Opinion: How to Study Humanistic Psychology

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SYNOPSIS

One of the most important ideas which is being discussed at the moment is the notion of levels of consciousness. It is a deeply embarrassing notion, because it suggests that some people are further on in their mental development than others, and are actually thinking differently from the average. This is a disturbing idea for many people, because it seems to threaten the democratic ideal. Of course it does not. What I am trying to do in this article is to give evidence for the belief that Humanistic Psychology comes from, and relates to, a higher level of thought than the everyday thinking of black and white, yes or no, either/or, one or zero – and which is generally labelled as 'dialectical logic', or 'second-tier thought'. In this article I am trying to explore some of the facets of this conceptual jewel.

When I came to write the third edition of my book *Ordinary Ecstasy* (Rowan, 2001), I realized that it would have be radically revised. I had already realized (Rowan, 1995) that Humanistic Psychology was dialectical through and through, and that this needed to be recognized and underlined. I had come up with headings such as 'There is and is not a difference between counselling and psychotherapy'; 'We are and are not dealing with a distinct and separate individual'; 'We know and do not know how children develop'; 'We must and must not hold on to our model of the person as being the correct model'; 'We are and are not looking for the origins of disturbance in our clients'; 'We are and are not looking to see how the problems are being maintained in the present'; 'We are and are not concerned with cure'; 'We can and cannot take our own culture for granted'; 'Empathy is and is not a skill'; 'We must believe and disbelieve the client'; 'Integrative psychotherapy is and is not integrative'.

These realizations were buzzing round and round in my head, and I resolved to make this kind of thinking central to the new book. Luckily, this was just at the time when the Association for Humanistic Psychology (AHP) in the USA was about to put on a major conference called 'Old Saybrook 2', to celebrate and renew Humanistic Psychology for the new millennium. I was able to use my new ideas to inform the keynote speech for that conference. It had headings like: 'Humanistic Psychology is and is not psychology' and 'Humanistic Psychology is and is not optimistic'. And so the subtitle of the new edition had to be changed to 'The Dialectics of Humanistic Psychology'.

Something odd happened at the Old Saybrook 2 conference. People from outside the conference were invited to the keynote speech, so the audience was quite large. But instead of people rising to their feet at the end, shouting and whistling, there was quite a quiet reception. And in the account of the conference which was subsequently published, there was no mention of the keynote speech at all. So I have tentatively come to the conclusion that humanistic people do not like to be told that they are dialectical thinkers through and through. But let me try to do it anyway.

In studying Humanistic Psychology, it is important, in my view, to use the right logical approach. According to this view, there is one form of logic which is quite unsuitable, and one which is highly suitable. The importance of this is that Humanistic Psychology can either be a leader in social-science study, or can lag behind and never fulfil its early promise.

The two kinds of logic I am referring to are conveniently known as 'first-tier' and 'second-tier' thinking. Let us look at each of these in turn.

First-tier Thinking

The basic idea of levels of consciousness as something scientific and testable comes from Piaget (1954): he distinguished between the earliest sensori-physical level; the preoperational, which is preoccupied with mastery, but is incapable, for example, of arranging a set of sticks of different lengths in an order of length; the level of concrete operations, which brings the ability to take the role of the other; and of formal operations, where we acquire the ability to engage in hypothetico-deductive thinking.

All four of these levels fall within what we now call *first-tier thinking*. Then came Maslow (1987), who gave the first level as preoccupied with safety, defence against danger, fight or flight, and fear; the second level as effectance, mastery, imposed control, blame and retaliation and domination; the third as love and belongingness, need for affection, need for acceptance, need for tenderness; and the fourth as a need for respect from others, social status and recognition. Then came Kohlberg (1984) with his research on morality, where he found the first level to be concerned with obedience and punishment, deference to superior power, external and eternal rules, musts and shoulds; the second to be concerned with instrumental hedonism, naive egocentrism, a horse-trading approach and selfishness; the third to be concerned with a good-boy (good-girl) morality, seeking social approval and liking to be liked; and the fourth to be concerned with law and order, authority maintenance, fixed social rules, doing duty, and so on. At the same time we have Jane Loevinger (1998), with her research on ego development. These results and others are illustrated in three figures (obtainable from the editors on request – eds), showing how similar are the findings from all these systems of research, sometimes extending over many years.

