

CPN Archives

The Threat of Aggression

George A. Kelly

The Ohio State University

Retrieved from

http://www.constructivistpsych.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/11/Kelly_aggression.pdf

Paper presented at Humanistic Psychology conference in Old Saybrook, CT (November 27-29, 1964). Reproduced from the George Kelly page of the Ecology of Mind site: <http://www.oikos.org/kelen.htm>

This conference has been convened to consider the topic of humanism in psychology. But I am not sure I have a very clear idea of what humanism is. Ostensibly it has something to do with man though I have often doubted that it had to do with anyone I know. Nevertheless, I suppose that when psychologists get together and say that we ought to revive humanism it is because they are alarmed by the tendency of their discipline to ignore man, except as an inexhaustible source of data, and to become preoccupied, instead with their own bibliographies, expendable animals and the rituals of laboratory science. A humanistic 'turn of events would, then, be one, I presume, in which the focal importance of living man would be reaffirmed and psychology would no longer be pursued for its own sake.

Those who attempt to revive humanism are likely to point to the culture of classic Greece as an example of what they would like to restore. That culture, as I understand it, was characterized by man's audacity in the face of adversities imposed by the gods or by nature. Its heroes asserted themselves as men, as men they dared challenge what their history and their gods told them was inevitable, and, as men they often suffered frustration and defeat. Yet while history, more often than not, continued to reaffirm its verdicts, the men we as humanists want to remember are those who refused to acquiesce to the facts of life.

HUMANISM AND CLASSICISM

But neo-humanism, it seems to me, is often no more than a form of classicism; that is to say, a preoccupation with adventure as a historical fact, rather than a present enterprise, a preoccupation with a state of affairs to be revered and restored, phrase by phrase and stone by stone. And the modern classicist is related to the humanist's heroes of the Fourth Century B.C. or the Fifteenth Century A.D. in about the same way the Twentieth Century Daughters of the American Revolution are related to the Eighteenth Century signers of the Declaration of Independence.

There were, undoubtedly classicists among the Greeks too, and it may be a little unfair to try to assess their role from this distance. Whatever it was they stood for, they were probably pretty skeptical of what was going on and I am sure they were always trying to revive something. I do not know what they managed to accomplish but there is little reason to believe it was their influence that made Greek culture either humanistic or classic. Nor does our admiration for the humanism of other times and places make humanists of us now, any more than does tracing our ancestry to a hero who fought for civil rights in the American Revolution mean that we have any stomach for the civil rights battles of our own generation. Indeed, I must note that the most heroic figures in today's struggle for human values regard their ancestors more in pity than in pride.

Humanism is then, as I see it, not something we revive. Revivals are the work of classicists. Humanism, instead, has to do with the present, the novel, the defiant, the alive, and with what the classicists often argue cannot be done. Where the classicist documents historical certainties, the true humanist fumbles with present uncertainties. The classicist seeks to be historically right; the humanist continually risks being historically wrong, in order to set something right. The humanist is aggressive and hopes thus to achieve better things, but the classicist, threatened by the humanistic enterprise, equates aggression with hostility, and hostility, in turn, with destruction.

THE HUMANIST PARADOX

Now there is another theme in humanism. It is a secondary theme that derives from the first. and I think it makes sense only when expressed in the context of human audacity. This is the theme that whatever is truly characteristic of man is good and should therefore be preserved and protected against any distorting influence. Man in

the light of his audacious achievements, should be encouraged to go on being the kind of person he has so aptly proved himself to be; he should express himself; he should go right ahead and be audacious. But he should not be permitted to tamper with human nature; that is carrying audacity too far!

It is this secondary theme - a theme sometimes identified as permissiveness, sometimes as non-aggression, sometimes as respect for the dignity of man - that often colors the meaning of humanism. Thus humanism appears to have created for itself a paradox. The audacity of man in general has proved to be so valuable a human asset that the audacity of any particular man must be restrained from impinging upon it. Man must express himself - that is very very important - but never, never must he express himself in such a way that anything human will be affected.

One way out of this paradox is to believe that the nature of man is such that if he does express himself - his true self - he will harmonize with all other men who truly express themselves. This is to say that the intrinsic nature of man is intrinsically compatible with its collective self, and that disharmonies arise only out of extrinsic distortions, or, possibly, out of temporary immaturities.

Another way out is to say that man cannot be manipulated except as his nature conspires. Whatever he does, it is he who does it. And the fact that he does it under certain imposed conditions in no way denies his dignity, but, instead, stands as a credit to his personal achievement ["under optimal psychological conditions" as we sometimes say]. A child learns to play the piano well by being forced to practice four hours a day. That is not suppression; that is a human accomplishment. When he grows up he will probably be proud of it - and perhaps think of himself as a first class humanist. A depressed person is disciplined to a hospital routine of scrubbing floors and scouring toilets. As a result he finds himself too busy to worry. So, again, man prevails! See how the organism's ingenious adaptability has contrived to substitute reality for imagination? How fortunate! Not everyone is able to do that!

