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One more step: from person-centered to eco-centered therapy

Manu Bazzano*

Department of Psychology, University of Roehampton, London, UK

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Drawing from various sources, this paper is an ardent appeal for a decentering of the notion of person in therapy and a shift towards ecology or “the earth household.” It focuses on the links between the paradoxical Daoist notion of *wei-wu-wei* (the action of non-action) and the person-centered ethical stance of non-directivity. It outlines the contours of a philosophy of nature with the aim of contributing to existing developments toward a contemporary person-centered therapy understood as an organismic psychology.

Keywords: organismic psychology; ecology; non-directivity; *wei-wu-wei*; buddhism

Ein weiterer Schritt: von Personzentrierter zu Öko-zentrierter Therapie

Zusammenfassung: Dieser Artikel, aus verschiedenen Quellen gespeist, ist ein feuriger Aufruf, die Idee der Person in der Therapie zu de-zentrieren und sich in Richtung Ökologie oder den ‘Haushalt der Erde’ aufzumachen. Er fokussiert auf die Verbindungen zwischen der paradoxen taoistischen Vorstellung des *wei-wu-wei* (das Handeln im Nicht-Handeln) und der personzentrierten ethischen Vorgabe der Nicht-Direktivität. Er skizziert die Umrisse einer Naturphilosophie mit dem Ziel, zu den bereits existierenden Entwicklungen einer modernen Personzentrierten Therapie einen Beitrag zu leisten, die sich als organismische Psychologie versteht.

Un paso mas: de la terapia centrada en la persona a la terapia centrada en la ecología

Abrevando de diversas fuentes este escrito es un llamado ardiente a descentrarnos de la noción de persona en la terapia y un cambio hacia un ecología de la tierra como hogar. Se enfoca en las conexiones entre la noción paradójica Taoista de *wel-wu-wei* (la acción de la no acción) y la postura ética centrado en la persona de no directividad. En este escrito delineamos los contornos de una filosofía de la naturaleza con el objetivo de contribuir a los desarrollos existentes hacia una terapia centrada en la persona contemporánea entendida como una psicología organismica.

Un pas de plus : d’une thérapie centrée sur la personne vers une thérapie eco-centrée

Résumé : S’inspirant de plusieurs sources, cet article est un appel passionné pour décentrer la notion de la personne dans la thérapie, et un mouvement vers l’écologie ou “la maison-terre”. Il met l’accent sur les liens entre la notion paradoxale Taôiste *wei-wu-wi* (l’action de non-action) et la posture éthique centrée sur la personne de non-directivité. Il décrit les contours d’une philosophie de la nature dans le but de

*Email: manubazzano@onetel.com

contribuer aux développements existants vers une thérapie contemporaine centrée sur la personne comprise comme une psychologie organismique.

Introduction

One of the characteristics of what Carl Rogers (1980) called the “persons of tomorrow” is their “closeness to, and a caring for, elemental nature” (Rogers, 1980, p. 351). In the same passage he goes on to write:

[The persons of tomorrow] are ecologically minded, and they get their pleasure from an alliance with the forces of nature, rather than in the conquest of nature. (Rogers, 1980)

The statement contains the aspiration to widen the range of awareness of a “fully-functioning person” (Rogers, 1961) so as to include the earth household. In this paper I will try to articulate Rogers’ point further, advocating the need for a shift in perspective drawing on disparate yet relevant sources such as Deep Ecology, Daoism, Zen,¹ and Phenomenology. What does “a shift in perspective” mean in this context? And why seek inspiration from the above sources? In writing about the persons of tomorrow’s ability for ecological responsiveness, Rogers’s emphasis is firmly on the “person.” In their different ways, the sources listed above encourage us instead to take one more step: *decentering* the focus from the person (or the self, two expressions which I will use as synonyms) which in turn allows us to register more fully the impact of what Rogers calls “forces of nature” on the human self. Reorienting the focus away from the limiting notion of the person and opening to the wider field of inquiry *inhabited* by the person is compatible with recent developments in person-centered therapy informed by Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology (Moreira, 2012; Bazzano, 2013) and Deleuzian empiricism (Bazzano, 2013; Rud, 2009).