Let us now just look at level 4. At this level we have acquired the idea of rationality as a prime value. This represents perhaps the most common level in our present society, at least in the West, and increasingly in the East. It regards science as the pinnacle of human mental development. And it has to be noted that its view of science is of something completely objective. It has powerful methods of checking as to whether something is true or false. It also regards this as the pinnacle of mental achievement.

What we have found in recent years, however, is that this view of science has been shown to be inadequate in relation to human beings, and to be based on a narrow philosophical doctrine called 'positivism'. This outlook works fine for things, but not for people. There is a good discussion of all this in Mertens (1998), who also discusses post-positivism and other positions.

When we are first introduced to the idea of rationality, we are told that it is based on logic. We are then taught the laws of thought, derived from the logic first outlined by Aristotle, and later used or elaborated by Newton, Descartes, Boole and others, and modelled in the Babbage logic engine, which became the basis of the modern computer. It starts from 'A is A', and carries on from there. It comes from a state of consciousness which Wilber (2000) calls the Mental Ego. It is extremely popular and useful, and is used in a wide range of activities. If we take a course in logic, this is what we are taught: it includes phenomena like the syllogism, the law of excluded middle, and so forth. We now call this 'First Tier thinking'. (Incidentally, I took an A-Level examination in this form of logic, and achieved good marks!)

Research in many different countries has shown that Wilber's Mental Ego level of consciousness corresponds to the level of 'Esteem from Others' in Maslow, 'Conformist' in Loevinger, 'Law and Order' in Kohlberg, 'Achievement or Affiliation' in Wade, 'Conscientious' in Cook-Greuter and the 'Inauthentic' in Heidegger (1962). At this level of consciousness we look to others to define us, and to reward us for playing our roles correctly. We use a kind of logic which has been described above, and we think that rationality is the prime value, and define that by these forms of logic. We are also dedicated to preserving and enhancing our self-image. This is the most common form of consciousness in Western society.

What is the relevance of this to Humanistic Psychology? It is that this form of thought is limited to the simply yes/no logic on which the computer is founded, and which positivism endorses fully. It will not do for the more advanced thinking which we need for carrying forward Humanistic Psychology. For that we need Second-Tier thinking, which Wilber calls 'the existential level', the 'authentic level' or the 'Centaur level' of consciousness.

What is the difference between this way of thought and the Mental Ego thinking which precedes it?

Second-tier Thinking

We do not have to take Wilber's definition of the Centaur as definitive, but in research terms it corresponds to the level of 'Self-Actualization' in Maslow, 'Individualist' in Cook-Greuter, 'Autonomous' in Loevinger, 'Individual Principles' in Kohlberg, 'Authentic' in Wade (1996), and so on. At this level, a form of thought emerges which Wilber calls 'vision-logic', and which is more usually called dialectical logic. This is a way of thinking that does more justice to the paradoxical nature of reality, as I have argued at some length elsewhere (Rowan, 2000). One of the key features of Centaur consciousness is that the person has worked through their Shadow material and fully owned their own body.

So what is the point of distinguishing between the Mental Ego and the Centaur? The Buddhists do not bother to do this for the most part, lumping them both together as the Gross. But for a therapist it is essential to make this distinction, because the struggle of many clients is to move from the Mental Ego, where they are at the mercy of others who can define and control them, and hidden internal assumptions which can define and control them, to the Centaur level, where they can be free of these constraints.

The best way of going from Mental Ego consciousness to Centaur consciousness is through counselling or psychotherapy, because it is a process which involves dealing with the Shadow. The Shadow comprises all those assumptions of the Mental Ego which are false or compulsive. The journey is basically one of defensiveness to non-defensiveness, or from closedness to openness, or from inauthenticity to authenticity.

Table 1: The Mental Ego versus the Centaur

MENTAL EGO	CENTAUR
Happy to play a role	Critiques the whole idea of roles
Wants to know other people's opinions	Not interested in opinions
Sees through other people's eyes	Sees through own eyes
Needs support all the time	Needs little support
Needs praise	Likes praise
Brought down by criticism	Meets criticism positively
The power is outside	The power is inside
The world is full of challenges	The world is full of opportunities
Crippled by failure	Energized by failure
Standards come from outside	Has internal gyroscope
Likes to follow the known path	Likes to be creative
Needs to be liked	Likes to be liked
Perception distorted by social needs	Clear perception
Prone to guilt, shame, anxiety	Self-acceptance
Cautious	Spontaneous
Ego or close group centred	World-centred
Fear of solitude	Likes solitude
No peak experiences	Some peak experiences
Fearful of others	Respectful of others
No real intimacy	Capable of intimacy
Humour is often hostile	Humour is not hostile
Creativity is difficult	Creativity is easy
Conforms to culture	Can see through culture
Likes either–or thinking	Sees through either–or positions
Many internal splits	Few internal splits
Defensive	Non-defensive
Logic is Aristotelian, Boolean, Newtonian	Vision-logic, logic of paradox
Struggle to find a centre	Centre is in here

