

WHAT IS THE MATTER WITH MAN: THE ORIGIN OF MUSCULAR ARMOR*

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Something is amiss in the development of the human species. Nations war, governments oppress, and individual human beings suffer, and they suffer too much. Why is there so much misery? Compared to higher animals living in nature the lot of most of the human race is an unhappy one. It might therefore be concluded that the higher development of the human race is a biological mistake, and the human race should aim to go backwards to a simpler, more primitive, less problem-ridden stage. There are anti-technologists today preaching something like this doctrine. Though such a message need not itself be taken seriously, it arises from conditions that should be. There is too much emotional and social misery on the part of too many human beings to be accepted as "normal" or "necessary." "Original sin" is a myth, but conditions leading people to believe the human race as a whole is somehow "tainted" are there for all with eyes to see. The thoughtful person must ask, "Why?"

The first step towards the answer was taken by Wilhelm Reich. He discovered that human emotional life is disastrously affected by almost universal chronic patterns of muscular tension which he referred to as the *muscular armor*, and which I call the *radix block*. The radix block is the "villain of the piece" in man's emotional misery. It is the radix block that distorts or destroys man's natural capacity for feeling. The radix block is what is the matter with man, or rather, is the mechanism responsible for what is the matter with man.

Reich observed and explored faithfully the nature of the chronic patterns of muscular tensions that form the radix block without ever understanding their origin. He showed how distortions of feeling resulted from these tensions, and were responsible for the mass irrationality of human society, for fascism, both the black and red varieties, for mystical religion and mechanistic science, for anti-sexual moralism and sexual pornography, for the rigidity and cruelty of educational and social systems, and for a host of diseases rooted in the chronic muscular tensions themselves and in the effects of these tensions on the stiffened and deadened bodies they produce.

Yet to Reich the radix block, the armor, was strange and inexplicable. He delineated its mechanism, but never discovered its cause. "Why did nature make this 'mistake'?" he asked, and he wrote:

"The answer lies somewhere in the realm of our existence which was so very much obscured by organized religion and lifted beyond our reach. Thus, it lies presumably in the *relationship of the human animal to the cosmic bio-energy* which rules him.

... it is not in the least a question of any guilt, but of a still uncomprehended catastrophe in the biosocial development of the human animal. The biological armoring of the human animal stands out as the central mechanism of this faulty development, but not as its cause; for the armoring, too, must have a comprehensible origin beyond the known mechanisms and the known consequences." (Reich, 1949, pp. 40-41. Emphasis Reich's.)"

* Dr. Kelley was justly proud of his unique contribution concerning the origin of the muscular armor. First presented in **Chuck Kelley's Radix Journal**, Vol. II Nos. 1&2, 1979/80. The concept is further developed in LIFE FORCE, 2004. (Ed.)

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A year later Reich told his students, speaking on the same problem:

“The whole human race is not crazy, you understand, the whole human race is not silly or stupid. There must be some reason, and we don't know the reason yet. There's a logic to it somewhere ... a rational element we don't grasp yet. I would even grant the foe of our work the right to fight us on that ground.” (Reich, 1950)

This is a remarkable statement from that remarkable man!

In COSMIC SUPERIMPOSITION Reich returned to the question of how it was that man alone among the animals was armored. He wrote:

“Why did man as the only living animal species armor?... why does the armoring of the human animal species exist at all, since it contradicts nature in man on every single step and destroys his natural, rich potentialities? This does not seem to make sense. Why did nature make this "mistake?" Why only in the human species? Why not also in the deer or the chipmunk?” (Reich, 1951; pp. 111-112)

And further:

“Still the question of how the armoring of the human animal as the only animal species came about remains with us, unsolved, overshadowing every theoretical and practical step in medicine, sociology, natural science, etc.” (Reich, 1951, pp. 112-113)

Reich believed that the radix block ("armor) originated in unknown fashion early in mankind's pre-history, and was then perpetuated through the centuries by socio-economic influences:

“We know that it is mostly socio-economic influences (family structure, cultural ideas on nature versus culture, civilization requirements, mystical religion, etc.) which reproduce the armor in each generation of newborn infants. These infants will as grownups force their own children to armor, unless the chain is to be broken somewhere, sometime. The present day social and cultural compulsion of the armor does not imply that at the very onset of the armor in the faraway past of the development of man, it was also socio-economic influences which set the armoring process in motion.” (Reich, 1951, p. 112)

