



The AHP Magazine Interview – I

Existential Therapy Meets the Humanistic Therapies

Existential therapist **Professor Ernesto Spinelli** in interview-dialogue with **Richard House**

Richard House (RH): Ernesto, I've long been a great admirer of your writings in the therapy field, and the thoughtful, sometimes impassioned but always carefully argued existential perspectives that you bring to the field. I think the humanistic world sees you as very much a 'critical friend' of Humanistic Psychology (as opposed to the sometimes fiercely critical attitude to humanism that some existential therapists occasionally exhibit) – and we are very grateful to you for that openness to our work and approach. I sometimes think to myself, 'Scratch a humanistic therapist and you'll find an existentialist not far below the surface!'; and I sometimes wonder whether the converse might also apply! I hope we can return to this interesting and provocative theme later; but first, can you tell our readers something about your early biographical history in the therapy field, and how, when and why you first realised that the existential-phenomenological approach was the one you felt most at home with.

Ernesto Spinelli (ES): Thanks for the kind words, Richard. I'll try to answer your points, but not in the same order. Bear with me. Like most therapists of my generation, my starting point was Freud. I'd begun reading his works at around the age of 15, but then really got into them once I started university. In my final undergraduate year, 1970–1971, the humanistic explosion had reached Montreal, Canada, and I took a year's course on Person-Centred Group Therapy – which was mainly an experiential course, but which introduced me to Carl Rogers, Rollo May, Fritz Perls and various others.

After I'd moved to the UK and was doing my Ph.D. at the University of Surrey, I got involved in another ongoing humanistic group process, and also started a psycho-analytic training in London. Both, in their own ways but for similar reasons, put me off the whole idea of both training in, and being involved with, therapy.

Fast-forward to around 1981 and I'm now a psychology lecturer at an American-International College in London. At some point, I'm asked to start teaching a course on Humanistic Psychology (I'm already teaching one on psycho-analysis, of course). I agree, but only if I'm allowed to focus the course on what might be the underlying philosophical principles that unify a very wide range of competing approaches. Preparing for that, I keep coming across two words which I'd heard before but hadn't paid much attention to: 'existential' and 'phenomenology'. So I start reading (and re-reading) Edmund Husserl and gang, and this crazy idea comes to me that maybe some sort of therapy could be made out of this. Of course, this arrogant idiot finds out soon enough that a fair few other people have thought a very similar thought long before he ever did.

Anyway, why did phenomenology in general, and existential phenomenology in particular, re-awaken my interest in therapy? Because, it seemed to me, finally there was the possibility of exploring therapeutic concerns from a foundationally *relational* standpoint rather than from the separatist, individualistic framework that, in my experience, had dominated psychotherapy. And more – that in taking this relational focus, the whole issue of therapeutic power was being addressed and contained, at least to some extent.

What had put me off in my earlier attempts at training was the extreme focus on the individual as some separate, bounded entity. This view had many implications, not least with regard to how I perceived the therapists I had come across as both accepting this view for themselves and applying it to manipulate, re-shape and impose their preferred beliefs upon their clients, often for what they thought were in the clients' best interests, but, as well, for the therapists' own interests. So... with regard to your point on humanistic and existential therapists: increasingly,

I find these labels too vague and limiting as points of significant distinction. For me, the distinction lies between the focus taken: relational being vs separatist individualism. I suspect that just as there may be any number of humanistic psychotherapists whose way of being/working is relational, there may also be any number of existential therapists whose way of being/working is individualistic. It depends upon whom you scratch.... and who scratches you.

RH: Well that's got us off to a flying start, Ernesto – or taken us right in at the deep end, depending on your preferred metaphor! Thanks for such a stimulating beginning. What you say here has helped me to understand more clearly why it is that you're far from being an 'ideological existential-phenomenologist' (if I may coin a somewhat dubious term). What I mean by that is that in your writings, you bring a wide-ranging perspective to therapy which is respectful (but not uncritical) of other approaches. I'm thinking in particular about your first book, *Demystifying Therapy* (Spinelli, 1994), which I had the pleasure of reviewing for the then *Counselling* magazine (House, 1995), and which I was delighted to see that PCCS Books had re-printed in 2006.

