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## EXPERIENCING MAHRER

***Experiencing: A humanistic theory of psychology and psychiatry*** by Alvin R. Mahrer. Brunner/Mazel 1978.

*This has to be a major review, because this is a major book. Not only is it majestic in scope, with its 884 pages - it is grand in its sweep and inclusiveness. It presents nothing less than an original theory of how human beings work. It is fully and very centrally humanistic, without being in any way a rehash of Maslow, Rogers, Perls and the other great heroes of the field. It is existential and down-to-earth, without kow-towing to Binswanger, May or Laing. I see it as a very fine and complete example and exposition of what Wilber (1980) calls "the Centaur stage" of spiritual development, where body and mind are fully integrated.*

*This book would be useful to anyone working in the field of humanistic psychology who feels the need for a better theoretical underpinning in their work. It is pertinent not only to therapists, but also to people working in education, management, social work or research.*

In his approach Mahrer uses just three concepts, deploying them with great skill and great subtlety. These are: Human potentials; Modes of construction of the world; and the primitive personality field. This makes the whole theory very simple and very easy to grasp. All we have to know is how these three concepts are used.

## HUMAN POTENTIALS

Potentials are of two kinds: operating potentials, which are engaging, or ready to engage, the world; and deeper potentials (of varying degrees of depth) which are not available to consciousness, but can become so, by turning into operating potentials. The relations between operating potentials and deeper potentials can be integrative or disintegrative.

Now what does that mean? The language is not familiar. That's the trouble with being original - you have to create your own audience - you can't just use an existing one.

Each potential constitutes its own zone of experiencing, more or less distinct and independent of the other potentials. It is as if each potential is its own mini-world of experiencing. In this sense, we are indeed multiple selves, multiple consciousnesses, even multiple personalities. Each potential has its own centre, its own self system, its own personality. (29)

This makes it clearer. We are talking about something resembling subpersonalities, ego states, complexes, internal objects, little "I"s. This enables us to use some of our existing understanding. So when he talks about relations between potentials, it is like talking about relations between persons - little internal persons.

The nature of the relationships among potentials is the major determinant of problems. A disintegrative relationship among potentials is probably the major factor in the occurrence of bad feelings, in the occurrence of bodily pain and suffering, in the construction of a person's unhappy world and . . . as the key determinant of human problems and pain . . . Our theory turns to the disintegrative relationship among potentials not only for "neuroses", but for the whole spectrum of human suffering. (28)

One of the main effects, says Mahrer, of a disintegrative relationship is that if and when a deeper potential starts to rise towards the surface, it is seen as very dangerous from the point of view of the operating potential which is in charge at the time.

To go even further, the disintegrative relationship **causes** the deeper potential to take a form which is monstrous and bad. The way (form) in which our insides appear to us is caused by our attitude of fearing and hating them. (43)

So a disintegrative relationship is one where we have negative attitudes toward our deeper potentials. And the closer the deeper potential comes to consciousness, the more dangerous it feels to the operating potential.

The opponent is inside, somewhere. It is the voice of the deeper potential, looming as a terrible urge of impulse, as part of a neurotic or psychotic condition, an awful thought, peculiar fear, primitive unconscious force, inherited weakness, taint or strain. We carry around our internal opponents, argue with them, fight and struggle with them and regard them through a disintegrative channel as fearful, bad, unyielding. (416)

We are talking about disintegrative relationships so much because there is no great problem with integrative relationships. If our attitude to our deeper potentials is positive, then they can become operating potentials as appropriate. So the problem Mahrer faces is - how can we transform disintegrative relationships into integrative ones? And the answer he gives is a very striking and to me altogether plausible one, because he shows so clearly why and how the process is so difficult.

If the deeper potential moves closer to the operating potential (and this can happen in a variety of ways), it starts to encroach on the domain of the operating potential. And if the relationship is disintegrative, this fills the operating potential with terror. It feels like being invaded by something awful. And at this point, which Mahrer calls the critical moment, a choice has to be made.

