

Short Book Reviews

Reviewed by **Richard House**

The Snake in the Clinic: Psychotherapy's Role in Medicine and Healing

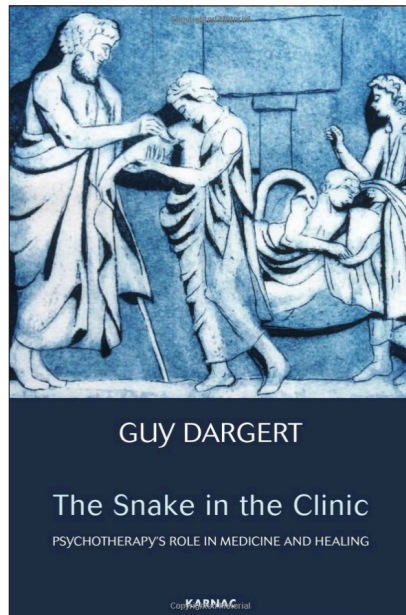
by **Guy Dargert**, Karnac, London, 2016, xix + 174 pp, price (paperback) **£25.99**,
ISBN-13: 978-1782203742.

The Snake in the Clinic reads like a discursive quasi-'stream of consciousness' on themes that will be of great interest to humanistic practitioners – and I hope the latter comment is read as a compliment, which it is. Themes like wholeness, paradox, and archetypal and perennial wisdom are central to this book, and it's one of those books where one needs to just 'surrender to a text' and see where it takes you.

Interestingly illustrated and well-indexed, I loved the way it weaves together a wide range of therapy-related themes with ancient wisdom, embellished by illuminating case material.

Dargert articulates beautifully the massive tension lying at the heart of the psychotherapeutic enterprise: viz. that between therapy seen as a programmatic, technique- and evidence-based *science*; and on the other hand, as a hermeneutic, meaning-making healing *art* in which we're unavoidably working transpersonally with the mysterious, the numinous (Jung) and the unknown unconscious (Groddeck, Freud). Dargert nails his colours firmly and convincingly to the latter mast throughout the book – showing just what will be lost if mainstream medicine (or the state, through state regulation) insists on forcing the psychological therapies into the restricting prison-house of modern positivist science.

A core message, familiar to many a humanistic practitioner, is that illness and its many symptoms should be viewed, experienced and even *welcomed* as a paradoxical, counter-



intuitive *opportunity for transformation* and personal development, rather than as some kind of malfunctioning of a human 'machine' that needs to be 'corrected' so that 'normal' functioning can be resumed. So much of mainstream health treatment is founded in the latter ideology (often, alas, colluded with by patients themselves). Yet for Dargert, if we neglect or ignore the imaginal, the dream, embodiment, and ancient perennial ways of understanding human experience, the kinds of help we'll be able to offer to those struggling with illness will be severely denuded, if not fatally compromised.

Discursively wide-ranging, rich and immensely rewarding, the book introduces the widest range of authorities who speak to these concerns, with intelligent, penetrating discussions of their contributions – names including Jung, Groddeck, James Hillman,

Rollo May, John Sarno, Candace Pert, Gabor Maté, R.D. Laing and Ivan Illich. We also read extensive accounts of ancient healing practices and environments, reminding us that illness is at least as much social, cultural and cross-generational as it is intra-psychoic and individual.

I found Chapter 4 on 'The origins of Western medicine' especially engaging and enlightening, though I personally missed Jerome Frank, Rudolf Steiner, Donald Winnicott, and critical psychologists like Mary Boyle not figuring in the discussion. Yet this book isn't meant to be a 'comprehensive review of the field', so this is in no way a criticism.

Those therapists and health practitioners most needing to read this book are quite likely the least likely to go anywhere near it, as it emanates from a paradigm that those immersed in materialism and modernity don't begin to understand, or else ideologically dismiss as being 'New Agey' and 'unscientific'. Dargart could perhaps have named and explored this very issue – i.e. the 'paradigm war' and apparent 'incommensurability' between mainstream evidence-based and cure-fixated medicine, on the one hand, and the healing orientation that Dargart supports – and how we can make sense of this

paradigmatic conflict. For if we don't begin this difficult cross-paradigm conversation, we'll just keep talking to our own side's 'believers' within our respective bubbles. The subject for another book, perhaps.

