EXPERIENCE AND SOLIPSISM

On the Dualistic Foundation of Client-centered Theory

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Introduction: Problem and Main Theses

Existing reviews of literature (e.g. Cartwright, 1957; Hart and Thomlinson, 1970) seem to indicate that no one has critically examined the philosophical foundation of C.R. Rogers' theories, especially not with regard to their basic concept "the phenomenal field" or "experience." The tendency has been to accept Rogers' theoretical views as grounded in a tenable "phenomenological-existential" philosophy of man.

The present paper represents an attempt to explicate and discuss some central but seemingly unrecognized aspects of the philosophical foundation of Rogers' client-centered theory. My main aim is critical. I want to demonstrate that both ontologically and epistemologically client-centered theory presupposes a clearly anti-phenomenological and anti-existential dualistic conception of man, and that this presupposition means that client-centered theory is based on an epistemological solipsism.

This position manifests itself in the following three ways: First, according to client-centered theory everyone has to learn his concepts of the mental from his own case alone and therefore has to speak a private language as far as his own mental or experiential states are concerned. Second, client-centered theory cannot incorporate the existence of an external world. Third, client-centered theory cannot account for the existence of other minds. Furthermore: As a consequence of this underlying
solipsism it becomes difficult to get a coherent understanding of client-centered theory, therapy and research.

To establish the above mentioned theses I will proceed in the following manner: I shall first describe what may be called the traditional dualism and then try to show that the basic concepts of client-centered theory are formulated in such a way that this dualism is logically implied. After that I shall try to map out how the three consequences mentioned above follow logically from such a dualism, and also document that they are in fact present in client-centered theory. Then I shall argue that the three consequences in question are essentially meaningless and untenable and indicate some more satisfying phenomenological and existential views. By this I want, among other things, to make explicit that client-centered theory, in spite of its seemingly phenomenological and existential orientation, implies exactly those problems which phenomenological and existential thinking has tried to transcend. Finally, I shall comment briefly on the impossibility of getting a coherent understanding of client-centered theory, therapy and research.

THE DUALISTIC FOUNDATION OF CLIENT-CENTERED THEORY

By dualism we shall here understand an ontological theory which asserts that there are only two basic categories of the existing, namely, mental and physical entities and events, and that there is a contingent relationship between these two categories. By this is meant that it should be logically possible (even if it is not the case in real life, of course) to think of a physical entity (e.g. the living human body) without implying that this physical entity has anything to do with something mental (e.g. the mind), and vice versa: It should be logically possible to think of something mental (e.g. the mind) without implying that this mental entity has anything to do with something physical (e.g. the living human body). It was evidently the possibility of this contingency Descartes had in mind when he spoke of the separateness of soul and body (Malcolm, 1971). A lot of arguments may be found to support this view (see e.g. Shaffer, 1966).

However, given this formulation, the question arises as to