But it is difficult for me to see how either of these constructions can provide an escape from the humanist's paradox. The interpretation of man as a naturally harmonious being, who likes other people in proportion to his admiration of himself, seems to ignore the fact of human tyranny. Whether he can rise above this

unpleasant fact is another question. But it appears to me to be as presumptuous to regard man as naturally good as it is to label him as inherently evil. Moreover, we are still much too busy sorting out good from evil to be altogether clear about which is which, or whether man is wholly one or the other.

The other construction of man - the construction of him as an ingenious conformist, a slave who is smart enough to know his place - is not very encouraging to the fellow who doesn't want to be a slave, or practice his music lessons or live in Levittown on the banks of Walden Pond. He persists in thinking that under other circumstances he might accomplish a lot more. He may be right. And then, again, he may be wrong, for some men do accomplish more under a reinforcement schedule than when left to their own devices. And what is the humanist going to say about that?

THE MEANING OF THREAT

The human enterprise is, at best, a touch-and-go proposition. Any assumptions we make about what is good, or what is evil, or what will open the door to the future are best regarded as temporary only, and any conclusions we draw from our experiences are best seen as approximations of what we may eventually understand. The human quest is not about to be concluded, nor is truth already partly packaged for distribution and consumption. Instead, it seems likely that whatever may now appear to be the most obvious fact will look quite different when regarded from the vantage point of tomorrow's fresh theoretical positions. Yet it is a misfortune that man should be so set on being right at the very outset that he dares not risk stupidities in an effort to devise something better than what he has.

This brings us back to the audacity of man, which, as you already know, I have come to regard as the primary humanistic theme. I like that theme. But let us not overlook the fact that this audacity is the very thing that men fear when they see it about to be expressed - and as often admire when it has run its course. In a world where vast experiments are being undertaken, where new psychological devices are being employed, and strange societies are being constituted, we dread the far-reaching implications of what is about to happen to us.

This is threat. To feel that one is on the threshold of deep changes in himself and his way of life is, I think, its essential feature. Threat is, from this point of view, a personal experience, not a set of circumstances. Moreover, it is in the context of

threat - or dread - that the two terms - aggression and hostility - become subjectively synonymous. And may I point out the curious fact that they have become synonyms both in the language that diplomats use and in the language that psychologists use - as well, it seems as in the language that humanists speak.

So how do we encourage human audacity without inviting one man's initiative to suppress another's? This is the humanist's dilemma. It is also the dilemma of democracy - how do you give political sovereignty to a people, or a state, bent on suppressing its minorities? So, also, it is the problem of the economist - how can you have a free enterprise system that produces the Bell Telephone Company, and still claim that you have anything that even remotely resembles free enterprise? And it is the problem of the liberal scholar - what happens when you are liberal with the board of trustees of a state university?

AGGRESSION

Before trying to find a humanistic answer to these questions, let me turn to a psychological matter. We call aggressive men hostile because what they do seems destructive, especially when it is turned toward us. We don't want them to meddle with our lives. Thus we judge them by what appears to happen to us as a result of their initiative.

But what happens to us is not to be confounded with what is happening within them. What they undertake is not measured by what we experience. If one is to have an adequate psychology of man, it must be a psychology of the actor, not the victim. This is to say that behavior needs to be explained within the fact, not before or after the fact. Our own reaction to what another person attempts is scarcely enough to account for what he is trying to accomplish. Nor do our hurt feelings constitute a psychological analysis of his behavior.

Now may I go on to say that this equating of aggression with our projection of destructive intent is the outcome of Nineteenth Century notions about scientific determinism. To think scientifically about the psychology of man has seemed to mean that we must regard him as an intervening variable - called an "organism" - in a stimulus-response couplet. Our ventures collapse when challenged by an aggressive colleague. How shall we explain it? Simple! The collapse is the observed response; he is the obvious stimulus; and we are the organismic victim caught in the

S-R squeeze. His aggression caused our downfall; and what more do you need to explain what the rascal was up to?

A stimulus-response psychology is, of course, one in which human responses are explained in terms of their external antecedents - their stimuli. And stimuli, in such a system are reciprocally explained in terms of what they produce - their responses. That is the solipsism - or equation, as we prefer to call it in mathematics. If I am threatened, then the person whom I see as the stimulus explains my experience. If I can cope with his aggression only by contemplating a profound change in myself, then the scoundrel must be hostile. Psychotherapists will recognize this as something that turns up rather frequently among their patients. But it is much more widespread than that; it is a conclusion commonly reached by all those who live out their lives according to the formula of stimulus-response.

