Non-directivity and relational depth: two forms of mysticism?
PCQ 2007

Ivan Ellingham

You are probably aware--thanks in part to recent contributions to this quarterly--that within the person-centred approach at the present time tension exists between, in the one corner, those I shall call the *non-directivists* (NDs) and, in the other, those I shall name the *relational depthers* (RDs): leading NDs being Barbara Brodley, Jerrold Bozarth, Lisbeth Sommerbeck and Sue Wilders; leading RDs being Dave Mearns, Mick Cooper and Peter Schmid.

The nature of this tension is the focus of this article. I shan't, though, be attempting a detailed exposition of the positions of the two camps. Such expositions are found respectively in Brian Levitt's *Embracing Non-Directivity* (2005) and Dave Mearns and Mick Cooper's *Working at Relational Depth in Counselling and Psychotherapy* (2005), along with recent articles in *Therapy Today* and in the *Journal of the World Association for Person-Centered and Experiential Psychotherapy and Counseling*--also see Sue Wilders' critical judgement on 'the theory of relational depth' in the February 2007 edition of *Person-Centred Quarterly.*

Rather than an elaborate discussion of the two positions, here I offer certain reflections on the whole debate set against the backdrop of what Brian Thorne and I consider 'the cutting edge' of person-centred theory (Thorne, 2002: 5): Carl Rogers' late prizing of the 'the transcendent, the indescribable', 'mystical, spiritual dimension' (Rogers, 1980: 130).

I should point up immediately that, like Rogers and unlike Thorne, my own prizing of such a dimension does not involve affiliation to any formal religion or spiritual tradition. Essentially my stance accords with Thorne's declaration that 'there is a growing recognition that religion and spirituality are not by definition connected and the very word "spiritual" is commonly used by those who wish to affirm their belief in an overarching reality which points to the inter-connectedness of the created order and to a perception of the human being as essentially mysterious and not ultimately definable in biological, psychological or sociological terms' (2002: 6)

Related to such a conception, mysticism, as I understand it, involves the apprehension of this orderly inter-connectedness, this oneness of all things, in a particularly intense fashion (Ellingham, 2006).

Mystical theses

This said, you may well be wondering what on earth the mystical, spiritual dimension has to do with non-directivity and relational depth.

My answer is, 'A great deal!' For, I would claim, when you explore in depth how non-directivity and relational depth are defined, you discover that there is a marked correspondence between these attempts to conceptualize the fundamental

character of the therapist-client relationship and two different modalities of mystical experience. My twin theses are thus:

1. That the definition of non-directivity corresponds to descriptions of mysticism where the individual self is said to lose itself in, be fused with, the greater reality.

2. That meeting at relational depth fits with accounts of mystics experiencing oneness with a greater reality while continuing to retain a sense of their separate identity.

Non-directivity, that is to say, corresponds with the notion of monistic *union*, while meeting at relational depth accords with mystical *communion.*

Self-loss in non-directivity

On Brodley's definition, 'client-centered non-directivity refers to an *attitude*--the non-directive *attitude* (Raskin, 1947)--*not* to specific behavior' (2005: 1). Here the 1947 paper of Nat Raskin that Brodley mentions is suitably entitled 'The non-directive attitude'. Unpublished until recently it forms the final chapter in Levitt's *Embracing Non-Directivity.* Rogers, though, read Raskin's paper when it was originally written and made some handwritten comments, comments which appear in Levitt's book. Rogers also includes a lengthy quotation from the same article in a section of *Client-Centered Therapy* (1951) headed 'The attitude and orientation of the counselor'. Although apparently only having access to Rogers' quotation and not to the whole of Raskin's paper, Bozarth (2000: 1) is happy to assert that 'the non-directive attitude was adeptly defined by a statement of Raskin (Rogers, 1951: 29)'.

Given these assertions by Bozarth and Brodley, it seems fair to say that advocacy of non-directivity equates with advocacy of Raskin's characterization of the non-directive attitude. It seems fair to say also that in this respect Bozarth and Brodley consider they are endorsing a description of the attitudinal stance of the client-centred therapist that Rogers himself endorsed.

Or does he? To me, if you examine closely what Rogers says in *Client-Centered Therapy* about Raskin's definition of the non-directive attitude, his endorsement is decidedly equivocal.

