

When Rogers met Adler:

Notes on Power, Masculinity, and Gender in Person-Centred Therapy

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A young Carl Rogers met the man he called “Dr Adler” in the nineteen twenties, and this is how he recalled the encounter years later:

I had the privilege of meeting Dr Alfred Adler ... in the winter of 1927-28 when I was an intern at the new Institute for Child Guidance in New York City. The Institute perished during the Depression. Accustomed as I was to the rather rigid Freudian approach of the Institute – seventy-five page case histories, and exhaustive batteries of tests before even thinking of ‘treating’ a child – I was shocked by Dr Adler’s very direct and deceptively simple manner of immediately relating to the child and the parent. It took me some time to realize how much I had learned from him (1990, p. 47).

It is difficult to determine how much Rogers *did* learn from Adler, for Adler’s influence on humanistic psychology, although pervasive, was unacknowledged. Striking if elliptic parallels between the two leap up at first glance: both moved away from Freudian ideas; both introduced varying degrees of equality in the therapy room; both refrained to accept the predominant role of sexuality, which Adler early on, and against the literalist trend, saw as “jargon”, symbol, and *modus dicendi* (1917: 100). What I will strive to sketch here, however, are not the similarities but those aspects in classical Rogerian psychology that appear incompatible with Adler. It is my belief that contemporary person-centred theory – which still largely rests on Carl Rogers’s psychological insights and methodology – would greatly benefit from having another look at these themes.

One of Adler's gifts was his ability to address difficult themes plainly and directly. With his wit, wisdom and common sense he tackled subjects such as aggression, masculinity, "masculine protest", power, striving for superiority – unpopular subjects in contemporary therapy. Adler was a man of his times even though, in the words of Rollo May, already a women's liberationists before feminism gained popularity (May, 1996:153).

Of the three forerunners of modern psychology, Adler was the one who understood best Nietzsche's difficult thought of the *will to power*. In Adler's reformulation, it became first *aggression drive* and then *striving for superiority*.

Cohn (1997:p.101), quoting Erich Fromm, has pointed out how the root of the word aggression, the Latin *aggređi*, is an intransitive verb, denoting the benign act of moving forward without hesitation as opposed to malevolent, misguided form of the same energy that manifests as a compensatory desire to exert power over others.

I have written elsewhere (2006) about Nietzsche's notion of will to power: in my view, none other than *plenitude*, overflowing of joyful energy (in humans and in the wider universe of which we are part) that resolves itself in *generosity*, in the expenditure of oneself for the benefit of all, what Buddhism calls *dana*. This view does not deny or evade the problem of *power*, a difficult topic in contemporary psychotherapy. Similarly, in Adler we find striving for superiority resolving itself in active adaptation, in ways that are useful to the community (1973: 31-32). The similitude with Nietzsche's will to power is clear when Adler refers to striving for superiority as "something primary, something which adhered already in primordial life" (ibid).

The Nietzschean *übermensch* (a term whose correct translation is *overman* and not the ludicrous 'superman') represents such constant aspiration to *overcome* the pettiness of the ego's demands. This became, in Adler's formulation, the "coercion to carry out a better adaptation". (Adler 1973: 32).

It is always a matter of overcoming, of the existence of the individual and the human race, of establishing a favourable relationship between the individual and the surrounding world. This coercion to carry out a better adaptation can never end. Herein lies the foundation for our view of the striving for superiority (ibid).

Here we find striking similarities with Rogers's idea of the *actualising tendency*, an idea whose genealogy takes us back first to the ground-breaking work of eminent philosopher/clinician Kurt Goldstein (1935) and to that of Abraham Maslow (1954:ix), and, before that to a thinker who also happened to be Nietzsche's elected tutor: Goethe. From Goethe, Goldstein learned the rare amalgamation between philosophical insights and empirical observation, for Goethe was in favour of both analysis – breaking down of knowledge, and synthesis – understanding of wholeness (Pickern 2000: 129).

Here I stress the unity between philosophical thought and empirical observation to counteract a biological model of formulation of the actualising tendency (Rogers 1978, pp. 7-8).

Adler addressed what he called the *aggression drive* (later to become *striving for superiority*) in both men and women, leading, in an individual who had undergone therapy successfully, to the awakening of *communal feeling* and the aspiration to contribute. His method was Socratic, his therapy akin to midwifery, gentle but direct (and directive). Also a man of his times, Rogers initiated a psychological school that emphasized growth, nurturing; his method a soft, more feminine approach, arguably akin to unobtrusive motherhood.

Classical Adlerian therapy accepts and celebrates male assertiveness and makes it “useful”, pliable to the needs of the community. It is also comfortable with the idea of *power*. The same cannot be said of person-centred therapy and discourse. Whilst I feel accepted as a man within the Adlerian community, my relationship with the person-

centred culture and community is more problematic (and potentially more creative perhaps). Here I feel less accepted as a man. What seem to be encouraged are feminine qualities of receptivity, non-directiveness, and empathy. The very metaphors of classical person-centred therapy are arguably steeped in what Jungians would refer to as the “mother archetype”. There seems to be little room for more distinctively male metaphors and discourse.

