now lives? Do they find it hard to consider alternative perspectives and frameworks? Can they see beyond the shadows on the walls of their own cave? I would suggest that the Estonians of 1990 and of 2020 are not alone. Today, most of us live in a world that is becoming increasingly complex, unpredictable, turbulent – and contradictory (Bergquist, 2020). Turning back to Plato's allegory, we live with an expanded cast of characters in the cave. First, there is something or someone standing near the fire in the cave. Part of the fire's glow is blocked, thus limiting the shadow-images cast on the wall. The blocking feature can be a cultural or personal narrative (one of Gross’ myths) that we absorb during our daily personal and collective lives.

Narratives and perspectives block out some of the light coming from the fire in the cave. Not only don't we actually see reality, there is something that determines which parts of objective reality get projected onto the wall. Those holding the partition that blocks out some of the fire's light have themselves grown up in the cave--but may hold a quite different agenda from other cave dwellers. What is the partition to be found in our own cave? How are members of Estonian society and our own society (including ourselves) blocked from seeing the full light of the fire inside our cave?

There is yet another character in our contemporary cave. This is the interpreter, reporter or analyst. We don't actually have enough time in our busy lives to look directly at the wall to see the shadows that are projected from the fire (which we assume is the “real” world). The cave has grown large and we often can't even see the walls of the cave and the shadows. We wait for the interpreter to tell us what is being projected on the wall, what is important to attend to and what the implications of these selected images are for us in our lives.

We are thus removed three steps from reality. We believe that the shadows on Plato's cave wall are “reality.” We don't recognize that someone or something is standing between us and the fire

and selectively determining which aspects of reality get projected onto the wall. Finally, someone else is situated inside the cave offering us a description and analysis. This is at the heart of the new way in which we are subject to authoritarian rule – we dwell in a cave that Gross has labeled “friendly fascism.”

What part of the shadow cast on our walls is being blocked? Who is doing the blocking and why are they blocking part of the shadow? Are there political agendas, economic agendas, sociological agenda – even theological agendas? As behavioral economists such as Daniel Kahneman (2011), Dan Ariely (2012) and Richard Thaler (2015) (the latest Nobel prize winner) might ask: who is sitting at the table when the agenda is set? Who is framing our perceptions and reinforcing our conveniently operating heuristics (Gross’s myths)? What about our elected officials (and others sitting at the table)? Do they see the whole shadow or are they also viewing a partial image? What about the interpretation? Are the “great leaders” of our society the interpreters? Or is someone else providing the most persuasive interpretation – perhaps a set of corporate leaders? Are prevalent myths dictating the interpretation? How hard will it be to overturn long-standing and “honorable” narratives?

The world of contemporary cave dwellers might be changing or at least becoming more complicated (and filled with contradictions) Some of the world operating inside Estonia and other countries may be changing. First, there are now multiple fires burning in the cave and projecting multiple shadows on the wall. The so-called grand narrative (of Western European and American origins) which defined much of our reality during the 19th and 20th Century is now collapsing. Gross’s myths might no longer reign supreme. We now have multiple, conflicting and contradictory narratives that make it difficult for all but the most xenophobic people in the world to see only one set of shadows. At the very least, Gross’s three myths may no longer reside on stable ground.

There is a second major change. This concerns the advent of social media and reality television as well as the purchase of goods and services directly from the source. Perhaps, everything is not centralized, as Gross suggests. We might now be moving back to a time when there are no “middlemen” or interpreters. The term *disintermediation* is being used to describe this potentially seismic change in our societal acquisition and framing of knowledge. Are the



middlemen losing control and does this mean that their bosses are also losing control? Is this part of the challenge leaders all over the world are now facing?

Regardless of the shifts now occurring in our world of knowledge, we seem to remain confused about what is “real” and often don’t trust our direct experience. We are facing many contradictions. We move with great reluctance (and considerable grieving) to a recognition that reality is being constructed for us and that we need to attend not only to the constructions, but also to the interests and motives of those who tend the fire and block images on the wall of the cave. We must also identify and examine the agenda of those who offer us their interpretations (including those of us who offer psychological insights). Can Plato’s cave and his dynamic perspective on the nature of truth and reality provide us with the opportunity to gain insights about the nature of the cave? What about the world that is projected onto the walls of the cave, and the nature and agenda of the interpreters? And lest we forget, Plato (and Socrates) had their own agendas many centuries ago that influence the way we look at the cave and the wall. Perhaps there isn’t really a cave or wall.

