

***David Bohm:
The Problem and the Paradox***

Thinking and feeling is dominated, through and through,
by a set of self-contradictory demands.

As long as a paradox is treated as a problem, it can never be dissolved.

Wherever one turns today, one finds people talking about a vast range of problems of every kind, social, political, economic, personal, psychological, etc. Most of these problems not only seem to be insoluble, but also tend to give rise to further problems. These go on proliferating indefinitely, eventually leading on toward disorders of world-wide scope, such as pollution, over-population, danger of destruction of the planetary balance of nature as well as, of course, danger of destruction of civilization in a nuclear war. On contemplating this general situation, one may even sometimes have a sense of being confronted by difficulties beyond the possibility of resolution by human intelligence and co-operative endeavour.

In this mass of contradiction and confusion, one finds a very curious common denominator; i.e. that everyone appears to agree that what is actually confronting us is a set of problems. Generally speaking, one does not find that people have considered the question of whether the word 'problem', with all that it signifies, provides an adequate description of what is going wrong in human affairs. Yet, if one goes into the meaning of the word, one can see good reason to raise such a question, and to suspect that the attempt to treat our current difficulties as 'problems' may be one of the more important factors preventing these difficulties from being properly brought to an end.

The root of 'problem' is a Greek word whose meaning is 'to put forward'. Indeed, this is the essential significance of the word, i.e. to put forward for discussion or questioning an idea that is suggested toward the resolution of certain difficulties or inadequacies. Thus, if one needs to reach a certain destination, one may suggest taking a train, and one can discuss the problem of meeting the train on time, paying for the ticket, etc. Similarly, sailing ships were seen to be a slow and unreliable means of transport, and so men put forth the idea of driving ships by steam, thus giving rise to the problem of how to realise this idea technically and to carry it out practically. More generally, it is clear that a large part of our practical and technical activities are centred on work aimed at solving a wide range of such problems.

However, when one puts forth an idea in the form of a problem, there are certain largely tacit and implicit presuppositions which must be satisfied if the activity is to make sense. Among these is, of course, the assumption that the questions raised are rational and free of contradiction. Sometimes, without our noticing it, we accept absurd problems with false or selfcontradictory presuppositions. In the practical and technical realm, however, we can usually sooner or later detect that our question is absurd, and we then drop the 'problem' as meaningless. Thus, for a long time, people sought to invent a machine capable of perpetual motion, but with the development of scientific understanding it became clear that this would be in contradiction of the basic laws of physics, and so the search for such a machine has ceased.

All of this is fairly clear in the practical and technical domain. But now, what is to be done when one goes on to consider psychological problems and problems of human relationship? Does it make sense to formulate problems of such a kind? Or is this domain not one in which the presuppositions behind the questions put forth for discussion are false, self-contradictory, and absurd?

Consider, for example, a man who suddenly realised that he was very susceptible to flattery. He might well put forth the idea that he ought to be immune to flattery, and then he would of course have the problem of overcoming his tendency to 'fall' for anyone who told him how wonderful a person he was. It takes only a little consideration, however, to see that this 'problem' is based on absurd presuppositions. For example, the origin of the wish to be flattered is often a deep sense of being inadequate, which is so painful that awareness of its very existence is largely suppressed, except for certain moments in which criticisms or some other indications of a similar nature momentarily call attention to this very unpleasant feeling. As soon as someone comes along and tells such a person that, after all, he is good, capable, wise, beautiful, etc., then the deadening sense of suppressed pain disappears, to be replaced by a buoyant feeling of pleasure and well-being. Along with this goes a tendency to believe that he is being told the truth: for otherwise, of course, there would be no such release. In order to 'defend' himself from the 'danger' of discovering that it is not the truth, such a person is then ready to believe all that he is told by the other person, and thus, as is well known, he opens himself to the possibility of being taken advantage of in countless ways.

In essence, what goes wrong in flattery is a subtle kind of self-deception. If such a person were then to put forth 'the problem' of how he can stop deceiving himself, the absurdity of this procedure would become self-evident. For it is clear that even if he tries hard and makes an effort to overcome his tendency to self-deception, this very effort will be infected with the wish for a pleasurable release from pain that is at the origin of the whole tendency, in the first place. So he will almost certainly deceive himself about the question of whether he has overcome self-deception or not.

More generally, one can say that when something goes wrong psychologically, it is confusing to describe the resulting situation as a 'problem'. Rather, it would be better to say that one was confronted by a paradox. In the case of the man who is susceptible to flattery, the paradox is that he apparently knows and understands the absolute need to be honest with oneself and yet he feels an even stronger 'need' to deceive himself when this helps to release him from an unbearable sense of inadequacy and to substitute instead a sense of inward rightness and well-being. What is called for in such a case is not some procedure that 'solves his problem'. Rather, it is to pause and to give attention to the fact that his thinking and feeling is dominated, through and through, by a set of selfcontradictory demands or 'needs' so that as long as such thinking and feeling prevail, there is no way to put things right. It takes a great deal of energy and seriousness to 'stay with' an awareness of this fact, rather than to 'escape' by allowing the mind to dart into some other subject, or otherwise lose awareness of the actual state of affairs. Such attention, going immensely beyond what is merely verbal or intellectual, can actually bring the root of the paradox into

awareness, and thus the paradox dissolves when its nullity and absurdity are clearly seen, felt and understood.

It has to be emphasised, however, that as long as a paradox is treated as a problem, it can never be dissolved. On the contrary, the ‘problem’ can do nothing but grow and proliferate in ever increasing confusion. For it is an essential feature of thought that once the mind accepts a problem, then it is appropriate for the brain to keep on working until it finds a solution. This feature is indeed necessary for proper rational thinking. Thus, if a person were confronted by a real problem (e.g, the need to obtain food) and dropped it before it was adequately solved, the result could be disastrous. In any case, such a mode of operation would indicate an unhealthy flightiness or lack of seriousness. On the other hand, if the mind treats a paradox as if it were a real problem, then, since the paradox has no ‘solution’, the mind is caught in the paradox forever. Each apparent solution is found to be inadequate, and only leads on to new questions of a yet more muddled nature. Thus, a paradox which has taken root early in life (e.g., that arising out of a situation in which a child is made to feel a sense of inadequacy) may continue for the whole of a person’s life, always changing in detail, growing more and more confused, but remaining the same in essence. And when the person becomes aware of the disorder in his mind, but describes this disorder as a problem, then this very step makes the activity around the paradox both more intense and more confused. Clearly, then, it is important to see the difference between a problem and a paradox, and to respond to each of these in a way that is appropriate to it.

This distinction is important, not only psychologically for the individual, but also for human relationships, and ultimately for establishing a proper order of society. Thus, one can see that it is wrong to describe a breakdown in human relationships as a problem. For example, it is now widely found that parents and children cannot communicate freely and easily. The paradox is that all concerned seem to understand their common humanity and mutual dependence, which imply the need to be open to each other, while nevertheless each person feels that his own particular 'needs' are being ignored or rejected by the other, so that he is 'hurt' and reacts with a 'defence mechanism' preventing him from really listening to what the other person means to say.

Excerpt from an article by David Bohm
as published in a Bulletin of the Krishnamurti Foundation Trust.