I wonder whether you could summarize for readers what your main criticisms were (and are) of psychodynamic and humanistic approaches? As I understand it, they have a lot to do with philosophies of the person, and also of the therapeutic change process.

ES: Actually, *Demystifying Therapy* was my second book. The first one was *The Interpreted World: An Introduction to Phenomenological Psychology*, which first came out in 1989, with a 2nd edition in 2005. But I do remember your review of *Demystifying Therapy*, Richard. It was so thoughtful and attuned to what I'd been trying to communicate that I was blown away by it. I think I may have even written to you to thank you for presenting such an insightful, and enthusiastic, analysis.

Anyway, *Demystifying Therapy* was, in large part, my attempt to provide some sort of response to Jeffrey Masson's book *Against Therapy*. I had thought that there was something of worth in a good deal of what Masson was criticizing about therapy in general, but that there was also a significant amount of misunderstanding and unnecessary diatribe. And also, following my earlier point, I wanted to put forward what I was formulating as an alternate approach to therapy which seemed to me to be steeped in existential-phenomenological principles (as I understood them). So a lot of the book is about questions of power in the therapeutic encounter, and how many of the assumptions that inform diverse therapeutic models might well generate unnecessary imbalances of power.

So with regard to psycho-analysis and psychodynamic approaches in general, I explored critically several key assumptions such as the analytic unconscious, transference/counter-transference and the role of the past – trying to show how these seemed to me to be problematic hypotheses **which**

seemed to exist primarily to enhance the power of the therapist and to protect him or her from undesirable client challenges to that power.

With regard to humanistic approaches, I focused on assumptions surrounding a single, (relatively) permanent, real or genuine or authentic self which could be contrasted with false, or unreal, or inauthentic selves. I tried to show how the therapist's beliefs in such often led to the client's voice and views being at best only partly heard, as well as re-creating within the therapeutic encounter something all too similar to the client's experiences of other wider-world encounters which, however unintentionally, served to provoke the client's experience of 'being wrong'.

But, going back to your comment about not being an 'ideological existential-phenomenologist'.... Again, you are being very kind. I don't think that it's possible to be free of ideology, but we can remain aware as well as suspicious of it. For me, existential phenomenology is steeped in unavoidable doubt and uncertainty (including the doubt and uncertainty which exists within any statement regarding doubt and uncertainty) **such that all of its statements end with a question mark** rather than a period or full stop. To me, that's a foundational stance that therapists can adopt with regard to any therapeutic approach or model.

RH: Many apologies for getting your excellent books out of sequence in my mind, Ernesto. And you did write to thank me for my review of *Demystifying Therapy* – I still have the letter all these years on! And for what it's worth I completely agree with you about Masson's *Against Therapy* – he was definitely on to something important and neglected with regard to therapy's 'shadow' side; but alas, his scattergun polemic just didn't possess the nuance, discernment and subtlety that would have been necessary to make his case convincingly. And so perhaps understandably, it did get written off and ignored by many of the very people who did need to be challenged about the shadow side of therapy practice.

Re '...re-creating within the therapeutic encounter something all too similar to the client's experiences of other wider-world encounters'; yes, I think this is a vital insight, and one about which the late clinical/critical psychologist David Smail also had a lot to say (e.g. Smail, 2001).

I love your 'foundational stance', Ernesto – beautifully put; and perhaps rather self-indulgently, I hope it chimes with something I wrote in 1999 (influenced by yourself, not least – e.g. Spinelli, 1996), that

therapy must routinely and ongoingly embrace a radical deconstruction of its theories and practices, paradoxically entailing a continual undermining of its own conditions of existence, if it is to avoid the kinds of abuses which are, I believe, intrinsic to the Professionalized Therapy Form as currently practised and culturally legitimated. (House, 1999, p. 384)

Focussing more closely on the vital issue of power, as it has already and appropriately come up: I remember reading an excellent article you wrote about power in the therapy relationship in the BAC(P) magazine (Spinelli, 1998, 2001). I was wondering whether you've had any further insights into the question of power – and how therapists might do their best to minimize the negative and unhelpful impacts of dysfunctional power dynamics in the work?

