

Alcoholism, Cybernetics and Unconquerable Souls: The 'self' and Gregory Bateson

If there is one social scientist whose mind humbles me and whose courage and example in defying social science orthodoxies spurred me to write this book, it is Gregory Bateson. Yet he remains stubbornly high on the abstraction ladder most of the time, dealing largely with errors of scientific conception, although his critiques suggest devastating consequences. At the risk of misinterpreting the extraordinary subtlety of Bateson's thought, I shall try to make the practical implications of his work clear. My flawed renderings should at least encourage greater public attention. Time could be running out.

I begin with Bateson's views on alcoholism, perhaps the most down-to-earth of his writings. I will warn readers when I start to interpret. For Bateson the alcoholic is afflicted less by drunkenness than by sobriety from which drinking is a temporary release, the escape from an insane premise – the belief that he must be stronger than his condition, that he possesses an 'unconquerable soul' embattled with the Bottle. It is the error of Descartes (see Map 6) that the mind must control the body.

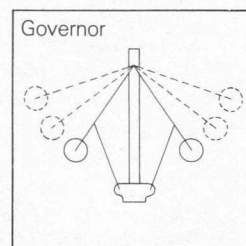
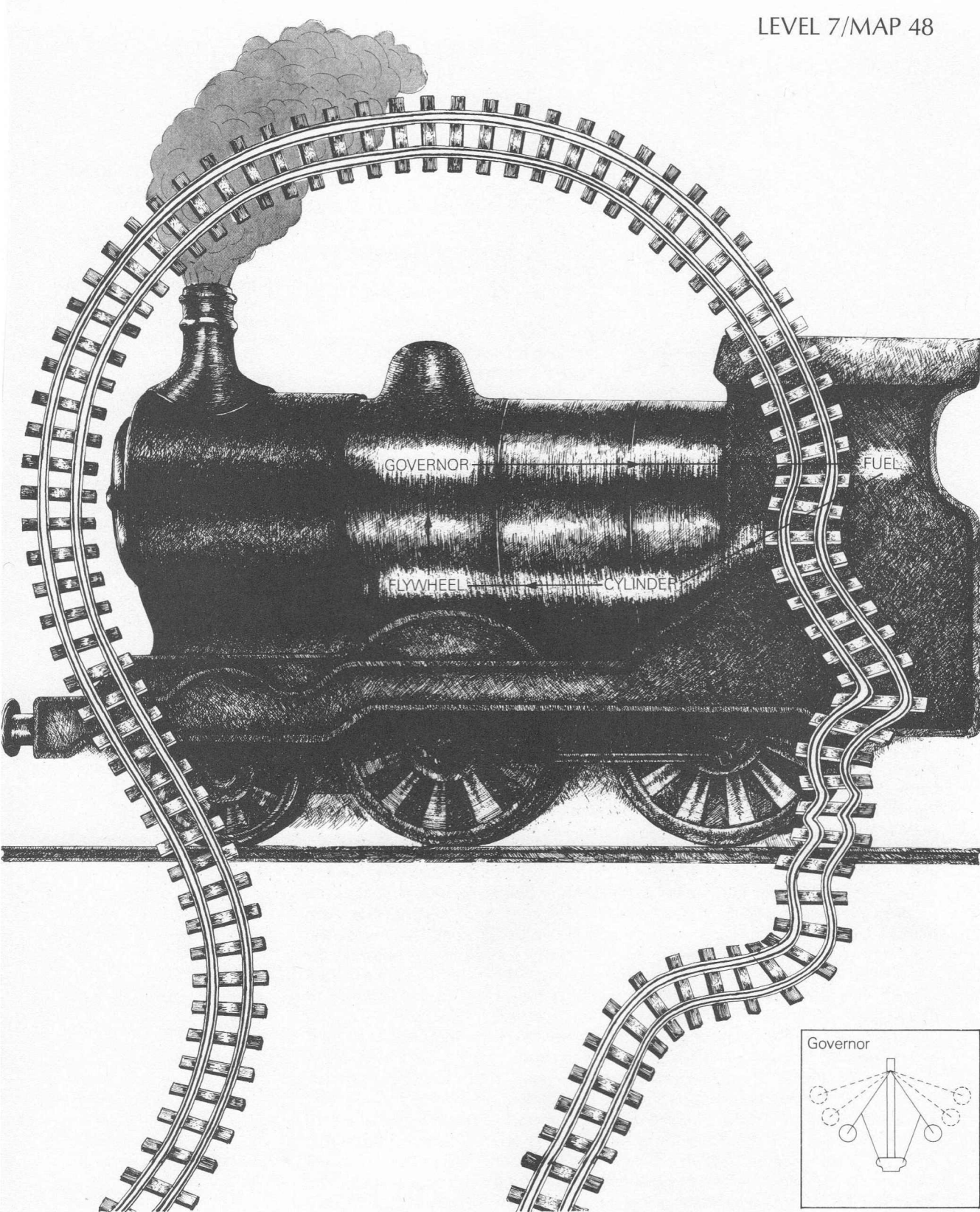
To understand this error, we need first to study Bateson's cybernetic conception of mind. An old-fashioned steam locomotive makes a useful analogy. At the top of the map opposite, the governor (B) consists of two balls attached to a rotating centre shaft. The faster the train goes the faster the shaft turns the higher the balls spin in a centrifugal pattern. The height of the balls progressively reduces the fuel (C) intake, which slows the cylinder (D), which slows the flywheel (A) moving the engine, which slows the turning shaft (B), which causes the balls to descend, which increases the fuel (C). What we have, in short, is a self-correcting system of mutual restraints which keeps the train at constant speed; if any one part of the circuit increases, a decrease in the corresponding part will modulate it, and vice versa. But suppose someone tampers with the governor. Now instead of the high speed of the rotating balls decreasing the fuel supply, it increases it, which increases the speed of the cylinder shaft, the flywheel and soon the train goes into uncontrolled 'runaway' or 'oscillation'. The driver is helpless. In fact, the word governor is a misnomer. No single part of the circuit governs any other part. Its 'intelligence' is in the entire circuit of (normally) self-correcting, homeostatic elements. The error of believing that the governor governs is analogous to the alcoholics belief that his 'will power' should be in charge. He has reified the concept of self and is attempting to regulate an entire cybernetic system by increasing the 'strength' and the 'power' of that one part. But, of course, as you increase the 'strength' of the governor's rotation you increase 'the fuel supply', in this case alcohol. The two run away together!

