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Manu Bazzano <sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup> University of Roehampton , London , UK

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## On becoming no one: Phenomenological and empiricist contributions to the person-centered approach

Manu Bazzano\*

University of Roehampton, London, UK

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The paper explores the meaning of *becoming* in relation to person-centered therapy. Two notions from contemporary perspectives within the philosophy of becoming are investigated: the practice of *epoché* as outlined by Merleau-Ponty, and the notion of *rhizome* articulated by Deleuze. Links are made to person-centered theory and practice, and how the latter can benefit from further grounding in empiricism and phenomenology.

**Keywords:** Becoming; epoché; phenomenology; Merleau-Ponty; Deleuze; empiricism

### Niemand werden: Phänomenologische und empirische Beiträge zum Personzentrierten Ansatz

**Zusammenfassung:** Der Artikel untersucht die Bedeutung des Werdens in Bezug auf die Personzentrierte Therapie. Zwei Auffassungen heutiger Sichtweisen in der Philosophie des Werdens werden unter die Lupe genommen: die Praxis der „epoché“, wie sie Merleau-Ponty skizziert, und die Idee der „rhizome“, wie sie Deleuze formuliert. Verbindungen zur Personzentrierten Theorie werden aufgezeigt und wie letztere davon profitieren kann, wenn sie noch mehr in Empirie und Phänomenologie verankert wird.

### Convirtiéndose en nadie: contribuciones fenomenológicas y empíricas al enfoque centrado en la persona

**Abstract:** Este escrito explora el significado de ser en relación con la terapia centrada en la persona. Investiga dos nociones de perspectivas contemporáneas dentro de la filosofía de transformarse: la práctica de la epoché desarrollada por Merleau-Ponty y la noción de rizoma articulado por Deleuze. Se hacen conexiones con la teoría y práctica centrada en la persona, y cómo ésta puede beneficiarse con más base en el empirismo y la fenomenología.

### Devenir “personnex”

**Résumé :** Cet article explore le sens de ‘devenir’, en lien avec la thérapie centre sur la personne. Deux notions issues des perspectives contemporains de la philosophie de devenir sont analysées : la pratique d’épochè comme esquissée par Merleau-Ponty, et la notion de rhizome explicitée par Deleuze. Il fait des liens avec la théorie et la pratique centrées sur la personne, et la manière dont celles-ci peuvent être enrichies en se fondant sur l’empirisme et la phénoménologie.

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\*Email: manubazzano@onetel.com

## にもならない：パーソンセンタード・アプローチへの現象学と経験主義の貢献

要旨：本稿では、パーソンセンタード・セラピーに関連する「なっていく (becoming)」の意味を探ります。なることの哲学において、現代的視点からの2つの概念が検討されています。それら2つは、メルロ=ポンティによる概説されるエポケー (epoché) の実践と、ドゥルーズによって明瞭に表現される根茎の概念です。パーソンセンタード・セラピーとその実践と、経験主義と現象学の更なる基礎から利益を得ることができるように、関連付けます。

### Becoming what you are

Ubiquitous in his writings, often interchangeable with “personality” and “self,” the term “person” was never defined by Rogers. He used the word generally, so as to designate each individual (Tudor & Worrall, 2006). In *Becoming a Person* (Rogers, 1961), he accentuated “person” *negatively*, i.e. useful in contrasting the psychoanalytic and behaviorist objectification of human beings. Not having inherited an explicit definition of “person” leaves the ground wide open to exploration – not only of what constitutes a person but also – the main focus of this paper – what is meant by *becoming*. “To become” – the *Oxford Dictionary* tells us – is “to begin to be, to develop into” (Oxford Dictionary, 2001, p. 120).

Rephrasing the ancient Greek poet Pindar’s dictum *genoi hoios essi*, “Become who you have learnt to be,” Nietzsche (2009) subtitled his final work “how to become what you are”. Soon enough the Nietzschean reader learns that in order to become what one is, one mustn’t have the faintest idea of what one is. As Deleuze was to reiterate nearly a century later: “The question ‘*What* are you becoming?’ is particularly stupid” (Deleuze, 1983, p. 2).

