

## teaching social justice

by rick turner

THE FOLLOWING article is based on a talk given by Rick Turner in which he dealt with the problems of teaching social justice. Much of what he said is based on his book *The Eye of the Needle*, published by Spro-cas.

Injustice is written large over the face of all relationships in South Africa. But once we reach the point of sketching out the main facts we still need to go beyond that to try and relate those facts to the life of each individual. Many white South Africans and many black South Africans too, can recognise the facts and yet would not see the implications of the facts for themselves.

One needs to realise that talking about justice is not talking about other people but talking about oneself. The relationship between justice (a certain type of relationship with other people) and oneself (one's own personal development of one's own personal being) is therefore the subject of this article.

An analysis of two very different concepts of what is meant by the self is required because the distinction between justice out there and the self in here rests on a misunderstanding, a very popular and frequent misunderstanding, of what the self is. A wrong concept of self exists which has a tendency to see the self as an atom, an enclosed and complete atom which manipulates the rest of the world from some kind of defence. An atom, which is already as it were complete, has its essence within it, the nature of which is simply to act out various essential elements in its behaviour. Some catch phrases

which one uses to describe this atom are firstly, the concept of 'human nature'. It is said that there is a fixed human nature, that any particular individual has a nature with which he is born and which has developed from inside during his growth and which now gives him certain values and certain wishes and goals, which he then naturally acts towards. Other such little catch phrases are used when somebody does something and you say they shouldn't do that and they say 'I can't help it, I'm that sort of person' or 'I can't help it I'm like that'. This idea that you have this self which you have been given and you just have to live with and a self which is independent of your relationship with other people, underlies quite a lot of our commonsense thinking. This is fundamentally wrong and the first step that we have to make in teaching about justice is to break down that idea of self and replace it with another which is essentially that the self which I have at any given moment in time is very obviously firstly a function not of human nature in some abstract sense, but of the particular society in which I have grown up and the particular culture which I have been given in that society, the particular history embodied in the language and the ideas which I have at any given moment in time; and of course all these things, the history, the culture, the society, are relationships with other people - they are not my atomic self. So my self is a socially created self rather than an independently grown atom. Secondly, even though it's a socially created self, it is not a final self which has no change elements in it and which I therefore have to protect against change. It is essentially an ongoing process and one has to replace the atomic view of self with the growth view of self - of the self as something which can grow and change, can grow in relationships with other people and through those relationships with other people come to understand and perhaps change one's own values system and one's own set of goals.

This requires self-comprehension and the self-comprehension also involves social comprehension, because as we have seen, self is in an important sense a social product. I therefore want to offer some categories or sets of categories which can be used fruitfully for this effort of self-comprehension and which will show the relationship between justice, i.e. a certain type of relationship with other people, and self-growth.

The first set of categories I want to stress is the distinction between direct and indirect relationships with other people. One may imagine what is described by an anthropologist as a face-to-face society, i.e. a society of a relatively few people - 100 maybe 200, cast away on a desert island, where everybody knows everybody else.

Each person's acts directly impinge, in a visible way, on other people's lives. So in a situation where your relationships with other people are all direct you can see what happens when you act. You can see what it means to other people and this means that the issues of justice and what is right and wrong in your relationship with other people are relatively straightforward and visible. However, most societies in which we live are not societies where relationships with other people are direct. They are societies in which relationships with other people are indirect, i.e. in a city in which you live you know, in a personal sense, only very few people, yet you are continuously acting in ways which have implications for people whom you do not know. If you hire somebody, you pay them wages. Your setting the wage rate is one small element in a very large market process which is determining the normal wage rate in society. This means that whether you like it or not you play a part by your little act in setting wages for everybody in that society. This act has implications for everybody. Similarly, when you buy, and you act on the market as a purchaser, you are taking part in a very large social process which has implications for everybody. Let us take a more dramatic example: You happen to own a factory at the top of a river into which you spew poison which poisons the fish all the way down, and ruins several industries, possibly putting thousands of people out of work - none of whom you see and most of whom, if you're lucky, won't even know it was your fault. Therefore within your society you are involved in a number of indirect relationships with other people - relationships which affect other people without your knowing that you are the cause and without their knowing that you are the cause and vice versa, other people are continuously affecting you. In order to understand yourself, you have to try and grasp the structure of these myriad inter-relationships between you and other people in society.

