

John Rowan

## PERSONAL MEANINGS AND PSYCHOLOGICAL LIFE

### A Double Review

The first of these two books is based on the first Guy's Hospital symposium on the individual frame of reference. The editors say - "This volume is concerned with problems in the genesis, expression and comprehension of personal meanings. Personal meanings arise from events and relationships which a person interprets within his most basic frame of reference - his awareness of being an individual, conscious of personal agency and personal biography". It has articles by Rom Harré, John Shotter, Fay Fransella, Mildred Shaw, Gloria Litman and R.M. Rosser among others. So it looks very promising. All these academics getting into humanistic psychology, wonderful.

But it soon becomes apparent that this is not to be the case. Somehow these people have found ways of approaching the individual frame of reference as if it were some complicated machine which had to be described from the outside; the individual gets lost altogether.

Rom Harré gives us a laboured and not very persuasive account of a distinction between the public/private dimension and the individual/collective distinction, such that these two dimensions can be at right angles to each other, forming four quadrants which he then proceeds to describe rather briefly and unhelpfully.

John Shotter gives us his usual approach to an outline of a prolegomenon of a preface to an introduction to a groundwork of a foreword to a consideration of a tentative mode of conceptualising the human individual, but runs out of steam before he gets very far.

Eric Shepherd has a chapter on **Coping with the first person singular** which starts off with sexism - "Man is the only animal whose consciousness can be directed upon himself" - and continues in such a way that we learn over and over again that Eric Shepherd doesn't know how to cope with the first person singular. It is full of excellent sentiments - "An appropriate attitude and action in helping is . . . 'Always treat others as you yourself would like others to treat you',

that is a first person singular. This is the unavoidable first step in taking personal meanings seriously". - but there is no instance of the author actually knowing what this means, or of doing it himself.

Fay Fransella does her usual chapter on personal construct theory, in which she repeats Kelly's well-known statement that we do not need the concept of the unconscious. Trying to understand personal meanings with no notion of the unconscious is like trying to fight with one hand tied behind one's back, in my opinion. Personal construct theory is a bit like rational-emotive therapy: it keeps on maintaining that it can deal with deep emotions, and keeps on actually not doing it.

Mildred Shaw's chapter is called **The extraction of personal meaning from a repertory grid** which again shows how personal construct theory can help one avoid any real meeting with a person.

The next chapter is all about how to reduce people's motives to figures and diagrams through multidimensional scaling. The horror of this is exposed when we read that multidimensional scaling "represents an emerging strategy that is applicable to the essentially phenomenological orientation of a psychology committed to personal meaning". Actually it is about as far from any proper phenomenology as Guttman is from Merleau-Ponty, or chalk is from cheese. It is about reducing many people's experience to one common pattern, not about personal meanings at all.

The next chapter is another of those "approach to an outline of a sketch" essays which never gets off the ground, even with the help of Hamlet.

The chapter by Keith Hawton presents some data from a study done on people who had overdosed in a suicide attempt. This is a tantalizing one, because he got fairly near doing something useful. But by reducing his data too soon, he managed to make nonsense of the thing in the end, and finished with nothing much to show for his efforts.

The next one is on alcoholics, and makes a few minor points in a modest way, nothing much to shout about. Gloria Litman's chapter is also about alcoholics, but was published much too early, before the investigation had even got under way properly.

Rosalind Furlong's chapter is on **Personal meanings in cancer**, which manages to quote an awful lot of people but to say nothing very much, and certainly nothing at all personal.

R.M. Rosser's chapter on kidney machines is better - it does at least give some real case histories and some feeling for what it is all about. I liked the idea of seeing the machine in various lights: as persecutor, as a good mother, as a sickness certificate, as magic, as escape from reality, as a threat to autonomy and as a missing link.

The final chapter is by J.P. Watson, and is on schizophrenia. An attempt to show the similarities and differences between schizophrenic experiences and religious experiences falls to the ground because the author doesn't appear to have experienced either.

All in all, this is a deeply disappointing book. Most disappointing, perhaps, is the attempt to claim to be phenomenological, while actually steering a million miles away from any understanding of what the phenomenological approach is. But even more disappointing for me is the attempt to approach personal meanings without any involvement of the authors in what they are talking about. This is the worst treason: it is treating new paradigm matters and issues in an old paradigm way. What a shame, and how shameful.

The Romanyshyn book is just the opposite. It is a deeply subjective account of psychology, which puts the emphasis on story-telling and the emergence of personal meanings, written in a very personal way.