Heidegger calls 'First-tier thinking', the realm of the They, the type of consciousness shared by the multitude, the majority. It is sometimes called the 'consensus trance'. It may be of interest to look in more detail at a comparison between the Mental Ego and the Centaur. Suppose that we drew up a list of the differences between the two – what would that look like? Using a technique which I call Dialogical Self Research (Rowan, 2011), I produced **Table 1**.

Now there is a potential danger with Dialogical Self Research that it may be too narrow, and in that way fail to do justice to the material at hand. It is always, therefore, reassuring when we find that someone else, using a different approach, has discovered much the same thing. In a book on therapy in the person-centred tradition, I found **Table 2**.

Although the context is different, the similarity is striking. Let us now move on.

TABLE 2: Difference in Functioning in the Two Self-states

'ME'	'I'
Socially defined self	Personally defined self
Behaviour guided by incorporated social standards	Goals set by own values
Morality defined by society	Morality based on personal values
Agenda for what has to be done set by society	Agenda set by self
Enables problem solution according to social standards	New, creative solutions
Repository of social knowledge and expectations	Contains self-knowledge
Provides social viewpoint in line with assimilated social values, attitudes and interactions	Reacts creatively to 'me'
Passive recipient or reactive self	Proactive
Concerned with past and future	Experiencing the present
Focus on others	Focus on self
Lives in roles	Acts from present personal values
Negative feelings and distress occur as a result of judgement of others	Distress occurs as a result of not meeting own goals

(from Zimring, 2001: 92)

Intermediate

There are many of these alternatives, such as fuzzy logic, many-valued logic, linear logic, infinitary logic, free logic, non-linear (non-monotonic) logic, and process logic (Kirkham, 1992). My attention here is not to focus on these, but it is important to be aware of them.

Dialectics is a form of thought which goes back a long way. In the West, Heraclitus in Ancient Greece was aware of it, and in the East there are a number of thinkers who practised it, the *Tao-Te-Ching* being a good example of dialectical writing. Dialectics is not the same as *dialogue*, and the Ancient Greeks, for example, were not dialectical thinkers in the modern sense, even though they were very interested in dialogue. In more recent times the greatest exponent of dialectics is of course Hegel: 'vision-logic evolutionarily became conscious of itself in Hegel' (Wilber, 1998: 132). Many Leftists followed Hegel's example; the most famous of these was Marx, though Engels and Lenin actually made more use of it, and Mao Zedong made good contributions too. The British Hegelians, such as F.H. Bradley and Bernard Bosanquet, were more right-wing politically, so there is nothing essentially left-wing about dialectics. Adorno (1973) and others emphasized negative dialectics.

The first characteristic of dialectical thinking is that it places all the emphasis on *change*. Instead of talking about static structures, it talks about process and movement. Hence it is in line with all those philosophies which say – 'Let's not pretend we can fix what we perceive now and label it and turn it into something stiff and immutable; let's look instead at how it changes.' So it denies much of the usefulness of formal logic, which starts from the proposition that 'A is A, and is nothing but A'. For dialectics, the corresponding proposition is 'A is not simply A'. This is even true for things, but much more obviously true for people. For therapists, it is essential: if I say that 'Andrew is Andrew', that is instantly a limiting assumption; but if I say that 'Andrew is not simply Andrew', that gives me an incentive to explore further the realm of possibilities that is Andrew.

But the second characteristic, which sets it apart from any philosophy which emphasizes smooth continuous change or progress, is that it states that the way change takes place is through *conflict* and *opposition*. Dialectics is always looking for the contradictions within people or situations as the main guide to what is going on and what is likely to happen.

There are in fact three main propositions which are put forward about opposites and contradictions.

