

Critical Spirituality: Towards a Revitalised Humanity

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The human dynamism implied by the concept of Thrival¹ is of particular concern to futurists engaged in exploring our human potential. This potential is not simply a matter of being able to chart a course and realise it; it is the ability to engage the multidimensional facets of our humanness in order to create maps to preferable futures that retain their promise and their openness. Such futures resist definition, challenging us as both individuals and societies to *be* our best, *do* our best and *dream* our best.

The utopian nature of any such future cannot be denied, it is a future in potential only. Much critical humanism has focussed on our current world - with its structures and illusions, its iniquities and inequities, its promises and false prophets - and developed thorough critiques of the social order. Critical futures is rooted in this tradition, it is a rebellious humanism, which at its best offers a host of heterodox and paradoxical visions rooted in the critique of those forces that seek the closure of human potential. Ziauddin Sardar sums this position up when he says of futures studies:

“It must work in opposition to the dominant politics and culture of our time, resist and critique science and technology (the most powerful agents of change and thought), globalisation (the most powerful process of homogenisation) and linear, deterministic projections (the official orthodoxy of the future) of the future itself.” (Sardar, 1999, 16)

To challenge the hegemonic is one thing, to build an alternative future is another. Noted critical theorist Henry Giroux, in surveying the effects of critical theory, has observed that little has changed as a direct result of critique. The problem he asserts, is that critical theorists of all complexions have concentrated too much on developing a grammar of resistance and not enough on a grammar of the possible (Giroux, 1986). In this too, little has changed. The disjunction between theory and practice gapes like a chasm at us over the centuries. Desiderius Erasmus made a similar observation over four hundred and fifty years ago: "If you keep thinking about what you want to do or what you hope will happen, you don't do it, and it won't happen." (Erasmus, 2005)

Clearly we need something more if we are to create the conditions for Thrival in our world. Critique, as it is currently defined, is not enough. The problem, as I see it, is that the human has been left out of humanism. Humanism has been too narrowly defined as an intellectual movement (which of course it originally was) with no sense either of the somatic condition of ideology nor of its liminal nature as an expression not just of the head but also of the heart and spirit. We need to reconfigure humanism to account for these essentially human qualities if we wish to engage neohumanistically with change.

¹ The theme for the conference at which this paper was delivered. *Global Soul, Global Mind and Global Action: From Survival to Thrival*, Tamkang University, November 2005, Taiwan.

The Neohumanist Moment

The conditions of late modernity have resulted in a convergence in history, environmental violence, economic injustice, political bankruptcy, resurgent religious fundamentalism, technological change and philosophical confusion. This moment places before us two possible routes into the future. The individual, every one of us, is faced with the choice between loss and alienation on the one hand (the future is an intensified and colonised extension of the present malaise) or a reclamation of self and spirit on the other (the future is an open and creative counter to present hubris). This convergence has created the conditions for the emergence of a neohumanist sensibility; we live at a moment in time that not just necessitates a deepening of human awareness but also validates it. At the heart of this process is our human capacity to reflect upon our selves. This is something new at the collective level in terms of the history of human consciousness and can best be described as a neohumanist moment. Niklas Luhmann sees the capacity to self reflect as a defining feature of modernity.

“The question (for individuality) is no longer ‘What should I be?’ but rather ‘How should I be?’ ... An individual in the modern sense is someone who can observe his or her own observing.” (Luhmann, 1998, 7)

This reflective faculty, when truly enacted transcends itself; it lies at the heart of this new humanism. It suggests a human formula for activating global Thrival that reads something like this:

Reflection + Ethics + Action = Thrival

This process links self-actualisation with social renewal. It is implicit to this new emerging reality that both go hand in hand.

In this sense we build a condition for re-imagining the possible by bridging the gap between the impersonal social imaginary faculty and the personal capacity to envision or imagine. The social imaginary is described by Cornelius Castoriadis as a process of signification:

“Social imaginary signification brings into being things as *these here* things, posits them as being *what* they are – the *what* being posited by signification, which is indissociably principle of existence, principle of thought, principle of value, and principle of action.” (Castoriadis, 1997, p313)

The personal capacity to envision is linked to hope and the reflective capacity to deconstruct and reconstruct the world around us and choose specific sets of conditions over others. This is a form of *eupsychia*: the ability to imagine and enact the constantly improving self. At its deepest level this is a spiritual condition that strengthens the personal identification with the world around us and provides the inspiration to come to its aid. This need to act is rooted in a set of conditions that are both personal (the desire for a better future for our children) and altruistic (the wish to care for the other).