ES: Yes, David Smail did have a lot of wonderfully apt and challenging things to say. As did Al Mahrer. They were great 'insider' critics of therapy, and I'm pretty sure they would have agreed with your statement. As do I.

About power.... There are the obvious abuses, of course. But I think that we're both more interested in the subtler abuses that arise with – and within – the therapeutic enterprise itself. Let me try to answer your question in a more immediate way. If we look at our currently ongoing dialogue, it seems to me that although it had an initial general focus (i.e. a discussion between Ernesto and Richard), it remains pretty flexible as to both its topics and its mode of engagement. It could go pretty much anywhere without either of us really leading or directing it. Of course, the 'price' of such is that it remains entirely unpredictable as to what it will touch upon or what direction it takes. Neither one of us is really in charge of that in that we're allowing the dialogue to find and pursue its own direction. All of which takes us into pretty uncertain territory, and may even provoke some degree of unease or anxiety in one or both of us.

But the pay-off of such a dialogue is precisely that in being so open and unpredictable, it feels genuine and alive, and I think we both feel a sense of connectedness and commitment to it. And... for all we know there remains the possibility that either one of us, or both of us, will be affected in ways that we judge to be significant – perhaps even life-changing – through it. Who can say?

Now it seems to me that when therapy is most effective and meaningful, it is precisely because some sort of dialogue (not necessarily verbal) has occurred which has a similar freedom and openness and truthfulness and uncertainty to it. But for this to happen, the therapist needs to let go of a lot of what s/he has come to believe is significant and necessary about 'how it is to be a therapist'.

What's this got to do with power? My guess is that much of the issues of power that are of concern to us arise precisely through the therapist's *unwillingness* to abdicate control of the encounter in terms of what is talked about, how it is talked about and what is deemed appropriate to talk about. But, of course, the latter is entirely against the current therapeutic *Zeitgeist* as set by more and more of the professional bodies, insurance providers, NICE guidelines and the like, who want therapists to always know what they're doing, how they're doing it and so forth, even before they've even met the client. And... in my view, as a result of this

dominant mode, therapy as a radical challenge to both persons and culture is being undermined and weakened to a level that I can't imagine any therapist or client would want it to be.

By the way, I should add that the view on dialogue that I summarized comes from one of the very great phenomenologists, Hans-Georg Gadamer.

RH: Thank you for this richest of replies, Ernesto. I certainly don't want this dialogue to turn into a self-congratulatory back-slapping exercise – but I emphatically agree with everything you say here. Perhaps this is the moment to start some 'scratching'!... I'm wondering, does the fact that I agree with all you say in your previous response make me more of an existential-phenomenologist than a humanist? Or put differently, in there anything *intrinsic* to the humanistic 'ideology' that would challenge or disagree with what you've said here? If not, perhaps this is at least one reason why 'humanistic' and 'existential' are often coupled together as therapy approaches (to the extent, even, of being connected with a hyphen). Engaging with this issue would also perhaps give you the opportunity to say something about your own relationship with the humanistic approach, and what you might value in it.

I'm also excited by your reference to Gadamer. Whenever I've encountered Gadamer (e.g. his seminal book *Truth and method*), I've always been very excited and drawn to his thinking – but for some reason I never followed through and immersed myself in it – to my great regret. I wonder whether you'd also like to say something more about Gadamer, and why his work and insights are so important for therapists.

ES: I think that an adequate way of addressing the existential/humanistic issue is to invoke the notion of 'a fuzzy space'. By this, I want to suggest that there are – or, more accurately, can be – points of significant convergence within the diverse systems.

For me, the issue is this: for humanistic approaches, the primary concern is the person per se; for existential approaches, the importance of the person is with regard to the much wider issue of being. As such, of course the models' concerns will touch on shared territories, but I think that the existential territory extends into wider vistas.

