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Group Rule

In the looking-glass world Alice meets the boyish twins Tweedledum and Tweedledee. What they stand for in Lewis Carroll's whimsically logical representation of reality—the playoff between similarity and difference—prompted me to begin a book for teachers celebrating the twins' duel.

> Like their names, they resemble each other to a point and then diverge. Tweedledum and Tweedledee represent all of us. We are similar in a general way and different in particular ways. And our differences, like theirs, emerge from the similarity itself. Only things that share a common origin can diverge. Our common humanity is like white light that, passing through the prism of heredity and experience, separates itself into the colors of individual variation. Out of one, many.
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> But at any time, the possibility remains of emphasizing the similarity and becoming one again. Tweedledum and Tweedledee *agreed* to have a battle, but when a "monstrous crow" flew down and frightened them, "they quite forgot their quarrel." Pushed to essentials, we forget our differences. The democratic slogan *e pluribus unum* emphasizes this reversal toward similarity. Out of many, one. We have the choice to stress similarity and unity or difference and multiplicity. Likeness and unlikeness are in the eye of the beholder and hence at the center of conceiving and verbalizing.[1]

The conceptual option people play in deciding what shall be like and unlike determines what or whom we identify with. How do people classify themselves? How do we classify others? And of course self-classification and self-concept form a circle. Examining the process of identification allows us to relate people's logic to their emotions, to detect the one buried in the other. Though classifying and abstracting belong to logic, they serve passions and build on emotional premises inherited from a community or acquired from early experiences. Intelligence alone does not prevent or resolve conflict and can, indeed, rationalize it endlessly.

At the same time that we explore the process of identifying, let's attempt to find some common denominator in the objections made to the text-

books. Surely, some unity of much significance to us all threads through and ties together the diverse vociferations, views, and values we have heard in preceding chapters. Some connections are easy to make, as between chauvinism and militarism, or authoritarianism and absolutism, and I have already suggested some. But what about racism and phonics? Or anti-Communism and antifeminism? Fundamentalism and "invasion of privacy"?

We have on our hands a mixed bag indeed, considered at one level, at face value, but since the movement that includes such censorship manifests extraordinary coherence—as in the New Right and Pro-Family campaigns—we can assume that at some level all these Dums and Dees stem from a common Tweedle. These forces, after all, are acting powerfully on whole states and nations today, in both Christendom and Islam. But I will refer to factions only to anchor discussion in today's realities; it would be singularly inappropriate to examine conflict so as to increase it. We are not so concerned with particular groups as with phenomena in everybody.

People classify themselves by how broadly or narrowly they identify. Imagine various possible identities scaled by broadening scope: family, neighborhood, local club, sports team, profession, ethnic group, social class, region, race, church, country, language, and so on to the largest conceivable identities such as the whole of humanity, "citizen of the universe," all living things, and finally, cosmos or entire creation. Clearly, the abstractive faculty plays a part in one's ability or inclination to identify beyond the local and tangible, that is, with entities well extended over time and space and very different from oneself—or at any rate from one's obvious manifestation.

Different identities set up conflict. The narrower one's identity the less it overlaps with others', includes others, and the more possibility therefore of conflict. Not many people in the world belong to my street gang or wear my school tie; more belong to my Protestant sect or my income bracket or level of education, but not nearly enough. But so what?—I can be a "Mercedes owner" and "a William and Mary alumnus" and a member of the Southwestern Abernathy County Hibernian Senior Citizens Rose Growing and Archery Club and still not conflict with other Americans or human beings. This may very well be true, depending on how one wears this identity psychologically. If broader identities subsume more concrete ones in a person—I am an Earthling or child of God *before* I am an American or Christian—then the broader identification should not allow conflict between the lesser.

The crux of the matter, then, lies with a person's *top* identification and with the strength of it. How many things does a person identify with? How far beyond the individual's locale and concrete circumstances do these go? And what is the priority of them among broader and narrower?