From Survival to Thrival

In terms of the theme of this conference there are parallels between the formula stated above and the conditions of Global Soul, Global Mind and Global Action. These are summarised here.

Global Soul	Global Mind	Global Action
Reflect Meditate	Ethics Benevolent Intellect	Act Transform

To move from a condition of mere sufficiency which we can describe as survival - *and let us not forget that for many the condition of life does not even meet this minimum standard* - to a condition of Thrival will require a deepened sense of human agency: One that incorporates the spiritual and the critical into a meaningful balance of depth and analysis.

Such a proposition is illegitimate within both the humanist and neoliberal traditions that currently define the possible. Yet such is the pressure of the neohumanist moment that the urgency is being felt by many thinkers and activists. Sogyal Rinpoche sums the situation up by declaring:

“The danger we are all in together makes it essential now that we no longer think of spiritual development as a luxury, but as a necessity for survival.” (Rinpoche, 1992 p.363)

Similarly, the Australian academic and social critic David Tacey, in assessing the condition of the Australian ‘soul’, renews Eliade’s call for:

“...a ‘new humanism’ that is not based on rational materialism, but assumes that the sacred is a basic category of human experience, and sees that the human cannot be separated from the nonhuman and the archetypal.” (Tacey, 1995, 4)²

Albert Einstein once observed that we cannot fix the problems of the present with the mindsets that created the problems. Critical humanism has failed to generate the change needed to build the personal and social conditions needed for the condition of Thrival. It has failed because it does not deal with the full spectrum of human potential. Over its long history it has dealt in various ways with the intellectual (including the theological), ethical and emotional domains of the human condition, and in addressing issues of inequity and the structural constraints that inhibit change and maintain current power arrangements it has also included aspects of humanities’ physical condition. Yet by situating itself within a largely material and secular discourse it has denied itself the spiritual resources that can challenge the deep myths and metaphors that condition so much of reality.

² A similar call is made by Konstantin Khroustski in his paper on Russian Philosophical Cosmology (Khroustski, 2005)

To step beyond Enlightenment rationality requires the inclusion of spirituality, only then can we meet Einstein's condition of breaking out of the current paradigm. In this way we lose nothing of the strength of humanism, instead we augment it with the inclusion of a spiritual rationality. Thus the tradition that defines the rational remains intact, it simply modulates to include a fuller vision of what it means to be human. We must remember that, as Alasdair MacIntyre notes,

“...rationality itself ... is a concept with a history: indeed, since there are a diversity of traditions of enquiry, with histories, there are, so it will turn out, rationalities rather than rationality...” (MacIntyre, 1988/2003 p.9)

When we recognise that rationality itself is contingent then we become able to develop tools of rational dissent that may shift and change according to context. What drives such dissent is a commitment to benevolence, a tolerance for paradox and a sense of community that values the vision of dissent as an integral part of the evolution of consciousness and the social and cultural processes that reflect it. Neohumanism, by embracing and validating a spiritual rationality, allows us to engage our critical spirituality in the quest for conditions that create, support and maintain Thrival; that condition of optimal self expression and security of humanity.

Critical Spirituality

Thrival will never arrive if we leave its emergence up to politicians, bureaucrats, economists or New Age gurus. Thrival will only emerge when we take personal responsibility for creating the conditions necessary for its continued presence on the planet. Critical spirituality recognises that, to paraphrase James Scott, what is rational to a bureaucrat is not so to a mystic (Scott, 1998, 22).

Donald Rumsfeld, in his famous *non sequitur*, described a range of knowns and unknowns. Much that is mysterious for him and his advisors falls within the domain of the valid from a critically spiritual perspective. Silence, mystery, awe and ignorance are all necessary categories for understanding the past, the present and the future. This is the fertile ground of dreams and archetypes, it is where the social imaginary of Castoriadis meets the personal imaginary of the citizen. It is here, where biography meets history, subject merges with object and agency and structure at last 'tie the knot', that we find a valid ground to engage Global Soul, Global Mind and Global Action.

This critical engagement with soul lies at the heart of Thrival as a key component of a revitalised humanity. When agency and structure are in balance then the future opens up and becomes a place of realistic dreaming. This is not a Utopia of closure where freedom is sacrificed to the Dream. Rather it is a condition of continuous becoming in which personal subjectivities constantly renegotiate the context of their becoming through objective adjustment. This is the horizon of the possible, and is driven by what Louis Marin calls a utopic (Marin, 1993). The point, he argues, is that Utopia is a trap but paradoxically, humanity must have utopias, visions of the good, the hoped for other place, in order to shape and inform social choices. The creative energy involved in the generation and dissolution of utopic possibilities is central to the maintenance of the social order. This terrain is the place of dream (utopic), the

emotional anchor of individuality within the impersonal process of the social imaginary. In this way, agency, a necessary condition for Thrival, is reclaimed.

