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The Ethics of Brainwashing

JOSEPH H. CREHAN, S.J.

IN ORDER to simplify this discussion, one may premise that leucotomy and surgical treatment of the brain is excluded from the strict definition of brainwashing, this being defined as the artificial removal of a man's settled principles of action and their replacement by others that are different and even opposite. The operative word in this definition is the adjective *artificial*, which implies that the means used whether chemical, electrical or sensitive (hypnosis or possibly telepathy), are somehow below the human level at which a human person has the right to conduct his affairs. Obviously there are many men who go into a Directors' meeting or a Governors' meeting with one idea quite firmly held and who come out having agreed to the opposite, and yet they cannot be said to have been brainwashed, since they have, as they say, "had it out" with their fellow Directors and have been convinced by a process of rational argument.

Techniques of brainwashing vary, but a brief summary of the kind of process followed may be given as a background for discussion. The prisoner, before questioning begins, is confined in various types of cell, in one of which the inmates have been beaten, in another of which they have confessed, while in a third they may have been waiting for months for something to happen. All this exposes the mind of the prisoner to strain and uncertainty about the future. After this he is removed to a tiny cell, scarcely big enough to contain him, there to await interrogation in silence and meditation. After some days he is surprised by the sudden opening of his door. A silent guard beckons him to follow, and he is escorted through

silent corridors on what seems an endless journey. At each corner the guard stops to listen, looks in both directions and then goes on. If he hears or sees any other person approaching, he pushes the prisoner round to face the wall until the others have passed. When the prisoner reaches the interrogation room the treatment varies very much. Questioning may be informal, as he sits in an arm-chair and is offered a cigarette. At another time he may be beaten until he loses consciousness, revived with cold water, and then beaten again. If his confession is not satisfactory, he is removed back to the cells for further softening-up. Back in his cell he will be waked up at any time of the night, or called out for questioning just as he has begun to eat the food provided for him. He may be deprived of all possibility of exercise or of sleep by a team of questioners who take over from the other until he is exhausted. Each questioner may begin all over again without reference to the answers given to his predecessors. If the prisoner stays awake long enough during this process, he will begin to suffer hallucinations, thinking that there are insects crawling over him or rats running about the floor. He will finally confess from sheer physical weakness.

If in the course of his interrogations the prisoner, without giving away any vital matter, lets slip some clue or some slight admission, his questioners will stick at this point and use it to drag more out of him, taunting him with it as if it were the whole of the matter. When (and if) he has eventually confessed, there will set in a reaction of remorse and self-reproach, and during this period the positive build-up will start. He will

be told that he is now on the side of his questioners and their revolution or whatever it may be. He will be encouraged to throw in his lot with them completely, as his former friends will now loath him and a new start will become necessary. A certain easing of his conditions will go with this, so that the returning sense of euphoria will brace him to make his choice effective and to reconcile him with what is being asked of him. This is the most delicate part of the whole job and only the most skilled interrogators will be used to put before him the ideals such as they may be of the new movement he is being asked to join and to outline for him his new path. They may say to him that they have been through a similar process themselves or may indicate that the whole world is coming over to their side, as an encouragement to him.

The chemical and electrical aids may be interposed in the process of questioning at any point where a hold-up has occurred. It is obviously not required in the present context that the working of sodium pentothal and sodium amytal should be described or the manner in which shock-treatment can alter the structure of memory. Attack may be made on the sense-apparatus by music or rhythm of a sort. In Evelyn Waugh's horror novel he makes Pinfold say: "The three-eight rhythm. The Gestapo discovered it independently. They used to play it in the cells. It drove the prisoners mad. Yes: thirty-six hours did for anyone. Twelve was enough for most. They could stand any torture but that. It drove them mad, raving mad, stark staring mad. The Russians use it now. The Hungarians do it best." In the coffee, drugs; in the air, sounds, but after all it is the psychological mechanism of human choice that has to be altered at the last.

The human will seems to operate

on two planes. These were distinguished by medieval theologians as *intentio* and *electio*, and may be interpreted as the plane of ideals and the plane of choice. It is in the light of his ideals that a man makes his day-to-day choices. It is not quite a matter of the mind making up a moral syllogism with the major premise serving as ideal and the minor premise providing the factual information which will lead to the immediate making of a choice, but rather that the ideals are settled principles resting in the mind which enter into ordinary choices, not perhaps singly but as a complex group. St. Thomas indeed thought that it was the duty of a man on coming to the use of reason to make his fundamental decision, to seek God or to turn away from Him, thus making sure that all his subsequent choices would be informed either by a principle of good or of evil. Some theologians still hold this view but it is not by any means universal. It may be that a moment comes to most people when they can say that they came to a realisation of what the existence of God should mean to them, but to say that this was at the moment of their coming to an age when they could first make a rational choice would not seem true to experience.