There is a fundamental difference between “environment” and “ecology.” “Environment” is what *surrounds* us humans, with the term implying a vision of the world as the peripheral contour at the center of which resides his/her majesty the human being. “Ecology”, on the other hand, from the Greek *oikos*, meaning “household” (Snyder, 1990), emphasizing the place we *inhabit* with other beings. The latter evokes a bio-centric egalitarianism, with *intrinsic value* equally distributed throughout the biosphere (Langer, 1989). Nature becomes intrinsically valuable with humans as integral, contributing expression of nature’s ways (Drengson, 1989). Ecology thus understood requires a deeper questioning of ourselves, of human life and nature (Devall & Sessions, 1985) and provides philosophical foundations for an existing organismic psychology which I believe is an integral component of person-centered therapy.

The distinction between an anthropocentric concern for the environment and an ecological reframing of our place in the world is not necessarily clear cut. What motivates our avowed “love of nature”? There is a whole tradition of love of “nature” and “the environment” associated with what the Scottish poet Kathleen Jamie (2008) aptly calls the “lone, enraptured male” (p. 25): the white, middle-class educated man boldly going about “discovering” land and wilderness, annotating its harsh or picturesque contours with quotes from Wordsworth and Thoreau. The ecstatic individual who longs for the wilderness is often part of that very same privileged class which brought about the demise of the wilderness and the disappearance of land itself – of what used to be “the commons” – in the name of private property and enclosures.

This sensibility is broadly associated with “reform environmentalism” and is, needless to say, anthropocentric to the core: defending the environment for the advantage of

humans, still seen as the zenith of evolution. Reform environmentalism is translated into legal or procedural fixes and technological improvements. To speak merely of “environmental reform” (rather than committing to a more radical ontological shift or way of being) confirms the view that ultimately only humans have intrinsic value and that nature is a supply. It affirms and justifies domination over nature; it endorses consumerism, competition, and emphasis on high technologies; centralization and a hierarchical power structure – all consequences of a reductionist perspective which understands the world as self-existing Everything – even the human body (seen as external to “mind” and “spirit” in a Cartesian split) requires subjugation and control (Langer, 1989).

An eco-centered therapy would be *educational*. I understand ecology as a form of education, in the sense given by Levinas (1961) to the word, i.e. away from Platonic maieutics of drawing out a latent knowledge and focussed instead on fully registering the impact that something truly *other* has on the self. For something to be truly other, it needs to be outside the sphere of the self and challenge with its very presence the complacency and alleged solidity of the self. For Levinas (1961; 2003), who creatively utilizes the formal structure of Cartesian thought, i.e. the separation of self from the other, we learn by being affected, by registering the very real impact of experience (the prefix *ex* in experience is the very same as external, exterior, exit etc) rather than by bringing out a supposedly “innate” and “inner” wisdom. Similarly, a congruent self progresses through stages of increased awareness and personality change (Rogers, 1961) by acknowledging the impact of experience.

This crucial step might begin with vague yearnings for wilderness, blue distance and horizons (Solnit, 2006), with the desire, as a client put it, “to dissolve my low moods through long, long walks in open spaces.”

Outline of the paper

I will begin with an example from clinical work which prompted me to think about ecology and therapy in the first place crucially highlighting the *paradoxical otherness* of the natural world. Humans are of course part of “nature” yet we seem to have succeeded (especially in urban environments) in shielding ourselves from it. As a result, a person’s encounter with the natural world can be positively startling, feeling like stumbling upon something “other.” Befriending this otherness, stepping outside the solipsism of the human self thus becomes an important part of the therapeutic endeavor.

Daoism, Deep Ecology, and Phenomenology all provide us with useful pointers which can open person-centered practice and theory to new directions. Useful pointers are of course already present in person-centered theory yet these need to be articulated, amplified and contextualized further if the shift *from person to ecology* is to take place. To this purpose I have chosen to focus on two examples: the first is the bridging of the person-centered notion of *non-directivity* with the paradoxical Daoist notion of *wei-wei-wu-wei*, normally translated as “the action of non-action” (Loy, 1985, p. 73). I will also look at the connection between Deep Ecology’s notion of *autopoiesis* (self-production) in living organisms and the notion of person-centered therapy as an *organismic psychology*.

