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A GUIDE TO HUMANISTIC PSYCHOLOGY

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(Third Edition)

THEORY IN HUMANISTIC PSYCHOLOGY

Because all the pioneers of humanistic psychology were very individual people, there is no one single accepted theory which we can lay out and say - this is it. But there are some very consistent themes running through all the material put forward by these people.

The first is that, deep down underneath it all where it really counts, you are OK. This goes against many other and much older theories which say that people are fundamentally bad, selfish, narrow and nasty. By saying that people are fundamentally OK, we do not at all mean that people are not sometimes destructive, or that there is no evil in the world. What we mean is that if someone will agree to work with us on his or her destructive actions or evil wishes, in an atmosphere of trust and acceptance, that person will discover that the evil and destructiveness are just as phony and just as forgettable as the false niceness of other people, which apparently causes no problems.

In other words, we believe that personal nastiness and personal niceness are most often, in both cases, masks and illusions, put on for reasons which seemed good at the time, but which have now become stuck and rigid, and out of our control. In that sense, if you want to use labels, we are all neurotic. By working on ourselves to unstuck the rigidities and loosen the mask, we can eventually learn how to live without needing masks at all - though it may be still be useful to put one on occasionally, as we might have a dress suit or an evening gown.

So when we talk about self-actualization, about getting in touch with what is the deepest truth within us, and allowing that to come out, we are not saying something fearful or dangerous. People often say - "How do I know I won't hate my deepest self when I come across it?" But this is an unrealistic

fear, and we may sometimes suspect that it is really designed to enable the person to avoid the necessary effort.

The second thread which runs all through humanistic psychology is an emphasis on the whole person. If we say that human beings exist on at least five levels - body, feelings, intellect, soul and spirit - then we have to do justice to all five of those levels in all our efforts at realising human potential. Ken Wilber (2000) spells out all the implications of this more clearly than anyone else. If I want to be that self which I truly am, then I have to be it on all five of those levels - I must not leave any of them out. Any theory, any therapy, which leaves out one or more of these must be inadequate to deal with the full human being who has to be met and responded to. It was Maslow who taught us to think in terms of levels, and to ignore all this is to live in Flatland.

Now today there is much more interest in the body - diet, exercise and so on - but much of that interest seems to us very external. It is as if we were supposed to be somewhere outside our bodies, disciplining them and making them do things, sometimes under protest. But the humanistic approach is to say that I *am* my body. If you touch my hand, you are touching *me*. So I am just as responsible for my body as I am for my thoughts, feelings, mental pictures or whatever - it is me doing it. This total responsibility for our own bodies, feelings, ideas and intuitions is very characteristic of humanistic psychology, and theoreticians like Mahrer (1989) and Schutz (1979) have made it clear exactly how this works.

This means that we are interested in integration. By integration we mean that the splits in the person can be healed, and that the holes in the personality can be filled. The various parts of the person can get to know each other better, accept each other more, and change in that process. This is not a process of subordinating all the various tendencies in the person to one overall control, like some kind of totalitarian ego - it is more like a harmony of contrasts.

The third thread we can follow all through the humanistic approach is the emphasis on change and development. Human beings are seen not as static victims or villains, but as people in a process of growth, which is natural and needful. All through our infancy, childhood and adolescence we are going through very substantial changes, involving our most basic attitudes and how

we see ourselves. Maslow said that we grow through six main levels of development, and his rather speculative theory has now been confirmed through the research of people like Lawrence Kohlberg (1981), Clay Alderfer (1972) and Jane Loevinger (1976) in many different countries of the world.

This process can continue, if we let it, in adulthood, too. We have all seen people we recognise as being further ahead than us, more complete, more evolved, more themselves. What humanistic psychology says is that we could all continue to grow if we did not limit ourselves and sell ourselves short. All the methods described in the next pages are designed to enable us to take off our self-imposed limitations, and continue to grow into our full potential as human beings.

One more idea which is important in humanistic psychology is abundance motivation. Most other psychology says that our actions are basically motivated by deficiency - that is, a lack of something. We may lack food and look for it, or lack safety and look for it, or lack company and look for it. This is to treat human beings as if they were basically something like a thermostat, only acting when something moves them outside their proper limits. But human beings also have an achievement motivation, and a need for varied experience, and an enormous curiosity, which takes them out of this deficiency-oriented realm into an abundance-oriented world of experience. So when we seek to realise our potential, we are not repairing some deficiency, we are entering a world where being can sometimes be more important than having or doing.

Most of us normally think that if we have enough worldly goods, then we can do what we want to do, and then we can be happy. The sequence is HAVE - DO - BE. But what we in humanistic psychology say is that it is exactly the other way round. If we can be who we really are, we will find ourselves doing things which genuinely satisfy us and give us enjoyment, and then we shall have all we really want. The sequence for us is BE - DO - HAVE.

This begins to sound almost religious, and it is one of the characteristics of humanistic psychology, which distinguishes it very sharply from secular humanism, that it has a place for the spiritual.

Maslow always laid great stress on the importance of peak experiences and the experience of transcendence. A peak experience is one of those times, felt by many millions of people, when all the pretence and all the fear drops away, and we seem to be in touch with the whole universe. It is a timeless moment of intense feeling, which comes to some people when they see a sunrise, or a mountain, to some when they hear great music, to some when they look at a child, to some when they are having sex, and to some in a religious ceremony. It is technically known as casual extraverted mysticism (Horne 1978), and it is within the reach of all of us.

In humanistic psychology we are very interested in studying this kind of phenomenon, and seeing how in some cases it can change a person's life. In fact, some of us got so interested in the whole area of the transpersonal - the more spiritual aspects of psychology - that a separate Journal of Transpersonal Psychology was set up and is now flourishing.

One interesting issue which arises here is the exact relationship between ordinary life, the process of development which we have been talking about, and the transpersonal. A good book which shows how all these things are linked is by Fadiman & Frager (1994). A look at Figure 1 may give some idea of the situation.

[Figure 1 about here: Four column chart]

It can be seen that the first column deals with ordinary everyday life, and with the forms of therapy which simply try to restore people to that when they get sick or unhappy.

The second column is the heartland of humanistic psychology, and deals with a number of issues which are crucial to this practice. Most of the activities described in this booklet have to do with the second column, though many have some interest in the first and third columns as well.

The third column is the heartland of the transpersonal in some of its practical aspects - see the further sections on this.

The fourth column can also be used in counselling or psychotherapy, but is more rare because of requiring more dedication to reach.

So when we say that humanistic psychology is concerned with the whole person, we really do mean it in a very particular way. We have developed a number of direct and effective ways of working, most particularly in the ways suggested by the second column. We assume that people are whole, and we treat them as if they are whole, and we encourage them to act as if they are whole. And in the pages which follow, we shall see exactly how this works out in practice.

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