We should also consider whether or not to step outside the cave. Can we actually leave the cave? Is it safer to remain inside the cave than to venture outside without the help of interpreters? Should we (and can we) face the profound challenge of unmediated experiences outside the cave? As we step outside the cave, are we likely to confront some objective reality through our experience, or is the experience itself constantly shifting depending on setting, context, interpersonal relationships and the nature of our own past experience? Are we just moving to another cave? Is the entrance to our cave nothing more than the entrance to an adjoining cave?

### **Imprisonment in the Cave: An Expanded Version**

Our increasing knowledge about the cognitive and emotional processes in which humans engage pushes us to an even more challenging perspective. The allegory offered by Socrates (through the voice of Plato) is actually much more extensive than the version I have offered. Plato provides us with more detail about life inside the cave and about what might occur if one cave dweller is allowed to step outside the cave and then returns to the cave. Profound implications emerge from this expanded version--and further questions arise about the role to be played by leaders and other cave dwellers in addressing these implications.

Inside the cave, its inhabitants (as prisoners) are chained so that their legs and necks are fixed, forcing them to gaze at the wall in front of them and not look around the cave, Behind the prisoners is the fire, and between the fire and the prisoners is a raised walkway with a low wall. People walk behind the wall==so their bodies do not cast shadows for the prisoners to see, but the objects they carry do. Prisoners cannot see any of this behind them and are only able to see the shadows cast upon the cave wall in front of them. The sounds of the people as they talk echo off the shadowed wall, and the prisoners falsely believe these sounds come from the shadows.

Apparently, the images swirling around the cave are much more complicated and diverse than are conveyed in our original description of Plato's cave. Does the cacophony of sounds and images move us to a state of denial and isolation? Do we try to close our eyes and cover our ears? A contemporary psychological observer, Ken Gergen (2000) writes about a *saturated self*, suggesting that we are inundated with some many different images that it is hard to sustain a coherent sense of self. Does this saturation of self tend to lead us to be more vulnerable to a single, authoritarian voice and interpretation of reality? Are we more likely to seek escape from freedom if we are afflicted by what Gergen described as our collective mental disease-- multiphrenia (rather than schizophrenia)?

### **Leaving the Cave**

What happens when one of the cave dwellers is unchained and leaves the cave? Do they simply enter another cave, or do they discover that the world is something more than the shadows they have always assumed were reality? Do they find that the world outside the cave is even more blinding and that it is filled with many contradictory belief systems? Let's imagine that this single prisoner (that we will call the protagonist) is freed from the chains and is forced to turn and see the fire. Our protagonist would not believe it if they were told that what they saw before was not real.

Our freed prisoner is likely to struggle when first realizing that the images and echoes are not what is real in the cave. Would our protagonist be angry about their previous life in chains seeing and hearing only an indirect view of reality – or would they wish to return to the safety of the chains? If they are angry, where should the anger be directed? If they want to return to

the chains, will this desire for escape from freedom be accompanied by a sense of personal shame?

The protagonist is then forced (or perhaps allowed) to leave the cave and confront the outside light and sound directly. The light would hurt their eyes and make it hard for them to see the objects that are casting the shadows. The sounds are likely to be strange. Perhaps another language is being spoken or no words are to be heard – there being only the sounds of nature or no sounds at all.

Our protagonist might be angry and in pain. This would only worsen when the radiant light of the sun overwhelms their eyes and blinds them and when the new sounds (or lack of sounds) play havoc on their ears (and psyche). The sunlight and sounds are representative of the new reality and knowledge that the freed prisoner is experiencing. Slowly, her eyes adjust to the light of the sun. The sounds become less bewildering. Gradually, the former prisoner can see the reflections of people and natural things in water near the entrance of their cave. A bit later, they can see the people and natural things themselves. Plato continues, saying that the freed prisoner would think that the real world was superior to the world they experienced in the cave. Our protagonist would feel blessed for the change, pity the other prisoners, and want to bring their fellow cave dwellers out of the cave and into the sunlight

