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The Authoritative Dimension in Social Relations

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Abstract

The catastrophic consequences of the abuse of authority perpetrated during the first half of the *secolo breve* have led to globally dimensioned cultural, social and psychological pressures towards the formulation of legal limitations able to prevent repetition of such aberrations. The ‘democratic’ wind, though undeniably effective in encouraging enhanced appreciation of, and undifferentiated respect for, each individual, has nevertheless proved weaker when required to find an appropriate theoretical and practical repositioning of the authoritative dimension proper to any social relationship, whether at systemic, interpersonal or individual level. The purpose of this inquiry is to encourage updated reflections on the role of the authoritative dimension in social and personal development processes.

Keywords: authoritativeness, authoritarianism, autonomy, obedience, transcendence.

1. Authority and power

What is authority? Do we live at a time of its profound crisis? Let us attempt to venture into the complexities that inevitably emerge from the answers to these questions. For Hannah Arendt, if we wish to avoid misunderstandings, it is perhaps wiser to ‘ask ourselves what authority “has been”, rather than “what it is”’. We would not be tempted to pose this question if authority had not disappeared from the modern world [...] In practice, no less than in theory, we are no longer capable of knowing what authority really is’ (Arendt, 1961, It. trans. 1999: 130-131). The consequences of this disappearance, according to the German philosopher, are visible to all:

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'Its loss means loss of the foundations of the world, which has effectively, from that time forth, begun to shift, to change, altering itself increasingly swiftly into different forms, with the result that we find ourselves facing a proteiform universe, where everything can be transformed into anything else from one moment to the next' (Arendt, 1961, It. trans. 1999: 134).

The springboard of the new subjectivity, that is to say of individuals intent on realizing their own deepest expectations, may therefore be identified in the 'end of verticality', that is to say in that 'disappearance of the hierarchical society to which the decline of the patriarchal function bears witness. The problem is not constituted by the real father, obviously, since the foundations of authority do not lie in biology, but in the symbolic role of this figure. The father, or rather, the name-of-father, no longer absolves its law-giving function' (Ehrenberg, 2010, It. trans. 2010: 240). Many today agree in seeing the crisis of the patriarchal archetype as providing the root, with cascade effect, of the crisis of all hierarchical figures in some way derived from it, or rather, the crisis of their specific 'symbolic' function.

Certainly, a 'disparity' between an entire generation and its subsequent one so disorienting from the psycho-social profile could not have come about through simple 'development of antecedents'. It is true, as Horkheimer reminds us, that middle-class thought itself 'began as a struggle against traditional authority and countered it with the right of every individual, as the sole legitimate source of law and of truth' (Horkheimer, 1936, It. trans. 1974: 25). This sociologist of the Frankfurt school further notes that 'according to Fichte, "Those who act by authority, necessarily act without conscience"' (Horkheimer, 1936, It. trans. 1974: 27). But these cultural premises would not have been sufficient to shift so radically the centrality of the authoritative figure: a detonator was needed.

Justification for this irrevocable change of direction was certainly provided by the psychologically disoriented climate in which the nascent global village awoke from the collective nightmare of the Second World War. Its atrocities, still today incapable of any rational explanation, provoked essentially by radical forms of abuse of power, induced many intellectuals (psychologists, psychiatrists, sociologists) to seek their roots in the murkiest crannies of the human soul and its social relationships. In this period, while Kurt Lewin, Ron Lippit and Robert White, of *Iowa University*, published their celebrated *Study of Leadership Styles* (1939), Erich Fromm (together with Max Horkheimer and Herbert Marcuse) brought out his *Studies on Authority and the Family* (1936), followed by those of Theodor Adorno on the *Authoritarian Personality* in 1950.