Written before Rogers' concise characterization of the 'core conditions' of empathic understanding, unconditional positive regard and congruence (Rogers, 1957), Raskin's portrayal of the 'non-directive attitude' can be seen as an embryonic attempt at defining these conditions, especially the condition of empathic understanding. In Raskin's words, the goal of practising '*the* nondirective attitude' is where

> counselor participation becomes an active experiencing with the client of the feelings to which he gives expression, the counselor makes a maximum effort to get under the skin of the person with whom he is communicating, he tries to get *within* and to live the attitudes expressed instead of observing them, to catch every nuance of their changing nature; in a word, to absorb himself

> completely in the attitudes of the other. And in struggling to do this, there is simply no room for any other type of counselor activity or attitude; if he is attempting to live the attitudes of the other, he cannot be diagnosing them, he cannot be thinking of making the process go faster. Because he is another, and not the client, the understanding is not spontaneous but must be acquired, and this through the most intense, continuous and active attention to the feeling of the other to the exclusion of any other type of attention. (Rogers, 1951: 29; Levitt, 2005: 331)

And what is Rogers' judgement on this 'attempt to describe what occurs in the most satisfactory therapeutic relationships'? (Rogers, 1951: 29).

'Even this description', Rogers concludes, 'may be rather easily misunderstood since the experiencing with the client, the living of his attitudes, is not in terms of emotional identification on the counselor's part, but rather an empathic identification, where the counselor is perceiving the hates and hopes and fears of the client through immersion in an empathic process, but without himself, as counselor, experiencing those hates and hopes and fears' (p. 29).

What I take this comment of Rogers to mean is that empathic understanding consists in an immersion in the other's world that simultaneously involves keeping hold of one's own experiential world and concept of self. Raskin's definition, Rogers seems to be suggesting, doesn't clearly portray this double aspect. It connotes, as Ed Kahn (1999) has described, a one-person, not a two-person psychology. Or, as the RDs would say, given that meeting at relational depth 'has many parallels with Buber's…notion of "dialogue" and the "I-Thou" attitude' (Mearns & Cooper, 2005: xii), Raskin's definition fails to adequately capture the 'dialogical' structure inherent in 'satisfactory therapeutic relationships'.

Rogers' differing definitions of empathy

But is the matter so clear cut as this? Is Raskin's characterization, and by implication that of the proponents of non-directivity, in fact at odds with Rogers' definition of empathic understanding? In other words, does or does not such understanding involve losing one's self in the other's experiential field? Maurice Friedman (1985), the facilitator of the famous dialogue between Buber and Rogers, points out that to the last Rogers presented alternating definitions of empathy, some di-polar and dialogical, some mono-polar.

As a leading exponent of Buber's dialogical philosophy Friedman emphasizes that for Buber an authentic I-Thou *meeting* of one person with the other is one in which a person 'does not lose his [sic.] center, his personal core, in an amorphous meeting with the other' and that 'if he sees through the eyes of the other and experiences the other's side, he does not cease to experience the relationship from his own side' (1985: 199). In other words, immersion in the world of the other is not akin to 'extremely monistic' mysticism where 'the mystic is absorbed in the Absolute' and where in order to achieve such fusion/union 'the mystic turns away from the world which is only an illusion, blocking the way to Reality' (Pfuetze, 1961: 137).

Buber had in fact been an advocate and exponent of such a form of mysticism until one day he realized that preoccupation with personal mystical experiences had led to him failing to sense the inner anguish of a young man that had come to him for help (1961: 31). Buber realized that the young man had in fact required of him a down-to-earth 'presence' not someone absorbed in their own personal ecstasies. As a result, Buber's attitude towards mystical experience radically changed. 'Since then', he later confesses, 'I have given up the "religious" which is nothing but the exception, extraction, exaltation, ecstasy; or it has given me up. I possess nothing but the everyday' (p. 31).

Although Buber turned his back on the mysticism of monism, the claim is that he actually progressed from monistic mysticism to becoming an exponent of a form of mysticism termed 'communion', one involving on the one hand a sense of oneness of self and Other and on the other a concomitant awareness of the separate identity of the two. Describing such a form of mysticism as 'a concrete mysticism of hallowing the everyday', Friedman elucidates how Buber developed such a way of being on the basis of his devotion to the teachings of the Jewish movement of Hassidism (2002: 337). In relation to interpersonal interactions, it is the mysticism of the I-Thou relation, of re-deploying the unitary knowing of another that we possess as infants, while continuing to retain our adult sense of our separate identity.

Abraham Maslow has some meaningful things to say about such mysticism and its relation to psychotherapy. Maslow in effect characterizes Buber's I-Thou dimension as 'the high plateau of Unitive Consciousness', a region that we get to glimpse in ecstatic 'peak experiences' (1971: 336)--Buber's monistic moments of 'religious enthusiasm'. Dwelling in this dimension, says Maslow, involves 'the ability to simultaneously perceive in the fact--the *is*--its particularity and its universality…both the sacred and the profane' (p. 112). 'Every good therapist', he contends, 'must be able to perceive both the sacred and the profane aspects of a person' (p. 112).