Reich even expressed a glimmering of insight into the cause of the radix block as I have come to understand it, associating it with a turning inward of human consciousness. He speaks of the early development of self perception:

“There is much good reason to assume that in such experiences of the self man somehow became frightened and for the first time in the history of his species began to armor against the inner fright and amazement ... it is quite possible that the turning of reasoning toward itself induced the first emotional blocking in man.” (Reich, 1951, p. 117)

The conviction that the "armor" was created primarily by socio-economic factors, and the failure to understand its biological value, kept Reich from unraveling the mystery he opened and explored so perceptively.

As a student of Reich's, I seized onto the mystery of the "origin of armoring," making many errors and wrong turns in the process. My first major insight was to realize that the radix block, (which I, too, called the "armor" at that time) could not be the result of a no-longer existing

event in man's pre-history. The radix block is so enormously handicapping biologically in its effects on health, rationality, sexuality, etc. that it would have been eliminated by the process of evolution:

“... anything as biologically handicapping as armor would be eliminated by normal evolutionary processes if its original cause were removed. The social mechanisms by means of which the armor is imposed on each new generation do not explain how it is that the more armored individual can compete successfully (in an evolutionary, biological sense) with the less.

“... Let me carry this thought further. Armor originated and continues to exist because, even though it is a biological handicap of the most severe sort, it has survival value. Armored man is in some way better adapted to life on this planet than unarmored man.... the mystery is how.” (Kelley, 1961, pp. 104-105)

It was another five years before the next crucial insight, the one that led to the solution of the problem, occurred to me:

“It was while re-reading T. A. Ribot's great book, THE PSYCHOLOGY OF ATTENTION, that I suddenly realized that the mechanism of voluntary attention described by Ribot formed the origin of the muscular armor described by Reich. This insight was the germinal point of my understanding of the origin of armoring: the armor originates in the volitional control of the flow of energy underlying feeling. This point was also the germinal point of the scientific and educational work I have subsequently carried out on feeling and purpose.” (Kelley, 1970, Preface, p. 5)

I would now say "the flow of the *radix* underlying feeling."

The biological disadvantage of the radix block is so great that it had to have some extraordinary survival function or it would quickly have been eliminated by biological evolution. The survival function is volition. Volition and the radix block, which is its mechanism, together with conceptual thought, which makes volition of value, form the source of man's power over the environment. Those able to suppress spontaneous impulses which interfere with their long-range direction achieve long-range goals. These goals often are concerned with control over their environment. Even when the goals worked for represent the warped and twisted values of societies that have drifted into life-negative directions, if conceptual thought, volition, and the radix block are well developed, these will prevail over emotionally "healthier" societies in which conceptual thought and volition are less well developed. The "happy primitive" has no chance against the "dour and joyless missionary" in the long run, because the latter exhibits much stronger volition, and works towards the values he has absorbed with a singleness of direction that is beyond the primitive's capability. Even if the goals are tragic, and he has utterly lost his feeling for life and capacity for pleasure, the missionary and the society he represents will rule. He will establish control over the primitive culture, and his values will come to prevail. They will prevail, not because they were imposed by force (though they often are), but because they are the values of the more evolved and therefore more powerful culture, its power being product of its people's greater capacity for conceptual thought and for volition. Conceptual thought and volition are the basis of virtually every human achievement, good or bad.

Volition is a limiting process, a blocking off by an individual of his own radix flow in directions contrary to his goal. This is man's way of channeling the radix flow in his body. The direction of attention or movement chosen by the will is followed only because other channels that

are spontaneously more attractive are closed. "Freedom of the will" is a misnomer; what man has is a "freedom of the won't!" Man can only block or impede or channel the radix flow, he cannot originate it.

In volition, a new second branch of the radix curls inward on itself to produce a pattern of muscular tension by means of which the original branch is channeled. The radix flows through the body plasma and plasma-filled tissues. It flows easily through relaxed muscle tissue, but is impeded by tense muscles.

