

## Language in the Human Potential Movement

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One of the major characteristics of the human potential movement has been a strong tendency to use language in a loose and generous manner. This has been in part a healthy reaction to the excesses of logical positivism in philosophy which stated as axiomatic that most if not all philosophic problems were essentially semantic problems and that if we analysed grammatical and linguistic factors carefully enough we would either solve these problems or redefine them in ways which would lead to solutions. Giant intellects such as G.E. Moore, W.V.O. Quine, A.J. Ayer and Alfred Korzybski - to name only a few - followed this path and explored its possibilities for deeper understanding.

'All philosophy', wrote Wittgenstein, 'is a struggle against the bedevilment of language'. The deep truth in this statement, however, was taken as a signal that all problems were linguistic problems and the great quests of philosophy - the search for meaning and value in life, the meaning of existence, the basic nature of reality - were largely abandoned in favour of analysis of the language in which they were stated. This great detour over the past 75-100 years has proven largely sterile and it is only lately that philosophy has begun to return to its former questions with the aid of the new tools and clarity provided by logical positivism.

It was partially in response to this rather dry road that the human potential movement reacted so strongly against any tendency to precision in language. The present problem is that we have swung to the opposite extreme where our progress is seriously hampered by the lack of precision in our language.

Let us select one term, widely used in conferences and journals which call themselves 'humanistic' or 'transpersonal' or use other appellations in this direction. We who identify our viewpoints and ourselves with these terms use it frequently and confidently. Let us take the term 'energy'.

I am not here questioning the fact that 'the universe is made up of 'energy', ' that 'everything is 'energy' or that - as Laura Huxley once charmingly informed me - 'Energy is God's delight'. All these may well be true for all I know and I would be the last to try to agree or disagree with these or with many similar statements which I appear to constantly run into. However (as G.E. Moore would have said) 'Precisely what do we mean by these statements?'

Clearly we are not using the term in the sense that physics uses it. We do not mean energy equals force times distance or even that it equals mass times the speed of light squared. What do we mean? I think the first question I might raise here is whether we are referring to one phenomenon or more than one when we use the word.

If we wish to ask whether we are dealing with one or more than one phenomenon the best way to start is to look at the characteristics of the phenomena in the different circumstances or contexts in which we observe it. If the characteristics are the same in different circumstances, then we are likely to be dealing with a single phenomenon. If they are different then the opposite is probably true.

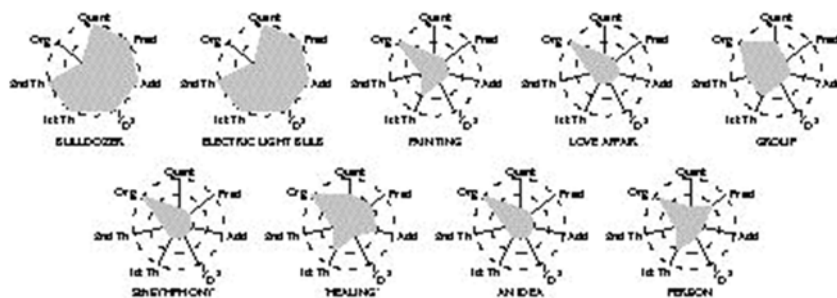
A survey of the circumstances in which 'energy' is used as a basic and explanatory term (and used in a way which implies that it is clearly understood by everyone in the same way in the

aforementioned conferences and journals) leads to the following list. This is by no means complete, but we can stop here - this is only a preliminary analysis to get a sense of the overall situation. More precise listings and analyses should be the province of Ph.D theses - the problem is admirably suited to them. The preliminary list of uses of 'energy' is 1. in a mechanical device (let us take a bulldozer as an example), 2. in an electrical mechanism (a light bulb for example), 3. in a love affair, 4. in a painting ('Guernica' will do admirably), 5. in a group of people, 6. a musical piece (the 5th Symphony for example), 7. in a 'healing' (psychic and at a distance), 8. in an idea, 9. in a per-son. All of us in this field would accept the idea that there was 'energy' in the first two. None of us would be surprised or particularly troubled to read or hear the sentence 'There is a lot of energy in...' (finished by any of the last seven categories.)

Given this list of nine circumstances in which the same term is used confidently and in an explanatory manner, let us take a list of characteristics and see if they are the same in all these circumstances. Since 'energy' was originally used by the physicists (and still is) we will include characteristics which the physicists would include if this were being used in their journals and textbooks.

As a preliminary list, let us include the following. Energy:

1. is quantitative - that is, can be described in numerical terms.
2. is predictable - if not in fact, at least theoretically.
3. is additive - do, for example, two bulldozers or two 'healers' produce twice as much 'energy' as one?
4. obeys the inverse square law - does the 'energy' get less in relation to the square of the distance between two lovers for example?
5. obeys the first law of thermodynamics - it can neither be created nor destroyed.
6. obeys the 2nd law of thermodynamics - becomes less and less organised as time goes on unless something is done about it.
7. needs an organic component to be active - An electric light bulb can go on and off by itself if it has a solar panel and a day/night sensor. A painting shows no activity unless a human being (organic component) is involved.



A brief glance at the radar charts (above) makes it clear that we are dealing with at least two separate phenomena which we have subsumed under the term 'energy'. It seems likely that

further analysis and a more extensive list of circumstances in which we have been using this word would lead to the discovery that there are more than two phenomena.

