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Humanising Forces:
Phenomenology in Science; Psychotherapy in Technological Culture

by **Dr Les Todres**

One of the concerns of the existential-phenomenological tradition has been to examine the human implications of living in a world of proliferating technology. The pressure to become more specialised and efficient has become a powerful value and quest. Both contemporary culture and science enables a view of human identity which focuses on our 'parts' and the compartmentalisation of our lives into specialised 'bits'. This is a kind of abstraction which Psychology has also, at times, taken in its concern to mimic the Natural Sciences. As such it may unconsciously collude with a cultural trend to view humans as objects like other objects and so, fit 'normatively' into the emerging world of specialised and efficient systems.

The present paper examines how the findings of a phenomenological study of psychotherapy reflects a movement by people in psychotherapy to recover their sense of human identity in ways that always transcend any form of objectification. Their human complexity is somewhat restored as they move back towards the concrete details of their lives where the human order has its life.

In addition to considering the implications of these findings for restoring the uniquely human dimensions of human identity, the paper will also consider the methodological role that an existential-phenomenological approach can play in supporting a broader view of science. In wishing to be faithful to the human order, it champions the value of the human individual as a starting point in human science and this includes a return to concrete experiences, the balance between unique variations and the ground that we share, and the movement from the particular to the general. As such, a phenomenologically-oriented psychology may have an important role to play in helping the broader sciences remember the 'human scale' of things.

Introduction

This paper would like to show how a phenomenological approach to qualitative research can be a humanising force in the context of Science, and how psychotherapy can be a humanising force in the context of technological culture. These two themes have a common concern, that is, to find alternatives to views and practices that depersonalise the human order.

Much has been written about the human implications of living in a world of proliferating technology, from Heidegger (1977) in the phenomenological tradition, to Roszak (1992) and others in the field of ecopsychology. The

pressure to become more specialised and efficient has become a powerful value and quest. Both contemporary culture and science enables a view of human identity that focuses on our 'parts' and the compartmentalisation of our lives into specialised 'bits'. This is a kind of abstraction which Psychology has also, at times, taken in its concern to mimic the Natural Sciences. As such, it may unconsciously collude with a cultural trend to view humans as objects like other objects and so, fit 'normatively' into the emerging world of specialised and efficient systems.

This paper describes a study that empowers an alternative view of both science and persons. As such I will pursue two levels of argument:

How a phenomenological research method tries to remember an essentially human order in its view of persons, one that includes the qualities of a unique individual as well the qualities of shared human existence.

How the results of a study into psychotherapy reveal psychotherapy as a humanising force that enables clients to remember a sense of identity which transcends objectification, compartmentalisation, and specialization.

Both of these concerns address the overall task of the paper to consider the role that they both play in helping Science and people remember the human scale of things, and thus how they function as humanising forces in different ways.

I will begin with the first level of my argument about methodology and how it is able to reveal an adequate view of persons:

Phenomenological Methodology as a Humanising Force

I was interested in studying the nature of self-insight in psychotherapy: what is it about this kind of self-insight that makes a difference to the way clients feel and live? I will come back to this question later. At this point, however, I wish to articulate some of the methodological concerns I had in approaching such a task. I was familiar with a body of literature in the humanistic, existential and phenomenological traditions which presented a coherent critique of simply adopting natural science as THE paradigm for human science research (see for example, Giorgi, 1970). Within this tradition, I was particularly concerned with the critique that a natural scientific world view and methodological approach carried with it the danger of defining human beings in reductionistic and utilitarian ways and that this could obscure the essence of the uniquely human dimensions of human identity. As such, I found in phenomenologically-oriented methodologies the following three remedies:

- A language which cares for the human order.
- The importance of individual concrete experiences as a starting point for enquiry.
- 'Research results' as possibilities with actual variations; that is, expressing 'results' in a way that are not deterministic in nature.

I would like to briefly elaborate on each of these concerns.

