

PRIMAL SCREAM AND GENITAL CHARACTER: A Critique of Janov and Reich

Charles R. Kelley

Prefatory Note¹

This critique began as a review of Janov's book, then developed somewhat further than a review. It compares key aspects of primal therapy with Reichian therapy, and views Janov's position in the context of Reich's work and the Reichian movement. Problems in both Janov's and Reich's positions are traced to an incorrect model of the problem of blocks to feeling, viz. the medical model, and an educational model is proposed as an alternative.

The Primal Scream: A Summary of Janov's Position

Janov, Arthur, *THE PRIMAL SCREAM: THE CURE FOR NEUROSIS*. New York: Putnam, 1970, 446pp. (Paperback by Delta)

As his subtitle indicates, Arthur Janov claims to have discovered *the* cure for neurosis. *The Primal Scream* describes his program for transforming neurotic into "real" non-neurotic post-Primal human beings.

Neurosis to Janov means defenses; the defense are the neurosis. Primal therapy is therefore designed to strip patients of all defenses. The new patient spends 24 hours alone in a hotel room before his appointment. He will see the Primal therapist each day for as long as he wishes (usually for no more than two or three hours) for three weeks, after which he will attend Primal groups once or twice a week for several months. His therapy is then over.

The technique of the Primal involves having the patient lie down and talk a little about his life at the outset, usually about early painful experiences with his parents. The patient is asked to talk to the absent parent in the way developed by Fritz Perls. Then the patient is asked to breathe heavily, gulping air in large gasps, as he surrenders progressively to his feelings. This results in the spontaneous eruptions of deep emotion that Janov calls Primals. These are often marked by involuntary screams from the depths of the organism, hence the title of his book. Primal therapy is a series of such Primals occurring first in the three weeks of individual therapy, later in Primal groups. These, according to Janov, shed the patient's defenses, leaving him undefended and real, free of the "unreal self" – which is his defenses – i.e., his neurosis by Janov's definition.

Primal therapy is the first systematic science of psychotherapy, according to its author, where cure can be fully achieved. Not only simple neuroses, but drug addiction, homosexuality, perversions, obesity, psychosomatic complaints, and even psychosis all respond. Sometimes breasts enlarge, facial hair grows, voices deepen, and patients grow taller, to mention but a few of the effects Janov claims for Primal therapy.

The theory of Primal therapy is described by Janov primarily in psychological terms. The

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defenses (neurosis) are born out of the child's unfulfilled needs, especially its need for love. The child struggles desperately and in vain to please his parents and be loved by them. Finally his painful unfulfilled needs are blocked from consciousness as a matter of self-preservation, so that the child stops feeling the pain they cause. But the price is tension and neurosis, and the replacement of real needs by symbolic ones. Instead of real behavior arising from real needs, substitute behavior arising from symbolic needs takes over. As long as the pain of the unfilled needs is repressed, the behavior will be unreal and neurotic. Only experiencing and working through Primal pain permits the person to get back into contact with his real needs, and so to again become a real person – this is the essence of Janov's position.

Reich's Priority to Janov

Many hundreds of us were screaming out our pain and fear in the spontaneous eruptions of feeling which characterized Reichian therapy 15 to 35 years before *The Primal Scream* appeared. To us the claim by Janov to have discovered the emotional release techniques he employs must appear dishonest. Janov is familiar with Reich, and refers to him often, but never in such a way that the reader can understand Reich's contribution to Janov's approach. Instead, Reich's techniques are described so as to give an entirely misleading impression, one which obscures Reich's contribution. Instead of discussing Reich's own position, Janov writes about one patient's hearsay report of how one Reichian therapist worked and criticizes Reich on this basis!

To make this point crystal clear: It was Wilhelm Reich – not Arthur Janov – who discovered how to open up the human being to the deepest level of feeling. This deep emotional release was obtained by Reich (as by Janov) combining psychological and physical work on the character and the muscular armor, which are the defenses. It was Reich who discovered that memories associated with a block to feeling would often be recovered when the block was released. It was Reich who discovered and outlined the role played by breathing in the defenses and how work on the breathing facilitated the release of feeling. It was Reich who showed how the pain and fear locked in our organisms would, when unlocked by his techniques, erupt in overwhelming involuntary expressions of feeling, in frenzies of rage, deep tragic racking sobs, and screams of pain and fear torn from the depths of our being – and by quieter and softer but equally significant deep emotion. It was the therapists trained by Reich who found there was no way they could soundproof their offices to hold in all of the sounds their patients made. The "Primal Scream" was discovered by Wilhelm Reich more than 30 years ago!

