

HUMANISTIC ALCHEMY

THE HUMANISTIC IDENTITY

For anyone considering this course, an overview of its roots in humanistic psychology is advisable. Humanistic psychology is known as the third force in contemporary psychology (the first being psychoanalysis and the second academic behavioural psychology), and has no specific content area. It is more of an attitude or orientation towards psychology as a whole that is accepting of 'many ways of looking' and can't be summarised in a single definition. Humanistic psychology has always been concerned with ensuring its relevance to everyday life and with values that make life worth living. A question for the viewer at this stage might therefore be: Do I resonate with the key themes identified hereafter? Does a course holding these values and underwritten by these beliefs meet broadly with my agreement and needs? First some history.

THE HUMAN POTENTIAL MOVEMENT

Humanistic psychology achieved a distinct profile in the two decades between 1950 and 1970. This was in a large part through its association with the Human Potential Movement of the 1960s and 1970s, an initiative to liberate people from a dehumanising and alienating culture, principally through groupwork designed to help people express their feelings more directly but also through a range of more non-verbal activities such as dance, massage and meditation. A milestone was the founding in 1962 of the still flourishing today Esalen Institute at Big Sur in California. This was a new kind of institution, the growth centre, that proved to be the prototype for scores more in the USA and Europe, the best known in Britain being Quaesitor, Kaleidoscope and The Open Centre, host to Humanistic Alchemy and the sole survivor of that trio.

VALUES

Typical humanistic psychology preoccupations are love, creativity, the real self, organismic unity, holistic perspectives, personal growth beyond adaptivity, being and becoming; spontaneity and play, the artistic and poetic, right brain and the metaphorical, naturalness, simplicity and humour; autonomy, authenticity, responsibility and response-ability; self-actualisation, ego transcendence and the peak experience (technically termed casual extraverted mysticism, an experience within everyone's reach). It should be clear that humanistic psychology is unashamedly values-based. These values, in the sense of what is emphasised within humanistic psychology, emerge from the following seven more philosophical background ideas and currents of thinking.

CONSCIOUS EXPERIENCE

The unique and conscious experience of the individual is of primary interest. Thus total objectivity as far as humans are concerned is seen as a chimaera, a vain quest. The variability of subjective

experience is accepted as given within this phenomenological orientation. There is a corresponding premium on being able to live in the here and now (gestalt psychology was seminal). This perspective does not necessarily preclude recognition of underlying historic drives, defences, internal object relations and phantasy (psychoanalytic viewpoint) but experience is not reduced so as to privilege analysis of the latent over the significance of whatever is manifest and in awareness.

SELF-ACTUALISATION

A basic human trend is a striving towards wholeness and unity, described by Maslow as a tendency to seek self-actualisation. Once basic survival needs are met (where deficiency motivation is to the fore) people will try to fulfil their potential and become more complete (abundance motivation).

This whole person perspective is well summarised by John Rowan:

'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 realizing human potential.'

Humanistic Alchemy also veers towards Wilhelm Reich (the founding figure for Western body psychotherapy) in recognising the dialectical nature of bodymind unity, i.e. first there is typically an urge - thesis, this meets with a resistance - antithesis, before the subject achieves an aware integration - synthesis. Generally, however, humanistic psychology downplays the conceptualising of psychological experience in either/or terms (such as conscious vs unconscious, inner vs outer, thought vs feeling).

AUTONOMY AND AUTHENTICITY

From existentialism humanistic psychology acknowledges inherent limits in human existence, while also insisting on an essential freedom and autonomy, expressed through the quest for sovereignty over one's life. The social conditions of life under advanced capitalism might suggest that for most people this perspective needs some qualification. Either way the power to choose and the capacity to change and grow are emphasised. The autonomous individual is seen as therefore responsible for her or his decisions. Inauthenticity or bad faith (Sartre) is the refusal to acknowledge this responsibility. Authenticity entails making decisions in the face of ever-present uncertainty, and though this is something of a counsel of perfection, with an awareness of the ultimate limit of death.

EXISTENCE PRECEDES ESSENCE

Again from existentialism humanistic psychology takes it to be the case that existence, the ongoing fluid sense of being alive, is foreground and a bodily experience; and therefore, as famously said, existence precedes essence. An implication of this is that we cannot definitively describe the essence of human nature as there is always at least a potential for a new, never before evidenced, behavior or development or act of ego transcendence. In tension with this perspective, each individual has specific limitations arising from their biology and the time and place into which they are 'thrown' (Heidegger), i.e. find themselves born into.

RESPECT FOR THE OTHER

From Carl Rogers, humanistic psychology takes it as axiomatic that human beings are worthy of respect, that empathy, congruence (also termed genuineness), non-judgemental responsiveness and non-possessive warmth are optimal aspects of normal emotional competence. Through these relational activities, respect (it means to look again) can be demonstrated. It follows that difference and diversity a priori deserve to be honoured. But none of the above should be construed as a claim that any old behavior (the problem of evil) is acceptable. To quote John Rowan again:

'We are not in the peace and love game, we are in the reality game; and if we do justice to the reality and the real self, joy will come in due course, in its own way.'

O.K.NESS

An individual is neither intrinsically good nor bad but deserves the benefit of the doubt. Ultimately, at the deepest level, we are OK. Humanistic psychology is neither an idealism nor is it compatible with a belief in either original sin or inherent instinctual destructiveness. Core motivations include the search for love, security, intimacy, belonging, creative fulfilment, meaning and truth. Interruption and dysfunction in these areas arise as symptoms rather than causes, and indicate an imbalance or failure of organismic self-regulation. Self-regulation is understood as occurring within a context of mutual interdependence with both others and the environment.

OVERCOMING ALIENATION

Modern life features a gross over-valuation of intellect and action, and a corresponding undervaluation of feeling and emotion. In a context of domination by the technological, the affective and expressive sides of life are typically relegated to the private sphere and to channels of organised entertainment where they become part of the spectacle. A mediated and titillating focus on the private lives of public figures and celebrities merely compounds this alienation. Humanistic psychology challenges these energy-sapping compartmentalisations of essential human wholeness and unfulfilled potential. Within Humanistic Alchemy, groupwork (the intermediary between public life and a private session) becomes a source of revitalisation for both the over- and the under-socialised person, and models authentic face-to-face community without facades. In this respect humanistic groupwork parallels a counter-culture continuing post 2000, a counter-culture that values freedom, including freedom for self-expression, authenticity and openness to experience.