So far as Friedman is concerned, Rogers at times definitely defines empathic understanding in line with Buber's conception of the I-Thou relationship, a case in point being Rogers' description of his approach to therapy given during his dialogue with Buber. 'I feel that when I'm effective as a therapist', said Rogers to Buber, 'I am able to sense with a good deal of clarity the way his [the person's] experience seems to him, really viewing it from within him, and yet without losing my own sense of personhood or separateness in that' (Kirschenbaum & Henderson, 1990: 48). Rogers himself thought that such a conception had 'some sort of resemblance' to Buber's notion of the I-Thou relationship (p. 48), and Friedman agrees. Indeed, Friedman judges that not only is such a description 'very close to Buber's definition', but so too are Rogers' other descriptions of empathic understanding where the therapist is characterized as 'accurately seeing into the client's world *as if* it were his own without ever losing the *as if* quality' (1985: 199).

However, there are those occasions, contends Friedman, when Rogers presents definitions of empathy that imply the idea of 'losing one's own ground' (p. 200). This is the case, says Friedman, where Rogers speaks of 'entering into the private perceptual world of the other and becoming thoroughly at home in it' and

'temporarily living in the other's life' and where he says that 'to be with another in this way means that for the time being, you lay aside your self' (Rogers, 1980:142f).

Conclusions

On the one hand, then, insofar as Dave Mearns' notion of meeting at relational depth has 'many parallels' with Buber's dialogical philosophy, it can be said to be in harmony with that form of mysticism that Buber espoused, the concrete mysticism of Hassidic Judaism. Non-directivity by contrast accords with the monistic mysticism of union as found in Hinduism and Neo-Platonism. Debates go on as to whether monism or communion best describes the true nature of our relationship with ultimate reality. Perhaps we are dealing with postmodernism's equally valid alternative perspectives: that Hassidism's concrete mysticism is not inferior to but simply different from its Hindu counterpart.

Perhaps, in the same way, non-directivity and relational depth can also be viewed as equally valid alternatives. But then again, perhaps not: that one will eventually prove a superior characterization of effective psychotherapy than the other. Or perhaps it will be possible to somehow integrate the two.

In any case, the proof of the pudding will be in the eating. It will be a matter, that is, of which conceptual scheme turns out to be the most fruitful and nourishing in developing our understanding of the effective psychotherapy relationship; which best able to illuminate the nature of 'the mystical, spiritual dimension'. Now, though, is not the time to convert the person-centred 'tribes' of NDs and RDs into religious cults; to dogmatically declare, 'We have the truth and you don't!'. Now is the time for empathic understanding, unconditional positive regard, and congruence, allied to sound reasoning and objective research. As Carl said to Gloria (directively or nondirectively, depending upon your point of view), 'A pretty tall order!'.

References

Brodley, B. T. (2005) About the non-directive attitude. In Levitt, B. E. (ed.) *Embracing Non-Directivity.* Ross-on-Wye: PCCS Books.
Bozarth, J. (2000) Non-directiveness in client-centered therapy. Paper presented at the Eastern Psychological Association. Baltimore, Md.
Buber, M. (1961) *Between Man and Man.* London: Fontana.
Ellingham, I. H. (2006) Towards a Rogerian theory of mysticism. In Moore, J. & Purton, C. (eds.) *Spirituality and Counseling.* Ross-on-Wye: PCCS Books.
Friedman, M. (1985) *The Healing Dialogue in Psychotherapy.* New York: Jacob Aronson.
Friedman, M. (2002) *Martin Buber: The Life of Dialogue (4th edn.).* London: Routledge.
Kahn, E. (1999) A critique of nondirectivity in the person-centered approach. *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*, 39(4): 940-110.
Kirschenbaum, H. & Henderson, V. L. (1990) *Carl Rogers: Dialogues.* London: Constable.
Levitt, B. E. (2005) *Embracing Non-Directivity.* Ross-on-Wye: PCCS Books.
Maslow, A. (1971) *The Farther Reaches of Human Nature.* New York: Viking Press.

Mearns, D. & Cooper, M. (2005) *Working at Relational Depth in Counselling and Psychotherapy.* London: Sage.
Pfuetze, P. (1961) *Self, Society, Existence.* New York: Harper & Brothers.
Raskin, N. (2005) The nondirective attitude. In Levitt, B. E. (ed.) *Embracing Non-Directivity.* Ross-on-Wye: PCCS Books.
Rogers, C. R. (1957) The necessary and sufficient conditions of therapeutic personality change. *Journal of Consulting Psychology*, 1(2): 95-103.
Rogers, C. R. (1980) *A Way of Being.* London: Constable.
Schmid, P. (2005) Facilitative responsiveness. In Levitt, B. E. (ed.) *Embracing Non-Directivity.* Ross-on-Wye: PCCS Books.
Thorne, B. (2002) *The Mystical Power of Person-Centred Therapy.* London: Whurr.
Wilders, S. (2007) Relational depth and the person-centred approach. *Person-Centred Quarterly*, February.

February, 2007
Correspondence: *ivan.ellingham@icloud.com*