Probably no one ever deliberately establishes a system of identities, but to understand the more hidden sources of conflict underlying obvious "conflicts of interest," such as economic competition, territorial dispute, and choice of school books for children, we have to clarify the identity relations that explain why people allow lesser differences to overshadow the more important similarities, to the point that everyone loses. Rationally, the collaboration gained by subordinating lesser loyalties to truly universal needs would more nearly permit everyone to gain whatever the material competition and disputes are about.

The logic of classification always requires exclusion as well as inclusion: the class of A implies another class of Non-A. Hence the name-calling of "Un-American" and "Un-Christian." Constantly calling attention to Non-A consolidates the identity of A. This is why rulers of all epochs have inveighed against and attacked other countries, races, or sects. Find a foreign enemy and you can always gloss over domestic problems and rally unity around the flag. So a conspiracy theory naturally accompanies divisive emphasis on concrete identities. Anti-Communism goes hand in hand with Americanism, as necessary as Non-A to A.

Because enemies help us to define and reiterate who we are, the more vigorous the action taken against them the surer we cinch our limited identity. Hence militarism goes with patriotism. If the enemy also builds character structure on narrow identities, then of course they may indeed really threaten us, partly from doing the same thing we're doing and partly from reacting to our menaces. Since males usually run government, a factor of sexual identity plays in here too; brandishing weapons and talking tough are macho acts to affirm virility. The case made for militarism and pugnacity on grounds of defense really glances off the truth, which is the psychological need for identity maintenance that causes groups to threaten each other in the first place.

Within this framework pacifists must be excoriated and branded "unpatriotic." Saluting the flag each morning in school is necessary to ensure that children grow up defining themselves as members of the identity group. Emphasizing *membership* naturally leads to a desire for a school dress code—as close to a uniform as you can get in democratic public schools—and for other uniformizing conditions such as a stereotyping curriculum that will submerge the individual in the group and imprint children so that they all know and think the same identity-limited things. This makes the identification take hold and work far better than if cohesion is jeopardized through variant dress and thought. The rule is an ancient one from primitive times.

Knowledge authorities go with group identities. In fact one tends toward one or another authority and identity according to the stage of consciousness one has attained. Psychologists may like to speak of an

"authoritarian character," but everyone of us is authoritarian in the sense that we have something or someone that authorizes our knowledge, however unconventional or personal. We may not follow a traditional, collective, centralized, external authority such as the "authoritarian" personality pledges strict obedience to, but we put our faith in *some* source.

An authority is one's source of knowledge and hence of guidance in action, since action depends at least partly on one's knowledge, and since any source deserving faith for knowledge deserves it for conduct as well. Do you believe scientific evidence, peer lore, ancient wisdom, your own observations, scholarly research, visions, newspapers and popular books, sacred scriptures, eminent contemporaries, logical deduction, auguries and card readings, intuition, or something else? The ways people differ in where they put their faith, what knowledge authority they believe in, may be the most important human variation we can become aware of, because such variation relates directly to stages in evolution of consciousness, which progress from a sort of group mind to individually acquired understanding.

Analyzing the identifying process in terms of classification and knowledge structures risks making it seem more logical and intellectual than it is. Far from it of course. This is gut stuff. The ratiocination comes afterward, as rationalization. First comes the identifying. In fact, we no doubt first learn to classify from feeling and observing social separations. This starts when we become conscious of ourselves as separate from the surroundings—me from other—and proceeds to behavioral learning of the differences between one family and another, between neighborhoods, and eventually between larger communities and countries with all their myriad enclaves and subdivisions. Very early, children become sensitized, from a million clues of action and speech, to social classifications in action. Indeed, these separations then serve as prototypes for intellectual distinctions. Identifications are made before the development of reason—which is part of my point—and when reason does become a conscious faculty, it is put into the service of maintaining a system of classification and identification generated emotionally and unconsciously.

Inasmuch as agnosis begins in childhood, it results fundamentally from parents' holding on to their children, whereas freedom of mind results from parents' releasing their children. More specifically, fearful techniques of child-rearing combine with exaggerated reverence for hearth and ethos to tie the child emotionally within a very exclusive and limiting world. In some measure this happens to every child, but in acute agnosis the view of knowledge is as follows.

