Retro Review Classics

Review by **David Murphy**, School of Education, University of Nottingham,
and former editor of *Self & Society*

Ordinary Ecstasy: The Dialectics of Humanistic Psychology (3rd edn)

By: John Rowan, Brunner-Routledge, Hove, 2001
ISBN: 978-0415236331, 304 pp

What a pleasure it is to be invited to review this book for the *Festschrift* to recognize the contribution that John Rowan has made to Humanistic Psychology. In 1992 I started studying a B.Sc. in Applied Psychology at what had until then been Liverpool Polytechnic, but had just become Liverpool John Moores University. I was 22 and in search for a better way, to lead a 'good life', and was hopeful of finding something to help me along the way. I thought that reading psychology would help to that end. I was lucky. When I arrived at Liverpool, I found there was a team of psychologists there who were interested and very involved in the study of subjects such as consciousness, psychology of religion, psychology of personal being, and counselling and psychotherapy. Les Lancaster, Mike Daniels, Dave Parker, Pam James and Nora Hart are a few names I remember.

Most interesting of all to me was the focus within the programme on Humanistic Psychology. On all of the elective courses that I studied there was one name that was a constant, a British psychologist called John Rowan. I read and enjoyed all of his books, and would refer to them in my essays. So, when I got to meet John, it was a big deal for me to sit around the table at the AHP Board meeting when John was co-chair. I was then co-editor of *Self & Society*. John and I had a brief conversation during the lunch break, and as we talked the conversation strayed on to the idea that Humanistic Psychology had been somewhat hijacked by the New Age movement. John seemed sure that this had been to the detriment of Humanistic Psychology in the UK. It's the only time I've met John, so having the chance to write this seems a real gift.

So, a number of years on when I receive the invitation to review one of John's books for *S&S*, how could I refuse? I couldn't, so I agreed, and the editors assure me that a gratis copy of the book for review will arrive soon. True enough, a few days later a package arrived in the reception area and I go to collect it. I get back to my office where I open the package. Blam!! My eyes are virtually watering. The pungent smell of incense and essential oils blasts into my nostrils. I breathe in the aroma. I thought, what's in this package? And as I slipped my hand in and removed it, I pulled out a second-hand copy of *Ordinary Ecstasy*! I smiled to myself. I had the image of John's book sitting on the dashboard of a smoke-filled, bashed-up, camper van travelling around and 'spreading the word'. Is this really what all that work had been for?

Ordinary Ecstasy is a substantial book, and one that every student and Humanistic Psychology practitioner could benefit from reading. The scope is really quite something. Now in its third edition, this book is just shy of 300 pages. Within those pages is an excellent analysis of the development, contribution and potential of Humanistic Psychology. The book begins with an outline of dialectics and its place in Humanistic Psychology. Following this is a history of the development and introduction to some of the main ideas and thinkers in the field. References are present in abundance, and this shows not only John's extensive knowledge and experience in the field, but also provides an opportunity for those not as familiar with the literature with a great resource to help 'sniff out' other excellent and important texts.

Following this are several chapters contained within a section devoted to the application of Humanistic Psychology. First is a chapter on counselling in which tribute is paid to Carl Rogers' work in the field. Then come two chapters on psychotherapy, beginning with an outline of Gestalt therapy and also an updated account of experiential psychotherapies, including Gendlin's Focusing-oriented Therapy, and Greenberg, Rice and Elliott's Emotion-focused Therapy. These additions show John's dedication to keep himself updated of developments in the field, and illustrates how his finger has always been on the pulse.

The second chapter on psychotherapy focuses on body work, a key but often overlooked aspect within

Humanistic Psychology. As I read this chapter I recalled once reading an entry on John's website where he'd simulated his own death and dramatized being at his own wake. John reported this to be an overwhelming experience, and reflected on how it somewhat transformed his fear of death. I also wondered when reading if it would have also enabled a feeling of being much more alive, and in the body.

Following on from this is a chapter on group work that again is comprehensive, outlining the different phases of, and styles in, the development of humanistic group work. This year I was fortunate to be part of the Association for the Development of the Person-Centred Approach (ADPCA) conference in Nottingham. It was a five-day conference; totally unstructured and non-directive. There was no pre-arranged agenda, no keynote speakers and no conference leaders/facilitators. The venue was booked and people turned up, over 100 of them. Much of what John refers to in the chapter I have witnessed at encounter-style conferences. The power of the humanistic group-work movement does seem to have become something less readily available and accessible today than it was some time ago. John's chapter on this made me think that this is clearly an under-developed aspect of our approach.

