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Some comments on 'Humanistic Psychology in a Consultative Role' by Charles Aylwin. (Self and Society March/April, 1981)

To me Humanistic Psychology must at least involve a respect for the complexity of human experience and an emphasis on the individual's ultimate responsibility for his own personal growth - the notion that people should be 'self-managers' as far as possible given that the structures which we live within may not wholly facilitate such developments. When I read the above paper however, I found that despite the title, the spirit of H.P. was absent and I would like to briefly explain why I found this to be the case.

In the first place while not regarding given structures which do not facilitate self-fulfilment as sacrosanct, I recognise that the reality of what 'is' cannot be ignored. Hence I would, of course, accept that Mr. Aylwin and his colleagues must 'recognise' and frequently 'accept' economic reality and organisational imperatives, (para.8). I also could not but agree with him that 'total conformity leads inevitably to the stifling of the individual . . .' (para.10). What I did find disturbing however was his seemingly total identification with his company which seemed to me to be at odds with the notion of his being (together with the other part-time representatives) the 'voice of staff'. I would argue that identification with larger collectivities is an excellent thing if in so identifying, individual or group autonomy is advanced in some way. In this sense trade union encroachment on management prerogatives may enhance the freedom of their constituents. In this case the identification of Mr. Aylwin, the one full-time elected representative of the staff on the Staff Council, with the overall organisation, would not appear to bode well for that Council's independence and hence their chances of holding off to some degree at least the demands of the firm on its employees. This feeling was strengthened by the rather remarkable statement that ' . . . employee involvement in decisions that directly affect them is encouraged. However, in the past, management generally did know best and the very able personnel advisors of today frequently still do. As a result, their proposals are usually good ones and consultation sometimes seems superfluous' (para.6).

Again, while recognising that Mr. Aylwin's discussion is in the context of consultation, it would seem at least theoretically reasonable to argue that authentic employee participation in decision-making might advance to some degree the chances of employee self-actualisation. Certainly, in a period when industrial democracy of one kind or another is at least on the agenda, it is somewhat surprising to read the categorical statement that - 'Decisions are, very properly, to be taken by management'. (para.7).

Another categorical statement which dismayed me was Mr. Aylwin's proclamation - 'I am a firm believer in meritocracy . . .' (para.8). In the context of H.P. it is rather worrying to find such an uncritical use of the notion of meritocracy which implies among other things that society or its organisations decides that certain aspects of self are unwanted/unworthy and hence must be suppressed in conformity with the operating standards of utility.

In the same paragraph Mr. Aylwin goes on to say that 'large and successful companies like ours can and do tolerate widely different approaches to problems and can make use of very differing individual styles. Particularly in the Central Offices it is this individualism which is likely to make us a poor hunting-ground for conventional Trade Unions'. In the first place I find this praise of individualism rather at odds with the idea of the all wise and all knowing organisation which permeates the rest of the paper to which I have made some reference above. With the mention of 'conventional' trade unions by the way, there would seem to be an implication that Staff Associations are 'unconventional' trade unions. This, of course, is not the case. The piece ends with a final celebration of the omniscient organisation as personified by the Chairman - 'It is not merely lip-service (when he) . . . records his appreciation of the resourcefulness, sense of involvement and participation of our employees'.

I see then little scope for a Humanistic Psychology in this counsellor role and it is thus that I feel that the whole mood of the paper is at odds with its spirit.