In effect, the choice is between surrendering or not surrendering to the intrusive deeper potential. Yes or no - that is the extent of the choice. The rising deeper potential is inviting the person to give in. Be me. Surrender whom you are and become what I am. (360)

Since this feels to the operating potential like death and self-destruction, the invitation is usually turned down. There are two other basic ways to go. One is to switch to another operating potential. This avoids the whole problem. (But it leads to the familiar experience of going round in the same old circles.) And Mahrer says that many forms of therapy assist the client to avoid the issue in just this way.

Virtually every helping approach assists the person in achieving the above goals (of avoidance) by shifting to another operating potential, and thereby helping the person maintain his self, reduce the burgeoning bad feelings, and push back down the rising deeper potential. These are the aims of supportive therapies, crisis therapies, suicide prevention centres, and the whole enterprise of chemotherapeutic drugs and pills. These are the aims of custodial treatment, behaviour therapies, ego therapies, milieu therapies and social therapies. Nearly every approach which aims for insight and understanding joins the person in achieving these goals. Programs of desensitization and token economy and deconditioning are the allies of the person in working effectively toward these goals. The war cry of all these approaches is the same: control those impulses, push down the insides, reduce the bad feelings, stop the threat, maintain the ego, push away the threat to the self, deaden the tension, guard against the instincts. (367)

So this switch to a different operating potential is for Mahrer no answer. But there is a third choice, which he also considers no answer. At the critical moment, the person can go into the state of unfeeling.

Once I follow the route of disengaging and entering the state of unfeeling, I have no freedom, no opportunity of choice, no capability of reflecting upon my life, no power or responsibility for choosing. To enter into the sleep state of unfeeling is to have forfeited choice. I have chosen not to choose, and to not know that I have made that choice. (376)

This sounds bad enough. Yet how chilling it is when Mahrer observes about this state that it is chosen more often than any other.

One reason why it is difficult to describe this state is that so many of us live in it so much of the time. I consider unfeeling as the characteristic state of human beings . . . Persons know the state of unfeeling only **after** they have emerged **out** of that state. (90)

If this state is not the answer, then, and if just switching to another operating potential is not the answer, the only answer must be the seemingly impossible one of surrendering to the deeper potential. And when we do this, we find that the seeming death is actually a rebirth on a higher level.

The centre of the person or self or person-as-operating-potential kills itself by hurling itself into the very core of the deeper potential. No longer is the centre of the person lodged within the domain of the operating potentials; no longer is the centre of the person separate from the bowels of the deeper potentials . . . In this adventure, the very core of the person plunges into the metamorphosis of self-transformation. Nothing is held back or withdrawn. (481)

When this happens, the deeper potential is transformed from its "bad" form into its "good form". Deeper potentials are in themselves neither good nor bad (though experiencing them feels good) - it is the integrative or disintegrative relationship with the operating potentials which makes them appear to be good or bad. For example:

When the older man feared and hated what he sensed within, it appeared as monstrous propensities for hostility. The bad form included scenes of carrying out physical violence, heinous acts of cruelty. When he achieved a new state of integration

with the deeper potential, he was filled with a whole new passionate energy toward effecting social change. As a judge, he was in a position to champion radical changes in the way young offenders were treated. It was as if the hostility within became transformed into an energetic cracking of barriers. The "breaking through" was only the good (integrative) form of the deeper potential which had presented itself as the feared hostility. (50) (There are many of these examples.)

So this is a paradoxical process, where we lose the self in order to find it again, transformed and enlarged. And the more we do this, the more we move towards being integrated people.

As I surrender into death, and as a dilated self always emerges as a consequence, there is a newfound paradoxical permanence to "I", a strange kind of continuity. I gain a sense of substantiality and permanence in being able to die and emerge dilated. My own self acquires a strength, a wholeness, an intact organisation to the extent that I can surrender it into death and emerge from the death still there - different perhaps, altered in many ways, but still there is something continuous. (499)

And so there is an inspiring though down to earth chapter on integration (of 79 pages) and an excellent chapter on actualization (45 pages) where Mahrer spells out where we are going with this kind of approach. He makes it very clear that special value is placed upon intense experiencing in humanistic theory.