By not acknowledging Reich's priority in the techniques of deep emotional release which he employs, Janov denies himself the opportunity to build on the broad foundation of experience with these techniques that has been developed by Reich and his students. Hundreds of man-years and dozens of written volumes are involved in this experience, including Reich's own books and those of his students – more than 30 volumes of Reichian and neo-Reichian scientific journals. Most of all, by not looking hard at Reich's experience and the problems of the Reichian movement, Janov has denied himself the chance to avoid Reich's own mistakes and has sentenced himself and the movement he created to repeat them at great cost.

Janov is an innovative, creative person. He appears to have learned to use Reich's techniques effectively and has applied them in his own way in a context he has created. He has combined techniques from Gestalt therapy (the source also unacknowledged) with those of Reich in an important new synthesis. His theory is primitive and undeveloped compared to Reich's, for he shows little grasp of the physical dynamics of the defenses, the muscular armor, and is far behind Reich in this respect. He speaks often and well of pain, but little of rage or fear, and his technique may be deficient in handling these. Still, *The Primal Scream* is one of the more exciting books to come out of psychology since Reich died. Most readers, especially those

with medical and psychological backgrounds, will question Janov's claim of profound changes in his patients, such as cure of psychosis, addictions, and severe and long-standing psychosomatic problems, of change in voice register, body build, etc. It is precisely those readers, experienced with the effects of Reichian techniques, who can accept that these effects sometimes do occur, for they have seen them in consequence of Reichian techniques. Janov overstates his case and offers inadequate evidence, but the primary fault of his presentation lies elsewhere.

I know nothing about Janov or his followers save what he presents in *The Primal Scream*, but this is enough to know that Janov is repeating one of Reich's most serious errors with a vengeance. Primal therapy is sure to have profound effects on the lives of many individuals, but its long range potential, its development, its effects on society and on the scientific understanding of man have been severely and needlessly curtailed. Reference to the Reichian movement serves to describe Janov's error.

Reich's Error

Reich discovered his deep emotional release techniques in the mid-30's. They were a natural outgrowth of his character analytic work, which had led him to find the bodily basis of the subject's defenses in chronic muscular tension. Release of the chronic tension by simultaneous work on mind and body resulted in the eruption of involuntary emotion that came to typify Reichian work. Reich called his technique "vegetotherapy" because it resulted in spontaneous discharges of feeling governed by the vegetative (autonomic) nervous system. (The term "vegetotherapy" was coined when Reich was writing in German, and the German term is less awkward.)

Reich's separation from psychoanalysis and his development of vegetotherapy in the years 1933-35 must have paralleled the early development of Primal therapy three decades later. The deep emotional release techniques as Reich applied them showed profound effects, both physical and psychological. Disease processes were altered, often dramatically, and individual appearance changed. Neurotic symptoms disappeared; the patient became more open and direct. The sexual experience changed, as the patient developed a capacity for complete surrender in the genital experience, i.e., "orgastic potency" in Reich's terminology. The result:

... the whole being of the patient changed so rapidly and so basically that at first I could not understand it. It was difficult to see how the tenacious neurotic process could admit of such a sudden change...

-- THE FUNCTION OF THE ORGASM, p. 130

Reich described the great changes that took place when patients were stripped of their armor, not as tendencies or directions, but as the natural and established result of successful Reichian therapy. Read, instead, the great changes described by Janov when patients were stripped of their *defenses* as a result of successful Primal therapy. The claims Janov makes for Primal therapy, like the techniques employed, are strikingly like those of 30 years ago by Reich.

And what was the result of Reich's claims on the development of the Reichian movement? Patients flocked in have their armor stripped from them so they could shed their neuroses and become "genital characters" in terms of Reich's description. In 1950 I arrived in New York to enter Reichian therapy and to study Reich's work. I found the Reichian movement to be structured hierarchically around Reich's "genital character" concept. At the pinnacle was Reich, viewed almost as a God. His close associates and the therapists trained by him served as angels, for they were surely genital characters, freed of armor and neurosis by Reich himself. Those who had completed therapy successfully also had angel status, but somehow we saw

very few of these. However, there were therapists in training and advanced students, -- apprentice angels, and below them the mass of novitiates, patients like myself, the bottom of the hierarchy, although its financial base. -- We were surely a cut above the balance of armored humanity, because we had seen the light, and had taken the necessary steps to put ourselves on the path toward an unarmored genital character structure.