But stimulus-response psychology is not the only possible kind of psychology. We can, if we wish, employ a psychology which casts its explanations in terms of what the person himself is doing, not what others do to him or what they think he has done to them. Aggression, in such a psychological system, is more akin to initiative. It is an expression of the audacity of man, even as he ventures into the realm of psychology. The aggressive man - like the humanist - may be one who risks being wrong in order to set something right - or in order to find out what rightly explains his fellow man.

HOSTILITY

Now hostility, in this way of thinking, may, or may not, involve aggression, and aggression may, or may not, involve hostility. The two constructs are propositionally independent of each other. If we are to employ a notion of hostility within this kind of psychological system we must understand the hostile person's enterprise in terms of his own outlook, not merely in terms of the threat that others experience when they seek to come to terms with him. Since any system of psychology must provide some explanation of the means by which a person checks up on himself, it becomes important to understand how the implications of such a check-up are incorporated. In stimulus-response theory the check-up is cast in terms of reinforcement, that is to say, by ascribing some kind of stimulus quality to the response itself, or to its consequences, which will feed back into the system. But in personal construct theory

the check-up is provided by confirmation of expectations. This is to say that if the expectations that follow from one's construction of events continually fail to materialize, a revision of the construction system is called for. This means that defeat must be recognized, failure identified, and tragedy experienced if man is to survive, and all the more so if man is to achieve anything of humanistic proportions.

But a major revision of one's construct system can threaten him with immediate change, or chaos, or anxiety. Thus it often seems better to extort confirmation of one's anticipations - and therefore of the system that produced them - rather than to risk the utter confusion of those moments of transition. It is this extortion of confirmation that characterizes hostility.

A nation, before admitting that its long leap forward in the defense of human life has proved invalid may destroy millions of lives, when those lives disclose evidence of the failure of the system. A country may go to war to displace responsibility for its failures. A man may commit murder to discredit what has proved him wrong. And, since hostility may employ passivity as well as aggression, we may find spiteful obedience used to simulate validity in a crumbling system, or solicitous affection used to smother a child's unexpected independence.

Nevertheless, whether undertaken by aggressive or passive means, hostility is, in a personal construct theoretical system, an extortional undertaking designed by the person to protect a heavy investment in his own construction of life. And, if, perchance, his hostility proves destructive of others, then that, unfortunately, is the way it must be. The economy must be preserved; the fact that the elderly starve in India or on the other side of town is incidental. Heresy must be controlled; too bad that intellectual curiosity on the campus must be denied. Bombs must be dropped; to be sure children will die, but who can say it was we who put them in the target area. From our point of view it is a precious way of life that we defend - Cadillacs and all. But what the hostile man does not know is that it is he who is the eventual victim of his own extortion. With the adoption of hostility he surrenders his capacity to judge the outcome of his way of life, and without that capacity he must inevitably go astray.

The acknowledgment of defeat or tragedy is not a destructive step for man to take. It characterizes, instead, the negative outcome of any crucial test of our way of life,

and, it is, therefore, an essential feature of human progress toward more positive outcomes. Hostility does not, for this very reason, contribute to human achievement. Primarily because it denies failure it leads, instead, to the abatement of the human enterprise, and substitutes for nobler undertakings a mask of complacency.

A STEP FOR THE HUMANIST

In this way of thinking, which I have proposed for the humanistically inclined psychologist there are three key notions that must be lifted from the context of stimulus-response psychology and recast in the light of a psychology of the man himself, they are *threat*, *aggression* and *hostility*. Threat, for the man himself, is the experience of being on the brink of a major shift in his core construct system. Aggression, for the man himself, is one's own initiative, not what that initiative may lead another to do or feel. And so with hostility too, hostility is the extortion of confirming evidence to present to oneself when there seems too much at stake to undertake the personal changes that natural evidence requires.

The humanistic psychologist's dilemma - how to protect human audacity from human audacity without stifling human audacity - finds another kind of solution when we manage to step outside the stimulus-response solipsism. It is the hostile, and not necessarily the aggressive enterprise, that must be guarded against. The aggressive effort to understand man, or to experiment with ways of accomplishing psychological feats never before achieved, is not intrinsically destructive. It may, of course, be hazardous.

It does become destructive, however, when one tries to make it appear that disconfirming events did not actually arise, or that what failed to occur actually happened. And this, in turn, is generated by the notion that we ought always to be right before we commit ourselves, a notion that later makes it very hard to concede our mistakes, or to revise our construction of the world when our heavily invested anticipations fail to materialize.

Humanism reflects audacity in man. But this audacity, when it substitutes extortion for disconfirmation, disengages itself from the world and abandons the future of mankind. Humanism, while it openly experiences defeat does not succumb to it, for to do that would be to give up man's aggressive undertakings altogether, and, with them all the aspirations that arise from being tragically human. Thus the experience

of tragedy and not the sense of certainty is the basis of all hope, and is indeed the most essential step in the bold pursuit of better things. And that, I submit, is a notion that lies close to the heart of the human enterprise.