I think that one way of clarifying the difference via analogy might be as follows. For me, humanistic approaches remain within a pre-Copernican worldview that places the person at the centre of the universe. In contrast, as I see it existential perspectives are ultimately post-Copernican in that the person is seen as an expression or manifestation of being and, therefore, no longer at the centre. So, a humanistic understanding of 'authenticity', say, concerns itself with denoting a particular way of being (or becoming) a person. An existential understanding of authenticity is much more about embracing being as it appears; it's not really any sort of personal advancement or 'growth' or achievement.

Practical implication: humanistic approaches are much more 'therapeutic' in the newer sense of that term in that they are primarily concerned with change, improvement, advancement and so forth. Existential approaches are much more attuned to the original meaning of therapy, which is concerned with the attempt to stay with the way that someone is being so that this way of being can be examined/disclosed/more adequately understood rather than actively (or directively) seeking a shift from that way of being towards some other – possibly preferred – way of being. This latter view sounds static or 'so what-ish', but it isn't at all. Which takes us to Gadamer... – or rather, one tantalizing little bit of the many ideas that Gadamer presented.

One of Gadamer's principal concerns throughout his life (and he lived to be 102!) was the issue of interpretation. He saw every act of interpretation as being necessarily contextualized within 'tradition' (all the interpretations that came before and which continue to influence every current attempt at interpreting). He was scathing of so-called 'objective' approaches in the social sciences, for instance, because for him, they sought to deny the context under which their 'objective' statements emerge.

At the same time, though, he was equally scathing of postmodern views that, for him, impose a fixed and limiting view of tradition which is overly biased toward issues regarding personal interpretations. Instead, he suggests the idea of interpretation as a sort of 'cultural festival'. Imagine a festival whose intent is to celebrate some significant past event. Gadamer argues that the festival event is neither an exact duplicate of the original event, nor is it something that is just an expression of currently preferred biases, modes and views. Instead, it is something much more creative in that it is a merging of both, of past and present, and, in being so, it is a creative expression of something new, never before existent.

So, for him, interpretation can never be de-contextualized and therefore never truly 'objective', and, as well, the range and extent of the 'tradition' from which an interpretation emerges can never be fully known, controlled or removed. Instead, the task of interpretation is to acknowledge and accept its contextual features (both the known and the unknown) and, as well, to attempt to be as critical of their biasing influences (both discerned and undiscerned) as much as one can be, so that this stance of critical acceptance itself permits a novel interpretative possibility.

Now this interpretative enterprise being proposed by Gadamer seems to me to be pretty much the undertaking that existential therapy sets for itself. The client's lived experience becomes the focus of a 'creative festival', and the therapy, via its critically attuned and accepting stance, becomes the means by which brand new interpretative possibilities emerge. The paradox is that in staying with 'what is there, in the way it is there, when it is there' in itself allows the emergence of novel possibilities of 'what is there, in the way it is there, when it is there'.

RH: There's so much I'd like to pick up on here, Ernesto, I hardly know where to start – I'll need to *choose!* (!) Thanks so much, first, for those insights about Gadamer. If I were at the start of my career rather than near the end, Gadamer would be top of my list to study and strive to understand.

I also just wanted to mention your earlier comment that 'the therapist needs to let go of a lot of what s/he has come to believe is significant and necessary about "how it is to be a therapist"'. This is very interesting, Ernesto. I'm very grateful for the first counselling training I experienced – led by Tony Storey at Cambridge University Extra-mural Studies (1987–90), it was built around the notion of what Tony called 'disciplined ignorance' – using the vehicle of 'the Skin' experiential inquiry group, in which we all contracted for the duration of the group to stay only in the present moment without reference to past or future, and also undertaking to make no judgements about whatever anyone said in the group. These few inadequate words can't begin to convey the depth, passion and power of these groups; but I now see them as generating exactly what I think you're referring to here – i.e. therapists shorn of the illusion (delusion?) of therapist expertise, and being as open as humanly possible to *what is* and to what emerges – free of protocols, pre-decided theories, our own projections and so on. But I'm hijacking your interview!...

