

In Thrall to a False God

THOUGHT FOR THE MONTH (10)

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People have needs or **drives**: physical, mental, social, emotional, spiritual ... People seek a life of **fulfilment** in which a range of desires are met. But we sometimes observe that people with natural talent or material advantages nevertheless make a mess of their lives. And we also see people with no special advantages having lives which are envied by the "advantaged" ones. What's going on?

We aim for belonging, financial security, friends, and perhaps wealth, power, popularity, fame, beauty, status ... **Each such outcome is a blessing in itself.** But in any full life, there will be times when one of these blessings may need to be sidelined for the greater good.¹ The problem is that some people are afflicted with a compulsion **to attach irrationally and obsessively to just one life goal** – to the detriment of all other needs – leading to a warped and unhappy life, often involving harm to others.

A person can have many gifts and advantages but nevertheless spoil their lives by taking one ingredient from the feast that life offers and clinging to it above all else – as if it alone were the key to personal fulfilment.

My first degree (majoring in philosophy), included behavioural psychology (as a 2-year minor subject). This involved lab work with rats in mazes. Normally, we would set up a maze with certain gates open and others shut, leaving the hungry rat to work out the successful route to the food. They'd get there faster in successive trials. But one rather cruel experiment produced a pathological behaviour with which we humans can readily identify. This is where the experimenter would change the gates between every trial, meaning the rat

had no chance of working out a successful path. The result, after many searches, was that the starved rat (to avoid going crazy?) would resort to a "hypothesis" (a technical term in behavioural psychology) – a rigid plan with no logical basis. For example, the rat's hypothesis might be: *if I always turn left, I'll make it.* Similarly, we can talk about distressed humans adopting a **monolithic hypothesis** out of desperation. One big but narrow goal, dominating one's life: what used to be called being **in thrall to a false god.**²

Let me discuss the *wealth* obsession first. I see no wrong in a person enjoying what wealth comes their way within a responsible, well-rounded and personally-fulfilling lifestyle. But there are unhappy souls who have endured emotionally deprived childhoods, desperately seeking the contentment they think they have seen in others. But alas, if I do seize upon wealth as the supreme panacea to my sense of emptiness, there will be a price to pay. Sadly, in my obsession, I will put money ahead of friends, partner and offspring. I will be hard-nosed and unfair with my colleagues or customers. Thus I will push away the much-needed human support which I have so desperately lacked since childhood.

Then there's the *belonging* obsession. If, as a child, I do not belong to anyone, I am (in nature) doomed – and will try anything to belong. But if nobody is really interested, my efforts will fail. I will grow up with a strong sense of vulnerability. There are groups, cults and ideologies lying in wait to provide me with a sense of belonging. The price? Loyalty to the tribe. It requires group-think. I will join in illogical witch-hunts against those who are identified by the movement as enemies of the

¹ For example, there may come a time when the rational choice is to let go of a serious sum of money, to back out of a venture that is causing too much harm to oneself or others.

² It makes perfect sense that the ancient Ten Commandments prescribe first and foremost that we work with [the creator of] the real world and warn us against the worship of **false gods**.

tribe or who don't believe in its promised utopia. Even so, the "correct" beliefs and attitudes of the tribe will change over time³. The membership (which may be in the dozens, thousands or millions) will unselfconsciously alter their "beliefs" to remain securely within their imaginary family.⁴ Sadly, it is not a real family, and members will remain starved of emotional security, sustained only by an **illusion** of belonging.

The *security* obsession is perhaps the least "glamorous", but very widespread. Some children receive a reassuring constancy of care, and a show of confidence from the parents, which can be followed by gradual growth in independence, producing an adventurous individual. What becomes of me if I am one of the insecure ones? I may be attracted to positions which guarantee security of employment in exchange for abject obedience. The price? I don't get to pursue my own interests, or to act on my own values or my own beliefs in my work. I must do exactly as prescribed. If my employer is indifferent or malevolent towards others, I may be required to implement cruel and unjust regulations. But I will be "secure". The history of tyranny is full of the unholy pact between the ruthless and the insecure.

My next obsession is *power* – extraordinary power over other humans, beyond the normal constraints of live-and-let-live. If power is my god, I will become inured to ruthlessness. I will seek and gain power in places where life is hidden from the wider society. This could be within a powerful but unaccountable government agency, a criminal organisation, or a ruthlessly-run company – and sometimes occurs where citizens are institutionalised and live under the mercy of overseers. Who chooses this path to self-fulfilment? One who has abandoned all hope of being loved and who resorts to cunning, opportunism and force to survive – and sometimes also to avenge the raw deal one has experienced in childhood.

³ ... to avoid ridicule when mainstream culture clashes too strongly with the doctrine – or when those in control of the faction are pursuing concealed ambitions.
⁴ Sadly, in huge national movements of history, when the powerful leaders are ready to make their move to

Well, those are four **false gods** – or monolithic hypotheses – for vainly trying to fill the vacuum in one's soul.

We could also talk about fame, popularity or beauty – more blessings that life can bestow from time to time. But when adopted as my one and only personal salvation, these false gods too are treacherous. The pitfalls are well-known, so we needn't labour the details here.

Who is the lucky child? The one who feels secure, with parents who love them **and** coach them for future survival as a viable person. The well-raised child will not need to desperately cling to a **monolithic hypothesis** – or false god – in an attempt to find fulfilment.

Is there hope for me if I have not had secure love and caring guidance, and am inclined to cling to a one-eyed solution to fulfil my needs? The aim is to open my eyes to the rich ingredients of a full life. Perhaps to rebuild, to:

- 1) vow to bring wholeness back into my life
- 2) realise that my upbringing was not my own doing
- 3) know that I can have what lucky children have – if I dare
- 4) resolve never to hate or resent those who gave me a poor start in life, nor those who may have been given a better start in life
- 5) choose my friends carefully (one good one is better than seven bad ones)
- 6) avoid bitter thoughts and bitter people
- 7) behave honourably to all, so as to be trustworthy – and known as such
- 8) rejoice when good things happen; remember to include the unofficial, unexpected and unpublished blessings
- 9) think of the millions who are much worse off (when tempted towards self-pity)
- 10) initiate, receive and return love
- 11) read the stories of those who have found personal fulfilment, and keep oneself open to the opportunities that life offers
- 12) expect to blossom under such a regime

impose harsh controls on the populace, sincere but gullible followers (such as Stalin's "useful idiots" or WW2's Hitler Youth) who express their shock and disapproval, are likely to find themselves denounced, dispossessed, incarcerated or even executed.