It is however interesting to note that Rogers’s initial descriptions of the actualising tendency, is “not free of one-sided male thinking” (Schimd, 2004:3): it is depicted as “directional, forward striving, expanding, transcending” as an “increasing force” moving towards autonomy a description which Schimd sees as “clearly determined by male experiencing and consciousness and formulated in male language” (ibid). Conversely, a more female interpretation would be portrayed as an “unfolding and differentiating process of shaping relationships” (ibid).

Apart from the ambiguous move of attributing relatedness stereotypically to women, relatedness itself, at least in the tradition of existential psychotherapy and not in that of psychoanalysis, is not the field of comforting inter-subjectivity but a destabilizing ground for the supposed solidity of the ‘I’. Indeed, in the formulation skilfully expressed by Spinelli (2007) relatedness is one of the existential ‘given’ alongside uncertainty and anxiety. I would stretch the point and say that not unlike classical Buddhism, for existentialism suffering is not a *symptom* but part and parcel of the human condition. And if we reflect on the contribution of Sartre to western thinking, we must also take on board the inalienable element of *conflict*. (Spinelli 2007: pp. 67-68). The dominant paradigm of humanistic psychology, based on Buber’s formulation of the I-Thou, overlooks the problem of conflict.

The I- Thou Encounter is an Abstraction

Martin Buber's *I-Thou* encounter that influenced so much of humanistic psychology and practice is an abstraction. Largely derived, according to Adorno (1964/2003: p.11), on Kierkegaard's theology or 'Christology' and "dressed up as universal posture", and romanticizing the 'immediacy' of the I-Thou encounter, it also grossly simplifies the issue of justice, or rather injustice. For an equal encounter does not exist and is, at best, a laudable aspiration. There cannot be dialogue between master and servant, unless justice is restored first. To romanticize the therapeutic encounter as an equal encounter is a mystification, and it drags therapy back to the 1920s before a socially-conscious Adler moved away from Freud's bourgeois world view and clinical practice.

Thus the I-Thou encounter is an abstraction. For it is always *I/he*, or *I/she*, *Thou/he*, or *Thou/she*. And - I would add - it is always *I/rich* and *Thou/poor*, more privileged and less privileged, *I/heterosexual* or *I/gay*, *I/inhabitant* of developed or undeveloped countries, *I/housed* and *Thou/unhoused*, *I/landlord* and *Thou/vagrant*, *I/black* and *Thou/white*, *I/respected citizen* and *Thou/refugee*. The element of difference is always present, and above all the *irreducible difference of gender*, for, as Luce Irigaray reminds, us "Marx defined the origin of man's exploitation of man as man's exploitation of woman" (1996:19) The so-called I-Thou encounter never happens in a cocoon, though some forms of therapy seems to strive to manufacture just that and then live and thrive in such a closely-protected bubble.

The shadow of God - who has been famously dead for a while - has come back to haunt the essentially secular domain of the therapy room. The shadow has come back to divert us from the fact that the other remains forever unknowable. How does the shadow of God divert us from the mystery and potential threat of otherness? It does so in an incredible number of ways: through introducing the transcendental flight into "spirituality"; through the elevation of Heidegger's thought and the aura existential

thought attributes to “being” (Spinelli 2007). Through romanticizing the encounter in so-called “relational depth” (Mearns & Cooper 2005). What these disparate modes have in common – and I only mention a few – is the tyranny of Oneness and what Nietzsche called the barbarism of One.

The *I-Thou* encounter still takes place within the empire of the self-same. There is no recognition of the irreducible alterity of the other, no acknowledgement of her mystery, no abdication of my desire to know, to possess, and to comprehend.

Is it OK to think? Is it OK to be a Man?

Adler was moving away from a Freudian model that proved to be stifling for a fair exploration of psychology grounded in communal feeling and common sense, and Rogers’s idea and methodology countered a traditional model in the educational system that did not value “the whole person ... only the intellect” (1978: p.69).

In our current situation, however, intellect has been banned altogether from the training rooms. At least this has been my experience over three and a half years of very intensive studies in humanistic psychology. The study and practice of “theory” is relegated to a few handouts and bullet points taken from summaries of digested reads. There seems to be a widespread fear and dread of theory, paired with the unchallenged tyranny of what goes under the label of “experience”. However, “experience deserves its name only if it transports us beyond what constitutes our nature”: (Levinas, 1987, p 47). Experience worth its name is what changes me. What we have instead in the name of experience is *philistine pragmatism*, an unwillingness to engage with anything that is not immediately *useful*. I found a good definition of such philistine pragmatism in Terry Eagleton’s *After Theory*:

Everything from thinking to love-making must justify its existence before some grim-lipped tribunal of utility. Even our thoughts must be rigorously instrumental. There is no recognition here of Bertolt Brecht’s desire that thinking might become “a real sensuous pleasure” (Eagleton, 2003: p.87)

Speaking both as a man and as a trainee in his third year of both Diploma and MSc in person-centred therapy, I lament what I can only characterize as the *feminisation of psychotherapy*. This is not only due to the fact that men are generally outnumbered in the profession, but stems from wider cultural implications. Too many times I have witnessed male psychotherapists belittle their masculinity; I have read eminent male theorists pay subservient homage to the progress made by women’s ideas whilst ridiculing maleness and masculinity.