The inward-curling second branch of the radix is the source of the pattern of muscular tensions that limit, check, inhibit, and by so doing, build the desired channel for the original "first" radix flow.

The original branch of the radix emerges from the pulsation of the body's visceral core, flowing most of the time up the back, forward, and down the front of the body. Basic feelings of pleasure and pain, love and anger, trust and fear are expressed through this first branch of the radix. The second, inward-curling branch of the radix is associated with the head, and operates through the central nervous system and the striated muscles. The feelings rooted in this secondary radix flow involve self-image, values, choices. Pride, self-confidence, determination, guilt, humiliation, shame -- feelings with a high degree of self-awareness and self-evaluation -- are rooted in this biologically newer, "higher" branch of the radix. And these self-referred feelings are the impulses expressed in the radix block, which selectively dams, channels, routes the primary radix flow. The muscles that accomplish the channeling are organized in functional groups, transverse to the longitudinal radix flow. In their totality they comprise both the muscular armor and the mechanism of voluntary attention and movement,

The radix block is experienced most vividly in holding back strong emotion, where powerful muscular tensions are required. The nature of volition is nowhere more evident than in observing a child determined to hold back tears or anger. The feeling being blocked arises from the spontaneous flow of the radix through the body plasma. The effort of control, evident in the held breath, stiff neck, and gritted teeth, arises from the inward-curling second branch of the radix, the source of volition. Pitted against the primary emotion is the second, originally experienced as the feeling that it is wrong, shameful, or dangerous, to cry or be angry.

As volition is learned, the muscular effort becomes more subtle and habitual but is always present, as has been noted by skilled observers. Breathing slows, and muscles tense in highly selective patterns. The classic study of the process is that of Ribot, made in the late nineteenth century. Ribot noted that voluntary attention was a late and special human development, much different from the normal spontaneous mode of attention that man shares with the other animals. Voluntary attention is forced and artificial, learned by great effort in childhood, always involving muscular tension and breathing changes. These quotes illustrate the point (Ribot, 1890):

"... every act of volition *acts only upon muscles and through muscles*,..." (p. 43; emphasis Ribot's)

"... voluntary attention is always accompanied by a feeling of effort.... (p. 56)

"... with all persons and in all cases there are modifications in the rhythm of respiration." (p. 61)

"... What is the origin of the feeling of effort in attention, and what does it mean?

... It depends on the quantity and quality of muscular contractions..."(p. 62)

Volition is an effort because it involves a conflict of impulses, a conflict between the old and the new branch of the radix, between the “built in” spontaneous attraction of biological programming and a laboriously acquired produce of human culture. Beliefs, values and thought must carry enough emotional impact to overcome the attraction of short-range activities or the interference of emotions that are incompatible with the long-range goal. Otherwise volition fails.

For the child to learn how to direct his attention voluntarily, he must learn how to cut off, to block his spontaneous impulses. The more powerful the impulse, the more tension and effort is required to hold it back. And the strongest impulses of all are those expressed in such basic feeling qualities as rage, fear, and hurt (grief or pain). The child faced with a life situation in which rage, fear, or hurt, is often roused must develop a chronic pattern of contraction if he is to control the feeling. Since the spontaneous radix impulse behind the feeling is checked and not discharged, the impulse does not soon disappear, and the tension opposing the impulse must remain to keep it in check. When the pattern is often re-stimulated, the residual impulse is often reinforced, and the opposed pattern of tension is likely to take chronic repressed form. The unexpressed feeling and, the tensions preventing its expression, become a permanent though repressed part of the personality. It is in this way that the radix block, in the damaging form discovered by Wilhelm Reich, is born.

The radix impulse that is kept from direct expression by the radix block tends to emerge in indirect secondary form. The quality of feeling is distorted by the block, however. Blocked anger is experienced as resentment, hostility, or hatred (which may be unacceptable emotions, and so further blocked). Blocked fear emerges as apprehension, over-sensitivity, shyness. Blocked grief and pain appear as depression, chronic sadness, moodiness or emotional anesthesia. And the chronic holding back of *any one* of these major negative emotions results in an incapacity to give oneself completely to pleasure.