The second set of categories that I want to illustrate include the two categories of personal relationships and structural relationships. What is meant by this is that one of the things that you learn in society as you grow up, is that certain types of relationships are taken for granted as being the normal way of relating to other people. To put it in sociologese: you learn to take on certain roles and those roles define certain structural relationships which you are to have with other people. For example marriage: If you are socialised in the normal way in our society you learn that a particular type of marriage, monogamous marriage with male dominance, is natural when entering into a marriage relationship; you have an idea

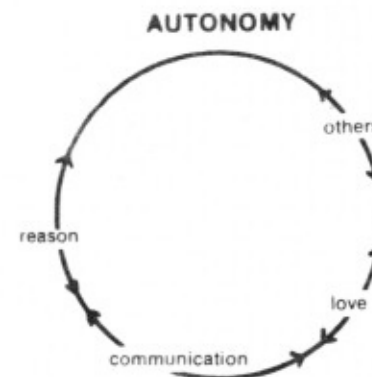
of what is to be expected in marriage, i.e. you move into a structure of pre-defined relationships. Within the context of that structure is of course a personal element - precisely the way in which you act out your particular male dominance or female submissiveness in the marriage situation. Similarly, if you are an employer certain structural expectations are placed between you and your employees. Within the context of that there is still a personal element. You can ask them nicely when you want them to work for you, you can wave the sjambok at them and you can pay them slightly lower wages than are the norm defined by the structural relationships. But on the whole the major elements in your relationships with other people are defined by the structure that narrows down your range of choice and it is only within the structure that the personal issues, the choices which depend on you, arise. There is a further important point both in understanding one's self and in understanding the implications of one's self for other people. One has to move away from thinking simply in terms of the personal and accepting the structure and to understand why in a particular institution, a particular structure has come into existence and whether it is perhaps that structure which is incompatible with the norm of justice rather than simply one's own personal situation in it. In studies on the history of slavery the church for example, held long debates on how to be just towards a slave. We know now that this is a contradiction in terms but one sees in that the relationship between the personal and the structural: The structural relationship of mastery and slavery taken for granted and the question of ethics being how to treat your slave nicely within that relationship.

The third set of categories that I want to use, relates back to the self. We have seen the sorts of relationship the self enters into with other people and the way this categorises them. Let us look at two which seem to be distinct ways of establishing one's own personal identity within this context of changing complicated relationships with other people. The category of identity has two sub-categories - the category of autonomous identity and the category of role-identity. The autonomous identity is a person who has established a firm sense of self and whose acts come from within himself in a situation of comprehension - understanding why he is acting in a particular sort of way and acting from that understanding.

Certain other relationships are linked with the concept of autonomy. To be able to act autonomously involves self-comprehension which again involves the capacity to think or the ability to reason. Reason is something which arises in relationships with other people. When I'm thinking I am always using categories and terms which I've

acquired culturally in my relationships with other people and the process of reasoning which goes on within me is a process which I have learnt in dialogue with other people's ideas. So reason requires communication as a type of relationship with other people. To be able to communicate with other people, to listen to what other people say, understand what they say and relate to them in terms of what they're saying seems to me what we normally understand by the term love. There is thus a link between autonomy, reason and communication which involves self confidence and openness to other people, and love and communication with other people.

Diagram A



If you are an autonomous being you can be open to other people, you can communicate with others, you can learn to reason more fully and learn to understand yourself more fully thereby developing further your autonomy - your capacity to love, communicate and reason. This is, as it were, not a circle but a spiral, i.e. a growth progress, in which, through and on the basis of a growing autonomy, you learn even further to relate to other people.

If in a fairly complex social situation you are not an autonomous person and are not the sort of person who can choose your own way of being in the world, it seems that in that situation people, instead of being able to establish their own identity, attempt to identify themselves through a particular role, and so the second category I want to use is the category of role identity.

What is meant by a role? If you identify yourself as a mother or as a teacher, or in South Africa as a white or as a black, then each of these roles has attached to it various types of behaviour which define how you behave with other people and various ideas through which you can define what you see as being your own importance in

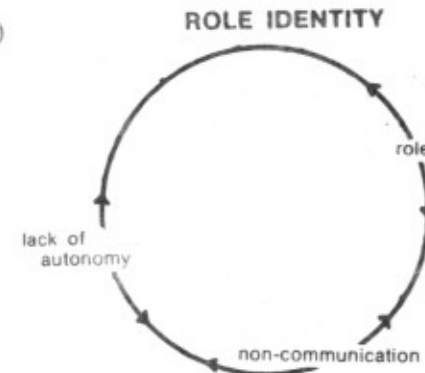
the world. So the attachment to the role, or role identity, leads to your attachment to some particular sort of role, like a sex role, man/woman, in defining a way in which you relate to people of your sex and of the other sex.