The origin of all the horrors of the worldwide conflict was thus identified, not simply in Nazi ideology, but in its deepest and most multiform primordial

root of evil, called the ‘authoritarian syndrome’, characterized by ‘hierarchization of social space, an irrational attitude towards authorities, building self-esteem basing on humiliation of the weak, aggression, superstition, projectivity, stereotypy, anti-intraception. Rigidity of educational attitudes as a manifestation of the syndrome of authoritarian aggression is the centerpiece in the structure of indicators of authoritarianism’ (Bezrukova, Samoylova 2015: 235). The link between authoritarianism and education was the first to be examined with particular attention, since it goes back to the primal origins of the socializing processes, that is to say, those that take place within the family. To the extent that it is among the most important educational agencies, in fact, it ‘provides for the reproduction of characters as social life requires them to be and supplies the larger part of the indispensable aptitude to authoritarian conduct’ (Horkheimer, 1936, It. trans. 1974: 47).

From a strictly ‘cultural’ point of view, it was in those years that ‘traditional’ authority began to be perceived as an attack on individual freedom: ‘Many began to consider authority as antithetic to freedom by definition, and it became a goal of almost all democratic movements to limit its role. One consequence of this evolution was that every form of authority came to be viewed with suspicion’ (Furedi, 2009, It. trans. 2012: 89).

The results of all this were uncontrolled and even antithetical with respect to initial expectations. The declared purpose of the first studies, in fact, was to discover in the destructive root of authoritarianism the potential nature of many ‘psycho-pathological’ profiles, in order to correct it or even eliminate it from civil existence, rather as had been attempted by outlawing the symbols and apologetic gestures of Nazism and fascism. But the operation proved much more complex than simple recourse to civil and penal codes. As many sociologists note, ‘the decline of authority was the first step towards the constitution of new forms of power with a range of action and a penetrative capacity hitherto unknown to history’ (Nisbet, 1966, It. trans. 1987: 150). It therefore proved impossible to resolve the problem through the advent of alternative theories, ‘theories (Marxist or anarchic) that teach history, for the very fact that they are illusory, ultimately encourage totalitarian forms of power’ (Crespi, 1989: 168). It thus had to be recognized that ‘paradoxically, the crisis in the principle of authority by no means corresponded to an undermining of authoritarianism. Quite the reverse; it was precisely this crisis that opened the floodgates to various forms of authoritarianism. A society in which the mechanisms of authority are weakened, far from ushering in an age of freedom, enters into a period of arbitrariness and confusion’ (Benasayag, Schimt, 2003, It. trans. 2004: 26). The recent outbreak of populism in the old and new continents seems to confirm this cynical nemesis, even when it parades under the name of ‘direct democracy’.

Only more recently have people begun to consider the possibility that the real problem was not the (ideological) one of power as such but, rather, that of its incorrect use. The distinction between *authority*, *authoritarianism* and *authoritativeness* is not often examined properly and there are still many who struggle to understand the basic underlying principles. This failing is serious since it risks obscuring the subtle confine between what is fundamental for the development of identity and what is actually the most radical obstacle to it.

At this point, in a 'stalled' situation, some researchers have felt an urgent need to re-examine the 'concept of power'. Their belief is that time is ripe for a more realistic analysis of the problem, to exploit in some way the terminal crisis of the authoritative relationship in order to investigate what cannot be banished from social dynamics without putting them at risk. It is necessary, first of all, to pose correctly

the crucial question in which the problem of authority is crystallized: 'In the name of what? In the name of what common principle do two partners, in a given situation accept a hierarchical relationship or one of authority, without this degenerating into authoritarianism? When we speak of a crisis, it is in fact the crisis of this relationship to which we refer (Benasayag, Schimt 2003, It. trans. 2004: 28).

History leaves its inheritance even in the most radically postmodern collective entities, just as it transfers to subsequent generations the problems not resolved by the preceding ones: for this reason, 'the debts contracted by the conscience on account of distorted and atrophied collective goals, must be paid at an interest rate bordering on usury. The slow death of the authoritarian passion has left in its wake hate and violence, twin widowers of a dead love' (Rieff, 1966, It. trans. 1972: 24).