Growing up as I did in Southern Italy, I have learned to value self-reliance. It is an aspect of self that does not feel welcome in the therapy training rooms. This is not anyone’s fault but reflects a general cultural trend. In the current climate I perceive self-

reliance being disparaged, its attributes caricatured and its proud, independent quality misinterpreted as rigidity. Perhaps self-reliance needs to be belittled in England, a nation that has thrived on the stiff-upper lip and that to this day – thanks to the misadventures in Iraq – is perceived by the majority of non-UK public opinion as aggressive and belligerent. But in my case, growing up in provincial Southern Italy, self-reliance was not only desirable, but absolutely essential. This experience was untutored, instinctive, and made me prone to mistakes, but it's a quality that I value to this day. And such quality is closely linked to another important aspect: masculinity. Far from wishing to espouse dominance, authority, and patriarchy, what I endeavour to do is to understand this odd, inexplicable feeling I have; it's as if *to be a therapist and to be a man in our culture is a contradiction in terms*. Can I be a man fully, without apologies, and still study and practice person-centred and humanistic psychotherapy?

Robert Bly (1990) addressed a similar issue, when he wrote of the ruinous effects the questionable interpretations of humanistic therapy had in American culture. I've been involved with men's groups in the nineties and one of the things I learned is a distinctly masculine way of celebrating intimacy, silence, and interaction; I learned that there is room for both *tenderness* and *assertiveness*. That there is a time for silent reflection, for a journey into the wilderness, as well as time for companionship, for healing, for song, poetry and the sharing of private and communal narratives.

It is from moments of pain and sorrow that I have written some of my best songs, and the rupture I sometimes experience prompts me to look at creative ways of articulating this dilemma. My sense is that I'm not alone in this, that other male therapists might share some of these feelings.

Boys feel the bonds of brotherhood instinctively. But academia falsifies and buries this sense of intimate belonging: psychology calls it *peer pressure*; sociology, *gang behaviour*; (Hillman, 1992: 231). These are ways to avoid acknowledging the fact that boys' simple

alliance veers towards *Gemeinschaftsgefühl*, the liberating joy and fulfilment that transforms life from cannon fodder to constructive and creative endeavour.

What does it mean to be a man? A difficult question that cannot be defined in a clear-cut way. Perhaps we should talk of masculine and feminine in the *yin/yang* sense, as attributes present in varying degrees in both men and women, *yin* representing (broadly speaking) receptivity, nurture, empathy, compassion; and *yang* symbolizing decisiveness, active engagement, wisdom. I find these two aspects wonderfully expressed in Buddhist pantheon by, respectively *Manjushri*, a Buddha yielding a sword that cuts through delusion, and *Kanzeon*, or “the one who hears the cries of the world”. Both are *Bodhisattvas*, both act out of profound wisdom and compassion, but they use different skills, or *upaya*. Here is how the Sufi poet and mystic Rumi describes the quality of masculine – or yang - wisdom and compassion - words that might sound slightly odd in our current cultural climate:

The Core of Masculinity

The core of masculinity does not derive from being male,
Nor friendliness from those who console.

Your old grandmother says,
“Maybe you shouldn’t go to school.
You look a little pale.”

Run when you hear that.
A father’s stern slaps are better.

Your bodily soul wants comforting.
The severe father wants spiritual clarity.

He scolds, but eventually
Leads you into the open.

Pray for a tough instructor
To hear and act and stay within you.

We have been busy accumulating solace.
Make us afraid of how we were

And here is another poem illustrating the other *yin* quality, in the words of poet Gloria Fuertes, as well as the insensitivity we men can often have:

Birds Nest

Birds nest in my arms,
on my shoulders, behind my knees,
between my breasts there are quails,
they must think I'm a tree.
The swans think I'm a fountain,
they all come down and drink when I talk.
When sheep pass, they pass over me,
and perched on my fingers, the sparrows eat,
the ants think I'm earth,
and men think I'm nothing.

I believe the first step towards fruitful and creative dialogue is thus acceptance of difference, and of gender difference in the first place. Only then we can come to the essential *recognition*. To say *I recognize you* entails acceptance of diversity, as well as of the essential unknowability of the other. It means accepting the nature of desire no longer understood in the acquisitive mode of possession and mastery but instead as a longing

for the impossible and as *prayer* – in this case gratefulness for the fact that this world in which – as existentialism teaches us – we are *thrown*, is also a tremendous gift.

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