Rogers provided, through various revisions, the most articulate exploration of the actualizing tendency (Rogers, 1951, 1959, 1979, 1980), which in turn is an application of the notion of becoming in the field of psychology. In erecting this mainstay of person-centered therapy, Rogers was well aware of parallel developments: from Gestalt to phenomenology, from organismic theory (Goldstein, 1995) to the work of the physicist Prigogine (1982), to name but a few, these many influences impacted his formulation. The aim here is to find further contemporary associations within the philosophy of becoming which might prove useful to the development of contemporary person-centered thinking and might provide the practitioner with a set of fruitful and stimulating insights. Two key notions will be explored within two influential philosophical perspectives, both belonging to an ontology of becoming: the notion of *epoché* in Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology (Merleau-Ponty, 1963, 1964a, 1964b, 1968, 2002) and that of *rhizome* in Deleuze’s radical empiricism (Deleuze, 1983, 1987, 1991, 1994).

### The counter-tradition

I understand person-centered therapy as an array of phenomenological/empirical methodologies inscribed within an ontology of *becoming*. The expression “ontology of becoming” depicts a philosophical framework devoid of metaphysics, i.e. without an organizing principle placed *outside* the process of living-and-dying. Also known as *counter-tradition* (Madison, 1981), the philosophy of becoming had its first exponent in Heraclitus (Bazzano, 2006; Kahn, 1979), the ancient Greek philosopher famous for his aphorism commonly translated as “you can’t step twice into the same river.”

Uniquely for its time, Heraclitus did not regard the world of phenomena as mere appearance or illusion; he did not imagine a better reality – more real, more permanent or more authentic. He unreservedly affirmed what is (or rather what unceasingly *becomes*). Echoes of this life-affirming stance can be traced through the centuries in Montaigne, Nietzsche and later on in phenomenology and radical empiricism.

The history of western thought is constituted by two tendencies: the “dominant current of rationalism and ... a counter-current which attempts to bring [us] back to a more just appreciation of [our] powers and limits” (Madison, 1981, p. 293).

Mainstream philosophy – the “tradition” – conceived two juxtaposed worlds: *being* and *becoming*. “Being” indicates permanence, unity, and monism, whereas “becoming” signals impermanence, multiplicity, and otherness. While the former is the compass for the formulation of systematic designations, the latter is by definition indefinable. The first gives in to the compulsion of system-building; the second maintains a fundamental *ambiguity* (Merleau-Ponty, 1963) in the face of an unfathomable and inexhaustible world.

*Becoming* stands for change, flux, the world of *phenomena* (i.e. what appears to perception). It stands for innocence, as in Nietzsche’s celebrated *innocence of becoming* (Bazzano, 2006), captivatingly construed by person-centered writer Claudio Rud as not-knowing (2009).

*Being* is, on the other hand, variously read as the world of Platonic Ideas, archetypes, of logico-mathematical, transcendental and linguistic structures both superseding and providing substance (Aquinas, 1948) or essence (Husserl, 1977) to the imperfect world of becoming, seen here as “mere” (superficial, imperfect, ephemeral) appearance. The very word “sub-stance” implies, for the Scholastic tradition which first formulated it, the existence of something else *underneath* phenomena.

This is not as remote from the world of therapy as it might seem at first. A therapeutic methodology motivated by the desire to unveil a pre-existing substance or essence (whether the self of the client or a particular constellation/dilemma/situation the client struggles with) will be altogether different from a more exacting phenomenological/empirical methodology, i.e. observant of what Virginia Moreira, echoing Merleau-Ponty (2010), aptly calls “emergent phenomenon” (p. 52). As argued by Moreira (2012), it is precisely by “keeping the person in the center that the psychotherapeutic process stagnates.”

It might be useful here to observe how Merleau-Ponty was influenced by the British philosopher Whitehead’s “process philosophy” (Whitehead, 1978), which also provided inspiration to Tudor & Worrall’s (2006) formulation of person-centered therapy as an organismic psychology. In spite of their diverse allegiances (the former steeped in logico-mathematical thought, the latter belonging to the phenomenological tradition), the idea of “process” turns out to be highly compatible with an “immanentist” notion of becoming.

The notion of the self as process is the basis of both existential and Gestalt psychotherapy (Crocker, 2009; Kennedy, 2005), and the interesting question here would be whether a notion of self as a process steeped in becoming might be at odds with Roger’s notion of a fully functioning *person*, unless of course we were to apprehend the latter as *agency* without “solid,” inherent, or, as it were, self-referential *identity* (Rud, 2009).

Attention to the emergent phenomenon and a keen attunement to a philosophy of becoming has implications for practice. The most immediate is a grounding of therapy in the difficult discipline of *epoché* – the suspension of any a priori notion – whether spiritual, scientific or psychological – that might get in the way of what the unfolding phenomena show. What this suspension signifies is by no means obvious, for, as we shall see, the way we understand epoché determines the way we practice.