## MODES OF CONSTRUCTION OF THE WORLD

But now let us pass on to the second main concept which Mahrer deploys. He says that we construct our world in four modes, each of which can fulfil any one of three different functions.

The four modes are: (a) Receiving an intrusive external world; (b) Utilising a ready-made external world; (c) Conjoint construction of an external world; and (d) Fabrication of an external world.

The three functions which such modes can serve are: (1) Providing a context for the experiencing of potentials; (2) Acting as an extension or externalization of our operating or deeper potentials; and (3) Acting as an extension or externalization of the relationships between our operating and deeper potentials.

This gives us many possible combinations to discuss, and there is no space to deal with them all, so let us just look at one or two examples.

1a and 1b are the supposedly normal ways of being in the world which are recommended in our culture. The world is our given context, and we simply deal with it as reality. We cope. We experience stimuli, and we respond in terms of our abilities and talents.

But Mahrer says that the other approaches are actually as common or even more common. In the following passage he deals with 2a, 2b, 2c and 2d.

If I helped to kill my aged mother by brutal inattentiveness, I can construct an external world which punishes me, does harm to me, is evil towards me. I can accomplish this by (a) the way I receive an intrusive external world, e.g. when the black cat crosses in front of me, I can receive that cat as an evil omen of hate, a sign that harm will come to me. I can (b) use a ready-made external world by marrying a woman who is ready-made to punish me incessantly for my inattention. I can (c) work conjointly with others to create their punishment of me. Or I can (d) fabricate (paranoid-like) "ideas of reference" in which people out there are plotting to do harm to me. In each mode the external world which I construct is an extended operating potential, an accomplice bearing the same relationship to me that I have toward the arcane, brutal inattention within me. (243)

So operating potentials can be extended into the world in this way, giving rise to the phenomenon usually known as projection. (229) Similarly, deeper potentials can work in the same way, but more mysteriously, because they are not available to awareness.

But Mahrer keeps on returning to the point that it is the **relationship** between the potentials which is crucial in deciding what it is we will project, and how much energy we will expend in doing so. So he says of 3a and 3b:

If the relationships among potentials are disintegrative, then behaviour serves to establish and maintain disintegrative relationships between the person and the external world . . . If the relationships among potentials are integrative, then behaviour serves to establish and maintain integrative relationships between the person and the external world. (306)

And one of Mahrer's most radical points is to say that there is no inherent tendency for disintegrative relationships to change. There is no "weak instinctoid need for self-actualization" as Maslow has it; no "movement toward wholeness of the organism" as Rogers puts it. There is just our own human choice. Still on possibilities 3a and 3b:

When internal relationships are disintegrative, behaviour moves inexorably toward a **painful** state of external relationships; when internal relationships are integrative, behaviour moves just as inexorably toward a **pleasurable** state of external relationships. (311)

When internal relationships are disintegrative, behaviour **increases** tension, not reduces it; behaviour **increases** the pressure of drives, not reduces the pressure. (314)

This explains why people move round in the same self-punishing grooves for so long: there is nothing to bring them out of it (until they start changing the relationships between the operating potentials and the deeper potentials). **And they will experience this as the world doing it to them, not as they doing it to themselves.**

It is important to note that Mahrer is not in any way saying that the world is unreal.

Regardless of the mode of construction, the extension of one's operating potential into the external world is quite independent of the degree of reality or unreality of the external world which you construct. You can construct an external world using either "realistic" or "unrealistic" building blocks. (243)

Indeed, it is the possibility of extending our potentials into the real world that gives us new possibilities for research methodology and for psychotherapy. We can deliberately extend part of ourselves into another person and experience them as that part of ourselves.