A Language which Cares for the Human Order

A phenomenologically-informed methodology demonstrates a concern to care for our informants' voices, to care for the human phenomena that are being expressed, to care for how our own voices as writers and researchers reveal, conceal and co-create, and to care for our readers as part of the ongoing conversation of understanding.

If one is faithful to the human order and cares in these ways, one finds words to show our

informants' experiences that do not just reflect its 'bare bones' (structure), but also its 'flesh and heart' (textures) (Todres, 1998, 2000b). Faithful to this, one could say that we are not only concerned with 'truth' but also with 'aesthetics'.

In my study of therapeutic self-insight this involved an attempt to present findings in a way that tried to retain the richness and texture of individual experiences while at the same time offering a level of description that applies more generally and typically.

Achieving such an aesthetic balance between presenting the individual level and the more general levels, is something that I would argue is necessary in being faithful to a human order where a language of finding the 'I in the thou' (Buber, 1970) is central. Such a language helps to retain the participative and shared qualities of human phenomena and reveals humans not as outsiders, strangers, mechanisms, clusters of behaviours and chemicals, but as intentional beings that are not reducible to variables or causes and effects.

Individual Experience as a Starting Point for Inquiry

In spite of all the philosophical moves which have tried to deconstruct subjectivity, I still find myself with Husserl's self-evident intuition that individual experience as it appears is our first access to understanding anything. So this asks us for a methodological approach which moves from the particular to the general, and justifies the use of descriptions of experiences as a crucial starting point for psychological enquiry (Giorgi, 1986). When asking psychotherapy clients to describe experiences of self-insight, they were naturally and intuitively able to refer to a whole world of meaningful experience. They expressed these experiences as a story in progress, and yet this story also revealed certain structures beyond their active construction.

The point of this theme for this paper is that such a methodology which grounds itself in the concrete experiences of informants is more likely not to lose sight of the fact that human living is an unfolding narrative in which meaning rather than measurement is the appropriate currency of understanding.

"Results" as possibilities with actual variations: Expressing "Research Results" in a way tht is not deterministic in nature

In writing a description of therapeutic self-insight, I was interested in expressing the results of the study in a way that was thematic rather than final. Thus, themes and structures, have more the quality of possibilities around which unique variations can occur. Expressing general themes as possibilities do not wish to deny the unique variations of the experience nor the freedom to respond differently. Rather, the themes are ways of organising meanings that have a shared and communicative value, and are faithful to examples of their unique occasions, but which give them a potentially transferable meaning for others. This concern to show individual experience in both its unique and shared dimensions encouraged a particular form of expression in the way the results of my study would be presented:

- It would be more than a definition or series of statements about therapeutic self-insight.
- It would tell us something that connects with universal human qualities so that the reader can relate personally to the themes.
- It would tell a story which readers could imagine in a personal way (Todres, 1999).

At the same time, the description would also be general or typical enough to contribute to

our academic understanding of the nature of therapeutic self-insight.

It would not attempt to exhaust the topic but would attempt to allow it to be seen more clearly, like shining a light which increases the reader's sense of contacting the phenomenon without fully possessing it (Van Manen, 1990; Marcel, 1949).

Such a way of expressing the results of the study tries to reflect the particular in the general; the dance of the unique and the shared. It allows a degree of open-endedness and freedom in the way we express the ongoing nature of human being. In relation to the theme of this paper, this is a remedy to a view of the person that is conclusively determined and enclosed in a thing-like manner.

Having made these three points about a methodology that tries to avoid depersonalising, technological and objectifying ways of thinking about human being, I will now turn to how the results of my study on psychotherapy may do something similar for how clients come to experience and reflect on themselves.