## Epoché

The practice of *epoché* (commonly known as “bracketing”) is the original contribution of the counter-tradition (Madison, 1981). Merleau-Ponty rescued it from the Cartesian impasse into which the writings of the early Husserl (1977) had diverted it. He restored *epoché* to its origins, to the radical scepticism of the ancient Greek philosopher Pyrrho and the Pyrrhonian school of Sextus Empiricus. In its original connotation *epoché* is a powerful antidote to dogmatism, the latter defined by Sextus Empiricus as the positing of unverifiable metaphysical entities and transcendental realities in order to “explain” our lived experience (Madison, 1981). This is a radical move from the transcendent to the immanent, from being to becoming. For Sextus, as for Merleau-Ponty, the philosopher/researcher suspends her belief in the non-evident objects of inquiry. This is not mere “doubt,” for doubt still belongs to the “natural attitude” which takes for granted the existence of a solid, material world “out there,” i.e. outside the mind of the observer.

The goal of *epoché* is “to free us from the Promethean desire to master the uncertainties of life” (Madison, 1981, p. 301) by exposing the illusion of ever finding an imaginary unspoiled vantage point, the solid foundation for Pascal’s tower reaching to the Infinite. The thoroughly radical aim of *epoché* is “to demonstrate the impossibility of a science of reality” (Madison, 1981, pp. 301–302). The bizarre thing is that Husserl in his early writings bended *epoché* in order to achieve the very opposite: the goal of Descartes and of all metaphysicians and rationalists, the construction of a science of reality. Merleau-Ponty (1961) restored *epoché* to its original meaning thus opening phenomenological enquiry to the unmotivated upsurge of the world.

Advocating an ontology of becoming or a “no two world ontology” (Lawlor, 1998, p. 15), as the counter-tradition has consistently done, means discarding “being” as an abstraction: *there is nothing underneath or beyond the world of phenomena*. In stating this, we dispose of an unnecessary idea which has kept mainstream western culture stuck for millennia. Whether construed as Christian *soul*, Cartesian *cogito*, or Husserlian *transcendental ego*; whether conceptualized as spiritual *essence* or reified Freudian *unconscious*, dominant western perspectives veered towards a denigration of this world of flux, impermanence and uncertainty in the name of an allegedly more solid, permanent, even *eternal* substance. This perspective downgrades the very world we inhabit in favour of a construct.

Rogers was inspired by phenomenology. Although his perspective was not consistently phenomenological – for several other influences played a part– his methodology was akin to and compatible with it. The suspension of theories, preconceptions and therapeutic agenda invoked by the counter-tradition practice of *epoché* are vital to the cultivation of what he called “presence” (Rogers, 1980) and to the offering of the therapeutic conditions (Rogers, 1956). His conception of the human being is organismic (Rogers, 1961, 1963, 1979, 1980), i.e. emphasizing a “basic tendency and striving – to actualize, maintain, and enhance the experiencing organism” (Rogers, 1951, p. 487). As he wrote elsewhere: “In short, organisms are always seeking, always initiating, always ‘up to something’” (Rogers, 1961, p. 3).

## Radical empiricism

Alongside the antinomy being/becoming, we also find a perpetual divergence in western thought between *rationalism* and *empiricism*. The former builds on ideas and concepts, believing in a pre-existing rational or spiritual frame into which unfolding reality would

fit. The latter relies on data, verification, fallibility; it starts from perception, the senses and the phenomenal world. Empiricists are by definition *pluralists* and *experimenters*: for Deleuze “they never interpret, they have no principles” (p. 55). In actual fact, empiricism does not have a first principle at all (Sedgwick, 2001), for it states the primacy of our engagement with the world, a dimension which is, for Merleau-Ponty (2002), pre-reflexive, pre-cognitive, even pre-rational. In turn *radical* empiricism, with its allegiance to immanence (Bazzano, 2012; Deleuze, 1994, 1991), presents us with an *experiential* outlook within the ontology of becoming. As such, it differs from what practitioners schooled in the Anglo-American tradition normally call “empiricism.” Radical empiricism describes an approach rooted in experiential/phenomenological investigation, whereas Anglo-American empiricism, as both Husserl (1970) and Merleau-Ponty (1963) made clear, shares all the unchecked conjectures and beliefs in a so-called “natural” or “objective” world “out there.” For Merleau-Ponty, Anglo-American empiricism (as well as the logical positivism of the “Vienna Circle”), takes for granted the fact that the self is one object among others in the world, ensnared in a causal relation with other objects in ways which can be explained by the laws of natural science. Merleau-Ponty (1963, xvi; 23) rejects this view for it fails to account for the connectedness of human experience. Of course Deleuze’s empiricism owes a great deal to classical empiricism, renewing and radicalizing the central tenet of unbiased observation.