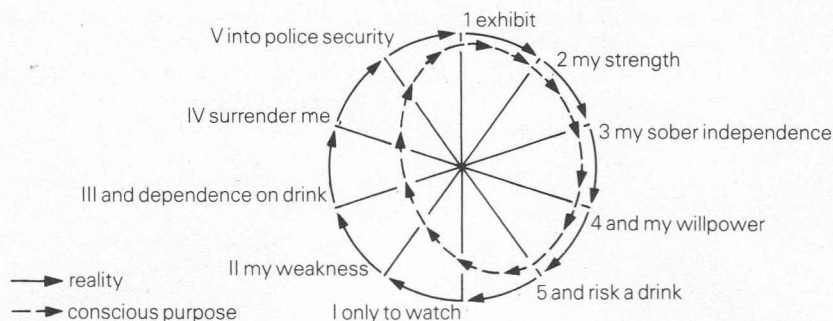
So far I have followed Bateson exactly, but the locomotive analogy is limited and I would like to convert it into the semantic elements of a value system. Bateson provides a lot of help here but stops short of actually giving us one. He stresses that values have a binary structure, power-surrender, exhibitionism-spectatorship are his examples. What these words transmit is information and this is 'news of differences'. The sentence, 'My aunt is angry with me because of the letter she did not receive', illustrates the fact that 'nothing', because it is different from a letter, can constitute a trigger for anger. There is no billiard ball striking another and transmitting energy in the mind, only differences which can be as insubstantial in their mass or force as zero correspondence.

