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Heresy-Hunting in the AHP

One of the things I've learnt from humanistic psychology is how to admit I'm scared. The word "heresy" scares me because it suggests the inquisition, and heretics being burned at the stake. But somebody once defined a heresy as what happens when one bit of a coherent body of doctrine is taken and blown up in size until it becomes a new whole - distorted and one-sided. And I happen to think that humanistic psychology is a coherent body of doctrine. It scares me when I see bits of it taken apart and blown up out of all proportion. So I'd like to admit that I see some heresies arising right now. I don't actually want to set up an inquisition, and I don't believe I have a right to do anything like that, but I would like to admit to my apprehensiveness and to question some of them. Maybe some other people have noticed these or other things going on and would like to question them too. I have come across nine of these "isms", and here they are.

Peakism In this aberration, people get hold of the bit about peak experiences and somehow turn it into something to *strive* for. Instead of the emphasis being on opening oneself up so that peak experiences have a chance to get in, all the emphasis goes on to nerving oneself for greater and greater heights. Colin Wilson is one well-known example of this tendency, but I also find it in Nathaniel Branden and Rollo May. The trouble with it is that it does inevitably lead on to the idea of the superman - the guy who stands on the top of the mountain peak, defying the lightning. Ayn Rand's characters often approach this and the tendency is quite obviously towards individualism and even fascism. (Individualism if it's you who's doing it, fascism if it's someone else doing

it, and inviting your support and followership.) Nietzsche is perhaps the prime example of all this, and I think he has influenced many people in the human potential movement, including some of those who don't recognise his name.

Instrumentalism This is the one where people use the methods developed within humanistic psychology to oppress other people in new and more effective ways. This can happen in management training, in encounter groups (one encounter leader eventually got the nickname of "the drill sergeant"), in trans-personal psychology ("if you ask about evidence, you're not being spiritual") and in many other fields; but the most dangerous is in education. Bill Bridges wrote an article some time ago in which he revealed his worries about this: is telling people to touch their neighbour any better than telling them to get out their exercise books? Is getting people to visualise the ascent of a mountain any better than getting them to copy the sums off the blackboard? The contact is different, but the form is the same - the teacher is the provider, and the student is the consumer. This is perhaps using new ways to prop up the old style of top-down teaching, instead of offering an alternative to it. Bill Romey has a similar idea when he gets worried about thinking of better and better questions to ask the students, instead of finding ways of encouraging the students to think of better questions themselves, and better ways of finding answers. The point is that humanistic psychology is about the realisation of potential, not about its limitation or its guidance into present grooves.

Peace-and-Love-ism This is the way in which group leaders and others aim at warmth, truth and openness in a way which seems to suggest that if you're not being warm, trusting, open and loving, you're not getting it right. This seems to happen at NTL in Bethel and also in co-counselling, sometimes. One word which is used a lot in this area is "validation". But we are not in the peace and love business, we are in the reality business. If we attend closely to reality and do justice to what is just there, my experience is that a lot of peace and love does ultimately ensue, but when it does, it too is real. If we aim directly at validation, we run the risk of getting a false sweetness

which itself becomes oppressive, because it becomes a norm which cannot be challenged. We may then project all our "badness" into the world outside. I once heard a man say - "I keep telling my wife that it's wrong to invalidate me, but she won't stop doing it!" Validation can be extremely valuable as an experiment, to check and see how much *invalidation* goes on all the time unawares, but as a way of life it is not an adequate approach, because negativity is important and valuable too. Being critical is OK, and not something to be avoided at all costs.

Expertism Here people take their patch and try to become the great expert on it. This they usually do by means of the written word. They invent new words, describe new processes, make new distinctions, develop new syntheses and in general strive to enlarge their speciality. I notice this happening quite often in the pages of *Energy and Character* where people following in the Reichian tradition seem to take a particular pleasure in these somewhat turgid activities. But it is also to be found in such books as *Primal Man* by Janov and Holden, which really takes a medical education to understand properly, and some of the TA books and papers, with their unique and specialised vocabulary.. (The Freudians, Jungians and Scientologists are of course notorious for this, but they are not really within the boundaries of humanistic psychology.) The point is that humanistic psychology is essentially anti-mystification, and expertism is mystifying.