To Deleuze (1983; 1987) we owe the creation of an effectual link between the best phenomenological tradition of the later Husserl and Merleau-Ponty, and the empiricist and analytical philosophy of science (DeLanda, 2002). This link is decisive for the advancement of a contemporary person-centered perspective able to claim relevance and critical currency in our contemporary world, for it emphasizes two fundamental notions: *becoming* and *multiplicity*. Having drafted the notion of becoming above, I will now turn to briefly examine the notion of multiplicity.

### Multiplicity

Rogers’ observations are grounded in empirical observation, in the ongoing interaction with the client and as such tentative, descriptive, non-dogmatic and non-prescriptive. His approach is not consistently empirical, for it relies on other influences, yet the aspiration to remain true to experience is constant in his approach.

For Rogers (1961, p. 122) the self is a *process*, a “flowing river of change”, inextricably intertwined to the organism, a notion reflected in Merleau-Ponty’s (2002) *body-subject*, and in Deleuze’s (1987) *multiplicity*, valid alternatives to metaphysical notions of *substance*, *essence* and *identity* which, inextricably fastened to the western idea of the self, keep psychotherapy stuck, stopping it “from working with the emergent phenomenon” (Moreira, 2012, p. 52) and prevent it from “the kind of experience that makes each psychotherapeutic encounter into an unrepeatable event” (Rud, 2009, p. 35). An empirical/phenomenological outlook will regard the self as *fluid* as well as *multiple*, i.e. dynamic as well as made up of a multiplicity of lines of becoming, in the same way as the skin is a collection of pores (Deleuze, 1987).

Person-centered theory appreciated the multiplicity of the self since its early days through the therapeutic stance of unconditional positive regard (Rogers, 1961), the essential characteristic of which is the recognition of the underlying organismic unity encompassing *all* aspects of the psyche. This remains a profoundly radical stance, even more so at a time when mainstream cultural and political trends veer towards a regimentation of the psyche.

Along the lines of unconditional positive regard, the more recent notion of “configurations of self” is a bold attempt to address the psyche’s inherent plurality. Its initiators formulated it as a “hypothetical construct denoting a coherent pattern of feelings, thoughts and preferred behavioural responses symbolized or pre-symbolized by the person as reflective of a dimension of existence within the Self” (Mearns & Thorne, 2000, p. 102).

Theirs is an attractive notion, undoubtedly helpful in facilitating an open review of the client’s “aspects and inclinations – when all the members of the intrapsychic family can be heard and valued” (Mearns & Thorne, 2000, p. 115). The notion is also problematic because it moves away from the *eco-logical* metaphor of the organism, central to person-centred therapy, towards an *ego-logical* view of the psyche as made up of parts within a mechanism, a core idea in psychodynamic (Hillman, 1976) rather than phenomenological and empiricist thought. Even more problematic is the fact that psychodynamic theory itself rests entirely on the Cartesian notion of a *Cogito* (a thinking subject as “mind,” separate from the body or hazily associated with it), a view incompatible with the organismic perspective which is at the heart of person-centered philosophy (Tudor, 2010; Tudor & Worrall, 2006).

For this very reason, we need to detach the valid notion of psyche’s multiplicity from the mechanistic matrix of Freudian psychoanalysis and inscribe it within a phenomenological/empiricist template. To this aim I find Deleuze’s (1987) notion of *rhizome* very useful.

### Rhizome

A term used in botany, “rhizome”, stands for a horizontal, frequently underground stem sending out roots and shoots from its nodes. It resists the vertical organizational structure of the root-tree system. Unlike the vertical and linear connections (the tree and its roots in the ground) for Deleuze and Guattari (2004), a rhizome is *ground-less*, multiple and mutualist – the latter attribute taken from interaction between species, as in the example of the orchid and the wasp (Deleuze & Guattari, 2004): “a movable, transitory interaction impossible to explain by the term identity” (Rud, 2009, p. 36).

The rhizome “does not germinate in the ground and develop a root structure like a tree ... [it] has no foundations and is not fixed to the spot” (Sedgwick, 2001, p. 137). Instead, it throws out tubers. These move over surfaces putting down *temporary* roots, and then they carry on moving. “Imagine a number of rhizomes in wood, blackberries for example, throwing out tubers, moving through the wood, entwining with one another. Now remove the wood so you just have the tubers. The points of intersection are the consequence of this process of growth, and this process is what Deleuze calls ‘becoming’. Becoming therefore constitutes a process of movement” (Sedgwick, 2001, p. 137). Such movement, Deleuze (1987, p. 1) writes, cannot be grasped conceptually, it “always happens behind the thinker’s back, or is the moment when he blinks.”

