

# The Past and Future of Humanistic Psychology

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## SYNOPSIS

In this article I declare my personal sympathy with aspects of Humanistic Psychology and state what I consider its strengths to be. I critique what I regard as its weaknesses – its lack of realism, lack of engagement with contemporary, harsh socio-economic realities, and some of its failures to live up to its promise. Humanistic Psychology may become a barely significant set of nostalgic theories and practices or yet find ways to bring its focus on birth, education, feelings and patriarchal civilisation to a new readership and public.

I don't want to spend too long on any tedious, definitional preamble (that comes at the end of this piece!). Instead, let me recount briefly what some of my associations with Humanistic Psychology are. Born in 1950, I grew up within the late hippie era. In my searching, late-teenage years, academic psychology was disappointingly about anything except human experience, just as Anglo-American philosophy was far too analytical, and even much existentialist philosophy escaped my grasp. But pacifist protest, rock music and drugs were everywhere. I was loosely involved, or interested in, yoga, meditation, existentialism, Zen, Gandhi, Krishnamurti, Hermann Hesse, Timothy Leary, Alan Watts, the Continuum Concept, peace, primal therapy, primal integration and (later) Mahrer's experiential psychotherapy. But I never quite belonged to the light and the good, reading Thomas Hardy (especially *Jude the Obscure*), Kafka, Camus, Henry Miller and others with rather too much negative pleasure. I was also never a joiner as such, but a loner and an outsider.

I wonder if Humanistic Psychology, like all similar movements and disciplines, has had its heyday of impact and spike of optimism, which is now past and in decline. I realise that I am for many of the things Humanistic Psychology and therapy stand for, but I am also against some, or rather I am doubtful about many, of its explanations even while

I may broadly support its aims. I still believe that ours is a damagingly patriarchal society that needs much more female influence and understanding of and respect for feelings, the body, children and the environment. But I do not share the optimistic belief that (all? – most? – some?) human beings are deeply autonomous, self-actualising and trustworthy. In my book *What's Wrong With Us? The Anthro-pathology Thesis* (Wiley, 2007) and in *Failure* (Acumen, 2012) in particular, I have outlined views about the ways in which I consider we are subject to entropic forces, negative evolutionary and genetic inclinations and capitalist threats. I think some practitioners of the humanistic therapies are perhaps stuck in a 1960s mindset of naivety and romantic optimism, and knee-jerk rejection of anything they think of as positivism and authoritarianism. If enough people trust their own organismic valuing process, primal or discharge away their inner distress, raise their children in a child-centred way, create local solidarity groups, meditate, dance, practise idiosyncratic spiritualities, eat the right things and recycle waste conscientiously, then all shall be well. Although I am obviously caricaturing here (and some, perhaps fairly, will think me cynical), there is some truth in the idea that most Humanistic Psychology/therapy is constituted by a simple set of optimistic values akin to religious faith, and is not

characterised by much radical, rigorous critical thinking.

Probably, some of my opposition to Humanistic Psychology (and all things bright and beautiful) results from deep incurable pathologies of my own, as well as my ageing process. Not for nothing have I been attracted to writers like Schopenhauer, Camus, Cioran, Beckett and Houellebecq. Temperamentally I am somewhat more Freudian (pessimistic) than Rogerian. I have to some extent 'done my own thing' in life but I have also compromised extensively, and wrestled only half-successfully with relationships, work and peace of mind. But my opposition also comes from disappointment, ongoing observations and wide reading. Janov's primal therapy (which I had in the late 1970s) was not nearly as successful as he claimed. Transactional Analysis did not remain simple and accessible for very long. Jackins' Re-evaluation Co-counselling did not really transform people or societies, and his biography casts serious doubts on him. Biographies about Krishnamurti too cast some doubts on his authenticity. My sons, raised in a positive, child-centred way, for all their good points, did not become anything like non-problematic, fully-functioning adults.

A great deal of writing on evolutionary psychology and deep history renders the shallow account of all psychologies suspect. The positive psychology and mindfulness movements in CBT seem to have hijacked part of the Humanistic Psychology agenda. Every other person I meet in the counselling/therapy field claims to be on a spiritual journey and yet remains inarticulate about what they actually mean. People involved for many years in humanistic therapy (indeed, in all therapies) did not stand out as significantly different from others in terms of freedom from neuroses, vanity and folly. Petruska Clarkson killed herself.

But I have never entirely shaken off the influence of Krishnamurti's simple, sincere teaching, nor of primal therapy's focus on feelings. Years in academia exercised my head but not my feelings, my attention to detail but not to large, obvious human problems. My current 'position' is roughly, highly concisely, as follows.

Human beings are evolved animals; many people still find this either unpalatable, or they do not really understand or accept it. In a nutshell, we humans retain all animals' need for food, and most of us also retain tendencies to be somewhat territorial, kin-protective and xenophobic, driven towards sex, with inflexible behavioural habits, and so on. The advent of complex human consciousness, symbolism and language led to something like a 'Fall'. For Ken Wilber this is a necessary dip, as it were, on the way to an awaited inevitable upward trend. For others, such as the primitivist-anarchist John Zerzan, our fall into agriculture, territoriality, patriarchy, symbolism, religion, etc. merely intensified via industry and technology in the last

few thousand years, to the point where it remains an open question whether we will destroy ourselves. Layers of self- and other-deception have not been greatly overturned by the psychotherapies, in spite of this being one of psychotherapy's main foci and proudest claims. Many people remain in the grip of irrational religions and other dubious systems of thought; and this problem is compounded by political correctness and postmodernism which fetishise and promote 'difference' and tend to silence deep investigation and authentic dialogue. What is called 'capitalist realism' (the thick milieu of monetary illusion, economic inequalities, addictive consumerism, dehumanising work and technologisation of the mind) shows no real sign yet of being much modified or overturned. As individuals (all 7 billion of us) we are probably far less autonomous and free than we like to think, being shaped by ancient historical forces and continuing political and economic factors that are arguably too big and complex for most of us to truly grasp and change. Now we are faced with potentially catastrophic climate change and international economic threats that we may well fail to meet effectively.