1. ***The interdependence of opposites:*** This is the easiest thing to see: opposites depend on one another. It wouldn't make sense to talk about darkness if there were no such thing as light. I really start to understand my love at the moment when I permit myself to understand my hate. In practice, each member of a polar opposition seems to need the other to make it what it is.
2. ***The interpenetration of opposites:*** Here we

see that opposites can be found within each other. Just because light is relative to darkness, there is some light in every darkness, and some darkness in every light. There is some hate in every love, and some love in every hate. If we look into one thing hard enough, we can always find its opposite right there. To see this frees us from the 'either–or' which can be so oppressive and so stuck. Mary Parker Follett (Graham, 1995), a great and recently rediscovered writer on management who was a closet Hegelian, used to say – 'Never let yourself be bullied by an either–or'.

3. ***The unity of opposites:*** So far we have been talking about relative opposites. But dialectics goes on to say that if we take an opposite to its very ultimate extreme, and make it absolute, it actually turns into its opposite. Thus, if we make darkness absolute, we are blind – we can't see anything. And if we make light absolute, we are equally blind and unable to see. In psychology, the equivalent of this is to idealize something. So if we take love to its extreme, and idealize it, we get morbid dependence, where our whole existence depends completely on the other person. And if we take hate to its extreme, and idealize it, we get morbid counter-dependence, where our whole existence again depends completely on the other person. This appreciation of paradox is one of the strengths of the dialectical approach, which makes it more flexible, in some respects, than linear logic.

A good symbol for these three processes is the Yin–Yang symbol of Taoism. The interdependence of opposites is shown in each half being defined by the contours of the other. The interpenetration of opposites is expressed by having a black spot in the innermost centre of the white area, and a white spot in the innermost centre of the black area. The unity of opposites is shown by the circle surrounding the symbol, which expresses total unity and unbroken serenity in and through all the seeming opposition. It is, after all, one symbol.

Practical Implications

The lessons of the dialectic are hard ones. It tells us that any value we have, if held to in a one-sided way, will become an illusion. We shall try to take it as excluding its opposite, but really it will include it. And if we take it to its extreme, and idealize it, it will turn into its opposite. So peace and love, cosmic harmony, the pursuit of happiness and all the rest are doomed, if held to in this exclusive way. This is of course what constructivism also says, but from a different angle.

The only values which will be truly stable and coherent are those which include opposition rather than excluding it. And all such values appear to be nonsense, because they must contain paradoxes. Bakhtin (1984) argued that in Dostoyevsky we find this thinking applied to novel writing, where it is possible to enter into the consciousness of different, and even totally opposed, characters. As a psychotherapist I have practised Humanistic Psychology, which comes from existentialist and phenomenological roots, but also incorporates dialectical thinking. It takes from Hegel, Goldstein and Maslow the concept of self-actualization, and this is one of those paradoxical concepts that are so characteristic of dialectical thinking. The concept of the self is self-contradictory, paradoxical and absurd. The self is at the same time intensely personal and completely impersonal; completely individual and just part of a field. And this is why, when we contact the self in a peak experience, our description of what happened is invariably a paradoxical one. When put into words, it breaks out of the realm of common sense. The whole idea of a peak experience, where we get taken out of ourselves into the realm of ecstasy, was written about at length by Maslow (1987), one of the few thinkers able to do it justice.

There is a logic of paradox, which enables the intellect to handle it without getting phased, and its name is the dialectic. It is complex because it involves holding the spring doors of the mind open – hence it often tries to say everything at once. But it shows how we do not have to give up in the face of paradox and abandon the intellect as a hopeless case. Slavoj Žižek (1993) has written very well about the importance of Hegel in understanding this material. And Bakhtin (1984) was well acquainted with this method of thinking, brought up, as he was, in a Marxist culture, where it was everyday to speak of such things.

How does one actually use dialectical thinking in everyday life? Some say that dialectics is not for everyday life at all – it has to do with 'ideas of the horizon' where we are dealing with concepts that are at the very limits of human thought. For everyday life, they say, formal logic is good enough. But I think Humanistic Psychology has shown us that you can use dialectical thinking even for walking, or driving, or eating, or playing tennis, or any other everyday activity (Rowan, 2003). Here are some of the principles of the dialectic for both Humanistic Psychology

and, I believe, practical philosophy.

Principle 1: TAKE NOTHING FOR GRANTED

This is one of the most important principles of Humanistic Psychology. All the time one is questioning the fixed categories, the rigid 'shoulds', the congealed knowledge that stops one seeing the world. Our beliefs are the greatest obstacle to clear perception, and the more we can unfocus from them, the more we can let in. **Fritz Perls**, one of the classic humanistic writers, was particularly clear about this.