Regarding your comment that 'existential perspectives are ultimately post-Copernican in that the person is seen as an expression or manifestation of being and, therefore, no longer at the centre'. This leaves me wondering about what the differences might be between existential and *postmodern* therapy approaches (e.g. Parker, 1999 – though I hear and am intrigued by how critical Gadamer was of postmodernist thinking). Postmodernism, as I'm sure you'll know, is often witheringly critical of humanism – and yet as a self-styled humanistic therapist, I love postmodern thinking, and I think it adds to and deepens what humanistic practice has to offer. There are arguably also key links to transpersonal approaches too – e.g. in terms of 'unknowing' and the like.

So I'm now wondering whether we might consider lumping together humanistic, existential, postmodern and transpersonal therapies into a *broad alliance* of approaches (perhaps not a million miles away from the existing Alliance for Counselling and Psychotherapy – see <https://allianceblogs.wordpress.com/>) that: (a) challenge head on (in their diverse ways) what, all those years back, Woolfolk and Richardson (2008; orig. 1984) termed 'the ideology of modernity'; and (b) that are quintessentially *counter-cultural* therapies that refuse to collude with the over-professionalization, expert-fixations and 'outcome' obsessions of therapy as a helping/healing practice. In this latter regard, I'm referring specifically to your earlier comment about the approach you advocate being 'entirely against the current therapeutic *Zeitgeist* as set by more and more of the professional bodies, insurance providers, NICE guidelines and the like'. Hear hear! – and I think humanistic, postmodern and

transpersonal approaches can also be characterized in this way. I'm also reminded of Brian Thorne's view that therapy is – or should be – a *subversive* activity that challenges the manifold abuses of institutional power in society.

So I'm wondering whether you see any mileage in such a four-fold alliance of therapy approaches, Ernesto, on the assumption that what unites them is far more important than what divides them. Such a move could also help to make the resistance to the modernist *Zeitgeist* much more effective and, thereby, difficult to ignore – a critical mass of opposition that is currently too fragmented, and is therefore so easy to be picked off and sidelined (e.g. by RCT mania, the CBT juggernaut, the noxious 'audit culture', and so on – King and Moutsou, 2010). Am I living in cloud-cuckoo land here, or might I be on to something?

ES: Well, I agree that you might well be on to something and that we are all currently living in cloud-cuckoo land – as the major socio-political events of the last few years have so clearly demonstrated. But this may be an opportunity. When 'the centre does not hold', that which has existed on the periphery becomes much more open to consideration and influence. I don't know; some days I feel so pessimistic about 'the big picture'. Other days, I have a strong sense of genuine possibilities in the air. Perhaps that fabled 'Age of Aquarius' is finally upon us. But maybe I only state that because I'm an Aquarian.

Anyway... This grand alliance you propose. I see it in a way that is more an alliance of persons rather than of models. As I mentioned before, there are any number of existential therapists out there who would consider my version/interpretation of it to be absurd, threatening, ill-conceived and/or fundamentally wrong. I suspect that similar sorts of divides and differences of views will be found amongst those who see themselves as followers of humanistic, postmodern and transpersonal models. So perhaps the alliance makes sense when it is between those who adopt differing general labels but whose primary focus point begins with a view that is basically critical of the usual 'points of centredness' that are assumed to be unassailable givens. The critiques might be about dominant notions of self, or interpretation, or relationality or whatever. And these critiques might take different directions or reach different *temporary* conclusions. Emphasis on the 'temporary' because it seems to me that what might unify the stance taken by the persons who promote and enjoy playing with such stances is a genuine open-mindedness. That question mark rather than a period at the end of each statement, as I mentioned above. For many, this view is too chaotic. So I can't see that the alliance can be focused on, or dependent upon, the models. It's too 'top down', I think. For me, it makes it too 'current *Zeitgeist*'-ish.

I'm not quite sure why I think this is relevant, but... I recently finished watching a very long, and very impressive, documentary series on a rock group called The Grateful Dead. People either love or loathe their music because of its inherently chaotic stance. From the start, the enterprise they formulated was

concerned with what could be created as some vast entity – involving musicians, and audience and available technology – rather than being focused on individual contributions, ownership, and the like. For years and years the Grateful Dead existed on the periphery of the Great Big Rock Machine, often driving agents and record company executives crazy in not being able to figure out what to do with this group of loonies. And they thrived being on that periphery. They had all the freedom of creative expression and social interaction that they wanted and needed. And then, suddenly, unexpectedly, they became mega-popular. They could only play in vast stadia that cut off much of the contact between them and their audience, and they lost the pleasure and surprise in what they did. Some of them lost all sense of meaning and purpose, and killed themselves on alcohol and heroin. Worst of all, I think, they lost their space on the periphery and, in moving towards (or becoming) the centre, they embraced more and more of that centrist *Zeitgeist*.

