

Introduction

When I was very young, and optimism about ‘science’ was at its height, I used to worry that by the time I grew up there would be nothing left in the world to discover and that I would be redundant as a thinking being. Well, I needn’t have worried: now that I am considerably older, it seems to me that the world I inhabit has never been so sunk in superstition and ignorance.

The ironies are unending. The idealism that led me to study psychology was partly founded on a feeling that here, at least, there were still mysteries to be unravelled. In fact, as it turns out, psychology—all unknowing—has done more to mystify the human condition than just about any other even remotely intellectual enterprise.

As I grew up in the 1950s—as callow a youth as any of that era—the post-war world was pretty grey and Spartan, but there was nevertheless (or so it seems to me now) a general belief in the possibility of improving the lot of common humanity—if not on a global scale, at least on the home front. A Labour government had come to power that, whatever its shortcomings, addressed inequality and injustice in a way that seems extraordinarily radical as against the dishonest manipulations of today’s ‘New Labour’. There were real jobs for people to do and an optimistic belief in the benefits of health and education for all. Much to the discomfort of some of the more affluent sections of the population (to which most of the people I knew aspired even though they didn’t belong), it seemed that the snobbery and privilege so characteristic of pre-war British society were on their way out for good. Even if vestiges of it lingered here and there, it seemed that Bertie Wooster’s world was dead.

But it wasn’t. Though wise enough not to draw too much attention to itself, it continued more or less unabated among significant minorities of the population, and nostalgic memories of its glories festered resentfully in the psyches of those who were only too soon to mount the Thatcherist counter-revolution. And now we’ve got it all back with—literally—a vengeance.

The ‘Twenty-First Century’ which politicians and tabloids love to invoke as emblematic of progress, is culturally and economically a rewind to the between-the-wars society so many of us hoped we’d seen the back of: a world in which a greedy and self-satisfied middle class re-establishes and ostentatiously celebrates the advantages of its parasitism on those who really produce the goods.

Not that nothing has changed—the mechanics of exploitation and privilege are far less crude than they used to be, and far less apparent to even the interested onlooker. The principal locations of exploitation have been moved, through the apparatus of ‘globalisation’, to where most of us can’t see them and don’t really care about them even if we can. The mass of the population, no longer so obviously belittled and patronised by its ‘betters’, is pacified by the deregulation of pleasure and stupefied by the relentless ‘dumbing down’ of information. The depth of perspective of even the educated class has been reduced to the span of no more than a few years, making it less and less easy to understand how and why societal change comes about.

And in all this ‘psychology’—a central tool of ideological power—plays its crucial part. If people are to be diverted from criticising the material circumstances that condition their lives, they must believe those circumstances to be irrelevant, and psychology has over the past century invented and sustained a magical theology in which it seems that people may choose *themselves* and shape their future by eradicating their past. Tragedy may be averted by no more, essentially, than wishing that things might be otherwise, and reality is reduced to a set of stories that may be manipulated to result in happy endings.

The only thing that people are called upon to *do* to realise their dreams is to *consume*, and psychology has been fundamental to the creation of the perfect consumer. The latter is an individual detached from every kind of social and environmental context other than that of greedy competition for goods and services with other individuals, existing otherwise in a fantasy world where there is *in theory* no limit to the achievement of gratification.

It is precisely in establishing the theory that psychology has been so influential. One of the central problems that faces the limitless ‘growth’ on which capitalism depends is the restrictions placed by material circumstances on what we can achieve—restrictions, that is, that arise out of our physical environment, our physical bodies and the existence of other people. These have to be dematerialised, changed from potential barriers into sites and objects of desire, where limitless aims may be attained through acts of consumption which are, crucially, mediated by essentially *mental* processes such as wishing and deciding—and dreaming. The modern consumer is in this way a pleasure-seeking idealist, dislocated from a real world, a real body and a real society. We must believe, among other things, that the earth’s resources are infinite,

that mind will triumph over matter and that there's no limit to what you can achieve if you really try. Psychology helps a lot in this enterprise.

