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CAN WE CHANGE OUR MIND?

The practice of psychotherapy and the many ways of 'self-actualising' can so easily lead us away from the experience of self-actualisation. This is because all of our attempts to improve ourselves are so bound up with life itself that it is hard to know where to draw the line between the two. A specific therapy such as Gestalt or Transactional Analysis is really only a set of symbols and ideas **about** life, and these symbols and ideas are just tricks or cunning devices to make us become aware of the obvious. A mirror is just a cunning device to make you see the obviousness of your face! In this way all therapies and self improvement techniques are just clever tricks to get you to become aware of what is obvious and present.

In rather the same way, the ideas and symbols behind psychotherapy can seem as strange as catching a glimpse of your face in the mirror for the first time. During the nineteenth century it was customary to view the nature of man as resembling a machine made up of many bits and pieces, and the early investigations of psychiatry and psychology were concerned with identifying and labelling all the 'bits' of the mind. But in time it was realised that these bits and pieces were not separate but were relational, and so the search for relationships began. From the study of the mind sprang up many theories and ideas about how it worked, and in time these theories and ideas acquired a reality of their own. But we seem to have forgotten that these ideas are just as much cunning devices, just as much mirrors, as the old classification of Galen's humours. You can pursue ideas about man forever, and become no wiser; you can work out all their implications, only to find implications within implications in an unending universe of thought, which you can explore forever. If you want to, you can remain stuck in this universe looking for an answer which is right under your nose, here and now in your everyday life.

The new therapies moved out of the realm of ideas and symbols and sought wisdom in the realm of experience. By discovering 'altered states of consciousness' they felt that the mysteries of life, absent from the ordinary everyday world of the senses, would somehow be revealed. The use of mescaline, peyote and LSD, of meditation and hypnosis, has certainly released us from the old ways of understanding the nature of the mind, but if we believe that these methods can give us an answer to the mystery of life, then we are once more running after old gods. The way in which we investigate these states of consciousness is essentially scientific, that is to say, analytical. To analyse (or classify) life is a very different process from experiencing it directly.

Science is concerned with quantity, and experience is concerned with quality or values. It is seldom realised that science and direct experience are as different as a penny and a joke. By means of a penny you can understand a unit of money, and by means of a joke you can appreciate the comic. And

whereas you could have a joke about a penny, you could not possibly have a penny about a joke! That is to say, although you might have the experience of science, in the sense of a man who experiences a feeling he can also describe, you cannot have a scientific experience. For experience is something applicable to every possible form of activity, it is not one form of activity among others. If we use the scientific attitude to describe an experience, we could end up explaining why we like a particular piece of music in terms of physiological functions, nervous responses and sense mechanisms. To measure a quality is like expecting a post mortem to reveal the secrets of a woman's beauty; to mechanise it is like expecting a computer to compute wisdom from its own un-programmed source.

Analysis may indeed increase our knowledge, and though knowledge may be power, it is not wisdom. It does not necessarily follow that because you can analyse the mind down to the last atom, you are able to lead a richer and fuller life than anyone else. I can open my hand just as well as a physiologist who can describe all the processes involved in opening it. Knowledge then, is a tool, a useful gadget, and a therapist is not an effective therapist because he has read an immense number of books on psychotherapy.

Self-actualisation, then, is not concerned solely with the acquisition of knowledge or described experiences; it is rather how we use the knowledge and experience that happens to come our way. To be aware, enlightened, self-actualised or whatever label we give it, we need no more than our ordinary, everyday experience. For here is life as we know it, and yet how little we know it, for we have to invent a cunning device called therapy to help us to live it aright. Even so it is amazing how that very tool itself can lead us away from the very thing that we seek. How does this happen?

Presumably, those who search for self-actualisation know that in some way or other it must be found within themselves. That is to say that no one else can experience it for them, anymore than watching another person eating dinner will fill our own bellies. Those who have an allegiance to Freud may view this differently. For them the Id is the driving force behind all actions and the defence mechanisms prevent the Ego from transcending itself and becoming completely actualised. Therefore all that can be done is to try to control the blind energies of the libido and to expel some of the devils within through the sacrament of the couch. But for those who do not follow the Freudian religion, and are seeking self-actualisation, the acceptance of both the gods and the devils of the mind is the first step.

This brings along with it the realisation that we are all of our experiences, not just the ones we like. It brings with it the realisation that you are these experiences, they are not something which 'happens' to an entity which is not them. To put this another way: man is potentially actualised and the task of therapy is to turn the potential into the actual. Thus the goal of therapy seems to be the realisation of your latent potential. These terms are really highbrow ways of saying that we want to discover the mysteries of life, to know what life is and to live in harmony with it. By talking about it in these simplified terms we can get a little closer to fundamentals because, as we have seen, terminology, psychological gobbledygook, leads us away from the thing that therapy is all about, and that is life itself.

The pursuit of self-actualisation implies that we are not, at this present moment, actualised. It implies that we lack something and must go in search of it. But what if we are, in fact, already self-actualised? What if we are already in harmony with life? Supposing that the feelings of confusion or unhappiness that we may feel are complete in themselves. What then? The truth is that we tend to see some experiences as self-actualising and others as not self-actualising. To believe that only the pleasurable feelings of joy, happiness, peace and contentment can be called 'self-actualising' and that the negative feelings of death, loss, pain and frustration are not, is to mis-understand the nature of life itself. Life and death, gain and loss, pleasure and pain are all included in LIFE as it is lived through each individual. But all the while we are on the look-out for some eternal essence which can stand apart from experience and maximise the positive experiences and minimise the negative experiences. This is really the old Ego appearing in a lofty disguise.

If we persist with this idea - that there is a self which can be actualised - then we encounter the old problem of having to divide ourselves from our thoughts and experiences. But is not the very dividing itself a thought? Why not divide ourselves again from that? And why not divide ourselves from the thought that we are dividing ourselves? This kind of thinking can go on forever. This circular thinking always arises when we have to face the question How can I improve myself? How can I, who am not actualised, become actualised? Is it possible, then to change our minds?

The answer to that question is both yes and no. We cannot change our minds by **trying** to change them. Nor can we change them by trying **not** to change them. If we try to change our minds we are really talking about trying to change the content of our experience. Our search for fulfilment in life is an attempt to minimise the problems and to seek more pleasurable experiences. We might seek out experiences which are rich and meaningful and avoid experiences which are unpleasant or painful. But this is not about changing our minds, it is about changing the types of experiences we want to have, and brings with it the realisation that our lives are in some way impoverished.

This, then, is the futility of the self-improvement game. The more we try to become self-actualised the more we realise that we are not. We have each set a trap to catch ourself. As long as we look for some kind of meaning beyond what is present we shall remain incomplete. In the last resort our everyday experience of walking, sitting, talking, thinking, eating and breathing is self-actualisation. Is this disappointing? Do you think the mystery ought to be something much more than this? But think for a moment: what could be more mysterious than the surprising fact that we are alive? Is there anything more astonishing than the fact that you laugh, breathe, sleep, speak and see?