

Conrad Lodziak, Brent Charlesworth  
and Dave Woodhouse

# The Self and Learning: The Dialectics of Liberation (Continuation)

Our research hints at the possibility that the 'real' or 'inner' self, which embodies a person's agency, is basically *at one* with other 'inner' selves. If this is the case, then quite obviously self-liberation refers more to a process in which we collectively or co-operatively move toward a just and equal society, rather than a process of progressive individualism conducted in a competitive ethic leading to heightened injustice and inequality. We attribute the self with qualities which are present in all selves, and thus we can claim that the liberation of self, at one and the same time, facilitates the liberation of other selves. Fromm suggests what to many, might appear to be a paradox, when he states that 'each individual carries within himself all of humanity.'

However, while liberation movements might ultimately be moving toward some notion of universal man, what concerns us in this paper are the kinds of barriers which must be overcome in the development of a liberated society.

As a person increasingly attempts to determine and control his own destiny, which is a significant characteristic of self-liberation, he is at one and the same time negating the values underpinning his alien self, and yet recognizes that a more complete self-liberation is being prevented by these very same values which are the dominant values in ours and similar societies. Thus, in this respect, self-liberation and the liberation of society are one and the same thing. As the person progressively resolves the conflicts within himself, that is, as he 'gets himself together,' he invariably finds himself to be in an increasing conflict with the dominant values of society.

The development of a liberated society cannot occur without a radical transformation of the 'false' consciousness underlying the dominant values of our society. Some aspects of this false consciousness are discussed below.

## **Self-Alienation**

Much has been written about the social and cultural forces impinging upon man which encourages his self-alienation. In many of these writings the point is made that what now appear as external barriers to a person's self-fulfilment, were originally created by man. For example, poverty can be attributed to man's greed; and racism can be attributed to man's ignorance and prejudice. Thus it can be said that man has enslaved himself, by creating institutions and myths, for example, to which he now places himself in subservience, and which act upon him in ways he would not choose.

Josephson writes:

*The problem which Jaspers raises is whether man can preserve his selfhood or identity in a world dominated by a giant technological and bureaucratic 'apparatus' of his own creation, yet alien to him. To the extent that we are unable to experience ourselves as being in control of our actions, as being 'alive', self-determining agents, it can be said that we are self-alienated.1.*

Self-alienation can be viewed as a condition in which the person is estranged from his 'real' self, to some degree.

*By alienation is meant a mode of experience in which the person experiences himself as an alien. He has become, one might say, estranged from himself. He does not experience himself as the centre of his world, as the creator of his own acts—but his acts and their consequences have become his masters, whom he obeys, or whom he may even worship. The alienated person is out of touch with himself as he is out of touch with any other person.2.*

The condition of self-alienation is believed by many to be the condition of normal man.

*What we call 'normal' is a product of repression, denial, splitting, projection, introjection and other forms of destructive action on experience. It is radically estranged from the structure of being . . . The 'normally' alienated person, by reason of the fact that he acts more or less like everyone else, is taken to be sane . . . The condition of alienation, of being asleep, of being unconscious, of being out of one's mind, is the condition of the normal man.3.*

The idea of self-alienation presupposes that there is a self from which we become estranged. This self, in order to differentiate it from the alien self is often termed the inner self, or the real self. What constitutes the inner self is a problem which has invited considerable attention from philosophers and social scientists. One can develop a theory of man and attribute qualities to the inner self which are consistent with this theory. This theory should be able to explain how man is perceived to be in actuality, and perhaps suggest what man should be. Alternatively, one can choose what one considers to be 'human values' and postulate that these are present in every person, and are embodied in an 'inner self'. Or, one can postulate the existence of a stable, consistent enduring aspect of each person, and attempt through some means of inquiry to determine the nature of this consistent and enduring self, which can be labelled the inner self.

In this study a few assumptions are made concerning the person's potential(s) for achieving an authentically meaningful existence. It is assumed that the most meaningful experiences are those which a person chooses on the basis of what Rogers terms 'the organismic valuing process.'<sup>4</sup> It is postulated that the organismically determined values are those values which a person discovers through the meaning which is a consequence of self-determined acts. Alien values are those values which a person has learned which operate in such a way to prevent and divert the person away from exercising his own organismically based agency.