What is the implication then of 'role' for the rest of the relationship which we have illustrated. Once you have identified yourself with a role, you no longer communicate with other people directly, but communicate with them through the role, through the sorts of behaviour which are defined by that sort of role.

If a university lecturer is expected to behave in certain ways to students, towards colleagues, etc., and there is a defined set of norms, then he relates to these people through these definitions and he is no longer actually communicating with the other person. Normally you are concerned with your role and the other person is concerned with his or her role and these two roles exchange little tokens which produce reactions in terms of the token. As a result of role playing, a breakdown in communication occurs and as a result of the breakdown in communication we usually get conflict. Role communication can be sustained in a society in which there is no change occurring because in that sort of society you can continue acting out day after day precisely the same role relationships without any problems arising and although you are not communicating, the lack of communication produces no problems because there is no change in the environment in which you would have to learn to react in new ways.

But in a society, or an institution which is changing, such as the church this is not possible. For example long differentiated roles of behaviour between a religious priest and a lay person in the church are changing and people still trying to act out the old roles are not communicating. They are entering into conflict with other people and the resulting conflict in this situation is to exacerbate each individual's sense of weakness, sense of inadequacy, and perhaps sense of fear. And, when you are frightened, or you cannot handle your situation you try to grasp your particular role even harder and the circle is completed. We had a growth spiral, but here we have an extremely vicious circle, a whole set of relationships which reinforce one another in preventing any communication process and preventing the development of autonomy. In the situation of non-communication and conflict you cannot develop self-comprehension and reason and you are thrown back into clinging to your otherwise inadequate role.

(Diagram B)



Two further points should be made before elaborating any further. In the education process, one finds that very few people to whom one is trying to talk, are willing to internalise what one is saying through dialogue. This is because most people are tied into the role identity and see knowledge only as something which they acquire to fulfil their role - to carry out their role. Of course at university it is not knowledge you require to carry out your role, it's your degree, so you don't learn to understand, you learn to pass exams., to help get your degree. So when you are involved in this process and identify with a role, you hold on to all this new information which is being fed in, but don't try to internalise it and use it in thinking about yourself. (Obviously this is the problem which we have in teaching about justice in South Africa). All the forthcoming information is seen as a threat to the role identity which the individual has and hence this challenge is met as all challenges are met, by turning in and trying to push away the challenge. So we do have to understand and try to get across to people what they're doing in this process, and the inadequacy of the role identity, if we're going to try to make them creatively aware of what is involved in learning and existing in society.

So far we have looked at the individual, but the individual is operating in an environment which contains social institutions and is of course also a material environment. So, we need to look at the way in which social institutions function in either supporting or inhibiting the development of one or the other of these identity patterns and similarly what material objects do in that process. In each institution such as a school, a church, a family, you are involved in certain sorts of relationships with other people and each