Converted on the doorstep

Five months into therapy, “Laura” described what she perceived as a change taking place in her life. “When I first came to see you, I felt ... mechanical ... a bit like a machine”. After a pause she added: “Now I feel more like a human being”. This moment signalled

an important shift in our work together. It was moving and significant for both of us. She had rediscovered intimacy with her partner, had understood deeply the importance of “non-doing”, of simply being, of playfulness and meditation, all things she had swept aside in her single-minded dedication to a stressful and demanding work in computer programming and designing.

Reflecting on it later on, I remembered the fascinating account of a case study recorded by Daseinsanalyst Medard Boss (1993) of a patient of his who during the course of therapy brought several dreams, the imagery of which progressively moved from mechanical to organic representations (first machines, appliances, tools, then plants, then animals) and gradually to the human domain. I registered the association in my mind without giving it much thought at the time. Then during a session a couple of weeks later, Laura said: “Last night I heard a bang on our front door”. Looking through the glass, she was astonished at what she saw: there was a fox standing next to her cub, the latter curled up on the door mat. “I had caught them unaware – she said – living their own life”. It was, she said, “a glimpse into another world.” There is “something special about a fox”, she added. “And that sound you hear at night sometimes, the sound foxes make ... it’s a *wild* cry ... untameable.”

Exploring this further, it felt to her as if this encounter represented somehow a missing link between what she had called “mechanical” and “human.” I now wonder whether Laura’s trajectory, from machine to human to the “natural world” more aptly reflects our contemporary condition of relating to others in an environment overruled by technology (oscillating between human connection and mechanized work) with accidental forays into a natural world increasingly perceived as “other.” This is of course only speculation on my part, yet I couldn’t help thinking of the difference with Boss’s case study, recorded in the 1970s, in which the passage from the mechanical to the human went through the “organic” world of plants and animals.

The client’s story brought back to mind my own first ever nocturnal encounter with a fox in the city at night, when, tired after a long day, I saw her appearing suddenly from behind a parked car, as I turned a corner onto a quiet street – both of us startled for a stretched-out moment, both staring at each other. Swift and alert, a fox lives untamed and untameable right in the midst of the city.

This is the nearest thing I know to an encounter with the numinous – not the *other-worldly* or divine occurrence implied by the term, but rather a *this-worldly* manifestation; belonging to the phenomenal world, yet extraordinary. Catching a glimpse of the wild, and at the same time being seen by a being that is altogether *other*. The gaze of an untamed being can be disorienting. Even a slight encounter with the wild (occasional and all-too-rare for a metropolis dweller) potentially calls into question my own way of existing. In this *disorientation* the seeds are found perhaps of a different perception, one potentially leading to ecological conversion or *reorientation*.

When still “young ... and full of trigger-itch,” the American conservationist Aldo Leopold (1987) was having lunch one bright day with some friends on a high rim rock. On seeing a pack of wolves crossing a shallow stream in the distance, they fired a few shots from their rifles. At the time he mistakenly thought that killing wolves was a good thing, as “fewer wolves meant more deer.” He managed to get close to the old wolf in time to see “a fierce green fire dying in her eyes.” In seeing that, he realized “that there was something new to me in those eyes, something known only to her and to the mountain” (Leopold, 1987, p. 129).

The green fire Leopold saw wither in the eyes of the dying wolf is the very life within all living things – the life a human being intuitively recognizes yet hesitates to affirm for fear perhaps of being deemed simplistic, “lyrical” or “unscientific” by the currently prevailing modalities of scientism and the Promethean new biology (Rose & Rose, 2013).