Spiritual-wism An inelegant word to describe an all-too-elegant reality. This is where one gets so very spiritual that one loses touch with the ground altogether. One puts one's trust in a set of higher functions, which rise about mere rationality. Eastern disciplines are full of this stuff, where the body is taken as being a drawback and limitation, only there to be disciplined and transcended, so that one can reach the thousand-petalled lotus or whatever. The so-called New Age is full of it - all sorts of Spiritual Masters (not many Mistresses) telling us that we are Gods, if we will only awake and arise and allow our true nature to emerge. Well, I've seen some of these Gods in action, and I'm not impressed. I think they're kidding themselves. One can go to

a so-called *Course in Miracles* and still not be able to do any miracles. (We can all do the *occasional* miracle.) We certainly do have a spiritual nature, but we are still human beings, and personally I feel a lot better about relating to another human being than about relating to another God.

My own view is that our spiritual nature is rationality, and that the main reason we don't recognise this is because we have a very one-sided view - derived from our education and the majority culture of what rationality is. Rationality at its best includes senses, feelings, intuition, will, imagination and so forth, rather than excluding them - in fact, the more it includes, the more rational it can be, in the sense of doing justice to all reality. What spiritual-wism does is to substitute a would-be and unreal notion of "evolved" and "higher" consciousness this all-embracing rationality. Its thousand-petalled lotus can get very heavy on the head - in fact, there's an unholy alliance between spiritual-wism and the majority culture in the way they both emphasise the head and the *higher* powers all the time. There is again this top-down emphasis which is foreign to humanistic psychology.

Feelingism One of the best ways of getting into the subjective realm where therapy is done is by going deeply into feelings. Unfortunately, this can all too easily turn into a worship of passion for its own sake, as if we're an end rather than a means. I have seen people bullied and intimidated because they weren't expressing feelings, or weren't expressing the *right* feelings (usually anger). But worse than that, I have seen people criticised because they weren't expressing feelings *all the time!* A kind of false picture of "natural man" seems to be behind this - a human being who is continually coming out with spontaneous feelings and expressing them in an immediate and naive way. I don't know where this come from - but it's clearly a quite inadequate picture of what human beings could or should be. Such a person would be just as one-sided and unbalanced as the spiky intellectual, the solidly practical person or the intuitive mystic. Human beings are not to be reduced to these one-dimensional models.

Autonomy-ism One of the key things about humanistic psychology is the emphasis it places on "taking responsibility for yourself", on "creating my world" and so forth. As a *therapeutic stance*, and taken in a *first-person way*, this can be extremely valuable and indeed necessary. But if it is idealised as a total answer to life, it can turn into a pathological wish to be independent of everyone else in the world. Such a person becomes quite incapable of love, because this involves some element of dependency on the other person, whether we like it or not, and whether our theory says so or not. There is a story about one group leader who preached autonomy, that eventually he got sick, and was taken to hospital, and was put on a life-support machine. One day he woke up, realised he was dependent on this machine for life, refused to accept it, and disconnected the machine. He died. But this heresy does not only affect the person involved, because if autonomy is urged in a *third-person way* ("s/he creates their own world") it can become punitive and oppressive, turning into something like "Pull yourself together", or "Stand on your own two feet". This is now very far from what humanistic psychology is all about. Human beings have wide capabilities of being dependent and independent, and usually need to explore all of them.

Sexism In terms of its overt wishes, humanistic psychology is clearly anti-sexist. Sexism involves reducing women to the rigid roles which represent the only proper ways of being in a patriarchal society - almost always service roles of some kind, but also idealised moralistic roles. Humanistic Psychology is dedicated to breaking down *all* rigid roles, because these are one of the main ways in which potential is limited by self or others. But somehow the patriarchal roles often seem to creep back into the work of humanistic practitioners. In group after group I have seen the heterosexual couple relationship underlined and supported, as if this were really the only way to be. There are several reports, in journals like *Humpty Dumpty*, of groups where the women were treated quite differently by the leaders, as compared to the men. Most group leaders - and a much bigger majority of the best-paid

and most prestigious leaders - are men. And most group attenders (in all the cases I have seen where statistics have been kept) are women. This is obviously an enormous question, which affects the whole culture, and it is not surprising that it should affect humanistic psychology as well as everything else. But it is certainly depressing to see a discipline which is dedicated to the questioning of fixed roles, and which is dedicated to personal awareness, often being so *unaware of sex roles* and the way in which they constrain the person's development. Humanistic psychology needs to stay true to its fundamental stance of questioning sexism and patriarchy.