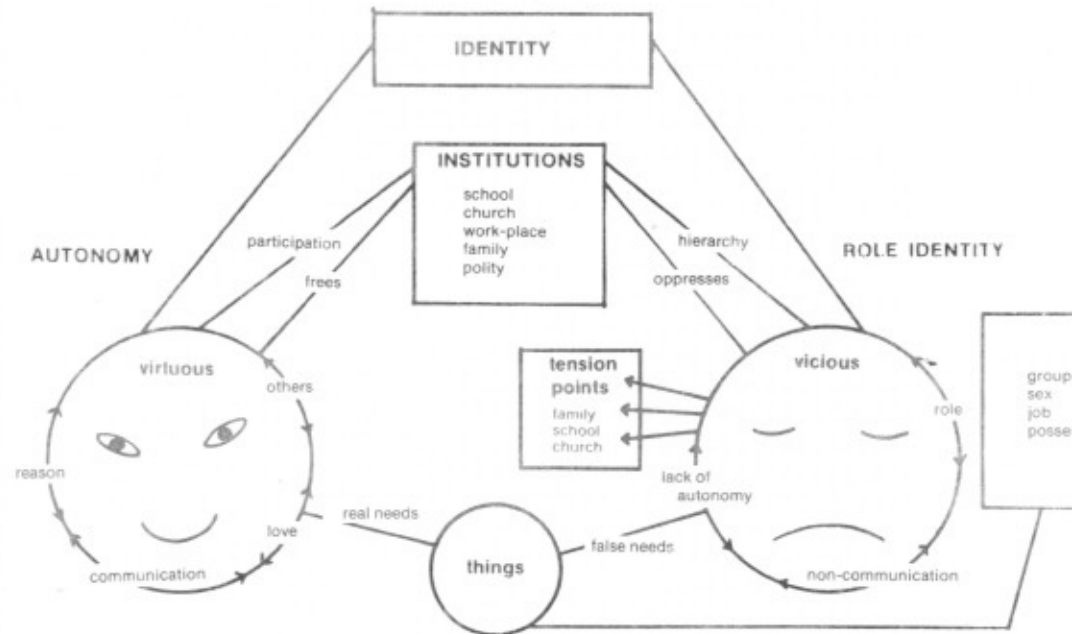
institution itself plays a role in the whole social set-up. So it seems that one can analyse the influence the institutions have on this personality structure in two different ways. Firstly, the direct way: what role does the particular institution play in a particular society? It seems to me that one can distinguish very crudely between specific institutions and specific societies which either oppress or liberate people. For example, the quality in South Africa of the political institution is clearly designed specifically to oppress people, it is designed to keep them down in a whole set of ways. Ideally one can conceive of a quality of a set of political institutions which were designed to enable people to relate freely to one another, i.e. the quality which was designed to liberate people. So we look at the direct function of the institution - either it oppresses or it frees.

Each institution, as has already been mentioned, is also a set of relationships between people and those relationships can play indirect roles in determining how a particular individual sees him or herself i.e. if the institution is hierarchical, which involves someone at the top giving orders and those orders being sent down - a situation where the average individual merely has to follow orders without trying to understand those orders and why they have been given - obviously that sort of institution reinforces the role identity. This is a hierarchical type of institution which is specifically defined in terms of people's roles and people acting out their roles without understanding. On the other hand, if we have institutions which are designed to involve everybody into a process of determining what the institution should do, this is likely to develop the autonomous identity. So I distinguish between hierarchical organisations, in which roles are reinforced, and what I have described as participatory organisations, in which the development of autonomy on the part of the individual is encouraged by the nature of the institutional structures.

One can look at, for example, a school system and analyse it in terms of these categories. What our present school systems do is essentially to provide people with the necessary skills for being low-level cogs in a large bureaucracy. A school can be compared to an archetypal bureaucracy, since it prepares people for living and working in the bureaucracy which dominates their lives when they leave school and prepares them for obeying orders, absorbing facts which are irrelevant to their specific needs at that time, and for accepting other people's definitions of what is and what is not important and then for acting out other people's definitions of how one should or should not act. So the school, through its hierarchical structure and the way in which that hierarchy acts, plays a role in

preparing people for the role-identity life. One could imagine a school system which did not do that, which attempted to initiate people into a process of self-comprehension and growth. So the point is that each of our social institutions needs to be analysed in these terms to see what function it does or does not play.

(Diagram C)



Finally, the individual and the institutional structure in which the individual is, are also within a material world. In order to love other people and relate to other people, we have to stay alive. We cooperate with other people in a world of things, which can be used as the substratum for our being in the world with other people. They can be used to simplify and make comfortable our relationships with other people.

On the other hand, one can develop to a situation where one feels one's identity is established by the number of things that one owns. One can develop to a situation where the acquisition of things has

become more important than one's relationship with other people. Ownership has become a role and things have become a cause of conflict between other people rather than a way of being in the world with other people. These can be defined as false needs. When we develop a set of false needs, these needs come between us and other people, creating conflict, reinforcing certain of our roles and relationships with other people.