Psychotherapy as a Humanising Force

One of Freud's enduring insights is about how, as human beings, we can compartmentalise ourselves in ways that are both helpful and problematic. For example, he saw how, in defining ourselves in ways that are too narrow, we can become preoccupied and stuck in a way that restricts our capacities for intimacy and work. Such 'stuckness' takes up energy and, what we have repressed, fights back and expresses itself in various ways. On the other hand, he saw certain kinds of compartmentalisation at different stages of development as being necessary and healthy. Although couched within a problematic meta-theoretical jargon, his writings on sublimation and repression (Freud, 1914) articulate their constructive role in achieving an organised self that can flexibly de-emphasise certain desires in order to resolve inner conflict and achieve workable forms of functioning. Whatever jargon he used, the developing self that he was describing, was one that was much more complex than that simply given by the world of nature or the world of society. It is this experience of 'more than' that I found, in my own research on psychotherapy clients, to be pivotal in understanding the kind of therapeutic self-insight that leads to a greater sense of freedom.

The results of my study led me to believe that the clients' experience and understanding of themselves of being 'more than' any fixed definition give by 'nature' or 'nurture' is an important liberating factor in psychotherapy. Such an experience and understanding may be crucial in generically restoring psychotherapy clients to a sense of themselves that remembers a freedom at the centre of human identity that transcends all the ways that they are defined into specialised categories and judgements.

In order to elaborate and unpack some of the implications of this, I would like to spend a bit of time describing the process and results of my study:

A Phenomenological Study of the Kind of Theraputic Self-Insight that carries a Greater Sense of Freedom

Process and Goal of the Study:

Ten people (six men and four women) who had been in psychotherapy for a minimum of four months were asked to describe a situation in psychotherapy in which they saw or understood something which carried with it a greater sense of freedom. For the purpose of this paper, all identifying features of the participants have been changed.

I was interested in a particular kind of therapeutic self-insight that they had experienced, one that carried with it a greater sense of freedom. All could recognise such an experience. A pilot study had already revealed that there were

certain kinds of therapeutic self-insights that did not carry a greater sense of freedom. For the purposes of this study, I was not primarily interested in these.

Because of time constraints, I will not go into the detailed methodological steps that I took in gathering and analysing the descriptions in a phenomenological way. Suffice to say that I was mainly informed by Giorgi's (1985,1987) recommendations, modifications of this suggested by Wertz (1985) and Anstoos (1987), as well as some stylistic concerns that I emphasised in the first section of this paper. The goal of such procedures is to arrive at an insightful expression of the invariant structure of the phenomenon: the kind of therapeutic self-insight that leads to a greater sense of freedom. The concern with formulating an invariant structure involves a question about what makes it what it is. And this involves a description of its essential constituents and how these constituents form a meaningful whole. The articulation of such a structure is based on an analysis of particular and concrete experiences that were lived through.

Results of the Study

The study resulted in the following analysis of themes and their meaning:

Enabling Factors of the Theraputic Situation and the Person of the Therapist

The first thing that the analysis revealed was about the enabling situation of psychotherapy.

A Structured Freedom:

Both the therapist and the situation provide a kind of human space that has an ambiguous quality. This ambiguity expresses how there are certain dimensions of the situation that provide clear structures and other dimensions that emphasise a lack of structure. The ambiguity of such a situation articulates a certain 'shape' to psychotherapy, one that is expressed in the phrase: a structured freedom. On the one hand a sense of structure is constituted by experiences of continuity of time, place and person, a growing sense of familiarity with the focus on the client's life, a growing sense of comfort and safety to explore within this context. Such a safe structure is a shape that does not emerge complete, all at once, but one which is realised and tested for over time.

Sometimes an informant would speak more about how the person of the therapist provided the sense of a safe structure and shape. Other informants would speak more of how the situation of therapy, the room and the timing were important in facilitating this sense of safe structure. But in all this, a certain experience of familiarity and continuity were important -- a settling down, a gathering together, an interpersonal 'home-coming'.