When the person experiences meaning through exercising his organismic valuing process, it

can be said that he is experiencing his inner self. In choosing experiences which facilitate expressions of his inner self, the person is facilitating the development of his own meaning.

These assumptions begin to make sense if one can accept that our most meaningful experiences tend to be those into which we put ourselves. That is, the more involved I am in an experience, the more meaning am I likely to derive from that experience, and the greater the potential I perceive for achieving meaning in an experience, the more likely am I to become involved in that experience. A person who is to some extent alienated from himself is unable to choose potentially meaningful experiences, because he is out of touch with his own meaning.

Mainly, from making inferences from observations of infants during play, it seems to us that the young child typically experiences more meaning in his activity than the older child and the adult. The organismic valuing process is more active during childhood, primarily because the child has not existed for long enough to have learned another set of values which are not organismically based.

The meaning we derive from our earliest experiences, as Freud theorised, becomes repressed. We replace this meaning with a meaning which helps us adjust to our early environment. In doing this we are learning a different self from the self with which we first experienced the world. Our original self, our original meaning can be labelled, the 'inner self'.

Thus Weiss describes the self-alienated patient as one 'who is disconnected from his past and his roots, with his childhood when his feelings were more spontaneous and genuine, with his adolescence when he faced the conflicts of growing up, with times in his life when he was closer to his real self, when his heart was alive, and when he took a stand for himself.'<sup>5</sup>

Storr also assumes that the child's original state which manifests itself in freedom and spontaneity, is left behind in development.

*As the child develops, its spontaneity and freedom grows less, for it is bound to come into conflict with parents and other authorities; and in its efforts to adapt, to be what it conceives others want it to be, to fit in with society, it must necessarily leave behind the idyllic state of completeness with which we postulate that it started . . . 6.*

Jourard makes a similar statement, and specifies that our thoughts, wants and actions are more real during early childhood. 'As children we *are*, and we *act*, our real selves. We say what we think, we scream for what we want, we tell what we did'.<sup>7</sup> He contrasts this real self with our public-selves which represent the selves we want others to see, and which we develop through the process of socialization.'

It is not being suggested that there is a perfect correlation between the condition of self-alienation and advance in age. Rather it is being suggested that the inner self is manifested more in our earlier experiences when we have yet to be socialized. Our initial alienation from ourselves occurs as we substitute our organically based meaning with an internalized set of meanings which we acquire from our experience of our significant others

in our earliest years. The extent to which we become alienated from ourselves in the early years is mainly dependent on the degree of congruence existing between our own meaning and the meaning which significant others expect us to acquire. Hence the importance of child rearing patterns. Also it is possible that what appears to be further self-alienation, to an observer, when a person internalizes a set of meanings from other significant others which differ from what he has internalized from his own parents, could in fact be more congruent with the person's original meaning. This possibility helps to account for 'radical' changes in life style which a few persons may experience when they are generally considered to be mature, or to have reached maturity.

As a person becomes more conscious of his power to control himself, his capacity for self-determination, his capacity to choose to be, to choose his own values, and as a person experiences himself as more alive and vital, more spontaneous, more natural, more creative, more curious, he tends, invariably, to attribute adjectives such as 'good', true, authentic or real, integrated, whole, etc., to himself. He attributes this power as arising from within himself, from his inner self. More specifically he asserts that the power from the inner self is derived from his increasing capacity to 'feel', to be in touch with his emotions and to recognize, value, and provide some expression for his fantasies and imagination. It is such a view of himself, if he can accept it with humility, which enables him to become more conscious of himself, to remain in touch with himself, to become more aware of his own alienation of himself, and to continue to direct himself into experiences which are more likely to be meaningful for him, and self-enhancing rather than self-alienating.

Perhaps the most important assumption upon which this study rests is that the person has the capacity to restore his agency, to regain contact with his inner-self, and to begin to determine his actions, thereby liberating himself from his own self-alienation. His own self alienation has been attributed to the process of socialization, thereby raising the age old conflict of individual versus society. Yet this conflict exists primarily because the values into which a person is socialised are values which threaten his own agency, and his own organismically based meaning. Theoretically such conflicts that exist between the individual and his society would be considerably lessened were he socialized into values which were congruent with his own organismic valuing process.

