



THE DISADVANTAGES OF HUMANISTIC THERAPY

JOHN ROWAN

Someone in the USA was having to write an essay on humanistic therapy, and was supposed to include in that a discussion of the disadvantages of it as well as the advantages. He said he couldn't find much on the disadvantages, so I tried to help by giving him these four:

1. Most humanistic approaches are really more interested in growth than adjustment or cure. This is paradoxical in a way, as everyone seems to assume that the object of therapy is to put someone right, but there you are. Someone with a focused problem such as fear of flying might do better to go to someone else. There are exceptions to this, as for example Rainer Sachse (1998) in Germany, but broadly this is true. I have written about this at greater length in the book I wrote with Michael Jacobs (2002), and also in my other book (2005) on the future of training in psychotherapy. Humanistic approaches are more interested in meeting people rather than in treating them.
2. Also, and this is really a rather similar point, the humanistic approach is always relational in its way of working. One of the best accounts of this is in the excellent book by Rich Hycner (1993), which I think is quite a beautiful account of this whole question. The classic is of course the magisterial book by Petruska Clarkson (1995,2003) which covers the question of the relationship from every angle. I have been writing about this myself recently (Rowan 2009, Chapter 5). There is a fine discussion of the whole question of intersubjectivity in the book by Rich Hycner and Lynne Jacobs (1995).
3. Most humanistic approaches are open-ended in the sense of wanting to stay with the person's actual presence and energy. They often try to teach the client to think also in this way. Someone who is impatient to know how many sessions it will take might do better to go somewhere else. I generally tell people to expect to keep coming for at least a year. The late Jim Bugental had a lot to say about this, making the point that if you get it right, psychotherapy can be a life-changing affair (Bugental 1987).
4. Many humanistic approaches are open to the idea that the problems of the person may be deeper than that person thinks, and that therefore it is not wise to accept the client's presenting issue as being the whole story. The client's goals might be just as neurotic as anything else they bring with them. Anyone who finds it threatening to believe that there might be more depth to them than they think at the moment might do well to stay away (May 1980). Research has

shown that if you give potential clients a list of things for which they might go to therapy, this is the lowest one on the list. But for the humanistic practitioner, finding the real person under all the pretences and self-images is a prime focus of activity. What a shame! What a nuisance!

REFERENCES

- Bugental, James W T (1987) *The art of the psychotherapist* New York: W W Norton
- Clarkson, Petruska (1995) *The therapeutic relationship* London: Whurr (2nd edition 2003)
- Hycner, Richard (1993) *Between person and person: Toward a dialogical psychotherapy* Highland: Gestalt Journal Press
- Hycner, Richard & Jacobs, Lynne (1995) *The healing relationship in gestalt therapy: A dialogic/self psychology approach* Highland: Gestalt Journal Press
- May, Rollo (1980) *Psychology and the human dilemma* New York: W W Norton
- Rowan, John (2005) *The future of training in psychotherapy and counselling* London: Routledge
- Rowan, John (2009) *Personification: Using the dialogical self in psychotherapy and counselling* Hove: Routledge
- Rowan, John & Jacobs, Michael (2002) *The therapist's use of self* Open University Press
- Sachse, Rainer (1998) 'Goal-oriented client-centred psychotherapy of psychosomatic disorders' in L S Greenberg, J C Watson & G Lietner (eds) *Handbook of experiential psychotherapy* New York: The Guilford Press

John has been a member of AHPB since 1970 and has written several books on humanistic psychology since then.

Humanistic day out!

Saturday October 10th

Andrew Samuels, Nick Totton, John Rowan, Jocelyn Chaplin

Humanistic values – needed now more than ever

Connaught Hall, Tavistock Square, London

10.00 am (for 10.30 start) – 4.30pm

Shared lunch

£50 (£40 members/ £40 concessions)

The workshop leaders have donated their time for AHPB

Booking enquiries: admin@ahpb.org.uk

Book through our website: www.ahpb.org.uk.

Cheques should be sent to

AHPB, BM Box 3582, London WC1N 3XX