On the other hand, there was a certain freedom, a lack of structure, in the happenings within the session and the interpersonal space of client and therapist. This freedom essentially involved an unknown dimension: neither client nor therapist knew much in advance about the direction that the specific content of the conversation would take. No matter how theoretically sophisticated the therapist or how much the client rehearsed in advance what would be talked about, both came to accept that surprising directions were always possible. For some clients this was scary, for others, this was exciting, and usually clients had both these experiences at different times in response to the open freedom of the potential content of the sessions.

The paradoxical nature of the tension between structure and freedom as the 'shape' of the psychotherapy situation appeared to provide an important enabling balance to the client, as if to give the following productively ambiguous message:

> There is something familiar and safe here which appeals to a need that we may have for security. Yet, at the same time, there is something challenging or

> invitational about the freedom within this that appeals to a need we may have for adventure and discovery. It is sometimes scary and sometimes exciting to play with this.

The ambiguity of this structure means that whatever learning takes place, the client has participated in such learning in an emotionally meaningful way. It is not a sanitised or theoretically abstract learning environment. Rather, the tension that has been described is emotionally engaged, a tension that is 'moving' and 'involving'.

The second thing that the analysis revealed was about the quality and nature of the therapeutic self-insight that occurs.

The Quality and Nature of this Kind of Theraputic Self-Insight

We now move on to the nature of the kind of therapeutic self-insight that carries a greater sense of freedom. What is the nature of this phenomenon that has been enabled by the structured freedom given by the situation and person of the therapist?

There are a number of dimensions and sub-components of this phenomenon:

It is not the self-insight on its own that has power: rather it is its 'before' and 'after', the entire narrative that is understood and experienced, that has freeing power.

Firstly, although there were often particular self-insights that were important, their credibility were only meaningful because of the personal narrative that had been forged as their context. Here are some examples of specific self-insights that occurred:

- I have been living as if I always expect to be rejected
- There were some important and valid reasons why I needed to hide and protect myself which often no longer apply
- Although trying to be like my sister has been restrictive for me, it has given me a sense of security
- If I am more assertive towards women, I am afraid that I will lose the relationship

These were important moments of self-insight but they were only given freeing power by the narrative that came both before and after these moments. It appears that it is the whole quality of the meaningful personal narrative that is crucial to the value of the therapeutic self-insight. This becomes clearer as we consider the qualities of the narratives that came 'before' and 'after':

A meaningful personal narrative is a linguistic and emotional work of understanding patterns and linkages over time: particular self-insights imply the work of 'patterning' that has preceded it, and the implied directions that can come after it.

Over time, descriptions of personal behaviours, feelings, and interactions are seen in a way that forms a pattern. For example, for Mary, the theme of wanting to be a 'good girl' first became vividly articulated in terms of the therapist-client relationship. She became aware that she was trying very hard to 'produce the goods' in therapy in order to please her therapist. She then became aware of this theme occurring in other interpersonal situations as well. She also began to remember situations that took place earlier in her life, particularly with her mother, where this was an important concern. This personal narrative of pattern-making/discovery is a linguistic and emotional work which links parts into wholes. It both feels and sees this relationship. As such the client is both a participant as well as an observer and develops a rhythm of closeness and distance to her own experience in which seeing patterns

give distance, whereas the experiencing of details, give closeness and emotional authenticity. The insightful quality of this pattern discovery/creation is in its 'sense-making' and such 'sense-making' is emotionally healing in a number of ways. This becomes clearer as we consider the emotional implications of such a 'sense-making' narrative activity:

There is an emotional healing to 'sense-making'.

There were three interrelated ways in which the narrative linguistic work was emotionally healing:

the felt credibility of 'sense-making' and our need for personal truth.

The 'sense-making' process of the personal narrative in which part and whole, or particular events and their themes, come together, produces a sense of felt credibility and personal truth. This is not just a freely imaginative process -- it is much more rigorous than that if the sense of felt credibility is going to occur. Personal 'sense-making' needs the 'evidence' of details almost as if there is an inner demand for rigour and truth-seeking. It is as if there are certain intuitive standards and questions in the process for the client: " Is this theme supported by the details of my life? Does this way of saying things, say it better than an alternative phrase or word?" There appears to be an aesthetic quality that satisfies a client emotionally when words fit experiences. For example, when a therapist used the phrase: "you seem to be saying that you want to develop further in this way",

the client paused and said: " not so much *develop* but rather *moving on*."

