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REVERSAL THEORY, THE PARATELIC STATE, AND ZEN

Western psychology is orientated firmly towards the telic state. That is, in its study of man it looks always for a purpose, for a motive behind action. Whether it speaks of that motive as instinct, as conditioning, as drive, as problem solving, as ambition, the supposition is always that activity is invariably a means towards a particular end. We perform action A in order to achieve goal B. Although some psychologists are now prepared to recognise what might be called a curiosity drive in small babies, that is a drive to explore the environment unconnected with the need to satisfy hunger or some other state of biological deficit, there is still the assumption that this exploration takes place to reduce tension of some kind, to satisfy some kind of innate need to find out about the environment and thus construct internal cognitive maps which will help in future problem solving.

Since western psychology is a product of western culture, the psychologist can hardly be blamed for his preoccupation with telic states. For western culture generally suffers from the same complaint. To most adult men and women, it seems axiomatic that action and purpose go hand in hand. The young child goes to school to learn. He goes on to further or higher education or into an apprenticeship to gain qualifications. He starts work in order to earn a living. He changes jobs in order to better his prospects. He marries to settle down and raise a family. He takes up squash to keep fit. He watches television to relax at the end of a hard day. He goes to parties to meet people. He takes a holiday to re-charge his batteries. At each point, the activity has a clearly defined telic goal. And when he brings up his own children, he tells them they must have a reason for their actions ('Tell me **why** you did it? . . . . . I don't believe you, you **must** have had a reason'), that they must think before they act, that they must weigh their words, that they must plan and scheme and prepare. Even the very small child, absorbed in the delight of smearing paint on paper, is likely to be asked what

his efforts represent ('Yes, but what is it, what's it supposed to **be**?'). Little wonder that the child soon learns to feel guilty if he has no reasons for his actions, if he has no purpose. Even the painting, before long, comes to have a name, as the child gives way to the puzzled persistence of his interrogators.

In a complex, technological society, telic, purposeful states are necessary if we are to survive. No-one doubts their value. But the question is whether telic states have been over-emphasised as a way of understanding human action and indeed as a way of helping people live their own lives. Should we not perhaps be paying more attention to purposeless states, to **paratelic** states in the terminology of reversal theory, that is to activities that are carried out without defined objectives, without clear goals nominated in advance and associated with the concepts of success and failure? Should we not be studying the nature of these states (as far as such study is possible), and the nature of the benefits they bring to the individual concerned? If psychology, amongst other things (some would say above all else) is concerned with mental health, then should we not show more interest in states which may be instrumental in bringing about this health?

With the development of humanistic psychology over the last two decades, questions of this kind have come more and more to the fore. But if we look through most psychology textbooks, we find the situation identified by Maslow in 1954 to be not much changed. No 'chapters on fun and gaiety, on leisure and meditation, on loafing and pottering, on aimless, useless and purposeless activity . . . . . psychology is busily occupying itself with only half of life to the neglect of the other - and perhaps more important half'. And even where this neglect shows signs of being remedied we still find that the notion of purpose is never far away. For example Hetherington (1981) in an otherwise sensible and sensitive look at the role of the clinical psychologist writes that 'it might be no bad thing if we were to bring transcendental meditation down to earth and redefine it in terms of what we know about relaxation'. Note the assumptions here. We western psychologists are 'down to earth' (i.e. close to reality) and are able to 'redefine' transcendental (and doubtless any other kind of) meditation in a way that the cultures who have practised variants of it for

thousands of years have been unable to do. Furthermore, we 'know' about relaxation, and presumably also 'know' that meditation has a purpose, and that that purpose is simply to relax the operator. Thus meditation can take its place along with any other technique whose purpose is clear and which can be rendered more efficient by judicious tinkering.

Paratelic Modes of Being

In reversal theory, we have a coherent attempt to counter thinking of this kind. Reversal theory recognises Maslow's 'other half of life' as a fit subject for psychological study. It accepts that there is a natural dimension in human behaviour running from the telic to the paratelic, from the serious and purposeful to the non-serious and purposeless. Further it accepts that this dimension relates not to activities themselves **but to the way in which these activities are performed.** Thus organised sport, which one might at first glance assume to be paratelic, is usually quite clearly nothing of the kind. The professional footballer, the professional golfer or tennis player, takes part in his sport with a very definite purpose in mind (financial gain allied to social prestige and power), and the spectator goes along to identify with this purpose and often to gamble financially on the outcome. Reversal theory therefore draws attention to the telic nature of much of the modern attitude to sport, and by implication reminds us of Huizing's warning some years ago (1949) that western society is losing the ability to play, and investing essentially non-serious activities with all the stern preoccupations of serious ones.

