

**John Rowan**

## **REVERSALS THEORY: CRITIQUE**

I have severe doubts as to whether this material should have been published in **Self and Society**, for the following reasons:

1. **The theory is not sufficiently humanistic** Sure, it is better to have two categories (telic and paratelic) rather than one (homeostasis), but it's a very minimal advance. I had an article published in 1956, pointing out the inadequacies of homeostasis as an explanation for human action; so it's hardly a new idea to say that it is inadequate in 1981. Surely there are more interesting and up-to-date opponents than this? Just to be against homeostasis as a total explanation is not enough to make one humanistic.

2. **The theory is essentially confusing** The telic category is well defined and culturally supported, and makes good sense. But the paratelic category muddles two very distinct - and important different things. Look at these two columns:

### **Pre-telic**

Impulse  
Messing about  
Loosing off arrows  
Disowned emotion  
Flashes of insight  
Pre-verbal  
Pattern

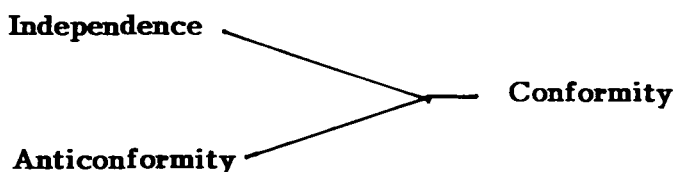
### **Post - or trans-telic**

Spontaneity  
Playing a game creatively  
Zen archery  
Owned emotion  
Intuitive perception  
Trans-verbal  
Praxis

Everything in both these columns would have to be paratelic, according to reversals theory. But I would say that, whereas those in the first column are not yet telic, those in the second column have gone past being telic. In other words, the one is too immature to be telic, and the other has grown beyond the telic. (This distinction is made much more fully in my article

"Hegel and Self-Actualization" in **Self & Society** for November/-December 1979). To muddle up these two very different levels of consciousness is in my opinion quite unforgivable. One of the articles here talks about the paratelic aspects of Zen and mysticism generally, while others talk of alcoholics and delinquents, who are surely nothing much like Zen monks? To collapse these categories together makes no sense.

3. **Other distinctions don't make sense** To talk about conformity and negativism, for example, ignores the crucial distinction between counter-conformity and independence. Strickler and others in 1970 (again hardly very recently) showed fairly conclusively, in my opinion, that the diagram goes like this:



This anticonformist **must** do something other than the group norms say, and is just as much bound and limited as the conformist; but the independent person is free to do the same sometimes, and different things at other times. There is a practically significant difference here. To call both these things negativism seems to me indefensible.

4. **The theory is not usable in practice** It seems to me that humanistic theories always have direct practical applications. But although one of the contentions of reversals theory is that it does have a part to play in therapy, this does not emerge, so far as I can see, from any of the articles here. When it comes to the actual therapy, we are told about Gestalt techniques and other existing approaches, but never about how the theory can actually be used in practice.

5. **It's all black and white** One of the first things we are warned about when we start to think seriously about politics, is not to think in black-and-white terms. To do so is regarded as the sign of an immature political thinker. Yet here are these psychologists and other experts not only thinking in black-and-white terms, but asking everyone else to do so as well. If it's not telic it must be paratelic. Telic is reasonably clear; so everything else is going to be dumped into the paratelic. It reminds me of the

split-brain stuff, where the left brain is reasonably well-defined; so everything else has to be dumped into the right brain -again with absurd results.

6. **Beware of tests** The idea of having a test fills me with horror. The paratelic part of the test would have to lump together quite unlike things, and would tend to reify something quite unreal. And presumably I could score high on the telic part at work, but score high on the paratelic part at home - the different contexts producing different replies, as well as different actions. Maybe one of my subpersonalities is telic, and another paratelic? Such a test would go the way of all other personality tests - used mainly to oppress somebody by reducing them to someone else's categories.

None of these six reasons seems to me to be highly technical, or something only an expert could understand; they seem to me rather obvious, and I'm surprised that the theory has got this far without someone pointing them out to the authors. Maybe they have? Maybe the authors have good answers to them? I'd certainly be interested to see what they have to say.

---

## **REVERSAL THEORY : A CRITIQUE OF JOHN ROWAN'S CRITIQUE**

**Mike Apter and Steve Murgatroyd**

There are many ways in which it is possible to respond to the kinds of comments made by John Rowan in his critique of the material included in this edition of *Self and Society*. We have chosen to deal with each of the points he has made in turn. Before doing so, it is clear that some of the difficulties he has encountered are due to the limitations of space which have made it impossible to present the theory in its full complexity. Also, the decision to offer a variety of contributions rather than a simple cohesive account of the theory added richness but may have obscured a few critical points. A thoroughgoing account of the theory as a whole, including some of its implications for practice, will be found in **The Experience of Motivation - The Theory of Psychological Reversals** written by Mike Apter which is to be published by Academic Press early in 1982.