What one should know has been divulged some time ago by a patriarchal authority and is transmitted within one's group as part of membership itself, implicitly through behavior and more explicitly through oral

teaching. The connection between knowledge and group identity is critical. One does not acquire knowledge, one inherits it from one's group. The individual does not learn on his or her own and know things others of the group do not. People know collectively and know the same things (a standardized curriculum). Not wanting to know means not wanting to know more than the inheritance, than fellow members know, than fits into the group knowledge. What is fit to know is known already. Anything else spells danger or disloyalty. This limitation places a premium on collective unity, uniformity. Individuals who know other things may act other ways and go other ways. They "err" and "sin." They lose identity and endanger the continuance of the group. The purpose of all this is to ensure group survival within which to provide individual security.

Let's not be judgmental about this: such an authority is sensible given a certain stage of development that might make other authorities downright dangerous – or perhaps I should say, even more dangerous. Fanaticism and bigotry have been necessary for whole peoples in history and still are for some individuals and groups. And some part of virtually all of us is drawn to such an authority in the more stressful courses of our life.

Conventionally, one thinks of authority as warranting law, not knowledge, but it is precisely the confusion of rules with knowledge that we are dealing with, the taking of laws of man for laws of nature. When we don't want to know, it's because we want to fall back on rules and not have to sift through all the indefinite, ambiguous, incomplete, uninterpreted information of ordinary life and try to distill from it some conclusions that we can feel confident to act on. We long for a Supreme Codifier who has predigested life's possibilities and converted endless intricate experience into a set of simple laws. But we can't short-cut in soul school. And no one else can take the course for us.

Now actually, scientists and philosophers would like nothing better than to apply so well their principle of parsimonious thinking as to produce brief, elegant laws that cut through the clutter and crystallize a maze of information in a few symbols. But the book banner in us rejects *these* laws. It wants laws in the other sense, of directions and orders. It does not want a law that enables you to get on top of a lot of knowledge; it wants a law that makes it unnecessary to know a lot in the first place. The difference here is between simple and simplistic.

If you are chiefly concerned about doing the right thing according to a group code, you do not want a lot of knowledge, because it will only make more difficult the task of living up to the code. If, on the other hand, you are trying to perfect yourself and evolve through growth, you are committed to learning all you can, and knowledge – even when it's bad news – is your best friend. Clearly, a crucial division among people

—and within a person—concerns whether one should obey a group authority or the individual's own authority. Most of us fluctuate a great deal between the two, berating ourselves for listening so much to other people but doubting ourselves too much to act consistently on our own understanding.

Much of the usual school censorship attacks equal representation, the doing justice to the pluralism of this country and this globe. Anything international, ecumenical, or universal seems wrong if knowledge is tied to a group identity that is never planetary. The censors do not want their children to know how other people live and think, because they do not want them to know about *alternatives* of any kind—other customs, other beliefs, other values, and other courses of action.

Nor about other interpretations. "Situation ethics," "relativism," pluralism, ambiguity, symbolism, and irony all violate the first rule of agnosis—to suppress alternatives because all these present more than one point of view or possibility or message or meaning. It is in the nature of knowledge based on group or patriarchal authority that it detests and resists alternatives, because alternatives permit individual decision making, whereas the whole point of limiting thought is to limit behavior. Dogmatism may be defined as admitting no alternatives; its goal is to enact and enforce conformity.

Such is the direct link between a "literal" interpretation of the Bible and collective control of individual action. Granting no alternative renderings of the text, no symbolism, no multiple meanings at historical, moral, philosophical, and mystical levels corresponds to the removal of options for action. One who cannot envision plural pathways cannot choose. (Suppose that evolution calls for each person to grow to God on his or her own, not to be blindly herded without acquiring personal knowledge or exercising personal choice.) As a factor of action, choice points in a practical way to the common denominator of the agnosis syndrome—the limiting of knowledge and identity according to the dependence of the individual on the group.