Thus the condition of *being* ceases to be defined in the passive sense of submitting to an external reality, or as a denial of that reality as illusion or *maya*; instead it takes on a more muscular identity as a process of energetic reflective engagement with the conditions of mind and social ordering that so often deny agency as a condition of social reality. This condition of being involves both Global Soul and Global Mind as it is concerned both with spiritual reflection and intellectual critique. Meaningful *doing* is the result of effective being and results in Global Action. Personal and collective identity, purpose and fulfilment result and immediately Thrival becomes a dimension of social reality. *Dreaming* now takes on the creative potential of transformation. This is the gift of the emergent critically spiritual condition.

So critical spirituality creates new categories for making sense of reality and acting upon it. It fills the hole in holism by actively promoting an integrated vision of the human being and thus challenges the dominant hegemonic discourse that stifles agency and colonises the future (Milojevic, 2005). New categories allow for dissent. Some of these categories are steeped in Tantra and the Indic episteme, others allow for indigenous insights into relationship and the ontology of identity (Mueke, 2004). Still others draw on new insights into human nature and the nature of ethical action offering a framework for understanding consciousness as a living energy, *microvita*, that has organic properties and can multiply and also die (Bussey, 2004). When categories are challenged we find the present is less claustrophobic, it becomes a fragile and contested terrain over which various possible presents and futures, and even pasts contend (Inayatullah, 2002, 8).

Dimensions of Critical Spirituality

The critically spiritual perspective integrates the concerns of critical theory for social justice, gender equity and processes of legitimation with an identification with the other that is based upon a meditative stance that establishes a sense of unity with and between minds. This identification is the root of relationship and was alluded to in the thinking of Michel Foucault as an ethic of care that had been eclipsed by the western obsession with the Socratic (Delphic) injunction to “Know oneself”.

“One of the main themes Foucault explored in the early eighties was ‘the care of the self.’ The nearly complete uncoupling of this imperative from its twin, ‘know yourself,’ is an essential element of his diagnosis of modernity, in which the latter imperative was gradually to eclipse the former as a philosophical object.” (Rabinow, 1997) xxiv-xxv

The schism created by the triumph of self-knowledge has led to the dominance of the head over the heart which was radically devalued as a way of knowing and engaging reality.

Critical spirituality fosters the identification of self with the world, the collective and the cosmic good. It does so by acknowledging the depths of the human condition and building contemplative processes to incorporate these into the construction of knowing and acting. As Foucault acknowledges, care is a central ingredient here. Care

implies relationship with both self as other (the deeper self denied by modernity) and also self as world: That part of reality that Joanna Macy describes in her book *World as Lover, World as Self* (Macy, 2005).

Implications for Thrival: Global Soul, Global Mind, Global Action

The neohumanist moment is here and we must look at ways to successfully negotiate the transition from survival to Thrival. This transition requires that we embrace our full humanity, one which acknowledges and utilises the full spectrum of human potential. This means we must have active bodies, active minds, active hearts and active souls. Only then will an integrative ethic emerge that will allow for the paradox of individual agency to strike a dynamic balance with impersonal structure.

Once this is done activism expands to embrace personal transformation as a political tool. Critical spirituality builds on the modernist capacity for self reflection allowing it to escape from the maze of the mind and find a contingent fulfilment in the soul. This implies a form of action learning in which theory is validated through practice and practice is validated in turn through reflection that then initiates another cycle. In this process, relationship becomes the basis for engaged ethics and a new language for defining the real, along with the probable and the preferable, emerges based on love and mystery.

Critical spirituality thus shifts humanity from the flatland of Giorgio Agamben's *homo sacer* (Agamben, 1998), 'alienated man' and the 'bare life', to the spiritually and socially transformative reality of what Patricia Kelly has described as *globo sapiens* (Kelly, 2004), those in touch with Global Soul who recognise and build on their relationship with the other and this world. This creates the consciousness of the custodian, the one who holds today in trust for future generations. This implies the awareness that we are ancestors of the future and that with this recognition comes responsibility and also the required energy to enact transformation, to shift from survival to Thrival.

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