Next come two excellent chapters on education, and training and organizations. Each of these shows the power of Humanistic Psychology for everyday life. As we are all educated in some form, and are inevitably joined in some way or other to organizations, the chapter provides both a resource for guiding and developing healthy, whole and constructive systems that can be growth promoting. When reading this book, and particularly these two chapters, it made be very aware of how narrowly focused on psychotherapy Humanistic Psychology has become. Today it seems that positive psychology is the 'new kid on the block', and we'd do well to present the likes of John's books to that community – and say – 'Look, we already said that!'

Concluding the section, there are chapters on the transpersonal, and on gender and sexuality. Again these two chapters show how broad John's knowledge is in the application of Humanistic Psychology, and the content of these chapters could be highly relevant today to all psychologists with an interest in the discipline. However, there is one criticism I would mention. The presentation on Ken Wilber throughout the book seems to me to be at least in part something of a contradiction, or perhaps this is a dialectic, such as the title hints at. A work such as that offered by Wilber being presented in the book in a serious manner seems to almost contradict John's concern with the New Age hijacking of Humanistic Psychology. Although I'm sure John would disagree, it seems to me that that's exactly what Wilber is guilty of doing.

The book ends with a final section that contains chapters on society, the self and the future of Humanistic Psychology. The renaissance of Humanistic Psychology, if that is actually what is happening, is no doubt still able to learn from the work of John Rowan. This book in particular, and John's work taken as a whole, without doubt places him as one of, if not ***the*** most prominent of British humanistic psychologists. I recommend that anyone who has not read this book, or has not read it for some time, should get a copy. It's packed full of great theory and application. There's a host of references to follow up, and John's sense of humour comes through in abundance. This makes the book an enjoyable yet substantial contribution to the field of Humanistic Psychology.

A 'Look-back' Review by **Dr James Traeger**

Human Inquiry: A Sourcebook of New Paradigm Research

Edited by: Peter Reason and John Rowan, John Wiley, Chichester, 1981
ISBN-13: 978-0471279365, 554 pp

Researchers Stirred into an Embodied Awakening

As I start shaping this review, I am sitting on my own in the library at Ashridge, reflecting on the last couple of days. I have been participating as a part of Faculty in a 'Doctoral Transfer Viva', wherein the students attending the Ashridge Doctorate in Organizational Change (ADOC) are passing through an important gateway in their research and studies. The feeling I have is one of tiredness and elation. In the last 24 hours, I have had at least ten

incredibly rich conversations with people whose change practice dwells in corporations and communities located across the globe. As well as the inspiring and humbling stories of human flourishing edging its way forward, I feel part of a multi-coloured architecture of synchronicity – marvelling at the sheer humanity of overlapping stories between worlds that rarely have such a chance to meet, intermingle and coalesce.

What has this got to do with the book *Human Inquiry*? Because the life-world we hold open at Ashridge is a direct descendant of, and I hope the fulfilment of, some of the dreams of those pioneers of alternative ways of knowing and practising that were its authors and contributors. Those people are still the significant reference points by which these students steer. These are the stars in their firmament. This is both exhilarating and troubling. Did the men (for they were mostly men) who set out their stall in 1981 hope to be reified in the writings of the class of 2015? Was this a primary purpose, or a by-product that demonstrates the quality of their work? Nevertheless, if you trace back this river of reflection, *Human Inquiry* stakes a legitimate claim as one of its primary sources.

As Hilary Bradbury said, in response to my request for a comment:

> Peter Reason's work with John Rowan and the 'Human Inquiry' paradigm led to the development of the *Handbook of Action Research* which has been a bestseller (in the small potatoes of academic best selling), and perhaps more importantly has helped to co-ordinate many 'camps' under a 'big tent' to offer an alternative to conventional social science. The link, then, is that Peter was deeply influenced by *Human Inquiry*, and then he and I co-edited the *Handbook of Action Research* (and I am editing the 3rd edition, now that Peter Reason has retired). Also interesting – perhaps! – is that the vision statement for the related Action Research journal (that Peter and I co-founded, and which I now edit) is 'Re-enchanting Knowledge Creation for a Flourishing World'. In looking back at the *Human Inquiry* book, it makes sense to also look forward to what it helped generate. (Bradbury, 2014)

In the same way as it is said that psychology of the twentieth century was a series of footnotes to Freud, if you look at what many action researchers seem to write about these days, as they grasp the nettle of participatory social research, the same names recur: Reason, Marshall, Heron, Moustakas, Torbert, Rowan. Why is that? Is it just because this work is good, or was it that they intended it would be so? Indeed, this change game needs a bit of ambition.