The Nature of the Paratelic State

If we want a true example of the paratelic state, we must turn to the play of very young children. In such children, play is fully absorbing. It fascinates and occupies the individual to the exclusion of all else. Time, place, identity, all vanish in the concentrated attention of the moment. To exist and be part of the activity is enough in itself. The German philosopher, Eugen Herrigel (1953), in a book of inner quiet beauty, expresses this play state perfectly in a quote from the Zen Master under whom

he studied archery. The child, says the Master, holds the proferred finger of the adult 'so firmly that one marvels at the strength of the tiny fist. And when it lets the finger go there is not the slightest jerk. Why? Because the child does not think: I will now let go of the finger in order to grasp this other thing. Completely unselfconsciously, without purpose, it turns from the one to the other, and we would say that it was playing with the things, were it not equally true that the things are playing with the child'.

If we ask ourselves what happens to this ability to play, to operate fully in the paratelic mode, as the child grows up we see that it is systematically taught out of him. Not only by the general way in which we stress to him the importance of purpose, but also by the way in which we offer play to him in schools and organised formal education. The title of a popular book for nursery school teachers and playgroup leaders, **Play with a Purpose for Under-Sevens** (Matterso, 1965) sums this up. Play, even the play of the under-sevens, must have a purpose, must be carried out for some definable educational end rather than for the sheer delight the child derives from it. And worse is to come as the child grows older and takes part in school games. Games, it seems, only obtained a place in the school curriculum because it was held they were educational. They 'built character', they taught how to win and lose graciously, they helped produce the healthy mind in the healthy body. And as a consequence of this telic emphasis, we find that level of performance becomes more important than simple participation, that training becomes more important than enjoyment, competition more important than co-operation, the prestige of the school in the eyes of others more important than the well-being of its own members.

The Paratelic in Daily Life

This discussion of organised sport and games must not lead us to suppose that paratelic states are only desirable when we are supposed to be playing. Reversal theory suggests that in every area of life activities can be performed in either the telic or the paratelic mode. Failure to recognise this often leads the individual to act inappropriately. Concentrating again on the

paratelic state, since this is the main theme of the present article, we can draw an example from the highly telic individual who takes every remark made to him seriously, who cannot unbend even with his friends, who cannot laugh at himself, who plays everything to win, however trivial or diverting. Or we can take an example from the cynic, who by de-valuing everything pursues the goal of protecting himself from disappointment or failure, or the example of the art critic who believes every artistic endeavour must carry a deep 'message' of some kind to be dug out by earnest discussion and deliberation.

The use of this last example must not be taken to suggest, however, that the paratelic is concerned only with the trivial and the ephemeral, that it never produces results of any consequence in a society obsessed by prestige and success. Paradoxically, the paratelic state often produces results that elude the most dedicated telic individual. We sense this when we observe the relaxed performer succeed where the tense person fails. The golfer who cares too much about the results of his putt misses it, because he thinks always in terms of his final score, while the golfer who attends only to the activity of putting, oblivious to memories of what happened on the last green or of what may happen on the next, places the ball safely in the hole. Because he thinks only of the putt, and not of success and failure, he is far more likely to carry the activity through to its appropriate conclusion. Again Herrigel sums this up for us when he quotes the words uttered by the Zen Master as the latter watches him try to hit the archery target: 'The right shot at the right moment does not come because you do not let go of yourself. You do not wait for fulfilment but brace yourself for failure . . . . . The more obstinately you try to learn how to shoot the arrow for the sake of hitting the goal the less you will succeed in the one and the further the other will recede. What stands in your way is that you have a much too wilful will. You think that what you do not do yourself does not happen'.

The Paratelic State and Zen

Through the use of our quotations from Herrigel, if for no other reason, the reader will by now be aware of certain similarities

between the paratelic state and the condition sometimes called the Zen state, the condition in which the subject-object distinction seems to disappear, and the individual becomes totally lost in the activity (meditation, the martial arts or whatever) in which he is engaged. Zen, as a religious, philosophical and psychological system has it that our very act of striving towards a goal, or defining a goal, can be the greatest obstacle to its achievement. The literature of Zen is now sufficiently familiar to the west for us to be aware of the notion of the Zen craftsman who absorbs himself fully in his task, working without thought and without the constant mindfulness of profit until the task reaches its own fulfillment. In the west, where we have long since lost this kind of detachment in our daily work, we sometimes still find it in artistic activity. We write, we paint, we compose music, and a moment comes when we forget what we are doing these things for. We forget the potential audience waiting somewhere out there, the editors, the publishers, the date of the exhibition or of the first performance, we work only within the activity itself. Thus though there may have been a goal that first prompted us to start work, the goal ceases to be important, ceases to influence what we do, and what started out as a telic endeavour merges gradually into the paratelic.