Well and good, but is this important? Most of us would reply, 'That's all very fine and clever, but I know what I mean when I say "energy"'. And perhaps we do, but perhaps we are not as clear as we think and perhaps, even if we are, our communication with others may be less precise than we believe.

Does our language have an effect on our thoughts, and attitudes and our actions? We are sure today that it does. The brilliant work of Korzybski and others has analysed this effect. The great stress in the modern feminist movement on changing our use of such terms as 'mankind', 'he', 'his', etc. demonstrates that the proponents of such changes believe that there is such an effect. (If you doubt the strength of this belief, look at the instructions for preparing a manuscript that practically every professional journal will send to prospective writers these days and the fact that many journals will not publish an article unless the author has been very very careful about the use of masculine and feminine pro-nouns.)

We do know today how strong the effect is. It is not only the 'primitive' whose language has only one word for 'stranger' and 'enemy' whose behaviour is strongly affected by the words he uses - it is also us. The progress of physics has been made possible in part by very careful and repeated analysis of the descriptive and explanatory terms used.

The search for understanding of a particular situation has no objective end point. We stop our individual search when what we have found satisfies our curiosity and we feel we 'understand' enough about it. Until we, or someone else finds his or her(!) curiosity aroused about the new definition of the situation, our progress stops. Sometimes we find a phrase or word that does general duty in a variety of situations to satisfy our curiosity and save us from the hard job of trying to think further. (Science might well be described as an unusually obstinate attempt to think clearly.) Among the phrases of this sort that we would all recognise is 'It's the exception that proves the rule'. This is used when an observation tells us that a cherished belief of ours has not proven true in a case we notice. We ignore the fact that this phrase arose at a time when 'prove' meant 'test' (As in Aberdeen Proving Ground where the United States Army tests new weapons to see if they are useful) and we can relax happily with our old belief strengthened by the demonstration that it is not true.

Another such phrase in our culture is 'That's human nature'. Which can serve to explain anything the human beings do or don't do and saves us from having to think further about what sort of thing we humans are. If, in a given situation, a specific person responds aggressively or not, the explanatory phrase, 'That's human nature', applies equally. We do not have to face our ignorance and therefore do not feel guilty when we do not strive to correct it. In short, these terms and phrases make us believe we know more than we do and stop our thinking and our progress.

The term 'energy' appears to be another such helpful and reassuring term. It can be used in a variety of situations, satisfies our curiosity as to what is going on, makes us feel that we understand the situation to a comfortable degree, and keeps us from having to think further as to what is going on.\*

Looking at these charts, it becomes clear that we have been using the same term for two (at least) different phenomena. If two phenomena obey different laws and only fit in quite different concepts of reality (such as that reality is mechanical or non-mechanical) then they

are different phenomena and calling them by the same name is bound to confuse our thinking and our attempts to deal effectively with them and to learn more about them. Calling a four footed canine a dog and calling a four cylinder Ford a dog also is going, at the least, to confuse our decision whether to buy dog food or gasoline in preparation for a trip and lead to a lot of unnecessary patting of automobiles.

It is, of course, not only the human potential movement which uses language without much precision. In 1929 Walter Lippman spoke of political theory as having become confused as to the meaning of the terms it habitually uses. The lack of progress made by political theory may well relate to this.

*There have been passed down from generation to generation a collection of concepts which are so hallowed and so dense that their only use is to excite emotions and to obscure thought. How many of us know what we are talking about when we use words like the state, sovereignty, independence, democracy, representative government, national honour, liberty and loyalty? Very few of us, I think, could define these terms under cross-examination, though we are prepared to shed blood, or at least ink, in their behalf. These terms have ceased to be intellectual constructs for apprehending the facts with which we have to deal and have become push buttons which touch off emotional reflexes.[1]*

It is my purpose here to point out a problem of the human potential movement rather than to suggest solutions. There are, however, many possibilities. Korzybski would have suggested subscripts, energy<sub>1</sub> and energy<sub>2</sub> and so forth. Others might have suggested operational definitions each time we use the term, different terms, etc. But unless we recognise the problem and that it is not only confined to the one word I have used as an illustration (others would include 'vibrations', 'growth' and a host more), unless we do this, our progress will continue to be hampered. And for those who do not think it has been, I might point out that if I have an appendicitis attack, it will make a crucial difference whether my physician has been trained in 1990 or 1590. In one case I will live, in the other I will die. However if I have a severe arthritis and go to a psychic healer, it will not make any difference in which century the healer was trained. The results will be about the same. Nor have we learned anything much about understanding, training or using telepaths or clairvoyants in the past centuries. Nor even very much new about helping people to spiritual development. (I know of no other field - except possibly political science - of which this can be said.) This is pretty shocking when you come to think about it and when you consider the serious work that has gone into such areas as psychic healing and spiritual development by intelligent, dedicated and hard-working human potential people. It illustrates that something is or some thing's are very wrong. Our attitude towards language appears to be one of them.

#### Reference

1. LIPPMAN, WALTER. *A Preface to Morals*. New York, MacMillan, 1929, p. vi.

*\* One factor adding to the complications of this particular term is the fact that we often take concepts meaning something fairly similar that are used in other ways of construing reality and apply them as if they are synonyms for 'energy'. I think here of such words as 'prana', 'wakenda', 'grey force', and 'orenda'. These are terms that make sense in the particular way of organising and construing reality in which they originated. They make no sense when translated directly into others. Whatever it is that manifests in a 'meridian', it is not the same*

*thing that makes an electric light bulb glow. You confuse the two at the peril of your possibility of constructive thinking.*