When I was asked to write this 'look-back review', being the well-behaved action researcher I claim to be, I did some asking around. 'What impact did this book have, for you?', I asked, across several communities with which I am in touch. A few returned me blank looks. There was much email silence. One or two responses were quite fiery (see further on), but most who responded were misty eyed. With a kind of far-away look, they typically said: 'This was the first book I ever read on action research. I never looked back after that. Suddenly it felt like I had a home.' And yet, interestingly, if you asked them which chapter or writing was most significant, they often couldn't quite put their finger on it. It was as if the book itself represented a kind of meme, and that was all the permission they needed. To know that there were people out there, clever people, who knew about philosophy and stuff, and who had constructed together an intellectually credible and compassionate alternative to the traditional worldview of how we come to know about the ways things work in the human world, and could use words like 'epistemology' without looking daft, was permission enough. That seems to have been the purpose of this book. It has served that end durably.

Yet when asked to look at it again, for the purposes of this review, and I revisited my own underlining and marginal scribbles, what jumped out was a visceral rather than an intellectual response. In the chapter by John Rowan, entitled '*From Anxiety to Method in the Social Sciences*, by George Devereux, An Appreciation', I notice: 'Where does subjectivity begin and end?' (p. 79) The word 'subjectivity' is so underscored that the paper is nearly worn through.

Further on, Rowan, where he quotes Devereux directly: '[the researcher] allows a disturbance to be created within himself and then studies this disturbance even more carefully than he studies the [subject's] utterances' (p. 81). Next to the indented paragraph I have manically scribbled, 'Yes! Self as Instrument!'

Many pages are similarly thumbed, stained and scrawled. It is a book, yes, but in its patina is the evidence of bodies, exultant, sweating and straining, sometimes even a bit bored, but inspired nonetheless. My copy was a second-hand purchase. A nameless owner before me had furiously circled Peter Reason's citation of Paul Diesing in his appreciation of the latter's *Patterns of Discovery in the Social Science*: '[the holistic approach] exhibits the most respect for human dignity and freedom because it enables a person to work with, not on, his case, to treat him (or them) as fellow human beings rather than as

things' (p. 189).

Others too, when they looked back, noticed their emerging confidence embodied on the page. From the USA, Lyle Yorks, wrote this in response to my inquiry:

> Even as I write this I am looking at my original copy and all the highlighted paragraphs in various chapters. For example, the lead sentence in Chapter 10 by Rowan and Reason: 'Much of the argument presented in this book is that a true human inquiry needs to be based firmly in the experience of those it purports to understand, to involve a collaboration between "research" and "subjects" so that they may work together as co-researchers, and to be intimately involved in the lives and praxis of these co-researchers.' How initially challenging were those ideas. The implications for experiential learning were substantial for the field of Adult and Organizational Learning. (Yorks, 2014)

All of this highlighting, doodling and scratching speaks of bodies like my own, stirred into an important awakening.

There are those, of course, who see the book as flawed in ways that were hardly forgivable. Peter Reason himself, in his account of the days when he and John Rowan were formulating the book (published in this edition of *Self & Society*), admitted:

> But we didn't get it all right. One problem arose around gender. We were writing at a time when feminist consciousness was high, with a men's response beginning to find a voice in workshops and journals such as *Achilles Heel*. John and I were both very aware that we were privileged men, and had long discussions about how to make the language of the book gender-neutral (which was a point of great contention in those days). We sent a copy of the outline to the feminist scholar Helen Callaway, who remarked that since it had so few women contributors, it looked more like another book of male inquiry than human inquiry. How right she was... it was an embarrassing and sobering moment.