This is a kind of 'sense-making' that is credible to the client. The client herself is the only one who can emotionally validate a theme or an interpretation as it is only she that has a complex enough access to the textures of her lived experience. The healing quality of such credible 'sense-making' involves the emotional relief that happens when words are felt to serve the uniqueness of personal experience. Such 'goodness of fit' is a pleasing reassurance that the private world can enter the shared space of language and bridge the 'inner' and the 'outer' in a credible way. Such 'sense-making' also embodies the relief that one's life is not just made up of fragmented bits and pieces, but has some sense of temporal order and continuity. And here we move to two related qualities of therapeutic self-insight that brings past, present and future into a workable relationship.

Self-forgiveness

In the personal narratives that were forged, there was usually an understanding in which repetitive patterns were seen as understandable within a human story.

Thus early on in Bill's therapy he saw himself in a judgemental way as "pathetic" and "weak" about his lack of assertiveness. As the narrative evolved, he found credible details about his present and past interactions in which his lack of assertion took on a more complex meaning. He saw how he was afraid of being more powerful in a number of present interactions and also remembered how, as a boy, he wanted to show his little sister that he was not scary like their abusive father --- he remembers how much he wanted to protect her. His protective wishes towards others could be seen not just as a weakness but as a strength and even an admirable quality. So the emerging narrative recovers a more complex, human story and this can constitute a sense of self-forgiveness about being the way one is. This does not necessarily condone one's behaviour, but at least makes one less worthy of simple rejection. The healing factor of such self-forgiveness or self- accepting-understanding is that it empowers the kind of self-care that is needed to 'unhook' one from

premature, conclusive self-definitions and judgements. And here we come to hope.

c) *Hope*

This dimension involves a component of self-insight in which:

- a present restrictive, repetitive pattern that has been articulated, is seen as *not inevitable.*

- Also, the client sees more about where *personal agency* is possible and where it is not. As such, the client sees a different path forward from a mere repetition of the pattern and this constitutes an experience of *hope*.

Here is an illustration of these components taken from the study:

Jane came into therapy because she felt that her anger could destroy people she cared about. In therapy, a narrative emerged in which she came to realise that a pervasive angry attitude towards her ex-husband obscured a 'huge grief ' about what had happened to her and her children. As the narrative progressed, a de-centering of her anger as a central determinant of her existence occurred and was expressed by her in the following way: "Behind the walls is not an overwhelming anger that is going to make me kill someone." This was a great relief and a 'hope' that she needed. The sense of increased personal agency came with a dream that made her realise that significant relationships do not have to end painfully or threateningly. This helped her to feel that she could tolerate her youngest child leaving home. Subsequently their relationship improved. The healing factor of such increased personal agency is that it recovers the sense in which one is not merely a victim of circumstance and that the future does not have to be determined by the past.

All in all, the quality and nature of this kind of therapeutic self insight describes a 'sense-making' personal narrative with moments of liberating self insight that are credible and that 'unfreezes' personal time so that one can move into the future in a more active and hopeful way. Going one step beyond this, however, all this is able to tell us something more essential about the kind of freedom that occurs.

The sense of freedom that occurs is essentially an experience of "being more than…".

Here, the question that is addressed is: What is the essential nature of the kind of *freedom* that occurs in a self-insightful narrative process?

Here we move to a more philosophical level of phenomenological analysis, one which was approached in the transcendental phenomenological tradition. Here I am interested in the phenomenology of freedom. Such a question focuses on the implicit pre-conditions that underlie the kind of freedoms expressed by the informants. Within this task, the essential meaning that I intuited from the whole structure of the experience was that the phenomenology of this kind of freedom is revealed by articulating the phenomenology of experiencing personal identity as "being more than". What is *in* this experience of *being more than*?