One should be careful, however, about using the word 'psychology' too loosely, as it covers a wide range of academic and professional activities, many of which have very little in common with each other. The kind of psychology I am concerned with in this book is essentially the 'clinical' variety, which takes for its subject matter the broad field of 'mental health' and evolved from a mixture of behavioural learning theory, 'dynamic' (in particular psychoanalytic) psychologies and the so called 'humanistic' psychologies of the mid-twentieth century. It is in many respects closely similar to—and indeed for the purposes of my argument includes—other approaches to 'psychotherapy' and 'counselling' and is as concerned as they to establish *professional* credentials. 'Psychology' of this kind is no longer an intellectual discipline, a branch of philosophy or science, but seeks recognition as a protected, technical profession with established procedures for the treatment of psychological disorders. It is taught not to *students*, but to *trainees*, and it will soon be illegal for anyone to call him or herself a 'psychologist' unless officially registered as such.

As I have already suggested, the claim to objectively established validity implied in this professional stance is entirely without foundation in anything other than a carefully constructed mythology which has much in common with many other branches of 'knowledge' in the twenty-first-century world, not least the 'postmodernist' flights of many influential philosophical and cultural commentators, as well as theorists in some other branches of non-clinical psychology. I will say no more at this stage about why this should be so—I hope the reasons will become apparent as the argument progresses.

The dilemma facing me at this juncture is to find a name for what *I* am doing!

It's hard to see how I can avoid 'psychology' at least as *part* of my enterprise, as there is no doubt that that has been the discipline that has had most influence over the field to be considered. But it does have terribly misleading connotations and built-in assumptions—for example that we are concerned primarily with what goes on inside people's heads or 'psyches' (with what I shall call the world of 'ideality'). In fact we are concerned at least as much with people's worlds. Not to mention their bodies.

The terms 'therapeutic' psychology and 'psychotherapy' are also profoundly unsatisfactory, for the kind of human distress with which we are concerned has nothing to do with illness or treatment. The analogy with 'therapy' and 'treatment' has already misled us for over a century.

'Clinical' psychology is problematic because of its similarly unfortunate association with medicine, and also because clinical psychology has, as indicated, become a *technical* profession, like chiropody or dietetics, that

focuses on the pragmatics of relief rather than on any more abstract intellectual or scientific enterprise. Clinical psychology has given up any serious attempt to *explain*.

‘Counselling’ looks like quite a good term on the face of it, but has become ineradicably associated with the professional provision of a quite circumscribed form of psychological help, based in particular on understandings of Carl Rogers’s approach to ‘client-centred therapy’. Although there are brave attempts to rescue counselling from this conceptual dead-end (for example Alex Howard’s work),¹ they are in my view unlikely to be successful: counsellors are too set on becoming established professionals.

In many ways sociology and anthropology might seem to offer a more appropriate home, but their focus is too broad: despite an hostility towards individualism, I am still focally concerned with individual experience.

I think perhaps—under protest, so to speak—I’m stuck with ‘psychology’, but tacitly hedged round with all the qualifications I’ve mentioned.

Ultimately, our² concern is with human subjectivity, with the experience of being a person, and in particular with the types of suffering and pain that being a person can engender. Perhaps I should say *avoidable* pain and suffering, for otherwise our project becomes at once too grandiose and too simplistic: much suffering and pain is inevitable in a human lifetime, and may be understood and endured in many ways, many of them nothing to do with any branch of psychology.

The avoidable pain and suffering that forms the focus of our attention is not a ‘mental’ thing, but arises from our nature as embodied beings. But neither would it solve our problem to search for the origin and end of our suffering—as so much of psychiatry has done—simply in our biogenetic make up.³ For we are bodies in a world: of course (and very importantly) in a physical world, but also a socially structured, material space-time in which what we do to each other has enormous importance.

The strength and integrity of the subject is determined not (as therapeutic psychology would have us believe) by efforts of individual will, but by the adequacy or otherwise of the environment (including, crucially, the public societal structures) in which it is located.