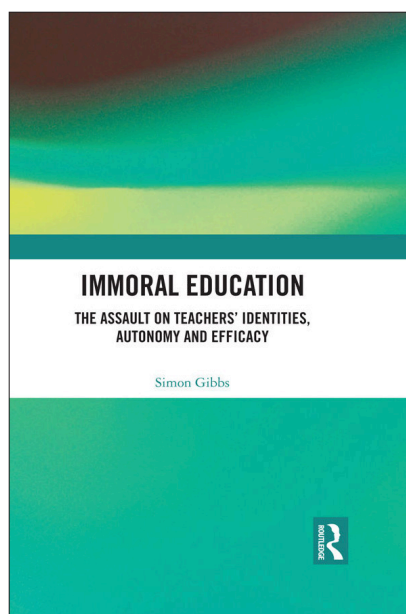
Anyone interested in healing, in the archetypal and depth-psychological aspects of illness and health, and in non-mechanistic challenges to the mainstream medical paradigm, will surely love this book. I highly recommend it.

Immoral Education: The Assault on Teachers' Identities, Autonomy and Efficacy

by **Simon Gibbs, Routledge, Abingdon, Oxon, 2018, 180 pp., price (hardback) £115.00, ISBN-10: 0815368364.**

In 2000 I wrote a paper for *Education Now* magazine with the sub-title 'The Modernizing **Assault** on our Education System'; and so I was delighted when I saw that nearly 20 years on, there are still educationalists on the case of this 'assault', and who are bringing it to public attention. This book's author certainly concurs that teachers have been subjected to a concerted 'assault' that 'dehumanises education' (p. 158).

Educational psychologist and university reader Simon Gibbs has written a book that will be of interest to anyone who cares about the abject state of our schooling system, and the criminal deprofessionalization of teachers that has occurred under the yoke of the unforgiving neoliberal audit culture that has engulfed our schools since the 1990s. For Gibbs, our very humanity is being systematically squeezed out of education, with appalling consequences for both teachers and pupils; and a core thesis of the book is that 'teachers' ethical autonomy, creativity and dialogical responsiveness have all been severely compromised by the prevailing neoliberal economic and political policies' (p. 27). Related to this is that the very purpose for education in hypermodern culture seems to have got lost (*ibid.*), with crassly mechanistic 'performativity' having replaced Macmurray's and Dewey's idea that education should fundamentally be about *learning to be human*. A core thesis of the book, then, is that 'education that is associated with the categorisation, grouping,



segregation and of stereotyping of groups and individuals is unethical and immoral' (p. 123).

One particularly interesting feature of the book for Humanistic Psychology is Gibbs' erudite exploration of the ways in which psychological phenomena underpin the educational experience. The book starts on territory that will be familiar to humanistic practitioners – viz. notions of self, identity and intersubjectivity, and with an informed and illuminating philosophical discussion drawing on the work of people like Derek Parfit, Emmanuel Levinas, Ken Gergen, Ian Hacking and John Macmurray. These discussions are closely argued, and will appeal to more academic and philosophically inclined readers – though the issues covered are of core concern for the theoretical base and concerns of

Humanistic Psychology. On page 18, for example, we read that 'our identities are... an artefact of our being in the (social) world in interaction with others'; and 'neuroscience has so far failed to identify neural mechanisms that could be unambiguously identified as the locus of a "self"' (p. 19).