Pleasure is fully experienced only when the individual gives himself fully to the radix expansion that underlies pleasure, when the body softens and surrenders to the activity that is the source of pleasure. But chronic patterns of holding that comprise the radix block may make this surrender impossible. Then the pleasurable activity may become a threat, for it pushes the individual toward the release of the block and spilling of the unconscious impulse held in check. This is especially true of sexual pleasure, the greatest pleasure possible to man, and thus the one most likely to result in dissolution of tensions making up the radix block. So the radix block serves to destroy the capacity for pleasure in general and sexual pleasure in particular.

The secret of the radix block, towards which Reich struggled so long without success, then, lies in understanding the nature and power of volition. Volition is the function of the radix block, and is necessary to purpose. The power stemming from volition is the reason the radix block develops and is perpetuated despite the enormous biological damage it does.

The destructive effects of volition are especially acute in the present stage of the evolution of purpose. This is the stage in which inherited biologically evolved values have been largely lost, but individual self-developed values are rare, formed only by the exceptional person. It is social and cultural processes that promulgate and perpetuate value structures in this unfortunate interim in human evolution. Societies and sub-cultures within societies are organized around values which have evolved socially. Because of the mass distortions of thought due to the radix block, these values incorporate mass irrationalities such as mysticism (e.g., in Judeo-Christian and Asian religious values), mechanism (e.g., in Marxism and in academic science), racism (e.g., in fascist values), etc.

Individuals seldom become able to examine the values their social group has evolved. If they do, they are in grave danger of finding themselves permanently outside of the group. For example, consider these widely accepted societal practices:

- I. Military conscription
2. State imposed education through state approved schools
3. Taxation
4. State defined and enforced sexual morality (e.g. state-defined monogamous families)
5. State approved practitioners and forms of treatment of disease

The individual in our society is expected to accept these practices, which are represented in our socially evolved values, as "good." An external observer might regard any or all of them as modern forms of slavery. Few among us are able to examine the practices objectively. Most adults have developed a vested interest in one or more of the establishments built around such practices, e.g., the military, educational, governmental, religious, and medical establishments, respectively, and feel threatened if "their" establishment is questioned.

Societies are organized around socially-evolved value systems. These value systems come to define the accepted morality and be incorporated into education, communication, art, and law, into the beliefs, attitudes and life styles of the society's members. The individual is subject to unremitting pressure to accept and work for the prevailing, socially fostered value system.

Work man must, and work requires volition. Yet working for values that are socially promulgated and have not become integral to the self is the most deadening self-destructive form of volition. To the extent that such values and goals are not individually conceptualized and chosen but impressed on the individual by others, the values and goals have little intrinsic attraction, and the individual must force himself to work for them. This compulsive work is deadening and stultifying, choking and destroying feeling, spontaneity and creativity. Its direction is toward the society of obedient programmed robots.

Socially evolved collectivist value systems build the society required for their own perpetuation. By their nature, such systems require the individual to subordinate himself to the collective. Independent individuals are a threat to any such socially-evolved value system; such individuals can create new values, values which may compete with and threaten to replace the old. The power of an established social system rests in its values being widely accepted. And an established system confers power and privilege on a special group, an elite, who thus have a vested interest in upholding the system and in preventing or suppressing competing values.

Socially evolved value systems almost necessarily come to be anti-individualistic. They promote altruism and self-sacrifice in the service of the society's approved values, which also means in the service of an establishment. Masses of individuals are psychologically castrated through the repression of their basic feelings, carried out in the name of education or religion or other social "good." The process of volition, the turning in on itself of each individual's radix, the formation of the radix block, is enlisted to suppress every nonconforming individualistic, rebellious impulse. The individual is made to feel ashamed or guilty over every anti-establishment feeling, and the destruction of his self-confidence makes him individually helpless and impotent, dependent on others to supply direction and meaning to his life.

The present stage of the evolution of purpose is a collectivist stage, rooted in socially evolved value systems. Feudalism, Christianity, "divine right" aristocracies, socialism, fascism,

communism, communal societies, democracy, all are based on collectivist systems of values, with their subordination of the individual to the society. Collectivism, like mysticism and mechanism, is a product of the radix block, a necessary but often disastrous stage in the evolution of purpose.