Where public structures are stable, supportive and nurturing, the spirit may blossom and flourish; where they disintegrate (where ‘all that is solid melts into air’)⁴ the subject becomes shrivelled and reduced to its biological elements of survival. A culture adequate to the blooming of subjectivity constitutes a form of enchantment⁵ born of our benign social collusion in buttressing ourselves against the harshness of our place in the universe to make it habitable in peace and civility. To destroy that enchantment is (rather like stripping the flesh from the steel skeleton of the Terminator) to reduce ourselves

to our animal nature, revealing an asocial set of ruthlessly competitive individuals. The most pitiless of these rise to the top as a kind of aggregation of oppression (a ‘band of brigands’)⁶ while the most fragile and sensitive sink to the bottom, struggling anxiously for survival, as (needfully!) paranoid as little birds that hardly dare to snatch a crumb for fear of failing to spot the stooping hawk or the crouching cat.

That is why social Darwinism comes to the fore at times when the brigands are in charge: the focus on human ‘nature’⁷ as the basis for communal living, the Thatcherite repudiation of ‘society’ and the glorification of selfishness and competition reflect accurately enough the state of a disenchanting world.

What kind of world we want is an *ethical* choice: the attempt to establish one or another as somehow *necessarily* more desirable or right is never likely to succeed—hence, perhaps, the inevitability of the political split between Left and Right. There is no indisputably objective or technical reason why we should consider or try to alleviate the individual’s experience of pain. People can and often do ignore or deny their common humanity with others, or deny, at least implicitly, that their common humanity commits them to any sympathy or compassion for those less advantaged than themselves. Indeed, such an attitude towards one’s fellows can be represented as tough, uncompromising, positively heroic: the supermen versus the wimps.⁸ But just as this ruthless world may be chosen—as it is chosen by the current rulers of the globalised neo-liberal market—so may it also be rejected.

This book is founded on just such a rejection. I’m siding with the wimps. We are not bound to accept that the ‘real world’ is one in which the ‘bottom line’ defines and determines right and wrong. We do not have to acquiesce in the impoverished vocabulary and banal ideological apparatus of institutional Business culture. We do not, furthermore, have to be intimidated by the more sophisticated intellectual apologists for postmodernism and the free market to be found in various academic nests like the London School of Economics. Our undertaking, in contrast, rests on a compassionate solidarity with others, and the fact that this is fundamentally and irreducibly an *ethical* choice does not mean it is in any way irrational (like many others, I have argued elsewhere⁹ that reason and ethics are not—and certainly do not have to be—separable from each other).

While what founds and fuels our enquiry is a moral position, the enquiry itself must be an essentially *scientific* one. By ‘science’ I do not mean the rigid, dogmatic, ‘positivist’ orthodoxy so rightly reviled by the postmodernists. I mean rather the kind of open, inquisitive, sceptical, empirical approach that keeps itself free of dogmatism by seeking to refer back constantly to an intellectual peer group of men and women who are both *informed* and of *good will* (Habermas).¹⁰

In struggling to elucidate the mysteries of the world and our relations to it, science has to acknowledge that its enquiries cannot be so objective as to be completely uninfluenced by our own interests, preoccupations and biological characteristics (Habermas,¹¹ Polanyi).¹² At the same time, however, it strives for *evidence* that is *as far as possible* free from conceptual and empirical mistakes and ideological distortions of one kind or another (e.g. religious or political—including ‘politically correct’—biases). Science is about our passionate conviction that we are placed within a universe that is not simply the result of our own imaginings, and our longing and determination to understand it. Ultimately, science is about reality, truth and freedom.

Our part is to occupy a tiny corner of this enterprise: i.e., to attempt to grasp and elucidate some of the ways in which human beings are brought to suffer avoidable distress. Much of this book is the continuation of a search I have been engaged in now for several years for a language—a set of concepts—which may offer us a better way of thinking about this field than has so far been available; a language, that is to say, that makes sense of our suffering, that may enable us to place it within a real world and perhaps even to begin to get a grip on it.