Eclectic Mish-Mash-ism One of the strengths of humanistic psychology is its adventurousness - the way in which it is prepared to try things out and see whether they work or not. But pushed to a one-sided extreme, this becomes a nervous search for novelty and the latest thing. And it also results in a set of practitioners who are using a mutually contradictory set of theories and practices and trying to turn them into a whole - which can only be a false-whole, held together unstably by the idealised wish of the user. And so we get Rogerian-Reichians, and Gestalt-Regressionists - the other day I even came across a Bhagwan-Marxist! The work of forging new theories, new unities of theory and practice, is avoided and side-tracked. This is not what humanistic psychology is about.

Conclusion

So these are the heresies I'd rather like to pursue and root out - except that I don't suppose I have the power or the right to do that. All I can do is to confess to my anxieties and difficulties about these tendencies.

Someone asked me what I wanted positively. I really think it's obvious (and I've said it all in *Ordinary Ecstasy* anyway), but just for the record here goes. I am in favour of humanistic psychology, and I think it is about encouraging development of human potential. This means questioning all those structures (whether internal or external) which limit and constrain people. The main

internal constraints seem to be rigid patterns of behaviour which have been set up as answers to the problems of living; however effective these may have been at the time, they have now turned into handcuffs or blinkers which prevent movement or awareness. Through the process of therapy, counselling, personal growth and general self-discovery, these patterns are questioned in such a way that they can undergo change. The self-image gets dismantled, and the rich realm of subjectivity which was pushed down as being too dangerous and too weak is now opened up and entered into and allowed to exist and be used and transformed. There is a feeling of being real instead of unreal.

The main external constraints seem to be rigid social patterns which have been set up as answers to the problems of living; however effective they may have been at the time, they have now turned into hobbles and straitjackets which prevent change of awareness. Through the process of Consciousness-raising, organizational work, Social research and Political activism, these patterns are questioned in such a way that they can start to move. Consciousness-raising because it focusses on external problems as much as internal ones; organizational work because hierarchies continually reintroduce fixed roles, and alternatives to hierarchies are much less well known and less well understood; Social research because it always changes that which it describes, whether it wants to or not; political activism because the laws and customs of the society usually favour the old structures, and need to be changed - for example, tenancy laws, building-society practices and building regulations favour the nuclear family to the exclusion of more communal arrangements.

To the extent that all these changes go forward together - the internal and the external - we shall find ourselves entering a new kind of Society with new kinds of people. Instead of doing repair jobs on fucked-up people we can spend more time on encouraging people to experience and explore ecstasy. Instead of changing a few laws, we can think about dismantling the whole structure of Government, based as it is on deficiency thinking and the avoidance of facing reality. But this is a step by step process, where at each step we

shall know what we are doing, just because we are trained to look at reality and to be real ourselves. Humanistic psychology stands for this unafraid look at the personal and the social - this cool ability to face and handle personal and social change in ways that are constructive and effective.

PROPS

Space
and
plenty of it.

Leisure
to reform, gardens to sit in
beds in which to stretch or cavort
indulgence to choose without reckoning or
reckon without compunction. To speak
certain those who listen will defer. Or
the props of poverty.

A rag-doll, a bland
battered-face clock, a bed with broken springs,
kippers, cracked mugs and jam, and sudden
self-righteous anger, easy contempt, the mindless
reassurance of solidarity; the clenched fist, the
brandished scarf.

To reject all these (albeit
with compassion) instead to be
naked and alert, calm yet
watchful, connected yet unattached
like a tree

John Hands