I can align myself with your experiencing self and thereby share in your experienced reality. This requires that you and I both focus our attention on a third something which is meaningful to you . . . so that I sense, am with, resonate to, share what you are experiencing. When I accomplish this, I experience as you experience, and this is, or can be, a way of gaining research knowledge of your experienced reality. (236)

There is in fact a whole chapter (48 pages) entitled - **The position of humanistic theory on some issues of the philosophy of science** - which was enthralling for me, because it is right in line with my own work in **Human Inquiry**, but which I will not try to cover in this review. Suffice it to say here that Mahrer's notion of research is very close to his idea of psychotherapy. In both cases we are actually entering into the life and the experience of the other person, not holding ourselves at a safe distance. This is very similar to the ideas of Watkins (1978) who talks about this as the phenomenon of **resonance** with the client, a skill which can be cultivated by the humanistic psychotherapist.

So this idea that we construct our external world is not just about pathology - it is about our most adequate functioning too. It all depends on whether the relationships between potentials are integrative or disintegrative as to whether the projection is healthy or unhealthy.

The question then arises, of course: Where do these potentials and their relationships come from, and why are they so often disintegrative?

## **THE PRIMITIVE PERSONALITY FIELD**

And here we come to the most original and the most hard to accept (for me) part of Mahrer's book. Before embarking on it, I would like to say that in my opinion the whole case does not stand or fall upon this part of the book. We could find the other parts of it valuable and persuasive without necessarily accepting all of this last section.

Mahrer talks throughout about "infantness". Usually an infant means a baby who can't yet talk, but by using the word infantness instead, Mahrer makes it possible to say that the idea of the infant can extend back to a year or two before conception in many cases (or even further back in more unusual cases). So the infant is being constructed by the parents as part of their external world before he or she comes on to the scene in any tangible form. And similarly at the other end, the parents can continue this idea of infantness long after the child can talk.

So the primitive personality field consists (in the usual case where father and mother are both present) of the operating and deeper potentials of the father and the mother, plus infantness. And this space, as it were, of infantness, gets filled by the physical baby and infant as and when it appears, and by the embryo and foetus before that. This means that the infant has no potentials of his or her own.



Bluntly, the potentials of the infant are the relevant potentials of the significant figures. That is, the potentials of the infant are those potentials of the figures within the primitive personality which pertain to the infant . . . The same reasoning places some of the relationships of the significant figures within the larger conception of the infant. That is, the relationships among potentials of the infant are those relationships among the potentials of the figures within the primitive personality which pertain to the infant. The disintegrative or integrative nature of these relationships becomes the nature of relationships within our larger definition of the infant's primitive personality. (623)

This is reminiscent of Freud's saying that the superego of the child comes from the superego of the parent, in quite an unconscious way, and at first it sounds as if this is a totally one-way thing. It sounds as if Mahrer is sinking the poor infant quite vanishingly into the field set up by the parents. But he is far more subtle than that. He is saying rather that this primitive personality field, while set up in the first instance by the parents, can be seen from various perspectives once it is set up.

In contrast to our common system of thought, humanistic theory suggests that the definition of an object varies with the context. What mother is depends on our context of understanding. Within the context of mother, mother is one thing, the centre of a given context. Within that context, baby is an extension of mother, a constructed component of her world. But when we switch to the context of the infant, and hold the infant as the centre of that context, then mother becomes a constituent of baby. (622)

There are . . . as many perspectives as there are participants. (671)

Having set up this notion of the primitive personality field, and the perspectives within it, Mahrer goes on to say firstly that the process of development of the infant into a child and into an independent adolescent and adult depend on the dissolution of the primitive personality field, and secondly that the parents have a lot of power and resources, if they care to use them, to prevent this dissolution from taking place.

So Mahrer is saying that the symbiotic relation between mother and child, which has been referred to by many psychoanalytical writers (e.g. Mahler 1975) goes back a lot further than psychoanalysts say, and involves the father as well as the mother. Anxiety, for example,

does not start with feeding or with birth - it may be present before the moment of conception, and may become intense for the infant at any point where it affects one or both parents. This is such an unfamiliar idea that we need to look at one piece of evidence at least:

As reviewed by Joffe (1969) the research first indicated a high correlation between maternal smoking and infant prematurity, especially when prematurity was defined in terms of birth weight. This research was interpreted as suggesting a causal relationship between maternal smoking and premature birth. Subsequent research, however, reported similar high correlations between premature low birth weight and **paternal** smoking! (677)