Daoism, *wei-wu-wei* and non-directivity

An outcome of the realization of the equality of all beings is the aspiration to *refrain from interfering* with the natural world, which for Daoism is the most natural way of life. Rogers (1973) wrote of how he came into contact with Daoism and with the teachings of Lao-Tzu in particular. At the beginning of a chapter titled “To be that self that one truly is” (Rogers, 1961) he wrote:

As the passage of time has enabled me to look more objectively at what I said, I feel satisfaction on two counts. I believe it expresses well the observations which for me have crystallized into two important themes: my confidence in the human organism, when it is functioning freely; and the existential quality of satisfying living, a theme presented by some of our most modern philosophers, which was however beautifully expressed more than twenty-five centuries ago by Lao-tzu, when he said, ‘The way to do is to be’. (Rogers, 1961, pp. 163–164)

Rogers (1973) also quoted Lao-tzu when referring to the work of therapists and of group leaders in particular, speaking of a “leader” as a facilitator: “A leader is best when people barely know that he exists” (p. 110). This way of life is ‘the action of non-action – *wei-wu-wei* in Daoism; *mui shizen* in Japanese Zen Buddhism (Ōkōchi, 1991). This paradoxical principle is not an endorsement of passivity and idle contemplation but emphasizes *letting go* and *letting grow* (Roszak, 1979) and is symptomatic of a profound trust in the ways of nature. It is an expression of the spontaneous way of being of all things, an immediate experience in which subject and object are not yet separated, rather than the contemplation of a solid, “objective” nature “out there.” As Nishida explains,

What we think of as the real plant, for example, is the living plant with all its shapes and colors, the actually perceived fact. It is only when we reflect on this, abstracting the moment of subjective activity from this concrete reality, that it appears as if it were purely objective nature. (cited in Ōkōchi, 1991, p. 209–10)

Applying the principle of *wei-wu-wei* to agriculture, renowned Buddhist writer, ecological activist and Dharma practitioner Gary Snyder (1990) points out that “all land, however wasted and exploited, if left to nature (*zi-ran*), will arrive at a point of balance between biological productivity and stability” (p. 90) and that a “perennial-plant-based agriculture holds real promise for sustaining the locally appropriate communities of the future. This is”, he concludes “acknowledging that the source of fertility is the ‘wild’” (Snyder, 1990).

The actualizing tendency can be understood as a metaphor for *befriending*, rather than distancing ourselves from “the wild” for these reasons: usually defined “from a human standpoint ... [i.e.] not tame, unruly, uncivilized, unrestrained” (Snyder, 1990, p. 9) “wild” can mean, if we turn it the other way, different things. In relation to animals, it means living within natural systems. A wild plant is “self-propagating, self-maintaining, flourishing in accord with innate qualities” (p. 10). A wild land is “pristine.” A “wild” society could be one resisting economic and political domination by global capitalism, and one whose economic system is in a sustainable relation to the ecosystem. In relation to individuals, “wild” can mean “un-intimidated, self-reliant, independent” (Snyder, 1990) and their behavior may be described as free, spontaneous, and unconditioned (Snyder, 1990). All of the above accounts resemble what the Chinese call the *Dao*, the way of Great Nature, often described as self-organizing, orderly, unmediated, manifesting freely, self-authenticating. They also resemble Rogers’s notion of the individual’s alignment with the organism and with its tendency to actualize. As “one of the “foundation blocks of the

person-centered approach” (Rogers, 1979, p. 98), the actualizing tendency has been defined as “the non-conscious and inherent property of living organisms to become whatever they are capable of becoming” (Merry, 2003, p. 83). An organic and natural metaphor, it “stands against the earlier inorganic or mechanical metaphors of Freud and Skinner” (Tudor & Worrall, 2006, p. 87).

In the sphere of therapy, the equivalent of *wei-wu-wei* is the ethical and attitudinal stance of non-directivity (Bohart, 1998), which is also (alongside the human organism’s tendency to actualize and the co-creation of facilitative conditions), one of the three “primary principles of person-centered therapy” (Tudor & Worrall, 2006), a stance necessary for a therapist “in order to be facilitative of another” (p. 253). Not unlike *wei-wu-wei*, non-directivity is based on a profound trust in the tendency of the organism to actualize, given certain conditions, as well as on a profound respect for human beings’ autonomy and inherent wisdom.

The contribution of deep ecology

Several authors such as Naess (1986; 1989), Devall (1980; 1988), Sessions (1987); Zimmerman (1987); and Snyder (1990) explored the principles and practices of “deep ecology” and of an eco-philosophy which, often drawing from Daoism and Buddhism, sees the urgent response to the ecological crisis as an opportunity for a radical reorientation.

