

The Humanistic Orientation at West Georgia

by Mike Arons

Development of a humanistic orientation at West Georgia was but one expression of fundamental social changes in America which had been gaining momentum for some time. Relative economic and technological success had not brought with it concomitant progress towards the personal or collective experience of fulfillment. The very attitudes which accompanied victory in the battle at the survival level were proving inadequate or inappropriate in discovering means for greater personal and social realization. Humanistic or "3rd Force" Psychology focused attention on assumptions and methods which promised to move beyond previously limiting conceptions of human potential without, however, denying to those conceptions their value within appropriate contexts. Not antagonistic towards the two dominant forces in psychology - Behaviorism and Psychoanalysis - representatives of the "3rd Force" Psychology rather saw themselves as naturally emerging from them. They took issue only with the limitations built into the assumptions and methods of their parent schools, notably the mechanistic assumptions of human functioning and the limiting vision of scientific methodology which amounted to little more than an attempt to imitate 19th Century physics.

Some consequences of these assumptions and methods - e.g., the great emphasis placed on animal research and on testing, proved wanting when confronted with realities inherent in America's concern with education and business. It was, in fact, in the business and industrial contexts that "3rd Force" Psychology gained much of its early impetus - at such centers as the Sloan Institute (M.I.T.), the Harvard Business School, and the National Training Laboratories. As an academic research, Humanistic Psychology is not "anti-scientific"; rather, it encourages the scientific approaches to the study of human being which are the most compatible with that unique subject matter. Hence humanistic psychologists view "empiricism" as more fundamental to an exploratory science than "experimentalism" in that the former grounds observations in experience, while the latter gives preeminence to an assumptive methodology. The humanistic emphasis on experience explains its appreciation of phenomenology, a rigorous approach which takes human experience of phenomena as its primary source of data. Likewise, this stress naturally aligns Humanistic Psychology with the arts, humanities, and philosophy. Commentary from these sources upon the nature and state of human being is given credence in Humanistic Psychology, whereas historically, it has been denied essential relevance by Behaviorists and other positivists who viewed experimental psychology as having grown such "pre-scientific subjectivism."

While Humanistic Psychology loosely embraces a very wide range of views, methods, theories, and specialties, Giorgi (1973) suggests that persons moving in a humanistic direction may broadly be characterized as follows: emphasizing fundamental uniqueness of human life; stressing integration of the "whole person"; concerned with the need to balance reductionistic/mechanistic "visions" of life with organismic, holistic ones; giving attention to topics such as love, choice, self-realization, fantasy, and creativity - dismissed by other psychologies;

aware of intentionality and values as crucial to understanding human action; committed to the development of methods of understanding and expanding human experience; giving attention to the experiencing person and to experience as primary to understanding humans; having concern with the unique, the exceptional, rather than seeking to study only the regular, the universal, the conforming; stressing research based on significance of phenomena studied; dedicated to the exploration of "synergistic" relationships in groups, communities, and institutions; rejecting only those assumptions which restrict enquiry; and holding on to a fundamental commitment to psychology as both art and science.

By "acting its age" and not pretending to be an old and accomplished science, psychology can infuse its methodology with rich, humanistic insights and, as increasingly is the case in programs such as our own, can provoke fruitful research into human potentials for expanded consciousness - e.g., research into altered states of consciousness and expanded capacity for and exercise of individual freedom and choice. Beyond research, however, Humanistic Psychology reaffirms in all areas of human endeavor a dignity which has been assaulted over the past few centuries, and almost obliterated in recent psychology by an excessive stress on rationalism and determinism. Under dominance of such ultrarationalist positions, the human individual has been seen as reducible to merely an expendable commodity, a predictable laboratory datum, or a controllable social pawn. The philosophy fostering such outcomes is sometimes called "humanism," and B. F. Skinner is an often-quoted representative of that school. Skinnerian "humanism" obviously is quite different philosophically from Humanistic Psychology with which, by name, it sometimes is confused. The latter is represented by the views of, among others, Abraham Maslow, Carl Rogers, Rollo May, Sidney Jourard, and Victor Frankl.

Reaffirmation of personal uniqueness, of choice, of individual responsibility offers a refreshing new (or, better, rediscovered) point of departure for education and educators. Broad humanistic educational objectives rest firmly on traditional Greek views of opening mind (consciousness). Self-knowledge is considered the basis for all knowledge, where "self," above all, signifies "meaningful." Socratic-like dialogue or its modern psychological counterparts are seen to foster this type of understanding, where teacher and learner are fellow travelers in the learning venture and where deeper personal and collective insight are the ultimate goals. In this venture, the teacher can be the gadfly (recently called the facilitator) whose skills go beyond the simple transfer of data via lecture format towards questioning the fixed assumptive reference point in order to "make room" for broader and deeper experience and insight into the permutations of "reality." Learning is viewed as a shared search for understanding including - but moving well beyond - that needed merely for gaining a trade or for appearing "well-educated." The job situation for the fully-functioning person must be viewed in the larger context of human welfare. Thus, as Dr. Maurice Townsend notes in a 1976 address, change itself must be prepared for. A humanizing education seeks to transcend the narrow specialization needed to perform a task, and humanistic psychologists emphasize the interdisciplinary nature which greater human sensitivity or insight can be fostered. The current term humanistic psychologists use to characterize this insight-centered education is "personal growth."