So this primitive personality field, which includes both parents and the infant, is powerful indeed. And it carries on its work of constructing the infant without needing the awareness of the participants. The entire scene may be carried on without anyone being conscious or even half-sensing what is going on. In constructing this field, parents can use any one or more of four basic methods or mechanisms:

1. **Inducing behaviour from scratch.** "By organizing the primitive field in a very particular manner, only certain infant behaviour can occur as the other side of the behavioural coin." (693)
2. **Developing behavioural nubbins.** The baby does something small - a hint of some later action. The parent then takes it as a fully developed indication of that later action, and treats it in such a way as to turn it into that action. "Mother will see before her a baby who is demanding immediate gratification, who is demanding that things be done right now; she will not see a mere behavioural nubbin, a whimper or a little cry."
3. **Attributing intentions to behaviour.** "All the baby has to do is to behave in the most ordinary ways. Indeed, baby's role is so easy that often all baby is required to do is **not** behave in some way . . . Any infant can be interpreted as behaving in a cold and unresponsive manner." (705)
4. **By being part of the field that is the infant.** Here the connection is intimate and inescapable. It is not a causal connection, but a relation of identity. It is an "almost magical relationship between the behaviour of infants and the personality processes of parents." (711)

By continuing to use these four methods, wittingly or unwittingly, parents can act so as to imprison the child within the primitive personality field long after it should have dissolved. If they want to do this -

They must (a) maintain ownership of the child's behaviour, (b) maintain ownership of the child's external world, (c) maintain ownership of the child's relationship with himself, and (d) prevent escape from the encompassing primitive field. (723)

And Mahrer goes on to give many moving examples of how this is done - a part of the book which I found very painful to read. It all sounds horribly familiar. He tells of how children's thoughts are monitored, contradicted, twisted and fed back in distorted ways so that the child doesn't know if it is coming or going.

Little wonder that some adults have practically no memory of huge slabs of their childhood; they were engaged in responding to parents, in carrying out what parents got them to do, in never owning their own behaviour. (730)

The parents will tend to hold on to the primitive personality field in this way to the extent that it is expressing in a successful way their own potentials and the disintegrative relationship between them. If there is a disintegrative relationship between the parents' potentials, then to that extent they will want to project their conflicts into and on to the child. So the dissolution of the primitive personality field depends upon the parents achieving some measure of integration.

If parents do not let go, then the self cannot occur. The act of dissolving away the primitive field is more than the passive freeing of shackles. It is an **active** step in the development of the sense of self. (756)

If the parent hasn't achieved intactness, the parent cannot enable the child to achieve intactness. (761)

Mahrer is very acutely aware of the difficulties involved in the process of emergence into selfhood, to the point where it sometimes seems a miracle that anyone ever achieves it. But of course this fits with his insistence, in earlier sections, that virtually all of us have some disintegrative relationships with our deeper potentials - this results very directly from our experience within the primitive personality field. But there are ways out, both for parents and for children. Here is an example, one of many given in the book:

From the beginning, Helen was mother's closest companion and confidante. Helen did not exist as a person, though she was six years old. She was run by mother, encompassed and owned by mother. When mother was ready to undergo her own personal change, she entered into the kind of psychotherapy which brought to an end her owning of her child . . . As the bonds dropped away, as Helen came forth out of the primitive field, little by little, in subtle ways, Helen's mother felt sad. Mother knew that Helen was not, and had not been, the perfect companion. In many ways, Helen had no understanding at all of her mother. Helen preferred to have other friends, and was not really interested in hearing mother's thoughts and feelings. Each tiny increment in the dissolving of the old field had its own entitled bit of sadness as mother became a new person with a new daughter. It was a good sadness, accompanying the dawning personhoods of both Helen and her mother. (762)

## APPLICATIONS

We have now looked at the three main concepts used in Mahrer's book. But how is the theory applied? How do we use it?