As an ecological movement, Deep Ecology is rooted in Eco-philosophy, which provides us with a different way of seeing the world: from the beginning it emphasized the need for a radical shift beyond a human-centered approach to nature. The first significant prelude to an eco-philosophy came with the groundbreaking work of Rachel Carson (1962), who argued for a radical rethinking of our attitudes toward the non-human world, denouncing the conceit implicit in the notion of humanity’s “control of nature,” as if nature existed for our convenience, a perspective which is at the foundation of western science, initiated by Francis Bacon’s vision of nature as economic good to be exploited by humans (Hossay, 2006). White (1973) suggested that the original blame for ecological problems was attributable to Christianity for its condescending legitimization of human-kind’s transcendence and “rightful mastery” over nature, seen as the pinnacle of a generalized anthropocentric (human-centered) attitude: “We shall continue to have a worsening ecologic crisis – he wrote – until we reject the Christian axiom that nature has no reason for existence save to serve man” (White, 1973, p. 25). In his view “we must rethink and re-feel our destiny” (p. 27). This rethinking, advocated by the Deep Ecology movement would imply an appreciation of the *equality of all living beings*. This seemingly all-encompassing claim essentially entails a decentering of the primacy of humans within the earth household, a perspective which comes pretty close to the non-hierarchical forms of religiosity found in Francis of Assisi, a rousing exemplar, a “patron saint for ecologists” (p. 30), inspiring us to go beyond the Cartesian dualism between humans and nature, mind and matter at the root of our misguided attitude toward the world.

“Contingently related” and the romance of the wilderness

The notion of “interdependence” is at the very centre of much ecological thinking. Yet its meaning, derived from Buddhism, is often misinterpreted.

Associating ecological awareness to the notion of interdependence, Nick Totton (2011) acknowledges as sources systems theory (which conceives the world as a set of adaptive and self-organizing systems) and Buddhism (in particular the notion of

‘interdependence’). The latter source is problematic for it reflects a *particular* reading of Buddhist texts (mainly via Joanna Macy, whom Totton quotes) filtered through a Romantic notion of the relationships between humans and “nature.” It might be useful to clarify my assumptions on the outset and also state why I consider the issue relevant to person-centered theory and practice. As I hope to explain, “interdependence” is, in spite of its popularity, an unconvincing rendering of “dependent origination.” My own understanding is that there are two sides to “interdependence,” one highlighting the *connection* between all living things, the other stressing the *insubstantial* nature of the self. By being connected to and even dependent on all living things I cannot claim to be *truly* existing: where does this thing call “I” stop, where does the world begin? On the one hand, “interdependence” appears to shore up the now predominant predilection for the dialogical and the relational in psychology. Yet the very same notion also introduces *groundlessness* (what is known in Buddhism as *sūnyatā*, commonly translated as “emptiness”) a place where, paradoxically, existential aloneness and the absolute otherness of the world manifest in all their uncertainty, beauty and inscrutability: “interdependence” can indeed be seen as “an overture to the symphony of groundlessness” (Bazzano, 2009, p. 13), undermining the alleged solidity of the self, rather than a confirmation of a more romantic and rather cosy notion of interconnectedness.

The notion of *paṭicca samuppāda* or “dependent origination” is mentioned by Nāgārjuna (150–250 AD). He is widely recognized as the most important Buddhist sage and philosopher after the Buddha, whose teachings, amalgamated with Chinese Daoism, gave rise to the *Ch’an* tradition (known as *Zen* in Japanese). For Nāgārjuna “dependent origination” means that every phenomenon in existence is “empty”, i.e. contingent and *not* existing by itself, what, in Stephen Batchelor’s (2000) translation of verse 24:18 of Nāgārjuna’s major work, is rendered as *contingently related*: “Whatever is contingently related, that is explained as emptiness. That is contingently configured; it is the central path” (in Batchelor, 2000).