It is divided into five sections: Psychology and the metaphor of science; Reflections of the psychological world - Things; Reflections of the psychological world - Others; Reflections of the psychological world - Body; The metaphorical character of psychological life.

This is a very hard book to describe. It goes from homely examples to historical analysis; from visual illusions to the philosophy of science; from Greek plays to the etymology of words. There are no neat conclusions, no brief examples to quote. Each part intertwines with each other part. It is very much like real life.

There is a lot of emphasis on the mirror and the metaphor. "The work of mirroring which describes our psychological method may be viewed, therefore, as a work of metaphoring". There is also a good deal of stress on the story which makes sense of things. "Psychological method is a work of de-literalising, or de-realization. In this work it is not the factual status of things or events which matters but the story which is reflected through them".

Romanyshyn goes on to explain that the question of personal meanings can only be understood properly if we adopt this kind of approach.

A metaphor, as the literary critic Howard Nemerov says, "stands somewhat as a mediating term squarely between a thing and a thought". It claims, in other words, neither the eye nor the mind. A metaphor is no more a matter of what the eye sees than it is a matter of what the mind thinks. It is no more a question of perception than it is a question of conception. A metaphor neither discovers a fact which is already there, nor creates an idea out of nothing. On the contrary, **a metaphor embodies mind and minds the body**. It brings mind to eye and incarnates mind. With a metaphor eye is deepened through mind and mind now matters through eye.

It is a pity that there is no space here to give examples. Romanyshyn gives a number of very persuasive examples of his kind of concrete work, but they tend to go on for several pages and be very difficult to summarise.

I found this book rather unsympathetic. It is extremely interesting, but for me it is too subjective, too dependent on one man's vision. It goes to the other extreme from the Shepherd & Watson book. I have more sympathy with an approach which still tries to be scientific in quite a rigorous and rational way, using the word "rational" in its full sense as that which does justice to reality. The point about rationality is that it marks a trail which anyone can follow: at its lucid best it makes one feel - "I could do that!" With this book, I feel as if it is marvellous to see Romanyshyn doing it, but I could never do it myself.

And yet I feel that there is more genuine interest in twenty pages of Romanyshyn than there is in two hundred pages of Shepherd & Watson. Let him have the last word:

**The psychologist alludes to what is elusive!** The psychologist speaks through the mode of story and hence points to but does not define what appears indirectly and what remains indirect. As such, therefore, it is the attitude of ~~play~~ **play** which best characterizes the psychologist-witness, since **allusion** and **elusive** are both rooted in the Latin word **ludere**, which means to play. The psychologist, who moves playfully towards that which moves playfully away, touches the elusive but does not control it.

With this reference to play I do not mean to suggest, however, the frivolity of games, the sense of play as escape which marks our modern age. I mean, on the contrary, the insightful play of metaphor. A metaphor is a play upon words, and psychological life as a metaphorical reality is a play upon the world. It is a dramatic tale.

Eric Shepherd & J.P. Watson (eds) **Personal meanings** John Wiley & Sons 1982. pp. 202 £23.75

Robert D. Romanyshyn **Psychological life: From science to metaphor** Open University Press 1982. pp 209

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Shirley Wade

## SOME THOUGHTS ON TRANSFORMING CRISIS

In *Self and Society* for March 1983 John Rowan reviewed Peter Russell's "The Awakening Earth; Our next evolutionary leap". This is an important book I wanted to see drawn to people's attention, so I was glad to see the review. However, although I agree with much of John's detailed criticism, I feel that he does not bring out what was for me the main point of Peter Russell's argument. It is not JUST that elementary particles combined to form atoms, atoms combined to form molecules etc., but that these evolutionary leaps occurred when exponential growth moved towards the all important number ten to the power of ten, (10<sup>10</sup>). There are apparently no known forms of life with less than ten to the power of eight atoms, and at the other end of the evolutionary scale the self-reflective consciousness of human beings seems to have arrived when there were around ten to the power of ten nerve cells in the brain cortex.

The reason why Peter Russell anticipates that a new leap forward is about to occur is that population analysts predict that during the next century the number of human beings on earth will rise to ten to the power of ten and will probably then stabilise. Of course numbers are not enough, there also needs to be cohesive structure, interaction and specialisation: but human societies do seem to be developing these. Indeed very great changes have taken place in the last 200 years, with the shift from agriculture as a focus for human activity, to industry, and now to all forms of information processing, which have recently overtaken industry as the dominant form of employment