2. A social necessity

The authoritative relationship appears to be an element that is neither that of 'accessory' nor simply 'cultural': rather, it must be considered part of the structural 'dynamism' of the individual and collective life, a *social and at the same time personal necessity*. We intend, with the expression 'social necessity', to indicate four different levels of analysis: *macrosocial* (a condition for the existence of the systems), *microsocial* (routine and daily dynamism of concrete social relationships), *socio/anthropological* (recognition of a structural dynamism) and, lastly, *instrumental* (strategy to enhance personal and collective potentials).

From the macrosocial angle, testimonies to the centrality of the authoritative relationship as a precondition for the existence and stability of

civil coexistence are to be found in the researches of practically every human science. That authority is essential for the stability of the social fabric is a central conviction of Durkheim's 'systemic' thought. For the French sociologist, in fact, the individual could not find inside himself, without external intervention, the necessary energy to coexist with others. What the individual lacks are precisely those moral qualities that impose privations and limits on the natural impulses. Indeed, while it is in every man's interest to acquire some of these and to seek them spontaneously, there are others (the specifically 'social' qualities) that can be aroused in us only by means of external action, through socialization (Durkheim, 1922).

Gerth and Wright Mills, too, deal with the problem of the social functionality of authority by starting from the concept of 'impulse'. From this point of view, they pose a central question: 'How are we to produce a person who desires or "wishes" what is socially approved, required or recompensed? How are we to conveniently orient the impulse toward certain role requirements?' (Gerth, Wright Mills, 1953, It. trans. 1969: 66). On the same wavelength are the reflections of Parsons who, resuming Hobbes's 'social contract', states that 'men agree to waive their natural freedom in favour of a sovereign authority that, in its turn, guarantees their security, that is to say their immunity from aggression by others, operated by force or by fraud' (Parsons, 1937, It. trans. 1987: 130). The American sociologist starts from the consideration that, in rigorously developing utilitarian hypotheses, a social system is inevitably transformed into a 'state of war', given that, 'where there is no limit to the means used, and force and fraud in particular, such a society can only relapse into a boundless struggle for power' (Parsons, 1937, It. trans. 1987, p. 134).

Less evident, but in its turn generally accepted, is the centrality of authoritative relations in the routine dimension of daily life, that is to say on the microsocial level. We tend to neglect, in fact, the evidence that on thousands of occasions we find ourselves in the position of having to be leader of a group: being parents, being teachers, effectively means assuming a guiding role (no matter how we exercise it).

More generally still, we might conclude that 'whenever two or more persons come together to implement a common goal, leadership is present and leadership is required. Throughout our lives, every one of us looks to others for leadership and others look to us for leadership' (Johnson, Johnson 1997, It. trans. 2005: 46). We must speak of leadership, in fact, whenever a relationship is created, even between just two people, 'in which the first influences more than he is influenced; that is to say: on account of the person leading, the led persons are guided and act and feel differently from how they would do otherwise' (Gerth, Wright Mills 1953, It. trans. 1969: 447).

In short, whatever their dimensions, 'it appears that all groups need a leader, for better or for worse' (Gordon, 1997: 13), because authority 'is – phenomenologically – an intrinsic dimension to every social relationship' (Donati, 1978: 40) and the hierarchical disposition of the functions of the social links is one of their essential requisites. Indeed, 'there is no form of community that is without some form of stratification of function and role. Wherever two or more people associate, there is bound to be some form of hierarchy, no matter how variable, changing from one actor to the other, or how minor. Hierarchy is unavoidable in some degree' (Nisbet, 1976: 238).

This brings us to the third level, which we defined as *socio-anthropological*: why has the authoritative relationship penetrated social interactions to the extent that it can be considered a 'structural' element of coexistence? The question takes us back to a primordial dilemma, the reply to which has radically opposing repercussions. We define this dilemma as 'anthropological' because the way in which (for the most part unconsciously) we intervene from outside to 'socialize' a young person, starting from a rapid and implicit consideration of his 'nature'. This requires us to take up a position with regard to two opposing paradigms: can we, in fact, take as our starting-point a faith in 'the child's innate goodness' (which implies a preference for freedom of development, of choice, of action, of the expression, even if instinctive, of their needs), or should we base ourselves upon a denial of innate goodness, 'and to imply corresponding preferences for discipline and authority, for habitual or learned behavior such as work, for structured learning environments, and for the primacy of prescriptive needs' (Miller, 1976: 335).