The emphasis is on all phenomena, including the self, being *devoid of inherent substance* (*svabhāva*), i.e. on all phenomena being *empty*. What is important to Nāgārjuna is that we stop the *reification* (turning living processes into “things”) of phenomena. As westerners, we have only begun to grapple with this radical Buddhist notion which still runs counter in many ways to the axioms of western thought and is therefore easy to misinterpret. With McMahan (2008) I believe that one of the main problems has to do with the fact that Buddhism in the West has been transmitted via the German and the English Romantics, via the American Transcendentalists and Rousseau. The above influences contributed to the currently predominant translation of dependent origination as “inter-connectedness,” which in turn translated “nature” and our relationship with it as the romance of the wilderness (McMahan, 2008), even into naive notions of Buddhist Romanticism (Thanissaro, 2002). Crucially, the outcome of Buddhist (and ecological) Romanticism is not a radical deconstruction of the self, a seeing-through its ephemeral nature but instead an identification of the self with a greater (capitalized) Self, in this case an *ecological* Self. I disagree with this interpretation, shared by Buddhist teachers such as Joan Halifax and Joanna Macy (McMahan, 2008) and by Deep Ecology’s main theorist, Arne Naess (1986; 1989) who, significantly influenced by Hinduism, writes of “Self-realization.” Why is this relevant here? Essentially for two reasons: Firstly, given that regaining an expanded, ecological (and capitalized) “Self” would apparently reconnect us to a primordial unity before our fall from grace, “inter-dependence” is understood as an ethic “in combination with the modern discourses of Romanticism, Transcendentalism, and systems theory” (McMahan, 2008, p. 178). In the age of the web, the matrix, and the network, the idea of inter-dependence is very appealing. This is

all very well, but something gets lost in the process, namely the recognition – yet the radical, existential nature of the teachings of the Buddha, summoned by ecologists to endorse their theories, are neglected. I will mention only two of these: (1) *Entanglement* – interconnectedness also means loss of existential solitude and freedom, dissolution of an individuated and internal locus of evaluation; (2) *Impermanence* – genuine ecological awareness awakes us (beyond “eating berries in the sunlight”) to the transience of all things – a profound and tragic realization, starkly rendered by Gary Snyder (1990) as “the sight of our beloved in the underworld, dripping with maggots” (p. 110).

Autopoiesis and organismic psychology

As an essentially *organismic* psychology (Tudor & Worrall, 2006), person-centered therapy presents interesting similarities with some key notions of contemporary ecology and with *autopoietic ethics* in particular. The main exponents of the latter are Chilean biologists Maturana and Varela (1988), for whom living systems are characterized by *autopoiesis* (i.e. self-production, from the Greek *autos*, “self” and *poiein*, to produce). All living systems, according to this perspective, constantly endeavour to create and maintain their own organization and structure. Living systems are “continuously engaged in the recursive (or circular) process of regenerating ... themselves” (Fox, 1995, pp. 170–71): unlike a mechanistic device, a living system is not merely self-organizing, but constantly *renewing* itself. Whereas a mechanical apparatus is built in order to “produce a specific product or to carry out a specific task intended by its designer” (Capra, 1982, pp. 271), an organism is mainly busy with renewing itself: “cells are breaking down and building up structures, tissues and organs are replacing their cells in continual cycles” (Capra, 1982).

Whereas a machine *functions*, an organism *lives*. The latter does more than merely renewing itself: it is a “center of goal-oriented activity” (Taylor, 1986, p. 119); the organism’s basic tendency is “to actualize, maintain, and enhance [itself]” (Rogers, 1951, p. 487), as well as to self-regulate (Goldstein, 1995; Tudor & Worrall, 2006).

Self-renewal, however, remains crucial, for it differentiates an organism from a mechanical device and sets the tone for a *life-based ethics*: being constantly busy with self-renewal means that an organism matters to itself, and that what we do to it also matters.

The organism is “at the heart of the person-centred approach” and of the “theory and practice of person-centred therapy” (Tudor & Worrall, 2006, p. 45); it is neither a metaphor, nor a theoretical construct but “a real, given entity” providing “a unified concept of human motivation” (Tudor & Worrall, 2006).