The structure of the *Spiritual Exercises* of St. Ignatius is also on this pattern. A man is encouraged to develop an ideal of doing something for Christ, and is then brought up against the question: "What have I done for Christ? What am I doing for Christ?", and the immediate choices are then to be made in the light of the ideal. In the discussion which followed the reading of this paper, the point was raised that to some minds the making of a retreat by a Catholic was more than submitting oneself to brainwashing. It is true that in going through the *Spiritual Exercises*, one is trying

to improve one's settled ideals so that subsequent choices may be more pleasing to God, but the means by which one effects that improvement bear no comparison with the technique of brainwashing. After their experience in Korea, when one-third of their soldiers who were taken prisoner were suspected of having gone over to the Communists, the American Army evolved a technique of inculcating their men with the ideal: "I am an American fighting man," and hope that in future emergencies that will prevent similar breakdowns. Unless such an ideal is rationally presented to the mind and adequately motivated, it would not seem to have much efficacy.

At this point one must advert to the concept of Original Sin. The framing of an ideal has to be in accordance with human nature, but it has also to be able to correct the bias to which human nature is shown to the subject. Thus in the *Spiritual Exercises* a man has to be encouraged to overcome himself in order to find the will of God, to find what he can do for Christ. In the political sphere there may be a similar attempt to bring a man to overcome his self-interest in order to work for the good of the party or of a movement, but in the nature of things such appeals are not so firmly based in reality. It is interesting to note that members of the Communist party are suspended for private immoralities that are notorious. It may be that this is a security measure, to avoid having party-members who are open to blackmail, but it may also be an admission that if they are not somehow integrated characters—even if integrated on wrong lines—they are of no use.

When a man has made it his chief end in life to get more strong drink, he does not need much manipulation to be perfectly brainwashed. If his drink supply is cut off, he will come to terms at once. The interrogators, as

soon as they discover this *intentio* in the man, know what they have to do, and all is over. If, like the late MacKenzie King, in Canada, their great aim in life is to succeed in communicating with the dead by means of Spiritualism, the brainwashing technique would have to be much more subtle. It might be risky to try to introduce in the man a belief that he was communicating with the dead and that they were telling him to join the Party and work for it, since his credulity might not go so far. These examples will, however, show that once a settled principle of action has been discovered, the man is open to manipulation in terms of that principle. If new principles have to be supplied to him, then he will need the whole treatment of breaking down and building up.

The plain moral question involved in brainwashing is this: "How far is it right to use outside influences to change a man's *intentio*? Can one ever rightly force an individual to be free? Can one use such a technique to improve a criminal during his imprisonment? In general one may answer that the State is there simply to provide the conditions that favour freedom and that help a man towards happiness and the greater knowledge of God; it has not the right to use human persons as if they were things. One may see this by the fearsome example of what was recently proposed by a correspondent in the *Eugenics Review*, that the State should administer to the whole population (by adulterating some staple food) the essential elements of the sterilizing pill and then allow some, for reasons and under license, the use of an antidote which would make them once again capable of bearing children and begetting them. The moral sense is revolted by such a proposal, but it is well to think out why this should be so.

There has to be made a distinction

between rational argument and what may for the want of a better word be called suasion. It is wrong for the State, or any of its organs, to act as a hidden persuader, and so to condition the citizens that they produce an almost automatic reaction of consent to a State directive. Citizens are not to be equated with Pavlov's dogs. Argument is fair; conditioning is not. St. Thomas More put all this very clearly in his *Utopia* where he was sketching a policy which had the full use of reason but as yet no light of revelation to help it. His ideas may be paraphrased thus:

King Utopus decreed that each one could follow what religion he pleased, and he might thus far try to persuade others to join him, that he should bring forward reasons to support his religion with peace and restraint, not striving to tear other religions to bits if he failed to persuade men to his own, not using any force at all and not stooping to abusive words. Any who offend in this particular the Utopians punish with exile or with enslavement. The intention of King Utopus was not only to preserve peace, but also he had in view the good of religion itself. He would make no hasty decision in such a matter . . . One thing was clear to him, that to exact from others by force, or threat of force, adherence to what one believed oneself was quite stupid and arrogant. He realised that the truth would make its own way and eventually come to the fore by its own power, if all was ruled by reason and moderation, but that if force and tumult prevailed the worst types of men, being always the most forward, would crush the most holy and the best religion under their own load of idle superstitions. He

therefore left this matter an open question and left each man entirely free to decide what to believe. He made only this provision, to be enforced with great strictness, that no one should so far fall away from the dignity of human nature as to believe that the soul dies with the body or that the world is ruled by chance without any Providence from God. One who fails in this way they do not count in Utopia as a man. He is given no honours and is not admitted to any public office . . . Still, they do not punish him nor compel him by force to conceal his opinion. He is forbidden to argue in favour of his opinion before the multitude, but in the presence of the priests and other grave men he is not only allowed but even encouraged to do so, for they trust that reason will finally dispel that foolish prejudice. Others there are, and these are not a few, on whom there is no prohibition, and these are they who hold that the souls of animals are likewise immortal, though not destined for the happiness that is ours nor to be compared with them in dignity.

Utopia leaves us then with the residual question: Granted that it is wrong to use suasion on a man in place of reason, when it is desired to change his course of action, does there ever come a time (as *Utopia* implies) when a man has so far sunk below the rational level and the dignity of man as to be exempt from this moral prohibition? One may also be moved to wonder what, if anything, the modern State is doing about fostering in its citizens a regard for the immortality of the soul and the Providence of God, which are the two essential presuppositions of civic life?

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