But collectivism is only an interim stage, a specific by-product of the social evolution of value systems. True purpose only comes into being when this stage is transcended. The truly purposive individual resists the social inculcation of values and learns to form his own by his own individual process of conceptual thought. Whereas the collectivist stage in evolution results in weakening selfhood and creating dependency, the individual stage, which is now in its infancy, results in strengthening selfhood and creating independence. It is the free and independent individual who becomes able to create his own value system, his own goals, his own way of living, working, and relating to others. And this is what the evolution of purpose holds in store for those able to work through the problems their own radix block has posed for them, to develop themselves in the evolutionary direction.

The Dawn of Purpose

Purpose, in the full sense of the word, exists only in man among the animals, and only partially in man. Purpose in this full sense is the control by an individual of his life so as to pursue values and achieve goals *that he conceived of, evaluated, and chose to pursue*. This last clause is essential to the definition of purpose as the term is used here. Purpose is not simply goal-directed behavior, for all animal life is goal oriented. Animals, man included, seek goals that are biologically or socially impressed on them. This goal-seeking behavior is not truly purposive. Even mechanisms -- automatic feedback control devices -- operate in "pursuit of goals," e.g., keeping the temperature of a room close to a pre-set value. Thus purpose does not inhere in the pursuit of goals as such. A servomechanism or automatic feedback control device will operate in "pursuit of a goal" conceived of and chosen by man, and it is the man and not the machine that exhibits the purpose involved in the machine's goal-directed activity. (Kelley, 1968) Machines may have "goals," but only living things have values, and only human beings have purposes in the full sense of the term. The new energy that is continually emerging from the radix within the individual makes him a source of change in the course of events. His future is not determined, but embraces a range of possibilities, depending on when and where energy is originated. His conceptual ability permits him to foresee future possibilities and to build values reflecting what he believes to be desirable for him. The more developed this ability, the wider the range of choice, the more possible futures open to him. When a possible future state or course of events is conceived of, evaluated, and selected by an individual to strive towards, it is a goal. Any possibility, any distance into the future can be a goal. If I decide to sharpen my pencil, to reserve a table for lunch at a restaurant, to become a neurosurgeon, or to write a book, I create a possible goal by the process of conceptual -thought. Then I may evaluate its desirability and the cost of achieving it, choose it as a conscious goal, and begin to move toward it by the process of voluntary attention and movement. And the hundreds of choice behaviors I initiate each day are governed by my values, which, even more than my long-range goals themselves, shape the direction of my life day by day.

Only a purposive person is able to conceptualize possible futures for his own life, evaluate them, choose that or those he will pursue and then work to realize his choice(s). The human being alone in the animal kingdom has the ability to conceptualize, evaluate and exercise volition to move towards his own individual goals. It is this that makes purpose, in the full sense of the word, unique to the human animal. Purpose has provided us with extraordinary power, including the power for self-fulfillment and for our own undoing. It is the source of our great achievements and

of our self-created misery and disasters. Human civilization, with all the good and bad that the term includes, is the product of purposive individual human beings.

The Origin of Armor: A Summary

The above is the substance of what I consider to be one of my major intellectual contributions, the solution to the problem Reich posed as to the origin of the muscular armor. Let me summarize the points I have made, restating my principal thesis.

Animals seek goals that they do not conceptualize and choose. They evaluate emotionally rather than conceptually and move towards these goals spontaneously rather than voluntarily. Animals must organize their behavior around goals if they are to survive. Goal-seeking thus appears early in evolution, and is a prominent feature of animal behavior. The unlearned emotional evaluations that lead an animal toward or away from something, and so govern goal-oriented behavior, have evolved with the animal species, and are those appropriate to the survival of the species. The animal's values take the form of feelings of hunger, desire, fear, rage, etc., in response to perception of certain patterns of experience. These are the values that are instinctively given, carried in the germ plasm. Behavior leading to certain (usually appropriate) goals thus has a built-in attraction for the animal, so that no volition is required in doing it. The animal "feels like" seeking a mate, building a nest, hatching its eggs, and feeding its young; by its nature it "wants" to migrate, to store food in the fall, etc. These are its "built-in" values. Volition is not required. It is required only when there is a conflict between conceptually controlled goal-directed behavior and a spontaneously more attractive here-and-now alternative. The student employs volition to study for an exam, if what is attractive in short-range terms is to see his girl or to watch TV.