An important link between identity and agnosis is choice. Conforming to some social identity, as we all do, limits alternatives in thought and action and amounts to repudiating some personal choice. This may go unnoticed within a homogeneous culture. Conflict occurs—and consciousness rises—when cultural pluralism forces acknowledgment of alternatives and exposes individuals to choice. Ironically, seeing choices comes from the same ability to see differences that lies behind social separations and conflicts. Thus a tremendous tension arises between the differentiating we are taught in order to distinguish insiders from outsiders and the plurality of alternatives implied by these very differences. "Other" people embody other options in thought and action. In singling

out "those" for our children we are also pointing out to them those other options. Look but don't see.

If the Upper Valley of Kanawha County had had its own school district it would not have been involved in a book dispute. If consolidation and bussing did not mix children, as Fike said, each subculture could transmit itself to the young through school in tranquillity. But, in a multicultural country forced by technocracy if nothing else toward increasing integration, keeping one's culture intact and discrete becomes very difficult indeed. Even distant cultures invade the home through television. National textbooks were just one more invasion into the Upper Valley, bringing cultures such as the black and Hispanic hardly represented otherwise even in Charleston.

Public schools not only mirror society but also provide a theater for enacting society's conflicts. In the school district come together all the factions of a community that otherwise might not have to deal with each other. For business, religion, recreation, and social life a populace can go different ways, but unless families opt out of public schools at their own expense, education remains the exception. As the central meeting place where differences are smoked out, the classroom becomes an arena for contending over divergent ways of life and modes of thought. Trying to educate a pluralistic populace by a single curriculum neatly focuses the dilemma implied in our national motto. "Out of many, one," we read on American coins—*E pluribus unum.*

Efforts of even well intentioned leaders usually reflect rather than solve the dilemma. The conventional political way is to try to salve conflicting parties by halving the difference between them. Typical of this way was the response of United States Commissioner of Education Terrel Bell to the Kanawha County dispute. On December 2, 1974, when the controversy was still boiling, he said in an address to the School Division of the Association of American Publishers:

> Parents have a right to expect that the schools, in their teaching approaches and selection of Instructional materials, will support the values and standards that their children are taught at home. And if the schools cannot support those values they must at least avoid deliberate destruction of them.
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> One of the real problems in the production and selection of instructional materials is that parents and communities differ so widely in what they consider appropriate. We are probably the world's most polyglot nation, with many subcultures increasingly interested in maintaining or re-establishing their identity in the larger society. We come from many socio-economic backgrounds. We have many divergent religious viewpoints. Our positions on politics and education and other things that matter run the gamut from ultra-conservative to ultra-liberal.[2]

Here Bell seems both to realize and to ignore the fact that the pluralism of the population does not really gibe with the expectation that schools will reflect parent values. Rather than really confront the dilemma, he ends with this recommendation:

> So I think the children's book publishing industry, and the schools, need to chart a middle course between the scholar's legitimate claim to academic freedom in presenting new knowledge and social commentary on the one hand, and the legitimate expectations of parents that schools will respect their moral and ethical values on the other.[3]

It may be demagogically advantageous to pretend that the conflict is between scholars and parents, but Bell has already said that parents disagree among themselves. Falsely shifting the conflict elsewhere distracts us from the dilemma of parents differing and makes the usual businessman's negotiated compromise look possible. Actually, Bell does touch on a real solution in the next breath when he says, "Certainly wider uses of individualized instruction for each child will give his or her parents the opportunity to rule out an objectionable book or film without affecting other children."[4] This was in fact the approach of *Interaction,* which substituted a classroom library for a syllabus. But it is not honest to toss in "individualized instruction," which was a conjuring phrase then, while clearly telling publishers at the same time "to chart a middle course," that is, continue to publish class sets for all but to make sure nothing offends anyone.

Patently, compromise will not work: the very omissions that placate some parents infuriate others. Publishers hearing Bell's talk would recognize the old business-and-government strategy of waffling. He told them very clearly to tone it down, boys, you see what's happening. Instead of offering thoughtful leadership, he sidestepped the contradiction facing publishers, namely, that adoption practices require standardized materials whereas community factions require variation. Furthermore, the rigid production procedures in these large corporations definitely militate against varying materials to achieve the individualization Bell so debonairly recommended. (Not surprisingly, Reagan recalled Bell to serve as secretary to preside over the planned demise of the Department of Education, which was indefinitely deferred.) Offering a self-contradictory solution to fit the original self-contradiction inherent in a single curriculum for a pluralistic public typifies the conventional political approach to solving problems brought over from the Old World. It is not the American way, which is a new way. In this case, that would be to go behind the dilemma to some underlying commonality among people.

