

BERNE AND ADDICTION

A stand to be taken by the TASI world at the forthcoming Indian TA Conference is firstly, that alcohol and drug addictions are more than roles in a Game, and that in order to move towards a game-free existence, one of the stepping stones is the 12-step programme of Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous.

Berne's thinking on AA is that it is a place where people who are playing the alcoholic game can continue to play the game without actually consuming alcohol, and that at any moment they may go back to consuming. He does not see this as a cure for alcoholism, and in this he is in agreement with the AA traditions. Using his own terminology, this can be interpreted as follows: The game alcoholic is a third degree game, and leads to tissue damage and to socially accepted suicide.

However, when a person gets off actual drinking by joining AA and following the 12 steps, then the person is still playing games which are elsewhere described as possible zero degree games. Thus, in TA terms, the AA meeting for the average member consists of a period in which strokes are exchanged as a zero-degree game of Alcoholic is being played. This is not the same as playing a game of Dry Alcoholic which may be also zero-degree, but which is more likely to be first, second or third degree.

Berne writes, "The stages in a game are distinguished as follows:

- (a) A First-Degree Game is one which is socially acceptable in the agent's circle.
- (b) A Second-Degree Game is one from which no permanent irremediable damage arises, but which the players would rather conceal from the public.

- (c) A Third-Degree Game is one which is played for keeps, and which ends in the surgery, the courtroom or the morgue." (1964 p. 64).

All three degrees of games are harmful. What I am postulating is the feasibility of a degree of game playing which, while acting as a guard against true intimacy for as long as this is needed, provides a non-threatening pathway into intimacy. This is the meaning of a Zero-Degree Game, namely, one from which no damage arises and from which good may arise. I think it reasonable to describe much of what goes on in the AA and NA meetings as Zero-Degree Games.

What can go on in a TA group in which AA and NA are honoured, is that individual persons addicted to alcohol or drugs may be able to identify when there is a danger of their slipping back into using the drug of their choice. For example, it is accepted that if they use some drug, then there is always a danger of their going back to the drug of their first choice, and in this regard, the plentiful use of tobacco by many of the AA and NA members is a dangerous practice. A second example is related to the person's rackets feelings: if they foster their rackety feeling, there is a danger they will play through their game to collect a payoff, and within a short time, claim their "free" prize of one more puff, or one more drink - which leads back into the addiction slump.

Berne has written quite a bit about addiction, especially in the days before he had invented Game Analysis. Thus, he describes a family in America in which different ways of using alcohol are given. Below are some principles taken from Berne.

- (1) "...when a man begins to take a morning drink to cure the shakes and hangover of the night before, he is well on his way to becoming an alcoholic."
- (2) "If a man can't stop drinking after the first one, when he has previously made up his mind to, he is an alcohol addict, since his craving now controls him, instead of vice versa".

- (3) "If a man is willing to lose his job, or let his children go hungry or without good clothes in order to satisfy his craving, he is an addict.... If the results of his drinking are seriously harmful or distressing to himself or to others, a man is an alcoholic" (no excuses accepted).
- (4) "When a man loses his perspective to the extent that he blames others for what he brings upon himself, he starts to become a burden to those who love him." (...and is an alcoholic.)
- (5) "If he keeps on drinking in the face of medical advice that he will seriously injure his system by doing so... chronic alcoholism is a slow form of suicide." (Berne, 1947, p. 208)

Berne suggests that "what an addict needs is not an analysis, which is seldom successful, .. but permission to stop being a loser." (Berne, 1992, p.185) The alcoholic needs "permission to stop drinking, if he can take it, and then a clear and unqualified Adult contract to desist, if he can give it." (i.e., p. 186).

Berne writes, "The fact that people who play a certain game can potentially play any of the roles in that game explains the success of rescue organizations.... What happens seems to be that the member switches to the role of rescuer in that particular game, instead of playing the one who is "it". It is known that if there arises a scarcity of people to rescue, those who have been "cured" are likely to relapse, which in the language of game analysis means that they switch back to their original roles of "it" in the alcoholic game. Ex-alcoholics make better rescuers than non-drinkers because they know the rules of the game better and are more experienced in applying them."

It is generally agreed that rescue organizations (especially Alcoholics Anonymous) offer the best chance for a cessation of drinking, better than other approaches, including psychotherapy groups. It appears that alcoholics do not find general psychotherapy groups attractive, and the reason is not far to seek. If it is remembered that the basic yield of a group is to help the individual

structure his time in such a way as to obtain the maximum gains, it is easy to understand that each person will seek out groups which are most congenial in this respect, groups which initially promise the greatest opportunities for playing his most highly motivated game. If he is frustrated in this quest, he will withdraw from the group. Thus it happens that patients remain in psychotherapy groups if they can play their favorite games there, or if they can see an opportunity to learn "better" ones, and withdraw if they are frustrated. An alcoholic does not find it easy to set up his particular game in a group of ordinary neurotics or psychotics, and since his capacity to tolerate frustration is notoriously low, he will soon withdraw". (Berne, 1961, pp. 108-110).

Elsewhere Berne gives a clarification. "Simple alcohol addiction should be differentiated from the game of "Alcoholic". Some people drink ten to twenty ounces of hard liquor every day, or before going to bed at night, but keeps a clean situation: they are on the job punctually every day and turn out acceptable work, and their drinking does not materially involve or injure other people. It is self-evident that this condition is more common among the unmarried. The drinker who gets himself involved in unpleasant situations at work, at play, or at home, is in a different category, and is playing "Alcoholic." This transactional difference is more significant than a chemical doctrinaire diagnosis. It is much less important from several points of view whether a man takes a drink before breakfast than whether he gets into altercations as a result of drinking." (Berne, 1966, p. 355) "Part of attraction of drug addiction is the excellent opportunities it provides for playing secondary games with a variety of people, such as policemen, doctors, judges and the prison personnel. In young people it also involves parents and school authorities. The primary game, the addiction itself, is probably very similar to "Alcoholic," although rescuers are fewer and the persecutors more numerous." (1.c. p. 356). Commenting on the two different perspectives to be found in Berne, Selavan opines that TA can help treat alcoholics even if alcoholism is thought of as an illness or addiction rather than as a game. (1990, p. 136)

There seems to be a lot of noise about words rather than about what is really going on. If we take Berne's definition rigidly, then we accept his way of thinking and speaking which is not necessarily the generally accepted way of thinking and speaking. From the point of view of game analysis, I am ready to agree that there is no such thing as alcoholism - if this were admitted, then we would be fitting right into the game. On the other hand, if I am asked, outside the context of game analysis, "Is there such a thing as alcoholism and are there persons who are alcoholics and addicts?" then my answer is, with Berne, "Yes, alcoholics and addicts do exist!"

In summary: alcoholics with a small "a" are those who use alcohol but do not play the Alcoholic Game, no matter how much they depend on alcohol for effective functioning, i.e., no matter how addicted they are; alcoholics with a big "A" are those who misuse alcohol and play the Alcoholic Game, getting themselves and others into trouble, and they are definitely addicted with addiction plus; finally, alcoholics with a meadium-sized "a" are those who are off alcohol, who play the Alcoholic Game without the help (or hindrance) of alcohol, at a Zero-degree level of intensity, and who as members of AA are committed to make the 12-step programme an essential programme of healthy living.

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Reference

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