Mahrer uses it most effectively in four chapters concerned with application: one on bad feelings (44 pages); one on painful behaviour (82 pages); one on the human body (32 pages); and one on human - behaviour (41 pages).

On **bad feelings**, Mahrer says that these are usually the result of disintegrative relations between potentials, and get worse the closer the deeper potential approaches the operating potential. All that is needed, given a disintegrative relationship and an approaching deeper potential, is an external situation which can provide for the experiencing of the deeper potential. Mahrer specifically shows how this applies to feelings of anxiety, fear, anger, helplessness, shame, depression, meaninglessness and so on.

The other kind of bad feelings, apart from these disintegrative feelings, is **the state of unfeeling**, which we have already met above. This is a very important concept for Mahrer, and he describes it very well. He says of it:

This is how we are most of the time. Every day we come near critical moments from which we preserve ourselves by quickly falling asleep while our deeper potentials momentarily take over. Then, moments later, we wake up again in charge of

behaviour. In undramatic ways, across days stretching into years, our conscious selves automatically disengage, leaving the deeper potentials in charge for a moment. In its dramatic form we speak of multiple personalities, or being in a fugue state, or being amnesic. But there is no label for the thousands of times we momentarily disengage ourselves and let the deeper potential behave for us, while we fall into the momentary state of sleeping unfeeling. (93)

So the theory not only helps us to understand the usual bad feelings, it also helps us to understand the times when we don't allow ourselves to feel anything.

On the question of **painful behaviour**, Mahrer says that all painful behaviour is concerned with disintegrative relationships among potentials. (This language is becoming familiar now, isn't it?) There are many ways in which we can do this. For example, we can behave in ways which express one of our deeper potentials, and which induce others to behave toward us in the same disintegrative manner in which we respond to those potentials ourselves.

Not only do we construct others into relating to us in the same way we relate to our deeper potentials, but the curious and baffling twist is that others fear and hate in us exactly what we fear and hate in ourselves . . . It is as if we are devilishly clever at being just the way we fear and hate in ourselves so that others fear and hate those very qualities in us. (406)

Mahrer runs through all those manoeuvres which we use in avoiding our deeper potentials, pushing them down, expressing them in crazy ways, etc.

I recognise that I am describing as painful, self-preserving and blockading of deeper potentials many of the behaviours which in other approaches are considered normal, healthy, adjustive - and even mature and optimal. Most normal, mature behaviour preserves the self - at the expense of the deeper potential. (438)

He says that we cannot avoid our deeper potentials - they will keep on rising up to be dealt with, they will keep on approaching and invading our space. They are the original, inexorable space invaders. "As long as the experiencing of the operating potential occurs, the deeper potential rises. There are no exceptions." (349) We may try to disengage from them, but

when you disengage from the deeper potential, it will come forth in its bad form. If the disintegrative relationship is **mild**, the deeper potential behaves in ways which may leave you guilty or ashamed . . . If the disintegrative relationship is of **intense** proportions, then the deeper potential bursts forth in a form which may be monstrous, twisted, ugly, bizarre. (444)

So the only way is to accept the deeper potential, with all the dangers and difficulties which that brings with it. We looked at these in the first section of this review.

On the **human body**, Mahrer construes it totally in terms of the theory - there is no separate physiology or structure of instincts or drives.

All bodily pains, from our perspective, are understood as merely another class of disintegrative feelings. (162)

He is not denying that a medical approach is all right in a medical framework, but simply saying that there is more than one framework. For any bodily pain, therefore, we shall start by asking what operating or deeper potentials it expresses or refers to.

Peripheral body pains tell us little about underlying potentials. But with regard to **deeper** bodily pains, I have been impressed with the predominance of a deeper potential which says: "Be concerned with **me**. Take care of me, minister to me. Attend to me, comfort me," and a second deeper potential which says: "I must pull back from what is happening out there. I must get away from the ominous situation. I must seek sanctuary." So common is this second kind of deeper potential that I have referred to this as "the retreat into the body". (166)

And Mahrer consistently holds to his theoretical position even in the case of those apparently most accidental of events such as breaking a leg.