The underlying question is less ingenuous and abstract than it might appear, and translates into a primordial attitude of a psychological nature, often not reflexive, but strongly influential on relational dynamics in general.

Burckhardt wrote: 'The serious problems began in the last century, especially as a result of Rousseau and his doctrine of the fundamental goodness of human nature. From this, educated and uneducated people alike have distilled the theory of the inevitable advent of a golden age, realizable if people are left free to act as they wish. The result, as by now even children know, has been the complete disintegration of authority in the hands of men, following which, as is natural, we periodically fall victims to pure power' (Nisbet, 1966, It. trans. 1987: 151).

That this basic choice was decisive was grasped, for that matter, even by Dewey, the principal artifice of the American and, to some extent, planetary, 'pedagogic revolution' of the last century. The American pragmatic philosopher strongly opposed the 'authoritarian' structure of official

pedagogy, which suffered from the illusion it could achieve order by repression. Indeed,

the often held view that children are evil (original sin) or are the enemy removes any moral restraints to their intellectual mistreatment [...]. The roots of modern western education are considerably connected to notions of the child as naturally evil who can be saved by control, denial, and authority. It is this view of the young which explains why education has been regarded as a moral discipline (Romanish, 1995: 21).

We come now to the last aspect relating to the need for authoritative relationships as a means of consolidating the social structure, the aspect we defined as *instrumental*. In this perspective, authority is seen as the most convenient and effective strategy with which to achieve goals that are at the same time collective and personal. The central feature of this particular type of exercising power, which is normally defined as *leadership* (even if, according to Parsons, it 'is not a form of power, but rather of influence' (1969, It. trans. 1975: 458) is its capacity to hold together and at the same time the urgency of *achieving goals* and the need to *make best use of collaborators*.

In general, therefore, there is a tendency today to propose an idea of exercising leadership, deemed to be new,

which shifts the 'fulcrum of charisma' from the 'Chief' to his capacity to make good use of the experience and skills possessed by those under him. This brings to the fore the enormous significance of the group, insofar as it contains single specific features which need to be suitably handled and exploited by the leader in his role of 'catalyst and organizer of the single skills' in a collective vision (Cipolla, 2004: 15).

In other words, leadership is not so much 'the exercise of power as such as the conferral of power on others' (Bennis, Nanus 1993: 206).

The metaphor of the symphony orchestra has been widely used to illustrate the type of relationship that exists between a person who directs and those who perform. Indeed, if the group constitutes together an entity that is more intelligent and more skilful than any one of its single members, 'the best group is one composed of individuals who prefer the advantages of learning to the satisfaction that derives from prevailing over others' (Attardi, Pasero 2004: 23). But, if we accept Durkheim's 'pessimistic' perspective, this cannot come about naturally. Every instrumentalist will be naturally inclined to display virtuosity of a solo kind, and will therefore be unable to give proper attention to what the other members of the orchestra are doing. In order to reduce this individualist tendency, the conductor needs to bring out the best

of each player within the perspective of the common effort, which only he can know in its fullest dimensions.

We may simply mention, here, the central function of authority when it has to collaborate for the creation of a 'relational asset', that is to say, an asset that 'consists of all those relations that can only be generated and exploited together and to which individuals must make recourse to obtain whatever they cannot have if that relationship is lacking' (Donati, 2015: 40). From a certain point of view, the way in which power is managed in such situations is not fundamental: it may be agreed upon according to extremely varied, more or less 'democratic', processes.

One thing is certain: it must be present.