What then are the values held by the alcoholic that lead to runaway? Bateson suggests a pride in the self and its will power, not a pride of accomplishment, not 'I succeeded' but 'I can', 'I can risk a drink, stay sober', and like any other boast it needs its challenge, the constant presence of drinks and drinking, an alcoholic polarization. 'Let me now interpret Bateson by attempting to make a circuit of these valuing processes:

Gregory Bateson sees the mind in terms of a cybernetic system, including the body and the environment, similar in some respects to that of an old-fashioned steam locomotive. The flywheel (A), which carries the engine's load at a particular speed, turns the shaft of the governor (B) making the two balls spin upwards and outwards centrifugally. The higher these balls spin the less fuel (C) is released, which slows the action of the cylinder (D), which slows the flywheel (A), which by lowering the spinning governor releases more fuel, which, of course, quickens the entire circuit. In short, this is a self-correcting system in which the increase (or decrease) in the speed of any one part causes another part to restrain (or enhance) it. However, if these mutual restraints break down the system goes into oscillation or runaway.

This analogy provides a useful illustration for alcoholism. The problem with many alcoholics is that they see themselves in terms of a Beleaguered Self doing battle with the Bottle, of Will Power fighting against Weakness (which they locate outside their conscious purposes). But just as you cannot control a steam engine by merely increasing the speed of the governor, so you cannot balance your mind by maximizing will power. The notion that governor and fuel are opposed triggers the escalation of both so that the entire circuit breaks out of mutual restraints. To stabilize the situation the cybernetic system must be re-established, all parts of the loop must be accepted, and an ecology of mind established.





The binary values and 'alcoholic polarization' involved are: 1-I exhibitionism – spectatorship, 2-II strength – weakness, 3-III sober independence – drink dependence, 4-IV will power–surrender, 5-V risk–security. The individual has given positive evaluation and included within his concept of a conscious, willing self: exhibition, strength, sobriety, independence, will power and risk. He has given negative evaluation and excluded from the concept of his own mind and self: spectatorship, weakness, dependence, surrender and security. Indeed, so unconscious and ego-alien are values I to V, that I have drawn a 'short-circuit' arrow that severs them from the conscious values 1 to 5. The alcoholic treats these cut-offs of repressed values as something happening to him, visitations by the Bottle, or betrayal by his own emotions of his 'strength of mind'. Typically we attribute to our bodies all ideas peripheral to consciousness, so that 'the spirit is willing but the flesh is weak'. If, to quote Pascal, 'the heart has its own reasons', this is because 'heart' is a part of the cybernetics of mind which we have displaced beyond the narrow confines of conscious purpose. It is perilous to try to control the circle I to V by manipulating just the conscious arc 1 to 5. The unit of survival is the organism plus the environment; and mind is as much in the environment, in the surrender produced by drinking and in the security provided by the police, as it is within the skull or skin. When a blind man taps his way down the path where is his 'mind'? It is in the tip of his cane and in the differences discovered between curb and path in addition to his brain.

The fallacy of 'encapsulated man', as Joseph Royce has called it, is responsible for more pathologies than just alcoholism. At bottom is a total misapprehension of where the trouble lies. Our materialist society and science tries to locate the problem in a thing, in a 'bad value', in 'drink', in 'weakness', or in 'dependence'. As in Map 43, we use linear yardsticks of virtue that make strength 'good' and weakness 'bad' and we split-off this badness from us. But suppose 'weakness' or 'security', are not in themselves pathological but that the pathology lies in the severance of their relationships with their complementary values, 'strength' exclusive of 'weakness' or 'risk' exclusive of 'security'. Once such continua become split they continue to feed around in excitation while ceasing to contain or constrain one another (see margin).