Most of the themes considered in these pages, and indeed a good deal of the text, originated in the ‘Internet publication’ *Power, Responsibility and Freedom* that I developed on my website over the past five years or so.¹³ I undertook that project in the hope that writing on the Internet would allow both a continuous interaction with readers and the possibility of maintaining a fluid, changing text that, freed from the constraints of paper and ink, could keep pace with changes of mind as well as changes in circumstances. In the event, however, the outcome of this experiment has been fairly disappointing.

Although I have no idea how many people actually read the web pages, I do know that very few people indeed actually responded to them in the way that I had hoped—a mere handful. I suspect that reading lengthy texts on the Internet is not something many people choose to do, and downloading and printing out, apart from being somewhat tedious and expensive, does not carry the same satisfaction as handling or owning a book. Published books, moreover, however unwarrantedly, carry with them a kind of authority that is lacking in Internet texts: the very freedom of expression that is such an attractive feature of the Web is also a drawback to those who need to feel—possibly quite unconsciously—that what they are reading has at least *some* kind of official endorsement.

It only became apparent after a couple of years or so that what had seemed another advantage of Web writing—its topicality—turns all too quickly into a disadvantage, or at least a burden on the writer. The instancy and fluidity of electronic text makes it possible to refer to other publications and events within

minutes of their occurrence, and this can make for exhilarating writing—and reading. Many excellent news, current affairs and activist websites attest to this huge benefit of the Internet. But for an amateur Web-writer such as myself, material written in the heat of the moment becomes stale surprisingly quickly and unless one constantly updates the text one is left with a production far too obviously reliant on yesterday's news. Books, in contrast, are written in full awareness of the relative permanence of the printed page.

Although, then, much of the material in these pages can be traced to *Power Responsibility and Freedom*, it has been fundamentally reorganised and greatly augmented. I have removed many of the topical asides that may still be found on the website and introduced new material (especially but not only in Chapter 2) that, I hope, carries my argument further. My resorting to a more formal medium of publication does not mean, however, that I would not welcome reader response, and I can still be contacted via the website.

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Notes

1. Alex Howard, 1996. *Challenges to Counselling and Psychotherapy*, Macmillan.; and 2000. *Philosophy for Counselling and Psychotherapy*, Macmillan.
2. I have found it difficult to decide whether to write mainly in the first person singular or the first person plural. In many ways I prefer the latter, but in the end the apparent assumption that writer and reader form a harmonious 'we' starts to sound laboured and patronising. Always to speak of 'I', however, strays almost as far in the direction of egotism. I have therefore tried to strike some kind of balance between the two, and I hope that the reader will bear with me if I have not entirely succeeded.
3. For an excellent critique of biological psychiatry see, Terry Lynch, 2004. *Beyond Prozac*. PCCS Books.
4. This observation of Marx's is treated at length by Marshall Berman, 1983. *All That is Solid Melts into Air*. Verso.
5. The concept of enchantment is discussed by Max Weber in his *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. Unwin Paperbacks, 1985 (original edn 1930).
6. Expression used to telling effect by Robert Tressell in *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists*.
7. For example Steven Pincher, 2002. *The Blank Slate*. Penguin.
8. For an academic exposition of this kind of viewpoint see John Gray's *Straw Dogs: on Humans and other Animals*. 2002, Granta. At a less rarefied intellectual level, Margaret Mitchell's character Rhett Butler, in a scene towards the end of *Gone With The Wind*, puts the

case for the ruthless swashbucklers and carpetbaggers of the world with surprising eloquence: it is they (the brigands) who are the heroes of chaos and disintegration, the carriers-forward of the race, while the likes of the pale and disorientated Ashley Wilkes quietly go to the wall, lost from a world from which the 'enchantment has vanished' (1974 edn, Pan Books pp.754–7).

9. Smail, D. 1993. *The Origins of Unhappiness*. HarperCollins. This work forms half of the double volume *The Nature of Unhappiness*. Robinson, 2001.

10. Habermas, J. 1987. *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*. Polity Press.

11. Habermas, J. 1978. *Knowledge and Human Interests*. Heinemann.

12. Polanyi, M. 1958. *Personal Knowledge*. Routledge & Kegan Paul.

13. www.davidsmail.freeuk.com/