

*Is there such a thing as "good" authority?*

CHARLES MELMAN

*Text taken from the book "Quelle autorité pour nos enfants?" (What authority for our children?) edited by Christian Rey, with Marika Bergès-Bouines, Sandrine Calmettes, Catherine Ferron, and Jean-Marie Forget, published by Éditions érès (2014) Transcript of a lecture given on December 8, 2012, in Chambéry during the conference "What is authority for children today?" The spoken style has been retained.*

We live in a time when the relationship with authority is no longer characterized by love, but by persecution. In what appears to be the usual, ordinary challenge to authority, it is not that authority weighs heavily, but that it does not provide everything. In other words, it is not perfect, it is not complete. It is only tolerated because of the deficit it imposes on everyone due to the subtraction of enjoyment that authority imposes by its very existence. It is quite obvious that our ambition, each and every one of us, is to be guided, to have the kind of authority that leads us and frees us from what is called freedom of choice—and even freedom itself. Even today, large segments of the populations that lived under totalitarian regimes remain nostalgic for that era, which protected them from any deliberation or hesitation about what was offered or proposed to them.

What we usually criticize about authority is not that it is excessive, but that it is incomplete, that it is not total. This is precisely what the substitution of the leader for the father figure is likely to resolve: indeed, what distinguishes the father from the leader is that the father (perhaps we need to be a little more precise in our use of these terms) only exercises power by delegation, delegation from an authority: this authority is that of the One at least. In other words, it is a power that is limited, restrained, and can only be exercised in accordance with the ethics imposed by this authority. This is also what we criticize the father for, after all: his power does not cover the entire field, and it is often the daughters who complain about this, feeling that they are being left out.

The difference between the father and the leader is that the leader has nothing else to restrain or limit him except efficiency, that is, the desire to see things through to the end, to the finish line; it is by this accomplishment that he will be evaluated, and this will be the mark of his success. This is therefore a change that concerns us. Due to my wanderings in the psychoanalytic milieu, which now go back more than half a century, I can say that I have always suffered from the misplaced nature of analysts' relationship with authority. I have never really understood this, since, more often than not, they did not detach themselves from the transference relationship with the group leader; possibly to highlight the unique merits of their own analyst, insofar as he was not recognized as he should have been in that group. It was quite common for hatred to replace love in this situation, with various consequences for the life of the group (splits, separations, etc.) in defense against something that seems very powerful to me: ultimately, maintaining this transference relationship with authority—whether in the form of love or hatred—protects against the true master. The true master is simply called death. This protects us, since it is the bulwark that allows us to attack x because life is not going well or is not going at all, because there is a flaw there, and at the same time, with this mode of attachment, the permanence of this "malaise in culture" is assured, as if we had to defend this

malaise in order to justify ourselves: at least we know who to blame. On the other hand, it is quite obvious that the recognition of this absolute authority that is death is eminently capable of giving life a different flavor; instead of making it obsolete or derisory, it makes it precious and desirable. To put the question another way: what could truly constitute for analysts—insofar as they follow Lacan's teaching—their master, that is, that to which they submit as the rule they apply to themselves, and outside of which they are elsewhere? It is a very simple rule, and an ethical rule: the term is rather poorly regarded today because it is rather overused, but nevertheless it is very valuable in this case, since what it means is that it is an ethic that recognizes the determining nature of the subjective and objective incidences that a human animal receives from the signifier. It's not complicated. Analysis is either that, or it's not: you have to know the subjective and objective impacts that a human animal receives in relation to the signifier. So, it's a master who is obviously not embodied by anyone, and with him we can behave as one normally behaves, whether mischievously or through desertion, it doesn't matter; but in any case, that's what ethics is: an authoritarian mistress. And if we have to look at things this way, these incidences that the subject receives in relation to the signifier are inscribed in discourses, and these discourses are imperative because the places they decide, that they dig, are eminently authoritarian. Try to find a place other than the one prescribed by the discourse... In other words, what is authoritarian here is not exclusive, reserved, at the top and on the left, for the master position: the others are, in a way, warned, they wait and impose themselves in an irreducible and definitive way. There are particular instances of this discourse that support other powers, of course, but which take their place based on this discourse: love, obviously; what could be more authoritarian for each of us than love for "the one"? What could be more authoritarian than desire? Nothing else. How can we not mention, on occasion, the authoritarian nature of weakness: what could be stronger and more authoritarian than weakness? That is to say, that which is capable of being supported by S2 and which, at the same time, is what commands the person who struts their stuff in S1—they must strut it the right way, in this case. We could develop a whole range of situations that are exemplary in their authoritarian nature, all of which can be deduced from these places ordered by speech and against which you can do nothing. You might then say: "But there is psychoanalytic discourse, and the ethics of psychoanalysts would be to uphold psychoanalytic discourse." Not quite, because what matters, even in this case, is not to be a non-dupe; of course, as Lacan points out, and it is no coincidence, there are those who are dupes of these discourses. There is no need to be non-dupes, those who cannot be fooled. But we must not confuse this discourse with what would be the ultimate reality, namely that it is never more than a discourse and that it is ordered in a circle. In other words, we must not think of ourselves as analysts in the same way that the other thought of himself as Napoleon—the analyst who has all the answers... To detach ourselves a little from this imagery, because intuitively, when we talk about authority, we set up and imagine the figure of the master: from our experience, we know that what commands us comes from the Other, that is, from a writing: it was written. What commands us in reality is what was written, with varying degrees of power depending on the culture: there are cultures where "it is written" seems truly irresistible, very difficult to overcome... to overcome what? To overcome awareness, dialectics, to pass into a word that refers to a whole that establishes the "not-all," in other words, that allows for division; what comes from the Other, from the real, and commands us, leaves us no division, it is absolutely totalitarian. It is conceivable that if this has a

