

Humanistic Psychology's Chief Task: To Reset Psychology on its Rightful Existential-Humanistic Base

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SYNOPSIS

This article examines professional psychology's shifting paradigms throughout the last 100 years, beginning with its roots in philosophy and concluding with its recent embrace of neuroscience. The main contention of this article is that the evolution of psychology is a philosophical as much as, if not more than, a scientific issue, and that the philosophical fashions of the given times tend to influence the focus of the profession. The author concludes that given this philosophical basis for psychological engagements, existential-humanistic philosophy can and should be the leading candidate for the emerging psychology of the future. In light of its holistic aims, it is argued that the existential-humanistic point of view provides the optimal opportunity to transform professional psychology from the narrow to the broad, and from the mechanical to the awe-based.

While some in the field continue to believe that psychology proceeds purely on the basis of positivistic science (e.g. Baker et al., 2008), I contend that this is patently naïve. Psychology was, and probably always will be, a philosophically based discipline. In this light, the field of psychology has actually been 'reset' many times over its relatively brief 100-year history, and this resetting has had as much to do with philosophical fashion as it has had to do with empirical evidence (see Kuhn, 1962).

The first time the field was reset was at the point where its standing as an explicit philosophy was replaced by its 'formalization' as an explicit laboratory science. This was the time when Wilhelm Wundt and his colleagues began basing psychology on the experimental method (or the philosophical approach of natural science) to evaluate laboratory findings. The second major time when psychology was reset was when psychoanalysis replaced laboratory science as the leading philosophical paradigm. This was a period, roughly the 1920s, when Freud and his colleagues emphasized the primacy of the so-called 'drive model' of human functioning over the conscious activities of laboratory investigation. The third major period of philosophical resetting was the usurpation of the psychoanalytic model by the behavioural model, where only overt and measurable human actions were considered the domain of legitimacy. The fourth major period of resetting was spearheaded by cognitive science, and the shift in emphasis from outward behavioural actions to inward informational processing. Now we are in a period where the predominant paradigm is quickly moving from cognitive science to neuroscience, from intellectual processes to behaviour-brain correlates.

So where does that bring us to at present? How should psychology be reset in the emerging era, and what role does that leave for Humanistic Psychology?

I believe that psychology should now be reset on its rightful base in existence. It is high time that psychology recognized what the great poets and thinkers the world over have recognized for centuries – that the main problem of the human being is the paradoxical problem: that we are both angels and food for worms; that we are suspended between constrictive and expansive worlds; and that we are both exhilarated and stupefied by this tension. The role this leaves for Humanistic Psychology is the role that William James so deftly set for it back in 1902. That was the year James wrote his book *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, calling for a radically empirical, experientially informed inquiry into the human being's engagement with the world (Taylor, 2010). I also believe that Humanistic Psychology's role today is commensurate with the existential-phenomenological-spiritual tradition of successors to William James (see Mendelowitz and Kim, 2010), exemplified by Paul Tillich (1952), Martin Buber (1970), Rollo May (1981), R.D. Laing (1969), Ernest Becker (1973), and many others who called for a new, 'whole-bodied' experience of inquiry and life. This whole-bodied psychology does not preclude other strands along its bandwidth, but it incorporates them as part of its awesome tableau.

In a nutshell, then: the chief task for Humanistic Psychology going forward is to reset psychology on its rightful existential-humanistic base. By 'rightful', I mean that if mainstream psychology is to become the field that Nietzsche once dubbed the 'queen of the sciences', if it

is to maximally apprehend lives and the transformation of lives, then it will need to show how mainstream psychology's present bases – cognitive, behavioural, and neuro-physiological – are wanting. It will need to show how one's relation to information processing, overt and measurable actions, and physio-chemical structures are but part-processes of an infinitely unfolding venture, a venture that comprises those part-processes, to be sure, but that also far exceeds them both in scope and consequence.

Consider, for example, how we have corrupted the term 'substrate' today. Substrate simply means underlying process or 'base on which an organism lives' (Webster's, 2003: 1246); and yet we have usurped the literal meaning of this term by reducing it to neurology. We have confused the physical base of organisms, e.g. 'neural substrates', with the phenomenological base of organisms – which is mystery. That is, the substrates of human behaviour are not merely traceable to a cell or a molecule or even an atom, but to an enigma that underlies all these overtly measurable processes – the groundlessness of existence. The groundlessness of existence is the *experiential* substrate of human behaviour/consciousness (see Schneider, 2013). The groundlessness of existence is the experiential base on which all things revolve, and we (that is, our mainstream culture, our profession) hardly ever speak of this problem, let alone acknowledge that it exists. Yet the substrates underlying neural substrates, the substrates that cause us the most problems and open us to the greatest possibilities – the 800 pound gorilla in our 'room' – is the groundlessness of existence.

I propose the following hypotheses. First: *most of our troubles as human beings can be traced to one overarching problem – our suspension in the groundlessness of existence.* Secondly, and a corollary to the first: *most of our joys, breakthroughs, and liberations can also be traced to our suspension in the groundlessness of existence.*

What is the rationale for these postulates? Just consider what we normally call 'psychopathology'. Consider what we experience following a great loss, or an illness, or a disruption. Consider the kinds of words we use to describe these upheavals – we feel the 'bottom has dropped out', that we have slipped into a 'black hole', that we are in 'free fall'. We feel 'crushed', 'sunk', or – in a word – 'groundless'. Further, consider how virtually all of these feelings drive us into 'disorders' characterized by our psychiatric manuals – e.g. depression, anxiety, mania and narcissism.

'I believe that psychology should now be reset on its rightful base.'



At the same time, consider what we experience when we can *confront* abysses of living, when we can sit with them, allow them to evolve, and potentially, incrementally, even become intrigued by them. How differently we can then experience the world; how fully we can then experience choice, possibility and poignancy, at every moment afforded to us.

That which I call 'awe-based' psychology is one possible inroad into the venture that I am speaking of (Schneider, 2004, 2009, 2013). By awe-based psychology, I mean a psychology that is grounded in humility and wonder – the adventure of living; and I mean a psychology that can radically enrich both *what* we discover, and *how we live* what we discover. Through awe-based psychology, we can impact every major sector of our lives, from child-rearing to education to the work setting to the governmental setting, and we can roundly enhance our science. Does this sound like a long-sought-after crossroad? Consider the following:

Mystery is a place where religion and science meet.

Dogma is a place where they part.

Awe-based psychology is a place where they can evolve and reunite.

Coda

We can talk until we're blue in the face about pat formulae and programmatic treatments. We can cite chemical imbalances in the brain, for example, or the lack of ability to regulate emotions, or the irrationality of conditioned thoughts as the bases for our disorders. However, until psychologists get down to the fundamental problem which fuels all these secondary conditions – our precariousness as creatures – they will be operating at a very restrictive level (and the results, I'm afraid, are all too evident in our society). The question needs to be continually raised: Is helping a person to change behaviour patterns and re-condition thoughts enough? Or do we owe it to that person to make available to him or her a deeper dimension of self-exploration? Do we owe it to that person to enable him or her to discover what really matters about his or her life, wherever that may lead? Do we owe it to his or her *society*? I believe so, and that the time for psychology to 'reset' is now. 📍



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Note

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