Since the condition of self-alienation can be considered to be the condition of 'normal' man, one must deduce that the values into which the western child is socialized are alien to his inner self. In the following section, we will examine these alien values, and how they operate to alienate the person from himself.

### **Society and Self-Alienation**

There is no easy way of explaining how the society and culture into which a person is born, facilitates the person's self-alienation. In an earlier page we attempted to explain how a person develops an alien self. Now our task is to pinpoint essential factors operating in our society, which can help to explain the widespread condition of self-alienation. All of these factors are interrelated, and if examined separately or together, the influence of these factors is very much dependent on the person's relation to himself, which is also dependent upon the extent and type of his socialization.

Risking over-simplification, the factors facilitating self-alienation are presented in a brief scenario.

### **Scenario: The Life Game**

It can be said that western man appears to have equated the achievement of status and the accumulation of material wealth with happiness. The pursuit of status and material wealth tends to result in a future orientation (or a past orientation) and a disorientation from the present. In other words man has an ends fixation which is so strong that he gives little attention to his own self-fulfilment while in the present, when he is engaged in a process to achieve his ends. Thus he tends to become divorced from the means through which he pursues 'happiness'. In order to achieve his goals, which engage him in some form of consumption, there must be something for him to consume. He, therefore, produces for rewards which are associated with his ends, and he utilizes his rewards in order to consume more material goods. He identifies himself more with what he consumes than with his production. He accepts the notion that his individuality is dependent upon those materials he chooses to possess. Thus his self-image is inextricably linked with what he possesses and consumes.

But not all can have the highest status, not all can consume and possess the most, since this would devalue status and material wealth. Status has a hierarchical ordering and one has to possess a modicum of wealth in order to increase one's wealth. Yet it is possible, in theory, for all, providing that they work hard enough, and consume wisely to continue to increase their wealth, thereby increasing their status. However, at any one time the wealth available is limited. It is necessary to compete for it. Western man goes to great lengths to win his competition which is never complete. The consequences of competing with others for status and wealth are several, but one of the most important is that human relationships are weakened. If I am in competition with you, I do not disclose myself to you, I do not trust you, I live under the threat of you etc.

The competition includes handicapped competitors. In fact, all but those who are winning are handicapped to some degree. Once in the lead, one's position is strong enough to maintain the lead. Those who are last in the competition don't appear to be able to improve their position, which can only be improved with a little success, but success is very hard to achieve when one is losing. In fact those at the bottom don't appear to be in the competition at all. Perhaps repeated failure has caused them to drop out. Besides those at the bottom perceive that the competition is unfair because to reach the same position as a more successful competitor, it seems that one has to jump more hurdles.

As in all competitions there are more losers than winners, but this is supposed to be natural because people are obviously not equal to each other. The leaders, however, don't want the losers to think that the competition is unfair. It must be seen that all have an equal opportunity to become leaders. This is important to the leaders, because they are leading by virtue of the fact that there are losers who are playing the same game. The losers are producing wealth, which the leaders, because they are already wealthy, are able to consume. So, the leaders help a few at the bottom to improve their position, to prove to all that if the game is played properly *all* can succeed. Most of the losers are encouraged by the example of those from their ranks who are succeeding, and consequently become more involved in

the competition. A few have fallen by the wayside convinced from continuous failure, that they are weak and not equal to the competition.

The leaders have invented means whereby all can have an equal opportunity to succeed in the competition. For those who complain that they are severely handicapped special provisions are made to help the weak overcome these handicaps. Education is one of the avenues which persons can use to increase their chances of success. However, we find that the same competition is occurring within education; the same rules are being employed, the same group of persons succeed: and the same group of persons are handicapped to compete in the name of education. Although there are a few who have improved their position in the competition by being successful in education, by and large the education competition reinforces one's original position, thereby perpetuating inequalities and a materialistic concept of individuality.

### **The Consequences of the Life Game for the Person**

The life game begins for the child as soon as he is born. The child is initiated into the game by his parents who use 'love' and punishment to influence the child's development in such a way that the child will have a solid basis for becoming successful. The child has to give up his own organismic fulfilment in order to meet the conditions of reward established by his parents. Invariably these conditions are related to the parents' expectations of the child as a producer, consumer and status seeker.