As embodied living beings, we are a rhizome and form a rhizome with the world. “The rhizome does not provide an account of our representations of states of affairs ... but an analysis of the congruence of different bodies and forces interacting in a reciprocal fashion” (Sedgwick, 2001, p. 137). For Deleuze, rhizomes produce “assemblages,” aggregates of diverse forces related to one another. An assemblage is “a multiplicity ... made up of many heterogeneous terms” (Deleuze, 1987, p. 69). The image of the rhizome is a good example of a non-mechanistic, non-deterministic understanding of biology, indirectly evoking Rogers’ (1980) well-known analogy of the potato sprouts in his boyhood cellar.

Rather than constructing *vertical* connections – of depth, of an unconscious, of an underlying structure and hidden reality which is supposedly revealed, Deleuze’s radical empiricism draws *horizontal* links. He praises the Scottish empiricist Hume precisely because he is a philosopher of *and* rather than *is*, because he always makes links and connections, bringing into play multiplicity instead of unity (Sedgwick, 2001). Empiricism deals not with “things” but “states of things,” i.e. neither unities nor totalities but multiplicities. Hence an empirical therapeutic approach deals with the dynamic process of becoming rather than the static notion of “person.”

In emphasizing multiplicity, the notion of the rhizome replaces the traditional notion of essence. In therapy this would mean replacing the conventional notion of identity with that of “emergent phenomenon” (Moreira, 2012, p. 52). The account of reality is no longer *essentialist* but *morphogenetic*, as well as historical. While the former relies on factors that “transcend the realm of matter and energy ... a morphogenetic account gets rid of all transcendent factors using exclusively form-generating resources which are immanent to the material world” (Sedgwick, 2001, p. 9).

The other crucial point is that for Deleuze multiplicity “does not designate a combination of the many and the one, but rather an organization belonging to the many as such, which has no need whatsoever of unity in order to form a system” (Deleuze, 1994, p. 184). Thus the notions of the “person” or the “self” do not need to be defined in terms of a pre-existing and even consistent unity or essence or “real self.” The empirical/phenomenological practitioner substitutes essence with ongoing *actualization* (Deleuze, 1994), paying close attention to series of “events ... jets of singularities” (Deleuze, 1990, p. 53), rather than searching for an imaginary essence, for notions of “depth,” for an unconscious, for “being” and so forth. There is no depth in such a universe of becoming: only surface, only phenomena, only the world – fully expressive, however, and endowed with intrinsic, pre-cognitive meaning (Merleau-Ponty, 2002). “There is no inner man” (Merleau-Ponty, 2002, p. xi), and meaning, unspoken, is a “vague fever” (Merleau-Ponty, 1964b, p. 19). A universe of becoming is a *universe without being* where individuals actualize, i.e. exist as “the outcome of becomings, that is, of irreversible processes of individuation” (DeLanda, 2002, p. 106), as ongoing processes rather than final products (DeLanda, 2002, p. 21).

### Being no one, going nowhere

The movement toward becoming a “fully functioning person” (Rogers, 1962) implies an acceptance of fluidity and multiplicity, a gradual acceptance, through “seven stages of process” (Rogers, 1961) of the manifold aspects of the psyche and a moving away from the fantasy of a unified, solid self. The practice of *epoché* renews a practitioner’s dedication to go back to square one, as it were, to look at the world/self/other afresh, to be a perpetual beginner (Merleau-Ponty, 2002). Fluidity and multiplicity accentuate the experience of being many, of being not-one, of being no-one. An ongoing process of actualization is made possible, whereby the self becomes pliable, creative, open to transformation. The beauty of the person-centered approach is that the self is neither discarded nor indulged but instead examined and gently, lovingly deconstructed. This process is greatly assisted by a grounding of person-centered therapy in the groundless terrain of phenomenology and empiricism. Then what we call “I” becomes an instrument – and the therapist a facilitator of healing and positive change. Not very dissimilar, perhaps, from the teachings of the Buddha on the nature of the self:

Just as a farmer carves channels in his fields to irrigate it; just as the maker of arrows fashions an arrow; just as a carpenter shapes a piece of wood, so does the wise person train the self (quoted in Batchelor, 2006, p. 23)

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