And this hierarchy based on the mystique of the genital character persists to this day in the orthodox Reichian movement, predominantly among those who call themselves "medical orgone therapists" and their patients. Only a few of Reich's therapists have had the courage to correct Reich's concept of the "genital character."

It is time that this be said in print. Reich's concept of the unarmored genital character is a fiction, based on an unwarranted extrapolation of trends and tendencies he saw in his patients. Reich was not an unarmored genital character, nor are the doctors he trained, nor are patients concluding their Reichian therapy. There are no genital characters, not in the real world. The concept of the unarmored genital character has exactly the same kind of reality as the Scientology "clear," or Janov's "Post-Primal" who is completely devoid of defenses. It is time that these notions be recognized for what they are, mystical fictions.

Reich represented himself as unarmored in seminars that I attended. He was accepted as the prototype genital character within the Reichian movement. But Reich, the "number one" genital character, developed serious paranoid trends in his later years. These were, I believe, shy of psychosis, but were certainly also shy of good mental health. In 1957 Reich died of cardiovascular disease, a condition reflecting chronic tension, i.e., muscular armoring, in Reich's own terminology. Autopsy indicated a severe cardiac disease condition.

Reich's death ought to have been used by the leaders of orgonomy to put the myth of the genital character to bed, but that would have destroyed much of the mystical force of the movement. Instead, the myth was perpetuated by Reich's inheritors. The announcement mailed to us by the leading figure in medical orgonomy after Reich's death informed us that Reich had died of "oranur sickness." This mysterious pronouncement, for which no evidence was or has ever been published, had the function of reassuring the believers that Reich really wasn't armored after all.

And what of Reich's "angels," the "genital characters" trained by Reich (and later by a successor) to do his therapy? With the powerful techniques and the profound and germinal scientific concepts of Reich as a starting point, Reich's disciples have done not one thing to indicate that they have superior thought processes or character structures to ordinary "non-genital" characters. The Reichian movement has been characterized by unproductiveness, backbiting, jealousies and pettiness. Lawsuits and threats of lawsuits, crank letters containing attacks on each other's work and characters and motives, and other forms of factionalism have abounded. There have been only two books written by medical orgone therapists since Reich died, authored by Reich's number one and number two disciples, respectively. Book number two consists entirely of an attack on book number one. The factions of medical orgonomy are in a desperate and silly contest to convince themselves and the world that they are the truly true disciples of the master, the only ones who really understand and are carrying out his work.²

Actually, Reich saw the smallness of his followers. In LISTEN LITTLE MAN he likens himself to an eagle condemned to hatching little chickens. The brave hopes for turning patients into genital characters that he had expressed in THE FUNCTION OF THE ORGASM, he renounced. He quit practicing therapy, saying:

² See Kelley, C.R. *Orgonomy Since the Death of Reich. The Creative Process*, Vol 5, 1965; and Boadella, David. *On Doctrinaire Movements. Energy and Character*, Vol. 2 No. 1, January 1971.

*... Nothing can be done with grownups. I am rather experienced in psychiatry and biology, human biology. Nothing can be done. Once a tree didn't grow straight, but crooked, you can't straighten it out.*³

-- Quite a change from the brave hope offered the readers of CHARACTER ANALYSIS and THE FUNCTION OF THE ORGASM! Only Reich's excessive and unreal hope for his therapeutic technique brought this uncalled for disillusion. He became discouraged with a truly great achievement because it fell short of the miraculous.

However, Reich never abandoned his dream of the unarmored genital character; he merely decided that it had to be reached by raising children free of armor rather than by therapy with adults. In 1949 he launched a research project on the rearing of armor-free healthy children, at a meeting attended by forty professionals. When Reich died in 1957 he left his estate, "The Wilhelm Reich Infant Trust Fund," to this and related aims.

To my knowledge, no one in orgonomy has yet succeeded in raising his child as an armor-free "genital character." I have met dozens of children raised according to Reichian principles by Reichian therapists and other parents who have had extensive Reichian therapy. When intelligently applied by healthy and loving parents, I judge the Reichian techniques to have been of real value, and the children to have benefited greatly. But every child has had his problems and hang-ups, and every child past the age of four or five has his defenses, his armor. The unarmored child is as much a myth as the unarmored, defense-free adult.