From birth the child is socialized to learn a substitute self to replace his inner, organic self. The home prepares him for school, and school is an extension of the home, in that the final touches are put to his substitute self.

In giving up his organismic valuing process, the child is giving up his powers for self-determination, for meaning, for learning how to use his freedom. The substitute self is without these powers although it may simulate them. The substitute self is without power because it is malleable, passive, other-directed self. The substitute self can be what others want to make it. If the child resists giving up his organic self, he becomes a problem to his parents and teachers, and may be described as 'emotionally disturbed', 'a difficult child', or a 'problem child'.

Once the organic self is given up, the person is prey for external powers. The external is represented by idols which can be things and persons. Unable to identify himself with his own organic base, the person identifies himself with idols, thereby attributing the idols with power over him. The person worships the idols, in the same way that devout Roman Catholics appear to non-Catholics to worship statues. The decoration in the young person's bedroom informs us that his idols can vary from Jesus to a fast car.

The more the person identifies himself with things, the more he becomes a thing; the more he identifies himself with others the more he becomes the other. The consequence is a loss of self and a loss of meaning. His own organismic valuing process is replaced with values external to the person. In learning a substitute self, the person assumes all that goes with this self: substitute needs, substitute interests, substitute feelings etc.

The substitute self is learned to enable the person to adapt to and compete in the life game, and is based on the values underlying the life game. So complete is this learning that the person believes that through pursuing these values he is creating freedom, but as Fromm has astutely observed, the person is, in fact, 'escaping from freedom'.<sup>8</sup>

## Conclusion

To liberate oneself from one's own alienation is an enormous task when one considers that this may involve a radical change in the person: a change which enables the person to discard his substitute self and choose an authentic existence in a society which will continue to treat him in ways which helped to create his self-alienation. This must surely take considerable courage.

To be engaged with one's own liberation is to be involved in a search for one's own meaning: the search for self-hood. The person engaged on this project hopes to transform himself from a passive, malleable, culturally conditioned organism into an active, choosing, initiating, valuing being. He hopes, in Sartre's terms, to will meaning into nothing. In effecting this transformation he becomes more conscious of his alienation, and more aware of himself. The person's ability to be conscious of his own alienation is a powerful and necessary tool in the process of liberation. Rollo May emphasises that a person's potential must be developed in self-consciousness.<sup>9</sup> As a person becomes more conscious, more aware of his self-hood, of his own meaning, he is more capable of using his meaning. That is, he is more capable of willing meaning into or attaching meaning to his experiences.

May concludes: 'finding the centre of strength within ourselves is in the long run the best contribution we can make to our fellow men.'<sup>10</sup>

## References

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## A DAY IN ACTION WITH HUMANISTIC PSYCHOLOGY:

Sunday 28 Sept:2.30 to 11 pm.

Many things are promised by group methods— everything from self-understanding to better human relationships, and from good communication to joy. This day is a chance to hear about and experience some of these things at first hand, and hopefully to put them together in a way that makes sense.

There will be a talk on the New Therapies by Glyn Seaborn-Jones, one of the leading practitioners in this field. There will be demonstrations of Gestalt growth work, Co-counselling, Psychodrama, Bio-energetics and Psycho-synthesis by representatives of the appropriate institutes. Alan Lowen will talk and demonstrate approaches to education opened up by these methods, and Nick Georgiades will do the same with Organization Development work, applicable to organisations of all shapes and sizes.

*Humanistic psychology is about everybody's  
emotional growth and health.*

*Humanistic psychology is about living  
and changing relationships*

The day will open with an event to make sure that those present are given some feeling of a shared experience, rather than isolated atoms floating in the void.

Social workers are particularly invited to this event, because so many aspects of the day relate to their needs and interests. But this day is for everyone who is concerned with their own personal growth, as well as those who are helping others to develop their own potential.

Entrance: students and SS, £1.50: AHP or ICA members, £2.00; Non-members, £3.00.

Place: Institute for Contemporary Arts, The Mall, SW1.  
Queries to box-office at 01-930-6393