Principle 2: THE IMPORTANCE OF SPONTANEITY

Again a crucial concept, which dialectical thinking makes easy to understand and easy to do, intellectually, emotionally and intuitively. Spontaneity is obviously a paradoxical quality, which you can only aim at by letting go. The great writer about this was **Jacob Moreno**, another exponent of Humanistic Psychology. In recent times there have been many writers on games and sports who have made use of such insights.

Principle 3: THE TRANSFORMATION OF QUANTITY INTO QUALITY

This important idea states that by simply adding things, we can eventually arrive at something quite different. In therapy, going intensively into one side of a conflict often brings us more vividly into the other; and if we push the whole conflict hard enough and far enough, a whole new vision may appear. Gestalt therapy is particularly good on this, and the work of Beisser (1970) is often quoted here. But psychoanalysts like Aaron Esterson (1972) have also used such ideas.

Breaking Patterns

So the main practical application of the dialectic is in breaking fixed patterns of thought and behaviour. Every time you adopt a regular and unaware pattern of washing, dressing, eating and so on, you are avoiding reality. But if awareness of these activities increases, the amount of play involved in them is also likely to increase. Taking responsibility for our actions is choosing our life, and this usually feels good. You can be responsible and playful at the same time, and this is one of the paradoxes in which dialectics delights. Carl Rogers used to write about this particularly well; James Bugental and Alvin Mahrer were other writers in the humanistic-existential tradition who made much of it. In management theory Mary Parker Follett (Graham, 1995) made it central in her thinking.

In recent years, there has been much more interest in dialectical thinking, perhaps led by the important book by Michael Basseches (1984), which presented the philosophical argument, the research methodology for recognizing elements and examples of dialectical thinking and assessing individuals' capacity for dialectical thought, and the empirical findings, all of which supported his claim that dialectical thinking represents an important stage in development, which is, on the one hand, normal and, on the other hand, quite rare. He makes a careful distinction between a dialectical solution and a relativistic solution to problems; and this is also one of the points made in Harris (1987).

Basseches bases himself on the Hegelian position, but others prefer to go by Fichte's version. For example, Valsiner and Cabell (2012) point out that the sequence thesis–antithesis–synthesis, often regarded as the heart of the dialectical position, comes from Fichte rather than from Hegel. Verhofstadt-Deneve (2012) seems to prefer Hegel, but also refers to Fichte. In all these cases, however, the writers are taking these ideas forward and using them very creatively, rather than simply referring back to earlier thinkers. It seems clear that dialectics is very much alive, particularly in the work, of course, of Slavoj Žižek (1993), who has argued very forcibly that the German Idealist tradition still has much to offer us in thinking about the world and its changes. Otto Laske (2009) is now offering courses in dialectical thinking on the website at www.interdevelopmentals.org, which is quite up to date, and falls in with the views of Manzo (1992).

Conclusion

Work still needs to be done in persuading the public that Humanistic Psychology belongs to the Centaur level of consciousness, as described by Ken Wilber. This means that it can only be properly described, only be properly explored, only be properly explained, in terms of dialectical logic. In this essay I have tried to explore the implications of this unfamiliar view. It is in a way a hard doctrine, because people in general seem to be quite hostile to the idea that there might be anything like alternative levels of consciousness, different from the customary logic of Aristotle, Newton and Boole. Nobody talks about this, nobody acknowledges this, nobody explores the implications of this: but in this essay that is just what I have tried to do.

So to sum up, what I am arguing is that in studying the world as Humanistic Psychology tries to do, first-tier thinking, on its own, is seldom enough. We need to use

second-tier thinking as well and, indeed, for much of the time, in order to deal with the complexities of our current world. ❺

John Rowan is well known as a humanistic therapist and writer, and has also done a good deal of work in the transpersonal area. His more recent efforts in the area of the Dialogical Self have borne fruit both in his work and in his writing. John is a Fellow of the British Psychological Society, and also of the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy and the UK Council for Psychotherapy. He has consistently pushed for more attention to the Primal and to the Transpersonal, which he has dubbed 'the Terrible Twins of Therapy'. His most recent book is *Personification: Using the Dialogical Self in Psychotherapy and Counselling.*

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