What happens, for example, when the person receives a blow on the head from a falling pot or a hurled rock or a piece of metal? If the predominant deeper potential relates to the importance of distance from the external world, high "person-world barriers" and the maintenance of a moat of separation, that person might well pass out in connection with the blow. If another person, in relation to the **same** blow, is characterized by a deeper potential for rage, that person may not pass out, but instead be mobilized into a wild spree of aggressiveness.

A third person whose deeper potential related to fragile vulnerability to the external world may suffer serious fractures and internal bleeding, perhaps even death - all in relation to the ostensibly same kind of blow to the head. (175)

This is much like the view of Will Schutz (1979), but expressed with far more precision and delicacy.

Finally, on the question of **human behaviour**, Mahrer says that there are two important principles which apply.

The first major principle of behaviour is as follows: Behaviour is a means of establishing and maintaining with the external world the nature of the relationships among the person's potentials for experiencing. (305)

According to the second principle, behaviour is a means of experiencing potentials. (315)

We have already referred to some of the applications of the first principle in our account above of the modes of construction of the world. As for the second principle, Mahrer emphasises how satisfying in itself the experiencing of potentials always is.

When I have a potential for experiencing power or affection or defiance or sex, the actual experiencing of it is an increase in something which may as well be labelled tension or excitement. (321)

When a potential is opened up to experiencing, there are special feelings which occur, bodily sensations. The kinds of feelings are given in such words as pleasure, aliveness, excitement, vitality, energy, buoyancy, joy, ecstasy, thrill, exhilaration, giddiness, merriment, happiness and satisfaction. All it takes is raw experiencing and I have these kinds of feelings. (37)

But this is only the case when the experiencing has the quality of being here-and-now. And this is what therapists are trying to achieve when they ask their clients to bring their past experiences into the present. So the most intense way of experiencing a potential is to experience it in the here-and-now, and Mahrer makes it very plain that intense experiencing is a prime value for him.

Actualizing persons experience their potentials with intensity, and their periods of intense experiencing have increased frequency and greater duration. (584)

In the crescendo of intense experiencing, the self assimilates

into the experiencing potential. There is no sense of self in moments of intense experiencing, no separated I-ness, no part which stands off and regards what is happening . . . In these moments, self-awareness is surrendered to a heightened intensity of experiencing unmitigated by conscious thought (Suzuki 1949). There is no separated centre of self to be pleased or displeased, to enjoy or worry about what is occurring. (589)

The intensely experiencing person is with you; he does not merely talk about being with you or tell you about it. He is irritated at you, rather than talking with you about his irritation. He shares with you - instead of telling you about sharing, or explaining how important sharing is, or lapsing romantic about the notion of sharing. (591)

These, then, are some of the applications of the theory, and with this our examination is completed. Let us now consider whether the whole thing is acceptable or not. Does it all make sense?

## DISCUSSION

The first thing that strikes me is how much unnecessary luggage has been eliminated, while still retaining a fully psychodynamic position. In other words, we are still interested, like any psychoanalyst, in what is going on inside the person, and in the whole process of development, but we have got rid of the last vestiges of instincts and arbitrary structures.

We have also got rid of a lot of the luggage favoured by humanistic psychologists. There is no urge to completion, no inbuilt process of individuation, no conception of evolution in any form. There is no use of the idea of early traumas causing neurosis.

There is none of the emphasis on biology which is found in behaviourism. There is none of the emphasis on the spiritual favoured by the transpersonal psychologists.

On the other hand, there is a big emphasis on the social. There is a whole chapter (43 pages) which we have not even touched on in this review, entitled **The construction and functions of social phenomena**, which is very well argued, and of course the whole notion of the primitive personality field is profoundly social.

So it seems to me that this is a very purely humanistic theory, which restricts itself very fruitfully to the heartland of the humanistic position.



The second thing which strikes me is how pertinent and usable the theory is. Not only have I found it very illuminating and helpful in my own efforts as a therapist - I have also found that it is very understandable to clients, and fits very well with their experience.