The Medical vs. An Educational Model

What is the problem here? Neo-Reichian techniques of deep emotional release, whether applied by Reich or Janov or others, are enormously powerful. When used in a directed way, they can and do bring about profound changes in personality and the body, in character and physique. Reich's statement that the "whole being changes" is not an exaggeration; it happens, -- not always, but often. I have seen it again and again. The voice drops, the body structure changes, the person becomes more open and expressive emotionally. What does *not* happen is that he becomes unarmored, free of his defenses, "cured." He does not change into some new and different kind of human being that is "real" and "well" or a "genital character" instead of "unreal" and "neurotic" or armored. To allege that he does only establishes an unreal hope for the newcomer that must bring eventual disillusionment or worse, self-deception. Pity most those unfortunates who wear the mantle of "genital character" or "post primal" or "clear," and are thus forced to pretend, over the years of their lives, to a non-existent state of being, superior to that of ordinary humans.

A major part of the problem is the use of a medical model to describe a non-medical problem. Reich and Janov, like Freud and most of his successors, have employed medical concepts to describe their work. They have thus spoken of curing the sick, of neurosis and treatment, disease and therapy. These terms have been applied whether or not those they dealt with had a real disease to give therapy to. In point of fact, the great majority of those going to Reich and Janov (and to Freud's present day exponents) are not sick; they have no real disease of which to be cured. Neurosis is only a metaphorical sickness. The disease has been manufactured in order to apply the therapy.

This is not to say that patients in Reichian or Primal therapy are not troubled, nor that they should not be going to their "therapists;" -- in most cases they should. What they stand to gain is not "cure" of "neurosis." Instead, they stand to undergo a significant growth experience,

³ Reich, Wilhelm. *The Source of the Human No! Orqonomic Medicine*, Vol. 1, No. 2, November 1955, p. 105.

a change in themselves that can sometimes be as needed, as rewarding and important as cure of a disease can be to a sick man. However, the kind of change they go through is not of disease and its cure.

Because of the medical model they have adopted, psychiatrists and psychologists like Reich and Janov have been forced to think in terms of unreal diseases and unreal cures. Thus we have the paradox of doctors who are not "well" by their own criteria endeavoring to "cure" "patients" who are not genuinely "sick." The super-well state of the "genital character" or "post primal" has been invented to fit the medical model, to make it appear that a "cure" is really accomplished. The "cured" individual, the genital character or post-primal, is nothing more than the fictional outcome of the process of "therapy" applied to people who are not genuinely "sick" in the first place.

Of course, many people coming in to Primal or Reichian or other forms of therapy are genuinely sick, and in need of treatment for their disease, -- real disease, for which real cure is possible. These are a distinct minority, however; most people come because they are unhappy, distressed, dissatisfied with themselves and their lives. They may be aware that blocks to feeling necessary to their survival as a child have remained to restrict their potential as an adult. They are troubled, and accept the label of illness in order to undergo an experience which they hope will change them, make them freer, more effective, less distressed, happier. -- And in many cases it can, not by a mythical cure of a metaphorical disease, but by techniques that provide a significant new avenue for change. Primal and Reichian "therapy" are, in fact, a powerful form of education. Often useful as an adjunct to therapy, they are not, properly speaking, therapy in itself. The advantage to using an educational rather than a medical model is that the process of change can be viewed in the context of human development and growth, rather than the context of disability and disease.

The form of education based on Reichian and neo-Reichian techniques of deep emotional release I have called "education in feeling." Primal and neo-Reichian therapy belong in this category. "Education in feeling" is one of the most exciting, dramatic, and needed developments in the education field. But while it can change its students profoundly, it does not render them cured of neurosis, devoid of defenses, free of armor. -- And that, I have learned, is a good thing, for the armor is more than just a "defense." Even though the armor is often crippling and even killing, it exists for a reason. Even if it really were possible to strip a person of all his armor (and it is not) it would do him a grave disfavor to do so.

The blocks to feeling that Reich calls "the armor" and Janov "the defenses" are a product of the capacity of man to control his feelings and behavior, and so to direct his life along a path he has chosen. One aspect of this is protection of the self from incapacitating emotions, a second the channeling of behavior towards goals. Both are important to survival. The key function they involve is that of voluntary as opposed to spontaneous control of attention. This control is a negative process, a learning to block attention and movement in directions one does not wish to go. It is accomplished by selective contraction of muscles. It is the basis of man's capacity, first, to function under stress, and second, to live his life long-range, to have direction, self-discipline, purpose.

