

Discussion

Following a pattern set earlier this year, this Section presents the contributions of members who wish to comment on papers which appeared in previous issues of the Proceedings at greater length than is appropriate for the Newsletter. The first is by Bruce Buchanan, M.D., D.Psych. on Németh's paper (reference below) and the second on the much-discussed "Whole Economy" paper by Smith, Starrs and Stewart, which appeared last December. Members (and others) who wish to react to papers they read are invited to contribute to this Section.

The Problems Of Knowing What Is Not So.

Bruce Buchanan

In a recent paper ("The Human Predicament: Walking Backwards Into The Future": CACOR *Proceedings*, June 1997), Dr. N. Németh has presented a provocative view of the human plight which helps to clarify facts and assumptions. It is only through such clarification that progress can be made, and I would acknowledge this contribution. However I find that considerable clarification and some amendments may be in order! While there is much with which I do agree, I will focus here on points where a different perspective may be worth considering.

A fairly simple appeal to "rational and realistic values", and an "assurance of unbiased diagnosis" leaves many key questions unanswered.

The underlying nature of "emotionally motivated" destructive outbreaks, even if "economically derived" is problematical. The need is for more precise diagnoses which may lead on to suggestions for remedies.

While there can be a split between emotional and intellectual influences on human behaviour there are also many reasons for perceiving a more fundamentally integrated relationship. Briefly, emotions reflect human needs and desires, and generate the hopes and dreams that suggest goals, and indeed have built civilizations. The intellect, for its part, can provide tools and models for understanding oneself and the world, including plans and arrangements which can achieve the goals of the heart.

That means may be in conflict with ends may indicate problems of process and content, but does not mean the fundamental structure is faulty.

Basic to the healthy organization of each human individual is a need for relative autonomy. Normally this is a product of long development, for which knowledge of oneself as well as of the world is required. For psychosexually and socially mature individuals, autonomy involves that sense of freedom and personal responsibility for self and family upon which civilization depends. The notion of "collective behaviour modification" is an

idea which must be considered with some caution in view of its very bad history.

Németh says that we "lack a process which could take us out of the conventional routine and move us to another plane of problem solving and prevention", and this is a reasonable aspiration. Yet in setting the ground rules for such efforts it is essential to emphasize that the changes which may be necessary cannot be imposed upon autonomous individuals from outside without creating those very splits between thought and feeling that are a major source of continuing problems. So, to this extent, the quest for "a better definition of a control mechanism for behaviour modification" may not be helpful.

I do not know the present status of Koestler's theories of the relation between thought and feelings, but I can believe they are "controversial", and possibly now seen by many as out of date. A more recent work – Descartes' Error: Emotion, Reason, and the Human Brain – by Antonio Damasio (Putnam, 1994) provides some of the basis for the views offered here. The relationships among the components and processes of the human mind are indeed complex.

Rather than posit a universal "paranoid element" in the human mind, we might note a general tendency of many people, especially when under stress, to abandon reflective and abstract thought and anxiously look for specific demons and scapegoats, or for idols in the form of vague ideals or great personages to worship – what Whitehead called the Fallacy of Misplaced Concreteness. The powers of abstract thought are essential to the proper use of language, and the narrow use of language as a symbol for force, to control and command in purely instrumental or arbitrarily persuasive ways, with inadequate understanding of the factors actually involved, is a major part of the problem. Behaviour which is inculcated by education of this kind may not meet the individual's own needs. The problem is not the conflict of reason and emotion but the attempt by some to exploit the feelings of others in ways that eventually are disappointing, and may in fact cultivate considerable reactive rage.

It is much easier to believe that many human beings have misunderstood and misused their gifts, than to conclude that the processes of evolution over several millions of years have been on a wrong track. A rational analysis which concludes that the brain lacks central co-ordination and leads inevitably to mental imbalance is evidence of overweening faith in rational analysis, not a useful basis on which to understand the problems which face us. Prolonged periods of cultural education and the use of language do not inevitably lead to fanatical devotion and brainwashing. The problems stem rather from the belief structures and the faulty ways in which education and language have been used.

Many writers have described this (e.g. A. Korzybski, W. Reich). There have been so many exceptional contributions which have been made by outstanding individuals that we cannot conclude that the inherited apparatus is inherently faulty. Rather, as Nietzsche pointed out, men and women are "incomplete animals"; they only fully develop as they take on responsibility, and work on freeing themselves from unthinking habits and mechanical responses.

Németh writes: "Unless we include our split-brain functioning in our planning, we shall go on forever talking in terms of empty phrases about technological innovation, peace, universal brotherhood, and control of social ills." As I see it, the problem lies not in our brains, but in the way we use or misuse our capacities for reason, emotion and for reflection on the relationships between these, and with the external world.

Traditional religions and beliefs have too often located our ideals out in never-never land, in limbo or in an unattainable heaven, not of this world because they have not been meaningful in terms of practical operations in daily living. Power structures have been able to equivocate, claim infallibility or immunity as an abstract principle, and place the onus on the victims of incompetent statecraft. Unless we can define our values – e.g. of truth, justice and freedom – with operational clarity, our education, culture and language will remain a source of continuing confusion.

I agree very strongly with Németh that there are no panaceas to be found in technologies – agriculture, medical science or whatever – or indeed in religions narrowly conceived. Yet I have difficulties with the proposition that the core problems are simple, to be solved by education and effective birth control. As so often, such recommendations could only be carried out properly if the problems did not exist; they provide only the illusion of a solution, a verbal form without content.

In my view the real problem is the dualism – the divorce between the world, on the one hand and, on the other hand the processes of minding through which we understand and must deal with the world. A narrow "scientific realism" is part of the problem, not a solution.

Our hearts and emotions provide the guidance we need with respect to the goals we should seek for the benefit of ourselves and our loved ones, which for the mature individual includes all those with whom he or she has reciprocal co-operative relationships, ultimately all life.

Our intellects provide tools for understanding which help to encompass these tasks. The effectiveness of such tools is impeded by the presence and cultural encouragement of illusions of infantile gratifications and egocentric power trips, the belief that enduring relationships can be exploitative and based upon unequal powers and injustice. Such beliefs, along with the economic arrangements they support, help to maintain our self-reinforcing delusions at the cultural level.

I see economics as setting the conditions and as providing resources rather than directing social vision towards worthy goals. Indeed a reliance upon economic criteria is perhaps part of the problem.

Ultimately, it seems to me, our political leaders must be held to better account, and this can only be done by public opinion which is better informed than at present. The many ways in which current power structures and large corporations can shape public opinion to their own special advantages have been well documented (Chomsky and others), and are indeed already breaking down in some instances (the tobacco lobby).

A free and responsible society requires informed public opinion, and the kinds of proposals and plans to achieve such ends will surely require innovative thought and experiment. It is a lesson from neurophysiology that structures are necessary for handling information in adequate variety and detail, and for providing reliable and prompt feedback as to consequences of actions, if any improvement in behaviour is to be expected.

An adequate informational structure may also provide a needed forum for public discourse, and thus the opportunity to deal with a variety of specific issues over time, provided it has sufficient carrying power and continuity. The Internet may assist by potentiating such arrangements.

Who can say? Implementation of a program devoted to meeting the information needs of public welfare and opinion, if it can help stimulate growing widespread realization of the high stakes and our common peril, might aid the needed co-ordination and momentum among existing initiatives in sufficient time to make a difference.