All the psychotherapies promote a concentration on the individual and the view that he or she can make effective changes in self and society. But this is not borne out by observation. No counselling or psychotherapy training course genuinely addresses in any depth the evolutionary, genetic, socio-economic, environmental and entropic forces stacked against us. Indeed, our field is much happier moving in a hazy spiritual or transpersonal direction than tackling these 'real world' domains. I think it is true that some of the deeper humanistic therapies address aspects of human dysfunction untouched by others, but not necessarily with great understanding or success, more often slipping into romantic and esoteric practices. What I would like to see is much more willingness to address all such themes, along with identifying what, if anything, is durable and promising about Humanistic Psychology.

To my mind, recognition of the damage of patriarchy is one such theme, to include the dangers of suppressing bodily and emotional needs. Others include consolidation of research on childbirth, birth trauma and its long-term effects; the damage done by competitive mass education; the psychology of greed and violence; the notion of 'radical honesty' (put forward by Brad Blanton) that promotes the values of authenticity and *parrhesia*; wider experimentation in dialogue in the manner of David Bohm; the possibility that something like an 'anthropathology-free' consciousness may be real and available to more than a handful of individuals like the Buddha, Jiddu Krishnamurti and U.G. Krishnamurti, Eckhart Tolle et al. (all of whom may or may not have

embodied such states). Humanistic Psychology still has some valuable proposals to bring to the table of research, practice and argument, but to do so it must be willing to think critically, to engage in interdisciplinary dialogue and to discard whatever is anachronistically redundant. And ultimately, do we need labels like 'Humanistic Psychology' any more than we need the labels of pathology?

One useful example of forward-moving psychology is Steven Pinker's recent book *The Better Angels of our Nature*, in which he demonstrates fairly convincingly that human violence of all kinds has declined significantly across the centuries, for diverse reasons. Pinker has some background in evolutionary psychology and uses statistics heavily in this book – factors which might alienate many Humanistic Psychology readers. Yet his message is extremely hopeful. It may take longer than we would like but we are becoming demonstrably more empathic and less violent as a species. Hopefully we will also gradually become less deceptive and greedy, and as much ashamed of these characteristics as we now are of violence against women and children, torture and capital punishment. Recent anti-capitalist protests focusing on bankers' excessive pay is one sign that deception and greed *might* be becoming significantly shameful.

Are there within the ranks of Humanistic Psychology people who can take on the challenge of research into radical human transformation? By this I refer to discoveries in the domain of freedom from anthropathology. Are there, as I intuit, links to be made between primal therapy and the kind of embodied 'mystical' states associated with Krishnamurti and others? I believe Janov, Reich and similar others took a wrong turn and came to premature conclusions about deep emotional and somatic access issues. I suspect that 'successful' deep primalling into an irreversibly innocent (pre-deceptive) state of human consciousness is currently a fortuitous reality granted only to a few gifted individuals, though I know that Tolle and some primal practitioners are much more optimistic about success in this area. Although I am sceptical about the claims of research on both meditation and primal phenomena, I think that here we potentially have Humanistic Psychology's equivalent of medicine's cancer research. Are these experiences real? Do they actually transform some people? Why do they fail with others? How can we learn from these questions? Can we put across such information in a way that scientists, politicians and the public can't ignore?

As things stand, Humanistic Psychology and therapy no doubt have some sort of future, but probably not one that is massively influential. Those who have played an active part in its development and retain faith in its potency may well

even regard it as thriving. On the pessimistic side I think we have to consider the possibility that it is now a relatively weak, minority-interest subject and practice sustained mainly by its committed or nostalgic elders and a handful of romantic enthusiasts. It has been eclipsed by the language-mesmerised intellectuals and the economically motivated technocrats and medicine men (e.g. proponents of postmodernist, social constructivist and Lacanian therapies, online therapy, CBT, psychopharmacology). Person-centred therapy and its tenets remain popular within some sections of the counselling world for mixed reasons: (1) because it appears to be 'easy' and 'nice' (my apologies at these observations, which I recognise as harsh but which I believe are necessary); and (2) because it appears to offer a form of attitudinal resistance to oppressive authoritarian trends and institutions.

I know this has been done before, but isn't there perhaps a need for a new humanistic (psychology) manifesto, spelling out values and aims for 2012 and beyond? The distinction between the confusing secular connotation of 'humanism' and Humanistic Psychology and psychopractice might finally be made clear. The precise relationship between Humanistic Psychology and the human potential movement likewise, but also consideration of views on the human condition, human nature, trans/post-humanism and the multiplicity of (not only Western) relevant anthropologies, might be focused upon. Acceptance of Humanistic Psychology as a noble-enough rag-bag of alternative lifestyles and modestly anti-establishment politics (if this is what it is) could be made explicit. Clarification of what still holds together the range of diverse therapies – Gestalt, Reichian, psychodrama, person-centred, Transactional Analysis, psychosynthesis, primal, existentialist, ecotherapy, etc. – under one identity could be a challenging task. It might also be accepted that in the irresistible *mêlée* of pluralism and entropy (what I think of as *neophilia within moribundancy*), some parts of Humanistic Psychology are moribund, some thriving, and some transmuting, even perhaps joining past enemies in new enterprises.

We certainly need some pro-humanising wedge between the dehumanising and irrational forces shaping our collective future. **6**



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