I've heard variations of this story too many times now to not be concerned about it. Maybe there's an importance in staying on the periphery if that is where you gravitate towards or where you feel most open and creative. Of course, there is the danger of constant dismissal, being seen as irrelevant 'voices in the wilderness'. Perhaps the views and concerns you and me and any number of other people share, and are impassioned by, are always going to be seen and heard as irrelevant by the great majority who accept the *Zeitgeist*. And maybe, at some future point in time – as is so often the case – such views will be seen to be acceptable, even desirable. And perhaps we shouldn't be concerned about what may or may not happen with regard to such. If we just keep doing what we're doing because in its widest sense it's 'fun', that sense will be picked up by those who recognize it as such.

I'm with Gadamer on this: the very greatest possibilities emerge and take root when left to their own movement and direction. If we start to direct and push, we inhibit their power, subvert their significance and run the risk of destroying them by pushing them too rapidly towards the centre. Sartre warned us that every movement of liberation will eventually become one of oppression. I think he's right to the extent that such shifts occur when their flow and focus get manipulated by impatience or despair or arrogance. Or, again, when the question mark becomes the full stop / period.

RH: Again I could go in many directions with your fulsome and thought-provoking reply, Ernesto! ...I find this all this fascinating... – not least because it touches directly on a key theme of our recent book, *Humanistic Psychology* (House, Kalisch and Maidman, 2018) – viz. the argument that, arguably, an intrinsically indissoluble aspect of Humanistic Psychology is precisely that it is counter-cultural – with Mowbray, for example, arguing that Humanistic Psychology 'must stay on the margin and not be absorbed, not be tempted by the carrots of recognition, respectability and financial security in reverting to the mainstream, but rather remain on the fringe' (Mowbray, 1995: 198–9).

But against this view, in the same Humanistic Psychology anthology we find Peter Hawkins, for example, arguing that this ‘fringe’ mentality ‘...is what I refer to as “the academic disease” – which I describe as wanting to stay as a spectator and critic in the stand, rather than get on the pitch and play’ (Hawkins, 2018: 258). And similarly, elsewhere in the same book we find Katie McArthur and Mick Cooper arguing that

For Humanistic Psychology... to meet the challenges of the modern world it must evolve and adapt, continually improving its theory and practice.... The danger for Humanistic Psychology in the modern world is that it remains, or becomes increasingly, sidelined in culture despite its great potential for contributing to a more psychologically healthy society. (McArthur and Cooper, 2018: 160, 165)

As I think you know, I’m very much with your position on this, Ernesto – and I have my own views on how to respond to the kinds of arguments that are raised by well-meaning critical friends like Katie, Mick and Peter. But I’m wondering how you might respond to their wish for humanistic (and, more widely, counter-cultural, ‘de-centred’) viewpoints to become more acknowledged – and even assimilated – by the mainstream.

ES: There is a wonderful phrase by David Rudkin that, I think, captures where you and me might be on this one: ‘The edge is where the centre is’. I think that it’s erroneous to attempt to direct one’s models and theories toward the mainstream centre. To me, that centre is full of periods, and cannot tolerate question marks. It’s somewhat stuffy and self-satisfied. And it certainly has nothing new to say. I might be wrong, but right now I can’t think of any great ideas that have ever emerged from that mainstream centre. Now, the centre that Rudkin points us to is precisely that centre that McArthur and Cooper identify as having the ‘great potential for contributing to a more psychologically healthy society’. But what they seem to be forgetting is that it was a contribution that emerged precisely because Humanistic Psychology was on the peripheral centre and not in the mainstream centre. To me, being on the periphery isn’t about being marginalized; it’s about voicing the issues and concerns that will continually disturb the mainstream. Personally, I like that ‘peripheral centre’ space much more than the mainstream centre, and so I tend to agree with Mowbray’s argument that you refer to above.