Returning to the theme of ambition, there were others, like Denis Postle, who saw the publication of the book as marking the point where the academic rot set in:

> Having learned co-operative inquiry in the room with John Heron and a lot of other people... that happened to include Peter [Reason], I didn't much use the book. My shorthand take on the book, without opening it again, is that it began the professionalization of a vernacular process that would have had a lot more value if it had been seen, say, as some kind of extension/enhancement of co-counselling. Instead, it became the basis for an academically framed mini-industry with potent practice yes, but as an enclosure in academia, i.e. as I see it now, what could have fed the common weal became locked up, captured, by the uni [sic] (even if, as I recall, they didn't want it!). (Postle, 2014)

But perhaps it is overly harsh to suggest that the academic enclosure of a kind of inquiring commons that Denis Postle sees the book representing was the purpose of the ambition of those who were involved in it. Even John Heron looked askance at the factorization of processes like Co-operative Inquiry, as we witness in this illuminating vignette from Josie Gregory:

> It was one of the first books I bought when I joined the staff of HPRG [the 'Human Potential Research Project', founded by John Heron] in Surrey in 1990, and I still have it. As the module research tutor on CASS ['Change Agency Skills & Strategies', the course that Heron's original programme at Surrey morphed into], I used the book for the dissertation research. However I invited John Heron over to Surrey for an annual CASS research day in about 2000, and when one of the students told him she was using the *Human Inquiry* book, as her methodology was Co-operative Inquiry, he looked at her and me with some disbelief and said, 'How can you possibly do co-operative inquiry if you are allowing other people, like the University hierarchy, including your tutors, to assess your work and decide if it's good enough? You have no power of decision in their judgements.'
>
> Heron's. like Rowan's passion was on the balance of political power in the educational process. They were radical in their quest for emancipatory education, demonstrated most vividly with the self and peer assessment processes they developed. Since that encounter I have never encouraged a student to use Co-operative Inquiry for their dissertation research. (Gregory, 2014)

This speaks of the spirit in these pages, one that is paradoxically troubled and indefatigable. I remember once Peter Reason came into a seminar, during the early stages of my own Ph.D. process at the Centre for Action Research (CARPP) at the University of Bath. Apparently, the evening before, he had seen 'The Crucible', by Arthur Miller. In the usual round of morning 'check-ins', I remember him saying, 'I saw "The Crucible" last night, and it made me wonder, what on earth are we trying to do with this action research business?'. The thought resonated strongly with me. I re-read 'The Crucible' myself. Of course, as a story about a kind of madness that overtakes an 'ordinary' community of so-called god-fearing folk, sweeping the characters along to a variety of dooms, it

has huge relevance to the social processes that we in action research are trying to explore. But actually what stuck with me wasn't so much what I read in the play, but the yearning that I thought I had heard behind Peter's exclamation. To me, it landed as a cry from the heart; an explication of the 'don't know' and the brave hope to stay with that, rather than making it safe by nailing it all down through cogent explanation. This is the spirit of *Human Inquiry* – one of groping bravely in the dark, but doing so with some heartfelt persistence and discipline.

One of my own favourite, oft re-quoted passages in the book is in the chapter by Moustakas on Heuristic Research, where he quotes Carl Rogers:

> It would be a very healthy emphasis in the behavioural sciences if we could recognize that it is the dedicated, personal search of a disciplined, open-minded individual which discovers and creates new knowledge. No refinement of laboratory or statistical method can do this. (Rogers, 1964, quoted in Moustakas, 1981: 217)

This suggests to me that there is something so arch about human relationships and their dynamics that only a particular set of intelligences (or should that be wisdom?) can find a way through, or perhaps subvert, our collective death-wish, as manifested by the oppressions that pervade most organizations, even ones seemingly committed to generative human and ecological futures. *Human Inquiry* helped to galvanize a new way; how we are learning to take a kind of thoughtful, compassionate yet persistent sideways glance together at these odd things. What it suggested to us is that there is a subtle, artful craft of *doing* that subversion (after all, it is *action* research) that needs setting out, and at the centre of it is the humility of *not knowing*. It is an 'ethics of embodied generosity', as Philip Hancock calls it (Hancock, 2008); a tentative yet persistent yearning (as Peter was suggesting that morning in Bath some time ago) towards a commitment to deepen the relationships with those we trust for the sake of some inchoate progress. This spirit matters more than most things in this craft.

As John Heron described in his article previously in this publication: '[It is] comradeship, friendship, the ever-deepening passion of mutual co-creative inquiry – and its transformative impact on action in the wider world – that really matters' (Heron, 2012: 55).

Yet this is not a naïve impulse – it is a political process because there is a set of vested interests, set within these organizations, including those constituting the 'Uni' (as Denis called it) that implicitly rejects this heartfelt, always provisional explication.This book was one of the first cogent attempts to bring together a worldview that sits behind this craft; one that was more than strong enough to resist this rejection, and in so doing has helped to open up a flourishing life-world of enchanted, artful relational research and practice. This is what I witnessed at Ashridge last week. For that I am very grateful to Peter Reason, John Rowan and friends.

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