The beleaguered Superintendent Underwood of the Kanawha County Schools was quoted in the press saying,

> I'm sympathetic 100 percent with the genuine protestor. If people truly want to narrow the gap of literature, that's why we have private schools. I hope they're successful.[5]

But sticking the protesters off by themselves is not public education for all students. Of course he felt personally injured, but the advice of the National Education Association was similar. They suggested giving the dissenters their own classes or schools but acknowledged this risked widening schisms. Now, this is essentially what the voucher system as now being proposed in some states would do—allow various factions to take their share of taxes and enroll their children in private schools or start their own schools.

Proposals like these are unacceptable. "Cool it and find a safe middle way," simply cannot be implemented. "Let them go off and do their own thing—and good riddance" sets a time bomb for the future. Letting subcultural groups split off and form their own private schools will seriously deepen community and national divisions. We have already experienced this sort of solution in the "white flight" from public to private schools that not only fail to afford the white students adequate resources or faculties but certainly enhance racism among all. Voucher systems would fiscally facilitate "white flight" and other splintering off into separate schools. In fact, it would not be necessary to found private schools, since most voucher systems currently under consideration permit, as one option, establishing new public schools, that is, reorganizing present schools into specialized campuses.

Such solutions are wrong because they encourage disunity and finesse the original problem of pluralism. Separation during the formative years prolongs for one more generation the intolerance about differences that is the root issue. Children who grow up apart will probably fight as adults, whose fates will become increasingly intertwined by economic, environmental, and psychological factors affecting everyone. Not having grown up learning to share resources despite personal differences, they will be unable to live, let live, and unite to solve common problems. Not speaking the same language they will not talk together. America needs to accommodate plurality *within* unity so that various parties can pursue, on the same sites, the ramifications of their goals and values and discover where these lead.

To pursue the logic of real individualized learning of the honest sort that would result in different children reading different materials and benefiting from different methods would have led Bell, Underwood,

NEA, and other commentators on the Kanawha controversy to something more like a solution, but all parties seem to have balked at the serious reorganization of schooling and publishing that this would entail.

How *do* you give parents what they want when they don't want the same thing? You individualize the curriculum, but you keep everybody together. Now, alternatives may be made available at four levels of a school system. Students may (1) go to differently specialized schools, (2) follow different "tracks" within the same school, (3) choose different "elective" courses within the same track, or (4) choose different things to do within the same classroom.

The last is best because only then are students working within each other's presence, where they can learn with each other, from each other, and about each other. A voucher system institutionalizes conflict rather than reducing it. Tracking within a single school results in de facto segregation of all sorts, schools within a school in the wrong sense. Electives permit more choice but still do not individualize enough and yet segregate some. For the younger learners at least, the one-room schoolhouse is the best model, whereby different working parties of somewhat mixed ages do different activities at the same time as chosen by the children under the guidance of the teacher.

As children mature, the time-space compass within which they work may expand beyond the classroom to the whole school and then to the community as a learning site but always without losing the mixing process of the original multifarious classroom. Thus even when going later to specialized learning sites in school or in town they will always be mixing, because as individuals make different decisions within the same system of sites and resources they will cross paths and influence each other. Authoritarian and fundamentalist parents will not at first like the mixing itself, but because it is incidental to the individualization and parents can still force their child to choose as they say, they will prefer it to mixing without a choice of activities and materials.

What kind of textbooks would go with a classroom thus organized for individualization? No textbooks, actually. I have always argued that the teaching of reading and writing would improve if schools could wean themselves from textbooks, which merely dole and standardize and take time away from the actual practice of the language arts. Books of course, lots of them, but any and all books—a diverse classroom library, not a single lock-step set.