At the same time, as an existential phenomenologist, my sense remains that what we are being faced with through such discussions and differing viewpoints is yet another expression of an irresolvable polarity conflict. The desire to be recognized, approved, respected, even simply acknowledged by the mainstream – maybe even to be part of that mainstream – is as powerful and as valid as that of wanting to remain on the fringe. An example: over the last few years there have been various existential therapists who’ve embraced the challenge of quantitatively focused research, and who have set about

successfully challenging the dominant myth that it’s only predominantly CBT-oriented forms of therapy that provide evidence of their effectiveness. I applaud these efforts and encourage their continuation in whatever way I am able to. My personal stance on this is in recognition of the polarity conflict, and my attempts to stay with and ‘hold’ it (and its possibilities) rather than seek to resolve it. Now to me, trying to ‘hold it’ is another way of trying to remain responsible in my locating myself on the peripheral centre. Staying on the periphery is hard work in that it requires you to:

- a) keep up to date as much as possible with the views, concerns, critiques and developments of those who are also advocates of the peripheral centre (as we were discussing before);
- b) keep up to date as much as possible with the views, concerns critiques and developments of those who are advocates of the mainstream centre;
- c) test your ability and willingness to ‘meet’ the views of both the other peripheral-centre advocates and the mainstream-centre advocates without either elevating or demonizing them – and your own views, of course;
- d) not just speaking or writing *against* the mainstream centre but also speaking or writing *for* your understanding of the peripheral centre.

Such a stance, it seems to me, requires huge dollops of open-mindedness, self-challenge, commitment and, perhaps most importantly, humour and the willingness to stay with – even enjoy – the uncertainty of it all.

At its heart is that ‘both/and’ stance over the more common ‘either/or’ one. Which is all very easy to put into words. Attempting to put it into action is the real challenge.

The hardest part, I think, is that the mainstream centre doesn’t tend to either make or value such attempts, and will disparage such as being irrelevant, unproven or whatever else. Until they’re not. This is the price that the peripheral centre has to accept: we have no way of controlling or determining when, or how, or under what circumstances, the peripheral view becomes heard, valued, even embraced by the mainstream view. It’s a ‘gestalt’ moment that happens when it happens.

Without getting into a directly political discussion now, I think we’ve witnessed and participated in quite a few of those moments over the past couple of years. That’s what leaves me thinking that we are at a critical point where what constitutes mainstream and what constitutes periphery may not be what we assume today for that much longer.

I have no idea how things will go for psychotherapy. But if we

think of the history of physics, it might be helpful to remember that at the very moment that physicists were bemoaning the future of physics because all the great questions had been resolved and become open to precise mathematical prediction, along came relativity theory and quantum mechanics. I remain optimistic of something similar happening in the world of psychotherapy.

RH: Well, it's with great regret that we have to 'hold it' now, Ernesto! – we've already gone over our allotted span, alas. 'What constitutes mainstream and what constitutes periphery may not be what we assume today for that much longer' – I think you're naming something absolutely vital here; perhaps our readers can continue this fascinating conversation we've started with some letters to the editor!

Long may you continue to be one of Humanistic Psychology's most valued and esteemed 'critical friends', Ernesto! A heart-felt 'thank you' to you for sharing your wisdom with us.