As a philosopher with an analytical training, Herrigel found his study of archery as a way into Zen was handicapped by the question of how one takes part in an activity without having a purpose, how one allows the telic state to give way to the paratelic. Surely the original purpose must remain there all the time, even though we may temporarily forget it? Surely within the paratelic state there must always be the telic, waiting to re-assert itself? Even in archery, there must remain the underlying desire to hit the target, and once having hit the target to hit the bull? Finally, he turns one day in exasperation to the Zen Master, and goaded by the apparent contradiction in what he is trying to do asks 'So I must become purposeless on purpose?', to which the Master replies 'No pupil has ever asked me that question before, so I do not know the answer'. The reply contains both a gentle rebuke to Herrigel that he should be the first pupil to ask such a question, and a subtle lesson that the answer is not something to be 'known', something to be grasped and stored away. The answer can only be experienced. One may start the

activity with a goal, but there comes a point where the goal is forgotten, where the telic gives way to the paratelic, and when later one remembers the goal one realises that it was never really there at all, that one moved through the activity without it and that therefore it was not the reason for the activity, nor ever could be. The goal was an illusion, a handicap that robs the activity of that very purposelessness necessary if it is to be fully experienced.

Conclusion

Thus of all its potential contributions towards the study of psychology, it may be that the aspect of Reversal Theory likely to be of most benefit is its concept of the paratelic state, and of its equality with the telic. Indeed, equality is the wrong word. The two states are not to be compared, except perhaps by the individual himself within the context of his own life. Further, by emphasising that it is not an activity itself which renders it telic or paratelic, but the state of mind of the person performing that activity, Reversal Theory allies itself firmly with humanistic psychology and with phenomenology in general in insisting that we cannot approach the full meaning of man without listening to what he has to say about himself. It thus stands in sharp contrast to the behaviourism that still dominates much of academic psychology, and to the notion that simply observing what people **do** provides us with sufficient data for the psychologist's purpose.

Finally, Reversal Theory brings psychology one step closer to confronting the essential paradox that lies behind all goal directed activity, a paradox long since confronted by Zen and by the other great religions and their leaders. We can illustrate this paradox if we return to the subject of relaxation, mentioned in an earlier paragraph. In a telic sense, one relaxes in order to achieve a certain end, say a lowering of blood pressure. We can then ask, what is the goal of the lowered blood pressure? Answer, a healthier and longer life. But for what? What is the goal of the healthier and longer life? One might answer happiness, but what then is the goal of happiness? And so the questions and the answers go on until in the end we realise that there is no goal, that in the end we have only the activity itself, and that the notion

that everything we do is really a preparation for something else is false. Certainly we could say (and would say if we are religious) that the goal of life lies beyond death, in a life that is to come. But again we then have to ask what is the goal of that life? The great religions of the world teach that it is final union with God (by whatever name He is called), and to the question what is the goal of that final union comes the reply that there cannot be one. The union is an end in itself. This is I think what the Hindus mean when they say that God created the world without ultimate purpose. Purpose implies a goal, whereas the act of creation has no goal. It is simply activity itself.

Within the context of this argument, it can be seen that the telic state is therefore itself an illusion, a condition which man uses to divert himself away from the present moment and into the fantasy of future states. It was this condition which Christ sought to counter when He said that the Kingdom of Heaven is within you, in the here and now. The implication was that we should realise we are already there. The eternal is already within us, not something out there in the future to be aimed at and grasped at. The point was further emphasised when He counselled His followers to take no thought for the morrow, and to become again like little children. We fail to see what is within us because of the obstacles we ourselves put in the way. As Herrigel says towards the end of his book, having finally found his way to spirituality through the study of Zen in the context of archery, 'Bow, arrow, goal and the ego all melt into one another, so that I can no longer separate them. And even the need to separate has gone. For as soon as I take the bow and shoot everything becomes so clear and straight-forward and so ridiculously simple . . . . . '

References

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