If I don't believe in textbooks why did I direct a program containing 172 of them? Because the atrocious truth is that schools do not create their curriculum; they buy it. This is atrocious because to the already crippling institutionalism of school systems it adds all the crudity and selfish impertinence of for-profit corporation practices. The most important decisions

about teaching are made in commercial houses, which have constraints of their own far stronger than the contractual rights of the academic people they sign up to "author" their materials. These companies will surely say that they simply put out what schools want, but schools have for so long relied on them that teachers automatically look to commercial materials for guidance, and even schools of educations rely on them too much in training teachers. In other words, few educators are capable of thinking about curriculum independently of published materials and of the tests toward which they are directed (itself a huge industry).

In history, economics, government, and other social studies, textbooks have often been biased, as the Gablers and other critics have charged, because these are subjects about which impartiality is virtually impossible and which reflect the reigning vogues of the time. School adoption not only gives a monopoly to whatever biases the adopted books contain but, as we saw, puts irresistible stress on publishers to cater to popular predilections no matter how narrow or ignorant these may be. The lock-in of a mass public bureaucracy and a large private corporation is so deadly that it may well be better to drop textbooks in all subjects, not just in the language arts.

At any rate, I decided that since schools were buying their curriculum prepackaged from publishers, then, to effect change, a publisher was where I had to place myself. At least books that were straight anthologies would entail the least risk to integrity. My strategy was to put into classrooms just such a diverse library as real individualization called for—no single set of anything, only six copies of many different titles (six so that partners could choose and read something together if they wanted). This still necessarily limited library would serve as a model for other reading material that could be brought into the classroom from all sources and organized by students and teacher together. In referring to *Interaction* as the "uncola" program Houghton Mifflin employees were acknowledging that these were trade books in effect, not textbooks. What was most radical about the program was not the subject matter of the reading material but the replacement of unison reading by individualized reading.

But this feature was wasted in Kanawha County, where it could, ironically, have offered a solution to the conflicting wishes of parents: children putting together their own reading program do not all have to read the same books or selections. Like most places, Kanawha County was not yet ready to individualize in such a staple, thoroughgoing way, so parents were not expecting classrooms to contain texts their child would not have to read.

In order to offer a broad enough array of materials and methods to make choice real, the whole community will have to become the school system. Parents will be teaching each other's children both in school, as

aides, and in town as masters to apprentices. Child and adult education would also mix. Cross-teaching and rub-off occur among different community factions for the practical reason that in order for everyone to get access to every sort of learning, all resources have to be pooled and shared. Rather than requiring more special expenditure for education, this community pooling would actually become more necessary the worse the economic situation became. What would justify all this mixing is that it is the only way to give everyone enough choices to make individualization come true. Ultimately, then, the urge to assert differences and to resist imposition by others would bring everybody together: we all want the same thing—to go our own ways.

Such a learning community would maintain unity across plurality. *E pluribus unum.* But it entails so thoroughgoing a reorganization of school-community relations that we should not be surprised that school superintendents, teachers' associations, and the United States secretary of education do not propose it.

> The only way in which a school system could approach neutrality would be to offer students a random multiplicity of literature and ideas and values, and permit them to select and read randomly with no guidance from teachers; and no one is proposing this.[6]

This in fact is just what I am proposing. But teachers *can* guide students by helping them find reading matter for their interests and needs. And individualized reading is not random reading.

In other words, the best way to avoid conflict over reading matter is also the best way to teach reading—break up the standardization and get students reading around in a rich variety of material not produced especially for schools, which simply must quit buying curriculum in a commercial package. But parental attitudes and teacher training will have to change also. Solutions that are resolutions are revolutions.

The revolution in this case moves us away from group rule of thought toward a kind of social unity that acknowledges and accommodates individual differences as variations of a basic human likeness. A standardized curriculum is a holdover from an earlier stage of human evolution when individuals were not developed enough to function in autonomy from a cultural group-mind and when, consequently, these loyalties caused cultures to clash. "Out of many, one" does not refer to conformity and standardization and cultural chauvinism, which caricature this ideal. The founding fathers drew this saying from ancient mystical traditions, kept alive in Freemasonry, where it referred to the unity in spirit behind the plurality of material manifestations. According to this teaching, the reason that it is possible to make many out of one is that the many came from the one in the first place.