### **Returning to the Cave**

Here is where the central question emerges: can our protagonist come back into the cave and what would this "enlightened" person say to those still in the cave? How would the dwellers take in this radically different perspective? The cave dwellers won't know what to do with the returning unchained "revolutionary" who talks about a different reality. What happens when this person returns to the cave? Would this person be considered a "philosopher" (as Plato suggests) or would they be identified as a "fool" or as a person who is "mad"? The former prisoner's conveying of their experiences is likely to terrify compatriots. Our protagonist realizes that they cannot remain in the cave. They would stagnate. Other cave dwellers will not change or move forward. They perceive our protagonist as dangerous. Our protagonist might be killed or at least isolated from other cave dwellers (imprisonment in a jail or asylum?)

The returning prisoner, whose eyes and ears have become acclimated to the light of the sun and sounds of the real world, might be blind and deaf when they re-enters the cave, just as they were when first exposed to the world outside the cave. The cave dwellers, according to Plato, would infer from the returning prisoner's blindness that the journey out of the cave had harmed the returning prisoner and that they should not undertake a similar journey. Plato concludes that the cave dwellers, if released from their chains, would reach out and kill anyone who attempted to drag them out of the cave. Would the cave dwellers then ask to be once again chained up - or perhaps they would reapply their own chains (establishing a myth of free-will and self-governance). Gross's friendly fascism would be reestablished. Order would be returned to the cave. The threat of true freedom would be quelled. All would be well in the kingdom and everyone would live happily ever after, starrng at images on the wall and hearing echoes emanating from unknown sources.

### **Conclusions: Personal and Organizational Caves**

There are several different ways in which to view the life of cave dwellers. We can identify the cave as existing inside the occupant's head and heart. The cave mentality exists when people become trapped or caught in favorite ways of thinking and acting. These heuristics (what behavioral economists analyze) confine individuals within socially constructed worlds and prevent the emergence of other worlds. Preconceived (and often contradictory) ideas become traps for people when they begin to hold onto their preconceived notions and biases that eventually become their reality.

The cave can also be viewed as a collective experience. This is the focus I am taking in this exploration of authoritarianism and freedom. An entire society can be perceived as the cave and its members as those who dwell in the cave. Expanding on Plato' allegory of the cave, we can assume that people collectively develop unconscious mechanisms and construct realities in order to handle anxiety and desire. Social systems are created and sustained by conscious and unconscious processes. We can become imprisoned or confined by the images, ideas, thoughts, and actions to which these processes give rise. Social systems become stuck in their traditional manner of thinking. There are rigid (though often tacitly held) rules about how things are done. There are Gross's shared myths. These are collective heuristics -- the most powerful kind. This is what "friendly fascism" is all about.

Life in a community or nation is deemed as a mode of cave dwelling when those who live and work in a social system are set in their ways of thinking and refuse to change. A released or escaping prisoner (as a visionary leader) returns to the cave and describes a new, blinding and deafening reality. Members of this social system are confronted with this new reality--one that requires a new way of thinking. They must re-assess organizational norms and societal expectations. They must drop traditional modes of functioning. Individually and collectively these cave dwellers must develop a new identity and new ways of relating to one another and their community's operations.

The cave dwellers are offered an opportunity to be liberated from the cave by the prisoner who escapes and discovers the "real" world -- or at least a different world. The cave dwellers are given the opportunity to discover that the world beyond the shadows of the cave is more richly textured, more complex, unpredictable, turbulent, and filled with contradictions. Perhaps this world is even more rewarding. The prisoner has escaped TO freedom and invites her colleagues to also escape to freedom.

Now once again appears the disturbing questions: do the other cave dwellers (and perhaps even the escaping prisoner) soon wish to escape FROM this new freedom? Do they long for a world (inside the cave) that seems simpler, more clearly defined and ultimately less challenging? Do they blame the escaped and returning prisoner for their new-found anxiety? Does the visionary leader suddenly become an uninvited outsider who wants to cause pain, confusion, uncertainty, and turbulence? Can the cave dwellers abide the contradictions that the returning prisoner brings to the cave? These are questions worthy of serious and sustained consideration by citizens of any country -- if friendly or not so friendly fascism and pernicious authoritarian rule are to be avoided.

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