therapeutic effect, as Freud said, it is to make it conscious, to bring it to consciousness - Lacan pointed out that it was only a matter of verbalizing it: but why does verbalizing what is written here have a therapeutic effect, if not to pass it into an order of speech that implies the "not-all," whereas in the field of the Other, it is obviously as an effect of what is supposed to be totality. In this relationship with the real, the relationship between the symbolic and the real—are the symbolic and the real knotted or unknotted?—a whole clinic of fabulous richness is organized: indeed, if they are knotted, what comes from the real has the character of being "other" (that is, without being the same, not being the stranger), whereas if they are unknotted, what comes from the Other is the stranger. This passage, this possible interplay between circulation on a Möbius strip or on a double-sided strip, is an absolutely major difference since, with the double-sided strip, the Other then becomes foreign, which leads to a fabulous clinical picture that also concerns the relationship to the body; I don't think we pay particular attention to the problem of hypochondria, yet that is precisely what hypochondria is: the body as foreign, which is therefore disturbing: "What does it want, what is it doing, and why isn't it working?" insofar as it is out of tune. This is also what a woman may experience in this alternation or alternative between being, or "other," that is, bound, before her place to the symbolic intervention of a father, or foreign, in other words, having nothing to do with this detestable and absurd world. In the realm of the "not-all," in this other place, that is, the possibility of oscillating between, on the one hand, the limit imposed by the phallus and, on the other hand, this other extreme open to the real, we can clearly see how a woman can thus alternate between what will be, on the one hand, the acceptance of the game of her femininity, or what we might call betrayal. I am raising this question of the relationship between the symbolic and the real insofar as it will become the matrix, the eminence of our relationship to the clinic, and of what moves us in our subjectivity. It so happens that it was in the psychoanalytic milieu that I discovered shame. What is shame, to be ashamed? I will offer you a definition: shame is when, belonging to a group of some kind, united by a set of ethics, it turns out that from within that group, people behave as if those ethics did not matter, did not exist. Those who find themselves (whether they like it or not) in the position of witnesses may experience what is at that moment a feeling of shame, not just humiliation, but shame. So shame is when, in a given group, there is a sudden breakdown of the ethics that hold that group together: since these ethics have no guardian, no police, no army, they are based solely on consensus, and once they are treated in this way, you can experience a feeling of shameful exposure, if I may say so. Insofar as ethics are ultimately based on "what we do not allow ourselves," what we cut out (we do not allow ourselves just anything), then the proposed breakdown of these ethics suddenly brings into the realm of reality what we have been able to give up because of these ethics, and what that gave up implied. To take an easy and illustrious example: when Moses comes down and sees his people gathered with his brother around the Golden Calf (in other words, ready to celebrate polytheism, with all the authorities present), he certainly feels a sense of shame. When we say, "Ah, there is authority," we seek to understand what authority is, just as we seek to understand beauty or will: "What is courage? What is authority?" This is our way, always linked to our dependence on language, which relies on being to defend itself against this absolute master, who is pure nothingness. So we have not made any decisive progress on these issues: currently, there are strange, very strange social problems—that is, the way in which the demands made by very small minorities become social problems on which society has to take a stand: "marriage for all,"

for example, is a generational issue; younger generations do not understand why this is even a question, which illustrates the validity of my theses in *L'homme sans gravité*. Does this mean that, at the same time, for structural reasons—defense of the father against the leader, etc.—we would be in favor of resuscitating the father (we'll put him on life support, he needs a little boost)? It is obvious that this resuscitation would be likely to last a very long time without allowing him to assert his influence and presence; it would be more like embalming. But the question is: is this compatible or not with the laws of speech, since that is what we recognize as laws specific to humanity? In discourse, there is no assignment of gender in terms of places; on the other hand, what there is in discourse is the dimension of otherness concerning the knot between the symbolic and the real, insofar as it is an essential dimension if we do not want to live in a definitively paranoid world, that is, in a space bordered by a frontier beyond which lies the enemy.

Does otherness necessarily imply gender distinction? Anyone familiar with same-sex couples knows that the fact that they are identical in terms of gender (there will often even be a rather crude representation in the imagination, we are not going to say male and female, but dominant and dominated, since it is in these terms, as in the animal world, that the question arises) does not prevent the otherness of the positions occupied by the couple. Ultimately, gender identity does not prevent the otherness of the positions occupied in the couple: we have never seen an egalitarian couple, it does not exist, even among monozygotic twins, because of the asymmetry introduced by speech. The dominant-dominated relationship is surely the completely stripped-down and reduced to the bare minimum aspect of what remains of discourse, the emaciated and desexualized discourse. What is the contemporary question about the change in the relationship with the father? It simply means that Oedipus has won; finally, he has won, he has succeeded. He killed the father, not to perpetuate him, but to erase all traces of him. So on that side, what remains as an anchor? Lacan says in the Rome report that the Oedipus complex is the subjective pivot that remains of the relationship of the speaking being, the speaking creature, to the signifier; it is the only thing he can know about his relationship to the order of the signifier: Oedipus, that is, the murder of the father and the incestuous tangent towards the mother. The only thing that can constitute it as a subject is what it can know of its relationship to the signifying organization that moves it. If there is no longer an Oedipus, indeed, we are witnessing it: the children who are brought to you are in this case, what remains as the subjective pivot of the speaking creature's relationship to the signifier? Only that, perhaps, that is to say, that there is the dominant and the dominated, perhaps only that remains, hence the demand for equality. But then, if all this is true, what should we conclude, since there is no answer prescribed by any supreme authority? How do you decide, or not: is it a matter of decidability? Is there no answer? Is there one? Here, at least, is a question that is eminently relevant to the ethical problem: there is no absolute master to answer it.