Tudor and Worrall (2006) paved the way to a philosophy of nature (crucial in my opinion to establishing more solid foundations to ecological thinking) which is both compatible with and applicable to person-centered therapy. They sketched a philosophy of organism inspired by the work of A. N. Whitehead, which can provide “ground for organismic psychology and for the theory and practice of person-centred therapy” (p. 49). For Whitehead, “the process is itself the actuality” (1978, in Tudor & Worrall, 2006, p. 50), a perspective at variance with more established philosophical beliefs, as Whitehead himself makes clear: “The philosophy of organism is the inversion of Kant’s philosophy ... For Kant, the world emerges from the subject; for the philosophy of the organism, the subject emerges from the world” (Whitehead, 1978, p. 88).

Whitehead’s project is wholly consistent with the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty (1963; 1968; 1970; 2003) one of whose main concerns was the development of a radically different ontology entailing an alteration in our relations with the non-human world. For Merleau-Ponty, “an ontology which leaves nature in silence shuts itself in the incorporeal

and for this very reason gives a fantastic image of man, spirit and history” (1970, p. 62). A fierce critic of both spiritualist immaterialism as well as scientific mechanicism, Merleau-Ponty recognized that Whitehead’s metaphysics was not prisoner to the Cartesian template and can provide useful ideas in the creation of a new ontology (Toscano, 2006). Treading this “middle ground” between the sirens of scientism and spiritualism, both Whitehead’s philosophy of process and Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology provide us with useful pointers for the formulation of a philosophy of nature useful in the development of contemporary person-centered therapy.

Loyalty to the earth: the eighth characteristic of a fully-living person?

As an organismic psychology, person-centered therapy naturally refrains from using those mechanistic viewpoints which, steeped as they are in mainstream western science, are partly to blame for the current ecological crisis. Could the expression *fully-living* register the organismic and ecological embeddedness of humans more accurately than the expression *fully-functioning* person? (Rogers, 1961). I would like to imagine an eighth characteristic of a fully-living person, in addition to the seven characteristics of a fully-functioning person listed by Rogers (1961): a greater awareness of the “earth-household” and a profound sense of interconnectedness with other beings within it. It would entail a primary form of loyalty to the Earth (Nietzsche, 1986) to which we inextricably belong. Entertaining the notion of an eighth characteristic is a way to spell out what Rogers (1980) already pointed out in relation to the “persons of tomorrow”. The implications are wide and they can only be sketched:

- (1) Firstly, this entails a clear aspiration to end our war with nature, i.e. building the premises for an articulate critique of the idea of “cultivation” at the heart of our dominant educational system in the West, designed as “movement away from natural process ... [as] a sort of war against nature – placing the human over the animal” (Snyder, 1990, p. 91).
- (2) Secondly, it puts into question mainstream spirituality, doubting both the overriding image of a centralized divinity sharply distinguished, as a “creator,” from the “creature,” as well as a hierarchical spirituality which claims a “special evolutionary spiritual destiny for humanity under the name of higher consciousness” (Snyder, 1990).
- (3) Thirdly, loyalty to the Earth also implies the ability to embrace the dark side of nature, what we often interpret as absurd, brutal, and parasitic. This is a crucial point in relation to person-centered therapy, which is arguably based on a philosophy which at times chooses to overlook the dark side of nature.

Conclusion

Being “green” or championing “green issues” has become a decorative badge for corporate culture and so-called green capitalism (H. Rogers, 2013), with conservationism being central to economic exploitation, profitability and the maintenance of the political status quo. Environmentalism itself originates with colonial expansion (Grove, 1995), as conservation schemes were adopted by colonial governments and swiftly mutated into ways of dispossessing or exerting control over native populations (Grove, 1995). Parallels may be drawn between the opportunistic and ultimately shallow approach of environmentalism and a form of therapy, arguably predominant today, bent at polishing the surface of the

ego-self, providing efficient ways of patching up an ever-elusive solidity and identity. Similarities might equally be found between a deep ecology and an organismic psychology, both motivated by an aspiration to widen the field of inquiry beyond both anthropocentrism and a self-serving ethos.

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Note

1. Zen (Ch'an) is the creative amalgamation of Daoism and Buddhism, therefore, for the sake of simplicity references to Daoism and Zen are not discussed separately.

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