3. A personal necessity

Let us now move to the standpoint of the individual, and inquire whether and how the authoritative relationship is central to the construction of subjective identity and to the pursuit of the individual's *ultimate concerns* (Archer, 2003). We are wondering, in short, whether there exists a *relationship of necessity between authority and identity*. Seligman has no doubt about this: 'The thesis is elementary: the idea of the self and that of authority are inseparable, insofar as every model of the self implies a particular concept of authority' (Seligman, 2000, It. trans. 2002: 18), given that 'authority and the need for authority are unavoidable aspects of the human identity and condition' (Seligman, 2000, It. trans. 2002: 7).

Research, filling in the gaps left by Max Weber (1922), has shifted the focus of inquiry, centring it prevalently on the 'receiver', analysing, that is to say, the reasons and procedures typical of those who accept to follow. After all, this is a 'relationship', and it is the follower who, in the last resort, accepts or rejects an authority. The key questions become, therefore, 'Why do followers accept and why do they refuse? What happens in the interaction?' (Gordon, 1997: 21). Also: 'When is it reasonable for a person to submit to authority, and what does such submission presuppose?' (Schrag, 1972: 554). And lastly, 'Is the person who submits to authority free?' (Schrag, 1972: 558).

Let us take these demanding questions one by one, seeking a plausible answer for each of them.

First of all, persons who submit to authority necessarily recognize their own inadequacy before a problem. This 'assumes that the one who submits to authority recognizes the scope of competence of the authority; that he has some basis for considering the person's wisdom, judgment, or foresight superior to his own; and that he recognizes that his own interest does not

conflict with that of the authority' (Schrag, 1972: 555). A first comment: 'has some basis', presupposes, in its turn, that a path towards maturity has already taken place and that the person is aware of what his own interests, and those of the person asking him to follow, are. The question therefore reverts us to a preceding stage: how was this awareness reached? The answer can only be, by putting trust in an authoritative relationship, even while relying upon a lesser degree of awareness.

What is clear to all and sundry is that, in order to satisfy these interests, certain means are needed (tools, food, money, physical force, knowledge, etc.) that are not normally available to everyone (we cannot obtain food, make clothes or obtain education unaided). For this reason, 'people actively seek relationships where they think the other person has the means to satisfy their needs [...]. They follow (and accept to be directed by) a guide whom they believe can give them what they need or what they desire' (Gordon, 1997: 22). In this perspective (and only in this perspective), it is plausible to submit to authority without this limiting our freedom.

The point is, however, that, with regard to children,

they are not yet in a position to exercise freedom of choice in the full sense, because they have not been sufficiently educated in modes of social life to be able to deliberate. The exercise of authority over them, therefore, cannot be an encroachment on their freedom: it is via exercise of authority that they will be inducted into modes of social life and thus be made capable of deliberating and exercising choice. A child is obviously not in a position to choose to do this or that until he has learned how to do this and that (Schrag 1972: 558).

At first sight, this statement of the problem may seem extravagant or even inadmissible. If we reflect on normal linguistic procedures, however, the idea becomes more plausible: 'The child who says "pookie" for "cookie" is not going to be able to communicate his desires for a cookie at all' (Schrag, 1972: 560). Learning to manage and, earlier still, to identify our desires, is in itself a process that matures only in an authoritative relationship, one that teaches us to 'give things a name' and thus be able to communicate what we want. Even our 'own name' is built, socially, through the same identical process: 'It is as a result of this identification with the people who look after them that children become able to identify themselves, to acquire a subjectively coherent and plausible identity [...] Individuals become what people important for them call them' (Berger, Luckmann 1966, It. trans. 1969: 182-183).

If, as Baumann has it, 'freedom is the capacity to do what we like', it must

be realistically observed that the very identification of what we like is a result, or an *emergent effect*, of a relation that introduces us to the sense of things, whether internal or external to us.

The affirmation and absolutization of 'differentiation' and 'pluralism' as the 'underlying structure of modern society' can, according to Berger and Luckmann, generate a sort of 'short circuit', a 'crisis of sense' at the moment when we come to forget that

the personal identity of the child is constituted when he sees his conduct mirrored in that of persons close to him. A certain congruency of sense in the conduct of these persons constitutes the most relevant premise for a non-pathological development of the person. To the extent to which this premise is not guaranteed, the probability increases that crises of subjective sense will develop (Berger, Luckmann 1995, It. trans. 2010: 110).