And the third thing I noticed was how absorbing this book is. I am one of those people who mark books a lot. I pick out passages which I might want to quote later or use in some way, or just remember well, and this book - very unusually for me - has markings on so many pages that it is almost embarrassing. All the way through, there are examples and case histories which bring the theory to life.

There are just three things I am inclined to disagree with in this book.

The first is the overemphasis, as it seems to me, on the idea of parental pressure in forming the infant. Although the resources of the infant are relatively restricted by comparison with the resources of the parents, it does have some, as all parents well know. And in my view the infant is always interpreting the world from its own perspective, right from the start. This is of course allowed in the quotes from pages 622 and 671 (see above) but Mahrer never really does justice to the infant's point of view, seeming to lose touch with his own insights here.

This ties in with my second disagreement. Mahrer always presents the dissolution of the primitive personality field as a positive process. In my view, the emergence of self can come about (and often does) as a result of negative experiences. The work of Winnicott (1975), Janov (1977) and Duval & Wicklund (1972) suggest very strongly to me that trauma can produce a sudden emergence of self - and self seen as negative. This produces splitting of the personality, and the real self/false self dichotomy which has been so often remarked on. The false self would then become, in Mahrer's terms, an operating potential, and the real self one of the deeper potentials. Repetitions of this and similar processes could produce the whole phenomenon of subpersonalities which Mahrer seems to go along with.

My final disagreement is about the lack of any spiritual element in the theory (except for a few references to Zen). It seems to me that since Mahrer does provide for different levels of the deeper potentials - he speaks for example about "mediating potentials" and "basic potentials" - it would be an interesting extension of the same idea to say that there are some very deep spiritual potentials which may arise and need to be dealt with, rather in the manner of Wilber (1980). This would of course spoil the purity of the theory, introducing an evolutionary element which is foreign to it.

But really my final impression is of the amazing power and sweep of these very stripped-down ideas. Listen to this description of people who have still not dissolved their primitive personality fields:

Most of the persons on this plateau are policemen and truck drivers, social workers and tennis players, university professors and housewives, voters and the politicians for whom they vote. These persons exist with an illusory sense of self . . . In truth, these persons are half-persons, without ever knowing that they are half-persons . . . They are inextricably linked to their families, yet move about as if they were free. They are inextricably linked to their jobs, their businesses, their communities, their nation, other people, "they" . . . Hundreds of thousands of persons, primitive personalities who are themselves half-persons, have constructed and maintained a world which replaces the missing primitive field . . . Instead of living in the old primitive field of mother and father, these persons have collectively constructed and preserved a new primitive field of laws, government, forces, determinants - which activate us, control us, force us to behave, house all the secrets, control our fates, shape our lives. They have erected a grand external world which is mysterious, oceanic, brooding, omnipotent. (796)

To me the great strength of this book is the way in which it moves very naturally between what is going on inside the person and what the consequences are for society at large.

This is a major work which I think must become a classic. I am appalled that I haven't read it before, and even more appalled that it is not talked about and referred to incessantly by humanistic practitioners. It seems highly relevant to all our work in whatever field of humanistic psychology. I see it as a great book in every sense.

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## Loneliness

It is Tuesday August 26th  
 I kneel body-across-my bed  
 While waves of loneliness swamp my being.  
 The hot afternoon sun  
 The unwelcome dawn rising  
 Play cohorts to my churning stomach.  
 Wave after wave of pain  
 Roll and suck at my gnawing gut.  
 I scream inside  
 But I dare not let it out.  
 Oh God! let it stop, I pray  
 I'm afraid of that bottomless pit  
 That deep crevasse inside me  
 Those years of covering my pain.  
 What agony this is Oh God . . . . .  
 I am so alone.  
 My belly heaves  
 Nausea fills me  
 But nothing will come forth  
 To ease the void within me.

I cringe with shame  
 At my contempt  
 For other beings  
 In similar plight  
 When in their absence  
 I did belittle  
 Their various ways of coping  
 With what is our common lot.,  
 I did condemn in them  
 The turmoil in my own soul  
 And thereby did further widen  
 The gulf separating man.