Bateson calls this process of splitting *schismogenesis*, literally 'a growing split in the structure of ideas'. He identifies two varieties, symmetrical and complementary. Symmetrical schismogenesis starts with the matching of drink for drink, 'strength' for 'strength', 'risk' for 'risk' between two or more persons. The game escalates until the drinkers come full circle into the complementary phase in which exaggerated 'strength' is matched by total weakness and collapse, and 'will power' by abject surrender to drunkenness. The consequence of this is that the alcoholic redoubles his conscious determination to remain sober. There, he fell off the wagon again! Could

Out of the night that covers me
Black as the Pit from pole to pole
I thank whatever gods may be
For my unconquerable soul . . .
Under the bludgeonings of

chance
My head is bloody, but unbowed

It matters not how strait the gate,
How charged with punishments
the scroll,
I am the master of my fate;
I am the captain of my soul.

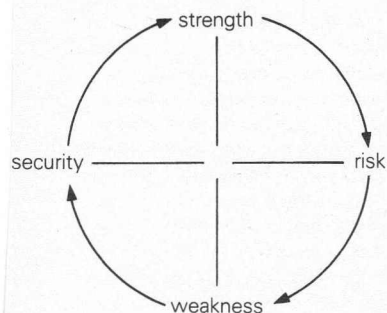
'Invictus' William Ernest Henley

'Consider a man felling a tree
with an axe. Each stroke of the
axe is modified or corrected,
according to the shape of cut face
of the tree left by the previous
stroke. This self-corrective (ie
mental) process is brought
about by a total system,
tree–eyes–brain–muscles–axe–
stroke–tree that has the
characteristics of immanent
mind.'

'Steps to an Ecology of Mind'
Gregory Bateson

'God grant us the serenity to
accept the things we cannot
change, courage to change the
things we can, and wisdom to
know the difference.'

The Serenity Prayer of Alcoholics
Anonymous



there be a stranger argument for 'will power' and 'strength of character'? And so the governor waves its balls and the fuel intake increases as the system goes into mounting oscillation between extremes and runs away. Most attempts to help the alcoholic at this stage will founder on his dualism. Sympathize and succour him and he suffers revulsion at his 'weakness'. Attack, abuse or challenge him and he postures the more.

Most professional psychologists agree, and it is a humbling admission, that the best hope for many alcoholics is the amateur self-help organization Alcoholics Anonymous. Its first prescription is in its title, anonymity for the overmighty self. This is not chiefly for self-protection but to put the overall principles of ecology above personality. AA prescribes an 'embrace' of the intoxicated values but without intoxication. It says, 'You are powerless against alcohol and must come to believe in a power greater than yourself'. This power is God, but a very personal God 'as you understand him to be'. The individual is a part of that power and must learn to live in harmony with it.

It may be impossible to help the alcoholic until he 'hits bottom' and unstabilizes his system so that the symmetrical pattern is broken, along with the conception of a singular selfhood subduing the earth. The surrender of the self, in which 'obsessions of the mind' heal their split with 'allergies of the body', is a spiritual experience. To those not yet ready to surrender AA says, 'Go and do some controlled drinking.' This helps the subject to prove to himself, that one drink is usually enough to make the disowned side of the cybernetic loop lash back and reclaim him. 'Once an alcoholic always an alcoholic', says AA. Not because this is literally true, it isn't, but because the conception of the self must expand permanently to incorporate alcoholic experience. The relationship between the individual and his God acknowledges a ground of being extending beyond the known self (see Map 5). This is paralleled by the 'buddy system', wherein each member may call upon and be called by a friend in need, so a new bond with the community is established. Much as wine symbolizes communion, the alcoholic has taken the symbol for the reality and uses drinking as a substitute for the relaxation, fusion, surrender and security of deep personal relationships.

Finally, we should note that splitting and oscillation can polarize many different kinds of value system and is by no means confined to the *machismo* syndromes detailed here. The 'serenity prayer' of AA is a hymn to the ecology of mind, to constant movement between fused values – risk and security, power and surrender, dependence and independence – to heal the splits between them and develop all synergistically.

MAP REFERENCES

Alcoholism, 50, 56; Cartesian dualism, 6–8; Conscious purpose, 50, 55–6, 60; Ecology of mind, 3, 47, 50, 55, 58–60; Oscillation, 14, 16; Runaway, 22; Schismogenesis, 47, 49–51, 56–60.