References

- Gadamer, H.-G. (2004). *Truth and Method*, 2nd edn. London: Continuum (orig. 1975).
- Hawkins, P. (2018). The necessary revolution in Humanistic Psychology. In R. House, D. Kalisch & J. Maidman (Eds), *Humanistic Psychology: Current Trends and Future Prospects* (pp. 251–68). Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge.
- House, R. (1995). Review of Ernesto Spinelli's *Demystifying Therapy* (London: Constable). *Counselling*, 6 (3), p. 233.
- House, R. (1999). 'Limits to counselling and therapy': deconstructing a professional ideology. *British Journal of Guidance and Counselling*, 27, pp. 377–392; reprinted in Y. Bates & R. House (Eds), *Ethically Challenged Professions* (pp. 94–109). Ross-on-Wye: PCCS Books, 2003.
- House, R., Kalisch, D. & Maidman, J. (Eds) (2018). *Humanistic Psychology: Current Trends and Future Prospects*. Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge.
- King, L. and Moutsou, C. (Eds) (2010). *Rethinking Audit Cultures: A Critical Look at Evidence-based Practice in Psychotherapy and Beyond*. Ross-on-Wye: PCCS Books.
- McArthur, K. & Cooper, M. (2018). The future of Humanistic Psychology: autonomy, relatedness and competence. In R. House, D. Kalisch & J. Maidman (Eds), *Humanistic Psychology: Current Trends and Future Prospects* (pp. 160–5). Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge.
- Mahrer, A. R. (2000). Philosophy of science and the foundations of psychotherapy. *American Psychologist*, 55 (10), 117–25.
- Mahrer, A. R. (2004). *Theories of Truth, Models of Usefulness*. London: Whurr.
- Masson, J. (1988). *Against Therapy: Emotional Tyranny and the Myth of Psychological Healing*. London: Fontana.
- Mowbray, R. (1995) *The Case Against Psychotherapy Registration: A Conservation Issue for the Human Potential Movement*. London: Trans Marginal Press; downloadable as a pdf file free of charge at: www.transmarginalpress.co.uk.

- Parker I. (Ed.) (1999). *Deconstructing Psychotherapy*. London: Sage
- Smail, D. (2001). *The Nature of Unhappiness*. London: Robinson.
- Spinelli, E. (1994). *Demystifying Therapy*. London: Constable; reprinted by PCCS Books, Ross-on-Wye, 2006.
- Spinelli, E. (1996). Do therapists know what they're doing? In I. James and S. Palmer (Eds), *Professional Therapeutic Titles: Myths and Realities* (pp. 55–61). Leicester: British Psychological Society, Div. Couns. Psychol., Occasional Paper 2.
- Spinelli, E. (1998). Counselling and the abuse of power. *Counselling* 9 (3), 181–4.
- Spinelli, E. (2001). Counselling and the abuse of power. In P. Milner & S. Palmer (Eds), *The BACP Counselling Reader 2* (pp. 331–6). London: Sage.
- Spinelli, E. (2005). *The Interpreted World: An Introduction to Phenomenological Psychology*, 2nd edn. London: Sage (1st edn, 1989).
- Woolfolk, R.L. & Richardson, F. (2008). Behaviour therapy and the ideology of modernity – revisited. In R. House and D. Loewenthal (Eds), *Against and For CBT: Towards a Constructive Dialogue?* (pp. 52–71). Ross-on-Wye: PCCS Books

About the contributors

Ernesto Spinelli was Chair of the Society for Existential Analysis between 1993 and 1999 and is a Life Member of the Society. His writings, lectures and seminars focus on the application of existential-phenomenology to the arenas of therapy, psychology, and executive coaching. In 1999, Ernesto was awarded a Personal Chair as Professor of Psychotherapy, Counselling and Counselling Psychology. And in 2000, he was the recipient of the BPS Division of Counselling Psychology Award for Outstanding Contribution to the Profession. His most recent book, *Practising Existential Psychotherapy: The Relational World* 2nd edn (Sage, 2015) has been widely praised as a major contribution to the advancement of existential theory and practice.

Richard House is an educational and left-green political campaigner-consultant. Formerly senior lecturer in Early Childhood (Winchester) and psychotherapy (Roehampton) and co-editor of *Self and Society*, Richard co-founded the Independent Practitioners Network and the Alliance for Counselling and Psychotherapy. The author/editor of 12 books – including *In, Against and Beyond Therapy* (PCCS, 2010) and *Humanistic Psychology* (Routledge, 2018, co-eds David Kalisch and Jennifer Maidman) – Richard is a trained Steiner teacher and childhood campaigner, having co-organized four globally influential multiple-signatory press letters on the state of modern childhood (2006–16), and more latterly two press letters for Extinction Rebellion.