In role relationships it is meaningful or it is habitual to use words like love, justice, truth - i.e. to use value words or ethical words. For example, if we take love, there are certain role expectations or role acts which are defined as being love i.e. if you happen to read women's magazines you discover that there are certain conventions about when one proposes and how one proposes and what one doesn't do until after one's married and so on, all of which define and play a role in socialising people into identifying love with certain sorts of warm feelings which you get at certain times and with certain sorts of behaviour patterns. When the individual has been adequately socialised into this, love itself, as an inter-personal relationship, becomes purely a role action and you produce the right reactions at the right moment and this then you describe as love. Similarly, we looked at the concept of justice or of fairness in discussing how one treats one's slave justly. If one assumes that the woman's role is to look after the kitchen then to treat your wife fairly is to give her enough money to do the housekeeping. So in each of these cases there are ethical principles which define and are used to define personal relationships which exist within the structural relationships. These ethical principles are what I describe as an immanent ethic, an ethic which stays within a 'taken for granted' world and tries to soften the edges of conflict within that world. And on the other hand, the main principles of justice, fairness, love, truth, can be seen as challenging a particular set of structural relationships; as demanding that one analyses the roles and escapes from the roles into autonomous identity. In that situation one has a transcendent ethic, an ethic which continuously challenges one to transcend particular social relationships and any particular sort of role identity which exists at that moment. I would take for granted that the ethic of Christianity is a transcendent ethic not an immanent ethic. It is an ethic which challenges all social institutions and all structural relationships and role relationships and the model presented by Jesus Christ in the gospels is the model of an autonomous being, of a free man who does operate in this growth spiral.

One important point is that others enter into the autonomous individual's life, and here we must not confuse autonomous with being

a selfish atom, as it automatically involves loving relationships with other people. But to identify with the role excludes other people from one's life. One does not relate to other people, one relates through one's role to other roles and not to the people underneath them. It seems then that that is the basis of the distinction between the transcendent and the immanent ethic; the transcendent ethic demands an attempt at loving relationships with other people, whilst the immanent ethic ignores other people and relates with other roles.

The tendency of individuals in South Africa, specifically whites, is to identify themselves with a specific role i.e. with the role of being white and the way in which being white is interpreted as defining how you behave towards other people. It seems absolutely impossible for most white South Africans to relate to blacks other than through role stereotypes. Underlying this is the relationship to things which produces the conflict within South African society and hence also perhaps produces the necessity for a role identity. The accumulation of goods is what white South Africans get out of South Africa, this is what they are here for; this is what they have been doing ever since they arrived. Their ethic is a strictly materialistic ethic of getting as rich as possible as rapidly as possible and it is this that underlies the racial issues. South Africa is not essentially a society in which ignorant whites discriminate against blacks because they don't know the truth about the equality of the races. South Africa is a society in which whites constantly exploit black labour because possessions have become more important to them than other people. Further, in trying to analyse the way in which certain institutions function to reinforce the false need or the 'thing' relationship and to reinforce the stereotype relationship, we may look specifically at capitalism. Firstly, in a capitalist society the essential thrust, the essential motivation, the essential value is the accumulation of goods and the socialisation process is one which automatically tends to encourage people to define themselves in terms of material possessions and hence to generate false needs. Hence to come into a position where the norm of one's relationship with other people is to use people in order to 'get things'; one pays other people low wages, in one's office; one tries to get on in one's job, in getting higher wages and therefore in order to do this one has to manipulate other people in that office. At each level the other person becomes a means and one's end becomes the accumulation of things.

Secondly, a capitalist society or a society in which you have private ownership of the means of production, is essentially a society where there is a hierarchy of decision-making because the

ownership means power. To own something is to have power over it. That something is something that other people need. If I am buying all the land around, for example, other people need that land in order to be able to work and survive. My ownership of the land gives me power over them and to give me power, power for which I am not responsible, is immediately to set up a hierarchy, to introduce a situation where I can through my power tell other people what to do. So, within a capitalist society, we firstly have the enormous role of things rather than people, and secondly, we have the necessary hierarchical structure which breaks down the possibility of autonomous development, which introduces the necessity and reinforces the necessity for role identity which has already arisen out of the conflict between people which comes about through the stress on things.

What are the possibilities of people breaking out of the vicious circle? This is essentially the question which is facing us when we talk about educating people for social justice. It seems that we have to look at each individual and see what conflicts and problems are arising for that individual through this process. When the individual is involved in this, the conflict tends to lead to fear and the problem of fear is solved by returning to the role identity. Our task is to try to intervene at this point and to start from the problems which the individual is facing through not communicating and attempt to generate in that individual a clearer understanding of him or herself and an understanding of the process in which he or she has become involved. That is what we need to do in South African society. We need to ask that type of question. It may be that the situations in which white South Africans experience the conflict of fear which they do experience in this area is so great that it would not be possible to make contact at this point. We need to indicate that there are many other situations where human relationships in South African society are vitiated or are meaningless and in which personal and social problems arise, and it is in these situations that we must work in order to help people understand that alternative.