Instinct as it operates in lower animals is overshadowed in the human animal by another form of goal-seeking that falls shy of being purposive. As we have noted, in man goal-seeking typically operates in the service of goals that have evolved socially rather than biologically. The values governing this goal-seeking behavior are not built into the germ plasm, but result from experience and education, and, for some, conceptual thought. Man has slowly evolved a freedom from biological determination of the values which set the direction of his life. Yet most people are unable to effectively create their own values independently, and cultural evolution has filled the gap. Human beings, like the lower animals, then, evaluate goals as a result of an external factor operating on them. But human values evolve socially instead of biologically, and are not species-wide. The values expressed in human goals differ substantially from one society to another.

When values are evolved socially instead of biologically, the attraction of a possible goal is not "built-in," and the goal will not be pursued spontaneously. A new form of behavior had to evolve to move men toward their goals, *voluntary* behavior, based on voluntary rather than spontaneous attention and movement. The mechanism of volition -- of voluntary attention and voluntary movement -- is the radix block, Reich's "muscular armor." Values that are socially impressed result in goals that are not "individually conceptualized, evaluated and chosen." These values govern the choice that is made, so the pursuit of such goals is not fully purposive as the term has been defined here, but an expression of purpose in an undeveloped partial form. This often abortive form of purpose has brought the tragedy of the human animal. It is "what is the matter with man."

Yet truly purposive behavior is possible to man. The individual human being can break away from the values impressed on him by his society. He can by choice take his life in a new direction that is uniquely his own. He can examine the values, principles, and habits of life held up to him by his society, subject them to a critical process of thought, reject those he finds faulty, and

develop new ones in their stead to guide his own life. And he can conceptualize and explore in his imagination the possibilities his own life holds, analyze what is required of him to bring the most desirable possibility about, choose that or those which he will try to actualize, and set to work to achieve what he has chosen. This process is developed very little in most people, even those we label "purposive," but it does exist, and in a few is highly developed.

It is in this way that new ideas, new scientific or technological developments, new dimensions and forms of human living are created. They are created by truly purposive individuals. The ultimate source is the radix process in the individual which makes possible the original, the uncaused, the newly created. This process is developed in a new way and employed more effectively by the relatively few purposive individuals in the world than by any other living creature of which we have knowledge. Every purposive person is an explorer, an originator, who has decided to leave the herd and move in his own direction, to blaze his own trail, to originate his own values, to move toward his own individual goals, goals he envisioned and chose. Every significant human achievement is a result of the work of purposive individuals.

The freeing of mankind from the pursuit of instinctive, biologically programmed goals is an evolutionary development that was a necessary prelude to the appearance of true purpose in the world. Unhappily, however, this freeing of man from the inherent evaluations of instinctive animal life cut him adrift from his biological roots. Biological evolution developed, tested, and perfected built-in animal values slowly over millions of years. By giving up biological for socially developed values, human societies became enormously more adaptive. However, they could also drift, like a ship without a rudder, into ways of living that were life- negative and (thus) irrational.

The very speed of cultural evolution is part of the problem, since many more generations are required to eliminate biologically maladaptive behavior patterns within a society than to generate them through social processes. Yet this speed of social evolution is only part of the problem. Why do societies develop maladaptive patterns in the first place? The drifting of human societies in maladaptive life-negative directions has happened again and again in human history. And the societies do not merely drift at random. The radix block, which is a necessary aspect of the evolution of volition, has often served to push human society in life-negative directions. *The radix block has introduced an irrational element into human life that man must learn to understand if he is not to destroy his own species.*

The problem can be restated in this way: The radix block that makes voluntary attention and voluntary movement possible for man changes the quality of his emotional experience. In this early partial stage of the evolution of purpose, the changes often take the form of distortions in the emotional life of masses of human beings. These mass distortions produce mass irrationality in social and political life, as they produce emotional misery in masses of human beings. Learning the way out of the problem begins by understanding the relation of feeling and purpose in human life, and the conflict between them.

(The next article in this series is entitled **The Conflict of Feeling and Purpose**, and continues the line of thought of this article.)

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