Being more than what I had previously thought and felt.

- Being more than what I had said up till now.

- Being more than any premature judgement of myself--good or bad.

- Being more than any 'thing' or self-enclosed entity that reacts to forces and causes.

To elaborate on some of these themes: There was always a 'more' to the narrative. Any particular conclusions, no matter how valid at the time are too 'thing-like' in themselves and always have a 'before' and 'after'. The 'more' has its life in the specificity of the life-world (Gendlin, 1997) that is always larger than the 'known' (Merleau-Ponty, 1962). Premature self-judgements and self-definitions also stop the flow of time-as-possibility and the call of 'the new'. In the experience of 'being more than…' a self as agent is recovered in which there is a potentially transcendental quality beyond a self that is reduced to the sum total of its past experiences. On the other hand, such freedom is not an absolute freedom. The results of the study revealed how the terms of the freedom arose out of a consideration of personal limits and repetitions. The open space of the freedom only makes sense in relation to these limits and restrictions.

At the end of this analysis, I am prompted to say that therapeutic self-insight is not the fundamental point of psychotherapy: it is more a means to an end, and points to an experience of 'more'. It is this experience of 'of being more than' or of 'being as possibility' that is the essential power of psychotherapy (Todres, 1993, 2000a).

Concluding Thoughts

To return to the theme of this paper: How did the existential-phenomenological method avoid depersonalising forces that may arise within a natural-scientific world-view?

In this regard, I concentrated on demonstrating three implications of my methodological approach:

1. That it tries to find a language that cares for the human order. This is a language that is full of human participation and that allows us as human beings to intuitively share in the phenomena described; a language that finds the 'I in the thou'; a language of experience on its own terms.

2. That it champions the value of the human individual as a starting point in human science. This includes a return to concrete experiences, the balance between articulating unique variations of experience with the ground that we share. The approach moves from the particular to the general, attempting to honour both levels of understanding and their complementarity (the hermeneutic circle).

3. That it remembers the freedom of the unique human occasion by expressing essences and themes, not as final and conclusive law-like absolutes, but rather as possibilities around which unique variations and actualities can occur. Truth in this perspective is thus an ongoing conversation which is not arbitrary but which is never finished and depends on questions and context. And the conversation is 'melodic' in the sense that it has shape, themes and variations.

How does psychotherapy help people avoid depersonalising forces that may arise from the way that technological culture defines us?

1. The psychotherapy situation enables a form of learning and exploration that embraces head and heart, is playful, and does not know in advance how things will happen. It is a work of un-specialisation.

2. The nature of discovering/creating an emotionally meaningful narrative is such that it reveals the future as possibility. It is a work of de-role-ing and involves an emerging sense of the complexity of personal identity that is

'more than' any definition can capture. Science and technology has up till recently felt most comfortable with definitions and their uses.

3. In learning about the restrictions and limitations of repetitive patterns of living and meaning, psychotherapy clients move beyond such self-enclosure. The intentional open essence of consciousness or being-in-the world is remembered, and as such, finds a transcendental dimension of being human that can never fully be objectified or turned into a 'thing'.

4. In 'sense-making', self-forgiveness and hope, the client moves back towards being grounded in the concrete details of her/his life. The flow and ongoing story of such concrete details are always 'more than' any simple abstraction or self-definition. Human complexity is somewhat restored, and this empowers the intuition of one's bodily-grounded situation as a valid way of knowing. Such personal knowing is a crucial remedy to a form of knowing that tries to regard the self from an external, outside, and measured point of view.

All this may be an alternative to the pressure to become more specialised and efficient and the pressure to study one another in technologically useful ways.

And as we stretch between earth and sky, there may be a sigh of relief as we remember something of being at home --its view and its feeling.

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