It must be made clear, though, that recognition of authoritativeness, its functions and its legitimacy lies, like the identity-making process, in the making. Indeed, to be even more precise, the two processes are inextricably interdependent.

The 'process forming' enables us to confirm our hypothesis concerning the link created between authoritativeness and *concerns*: the former depends on its capacity to guarantee support for achievement of the latter, which varies on the basis of the individual's development and awareness. For this reason, a person may lose authoritativeness after having been conceded obedience for many years, because he is no longer able to guarantee this support for concerns (whether primary or secondary).

4. Conclusions: authority as a social relationship

However we wish to understand it or however it is represented, authority can be perceived only as a 'social relationship'. This means that it always envisages an interaction between two agents who conserve a minimum of liberty. From this point of view, it needs to be observed that this minimum level cannot, ideally, be reduced to zero even in the most oppressive situations. There is always the possibility for the individual to *decide how to react* in any given situation (even at the cost of his own life).

Let us begin, therefore, by noting that, in any type of relationship, however great the asymmetry may be of status or of role, management and definition of the said relationship is in the hands, to varying degrees, of all its components. It seems worth clarifying, at this point, that the nature of the relationship does not derive solely from the quality of one single participant.

In other words, it is not that authoritativeness of one agent that determines exclusively the authoritativeness of the relationship. Seen from this point of view, the same observation applies as has been made for ‘credibility’. While Aristotle considered this essentially a personal feature and a moral quality that exists prior to the relationship, contemporary psycho-sociological reflections have modified this perspective. ‘Credibility, like authority, is not – or is not only – a personal feature, it is something that is attributed, which is recognized, by others’ (Gili, 2005: 4).

This situation enables us to understand how authority, and authoritativeness even more so, are in continual need of confirmation: trust, in fact, ‘cannot be imposed or “paid for”; it must be earned’ (Bennis, Nanus, 1993: 143). ‘This means recognizing that the nature of leadership is strictly relational’ (Chiari, 2005: 12). At a general level, therefore, those who influence and those who allow themselves to be influenced are therefore ‘active’ entities (in different ways and to different extents) in the authoritative relationship.

Authoritativeness is a *factor that emerges from the relationship linked to the growth of the guided person (and consequently of the guiding person) and to the test of experience*. An authoritative relationship comes about when power is *really* functionalized to the acquisition of elements that are potentially useful to the *good* of the person who obeys. Identifying this ‘good’ is always a highly *risky* adult operation, one that necessarily presupposes a *poor* but at the same time *decisive* position on the part of the guiding person, who must always be aware that the position taken may be corrected at every turn by the unimpeachable principle of *the way things are*.

How are power and good to coexist? How can we intervene to form an awareness without alienating it, while at the same time taking care, on the contrary, to make it ‘autonomous’? What is real autonomy?

No one (not even those of the Frankfurt school, as it has been noted) doubts that a father needs to impose coercion on his immature child: the real problem is how to avoid making this action repressive. From this point of view, the only guarantee

lies in the fact that the father, in his turn, is subject to coercion by a relationship that requires him to act on his child in the name of an objective (external, common) good that transcends the relationship. This happens, not just according to whether there are sufficient material resources, but according to whether or not the symbolic ethos (of his authority) is inspired by interactive values and processes of symbolic reciprocity (Donati, 1978: 43).

Let us examine two aspects of this description. Firstly, that of an 'objective, external, common good, that transcends the relationship'. Authoritativeness is concretized in the 'sacrifice' of an ideal reference to something that neither of the two entities in the relationship has, with respect to which each of them freely grants approval and for the achievement of which the knowledge of one is at the 'service' of the other's enrichment. The second aspect is linked to the first: this 'sacrifice' requires a 'reciprocity', in which the inevitable asymmetry imposes on the participants (but especially on the one who guides) a genuine biunivocal acceptance of everything 'new' that the relationship itself succeeds in generating.