I have described the process in greater detail elsewhere, as referenced in Table 1. Note the opposition between the goals of "education in feeling" and those of "education in purpose." "Feeling" is in the here and now, "purpose" is oriented to the future. Purpose is in important respects antithetical to feeling, and it is from the evolution of purpose that blocks to feeling have arisen. The "defenses," the "armor" are an expression of man's developing but imperfect capacity to control and direct his attention, his energy, his emotion, his movement, his life.

Table 1
Goals of Education in Feeling vs. Education in Purpose
(From Kelley, C.R., *Education in Feeling and Purpose*, 1970)

EDUCATION IN FEELING	EDUCATION IN PURPOSE
Free blocks to feeling	Establish and sustain one's own direction in life
Gain increased spontaneity	Gain better self control
Learn better to:	Learn better to:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • give and accept love • work through anger and fear • laugh and cry • surrender in orgasm 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • clarify one's values and principles • choose one's own objectives • pursue one's objectives effectively • take charge in crises
Feel more deeply	Achieve more meaning
Achieve better contact with others	Become better able to function independently
Develop more capacity for tenderness	Develop more capacity for toughness
Open up emotionally	Focus energy rationally
Attain greater emotional freedom	Attain greater intellectual clarity
Become better able to love	Become better able to work
Learn to enjoy life more deeply	Become better able to realize one's potential.

And the complete human being requires direction as well as feeling in his life, self-discipline as well as spontaneity, toughness as well as tenderness. Emotional release techniques leading to growth in the capacity for feeling are a worthwhile goal for most individuals, because the evolution of purpose has developed imperfectly, and has severely curtailed modern man's capacity to feel. Man needs to free himself from excessive and inappropriate blocks to feeling, to learn more effective and less damaging techniques for keeping his life "on track" and going where he wants it to go.

Yet to abandon *all* blocks to feeling would be to abandon all self-direction and control. To function effectively for a single normal day requires that man sometimes block his immediate impulses, his feelings, that he use voluntary as well as spontaneous attention. And voluntary attention is forced; it is the function underlying purpose, the defenses, the muscular armor.

The medical model also takes advantage of the transference phenomenon. In this society man is systematically rendered weak and dependent by family structure, social institutions, and government. The longing for a strong parental figure is therefore present in most people. This role is easily assumed by the "doctor" or "therapist" who, like a loving parent, understands the "patient's" hurt and tribulation, and is going to "make it better."

The transference emphasizes the elitist nature of the medical model. Dependence on daddy is replaced by dependence on the doctor. The "special elite group of the cured" is associated with the doctor, the adult, the parent, and the "sick" masses of mankind are

associated with the patient, the child. Those who identify with the elite claim a status that sets them above and apart from ordinary men.

But in this area of life, where man is struggling for knowledge, there is no "elite" who have discovered "the way," only cultists who pretend, who kid themselves that they have. The medical model, bolstered by the transference, institutionalizes this pretense. And one tragic result is that the techniques of Reich, reaffirmed by Janov, which form one of the major educational break-throughs of our time, become misunderstood, distorted, misapplied, mystified, and eventually discredited because they are not viewed in perspective from the start .

The deep emotional release techniques discovered by Reich are at least as exciting when viewed as an educational breakthrough as when viewed as "therapy." Viewed as education, they provide a new method for change, for realizing a potentiality, rather than for treating disease. They belong in the forefront of the human potential movement, where ways of growth are the objective, and new approaches and techniques are much sought after.

Because the new techniques are powerful, they involve grave responsibilities, and because they are difficult, they require effective training. A majority of those who are qualified at present operate within the context of the medical model. Bad as the model is, it is difficult to abandon because it is institutionalized, established, built into the fabric of our society in legislation, insurance practice, and traditional education. The neo-Reichian practitioner with a doctor's degree has a large vested interest in the medical model which requires a real sacrifice to relinquish. Nevertheless, Reich and Janov notwithstanding, the future of the deep emotional release techniques discovered by Reich and used by Janov lies more in education than in medicine. Surely it lies in both, but the educational application will reach more people, and from a more realistic base than Reich or Janov, employing the medical model, have supplied for their work.

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