Labelling, stereotyping and essentialism also come in for sustained discussion and critique (especially in relation to additional educational needs), looking at the psychological mechanisms involved in labelling, stereotyping and segregating people. Humanistic folk would surely agree with Gibbs'

conclusion that 'It is immoral at any interpersonal level to aggregate categories or groups of people under a label as that is to dehumanise unique experiences' (p. 35); and that labels are 'potentially one of the great moral villains in the way they help create and perpetuate prejudice and stereotypes' (p. 93). It was certainly heartening for this reader to see the Ofsted school inspection regime come in for such cogent and sustained criticism (p. 109–13) – and not least the extraordinary state of affairs whereby Ofsted teams 'do not have the remit to take account of context when evaluating the progress children have made' (p. 112).

Readers will also warm to Gibbs' taking on of what he calls 'neuroessentialism', that 'promotes an essentialist biological (genetic) paradigm as the basis of behaviour and psychopathology' (p. 92). And it's always useful to be reminded, too, that we are all capable of unconsciously engaging in stereotypical thinking (p. 95).

There is also a whole chapter on othering and dialogue, drawing on Laing, Buber and Levinas, amongst others, and the associated process of teacher deprofessionalization. There are of course parallels here with the rise of 'technicist' state therapy and the concomitant decline of thoughtfulness and an openness to not-knowing – for these are the very self-same paradigmatic conflicts and struggles. And what a contrast to the 1970s, when teachers had considerable autonomy and were far more able to exercise their own pedagogical choices (p. 76).

I frankly despair at the state of our schooling system, and at the incapacity of politicians of any party to deeply understand the enormous damage that the audit culture has done, and continues to do, to teachers and children alike. I'm reminded of political scientist James Scott's useful notion of 'seeing like a state', and that politicians seem congenitally incapable of *not* 'seeing like a state', nor of understanding the untold damage that their 'regime of truth' does to creativity, play and the artistic. I sometimes even fantasize that all education ministers and policy-makers should be made to write out 100 times Macmurray's injunction that 'Education is not *and cannot ever be* a technical activity' (quoted on p. 53, my italics), for under this inhuman Gradgrind system for which they are responsible, 'the role of the teacher as an autonomous professional has been derogated to be that of a technician' (p. 57).

I would personally have liked to see more in the book about the paradigmatic and neoliberal colonization of the schooling system by the noxious audit and compliance culture, and the complex

process by which it has been allowed to come about; but perhaps that needs to be the subject of another book. Yet there's certainly no doubt where Gibbs' own sympathies lie in this regard (e.g. see pp. 55–8; and his statement that 'neoliberal economic policies affect and infect education in a number of ways' – p. 125).

Near the end we see a welcome list of practical suggestions by which the current parlous, dehumanizing state of the schooling system might be retrieved (p. 158) – namely:

- Abandon standardised national testing of children
- Respect teachers as professionals and members of learning communities.
- Encourage collaboration, both within schools and between schools.
- Enhance the status of teachers and their initial professional education.
- Abandon the punitive inspection and grading of schools.
- Support and enable school and staff development.

Amen to all that. But alas, I think that all available evidence and experience show that politicians will be the very last people to get the message – for as Bordieu has argued (as did Rudolf Steiner nearly a century before him), the fields of economics and politics will always tend to subordinate the cultural (cited on p. 125).

Simon Gibbs has written an excellent book which shows us just how the best teachers have a sense of creativity, autonomy and agency, and yet how the current educational regime destroys teachers' professional identity and autonomy – with schools now finding it impossible to be organizations where learning about being fully human and inter-relating in a society are at the forefront. These are messages that those favouring a humanistic approach to education and learning will strongly support; and it's very heartening to this reader that there are ever-more authoritative voices like those of Gibbs being raised that fearlessly name the madnesses of the current system, and advocate the kinds of changes that will be necessary if we are to create a truly human(e) education system fit for the 21st century.

Richard House Ph.D. is a chartered psychologist who worked as a counsellor-psychotherapist for nearly 20 years, and is a former Steiner teacher. His books include *Therapy beyond Modernity* (2003), *In, Against and Beyond Therapy* (2010) and *Against and For CBT* (edited with Del Loewenthal, 2008). Richard is currently a political, environmental and educational activist and campaigner in Stroud, UK.