The dimension of 'transcendence' (which goes far beyond the category of 'credence') is essential for proper management of the authoritative relationship. Where this latter is handled manipulatively, it can only lead to trickery. Such a distortion is evident and leads to tragic results both interpersonally and socially.

Living in the public sphere without authority (and therefore without an awareness of the transcendence of the source of this authority with respect to power and those who hold it) means having to face once again from the beginning, though no longer with religious faith in a consecrated principle, or under the protection of traditional and therefore axiomatic behavioural criteria, the most elementary problems aroused by human coexistence (Arendt, 1961, It. trans. 1999: 192).

Another very effective description of the qualities of the authoritative relationship is provided by Sennett's description of the famous conductor Pierre Monteux at work.

There was no coercion or threat, there was simply one man trying to help others to improve themselves. To improve themselves, be it said, to the extent of their capacities. This, too, is an essential component of authority. The authoritative person is one who, having strength, uses it to guide others, submitting them to a discipline, orienting their action by reference to a higher model. Mastery, superior judgment, ability to impose discipline, capacity to arouse fear: these are the qualities of an authoritative figure (Sennett, 1980, It. trans. 2006: 17).

In this case, too, let us examine the most significant qualities. The authoritative person is one who *tries to help others to improve*, taking into account *their capacities*, and always with reference to *a higher model* (that 'objective, external, common good that transcends the relationship?'). It is becoming increasingly clear that the 'craft' of authoritativeness is extremely taxing. It is

necessary to keep constantly in mind the other person's 'objective' good, and a higher model (not abstractly, but in the concrete context in which the relationship takes place). It is necessary to know the paths that are presumed most suitable for achieving it (responsible and respectful use of greater skills and knowledge to help the other person to improve). It is necessary to understand the point at which the other person's development has arrived (and not a year ago, or last week, but now, in the specific present that is to be faced), in order to ask of the other the growth rate of which he or she is capable in this precise situation.

We might say, briefly, that authoritativeness is conserved only through great *care for the other, repeated and confirmed over time, 'updated'*.

But care for what? If we wish to consider the 'objective good' the sole adequate goal of the authoritative relationship, it is necessary to sustain, respect, 'put up scaffolding' and suggest any changes of route in the *concerns* of the person who is following. This latter concern, which synthetically determines personality and its existential unity, coincides with 'what a person thinks may make his life happy' (Archer, 2003, It. trans. 2006: 14). In the last resort, in fact, *'who we are is what we care about'* (Archer, 2007, It. trans. 2009: 61). Authoritativeness appears and may be identified as an opportunity to be helped in recognizing and pursuing our *ultimate concerns* through experience.

It is worth wondering, lastly, whether *anything or anyone can coincide with these ultimate concerns*. If human nature is *eccentric* (cf. Plessner 1928 and most early 20th century philosophical and sociological anthropology), any form of 'centring' it by means of objects (fetishes) or persons (gurus or despots) will coincide with a ruinous impoverishment of human nature, since 'men in every age get what they want. And while they are getting it, the invisible man within them has already moved ahead. Their constitutional uprooting bears witness to the reality of universal history' (Plessner, 1928: 363). If, therefore, authority is a *search for stability and security in the strength of others*, 'believing the search can be concluded is truly an illusion, a dangerous illusion. Only tyrants gain from it. But it is equally dangerous to believe the search must not be made at all. In that case, whatever exists is an absolute' (Sennett, 1980, It. trans. 2006: 174). If reference can only be made to a *high model* to which we are to be introduced (*introduction* is perhaps the authoritative person's most typical action), when this 'height' comes to coincide with the person proposing it to us, we are up against full authoritarianism, plagiarism and alienation. But when this search is not instituted or is abandoned to avoid the risk of dependency, everything becomes an absolute, so we are in a situation of idolatry, of fetish.

The authoritative relationship is therefore, on the one hand, essential to individuals' human and social development and, on the other hand, something very risky (the correlation with the loving relationship once again comes to

mind). But there are no alternatives that do not involve the loss of human features and potentials of absolute value.

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