THE FORMATIVE TENDENCY

At age 76 CARL ROGERS is still very active. During 1977 he led a team of five people from the Center for Studies of the Person in a Brazilian enterprise, where they conducted very large meetings in an experiential way; trained Brazilian facilitators for a Brazilian workshop of 200 people; published Carl Rogers on Personal Power (Delacorte); for the fifth time, worked with a staff in a two-week summer workshop, "A Person-Centered Approach: The Process of Individual Growth and Its Social Implications;" and participated with a Mexican-American staff in a Mexican workshop for those dealing with oppressed persons. In addition he participated in one of the four symposia at the American Psychological association, "Honoring Carl Rogers in his 75th Year." Further plans are forming for intercultural and person-centered workshops in Brazil, Spain, and England. Yet he still finds time for his gardening and for long walks on the beach.

The international interest in Carl's work seems to be growing. Books have been written about him and his work in French, German. Portuguese, Japanese, and extensive articles have been written in several other languages. His central hypotheses are being tested in an ever-widening field of personal and social experience.

I have often pointed out that in my work with individuals in therapy, and in my experience in encounter groups, I have been led to the conviction that human nature is essentially constructive. When, in a therapeutic climate (which can be objectively defined) a person becomes sharply aware of more of his or her internal experiencing and of the stimuli and demands from the external world, thus acquiring a full range of options, the person tends to move in the direction of becoming a socially constructive organism.

But many are critical of this point of view. Why should such a positive direction be observed only in humans? Isn't this just pure optimism?

So quite hesitantly, because I have to draw on the work and thinking of others rather than on my own experience, I should like to try to set this directional tendency in a much broader context. I shall draw on my general reading in the field of science, but I should like to mention a special indebtedness to the work of Lancelot Whyte (1974) in The Universe of Experience, the last book he wrote before his death. Though the book has flaws, in my judgment this historian has some thought-provoking themes to advance. I have learned from many others as well.

My main thesis is this. There appears to be a formative tendency at work

1 Rogers, C. Opening comments. Presented at the AHP Theory Conference, April 5, 1975.

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in the universe which can be observed at every level. This tendency has received much less attention than it deserves.

Physical scientists up to now have focussed primarily on entropy, the tendency toward deterioration. They know a great deal about this tendency toward disorder. Studying closed systems they can give this tendency a clear mathematical description. They know that order or organization tends to deteriorate into randomness, each stage less organized than the last.

We are also very familiar with deterioration in organic life. The system—whether plant, animal, or human—eventually deteriorates into a lower degree of functioning organization, into a lesser and lesser degree of order, until decay reaches stasis. In one sense this is what a part of medicine is all about—a concern with the malfunctioning or the deterioration of an organ, or the organism as a whole. The complex process of the death of the physical organism is increasingly well understood.

So a great deal is known of the universal tendency of systems at all levels to deteriorate in the direction of less and less orderliness, more and more randomness. When it operates, it is a one-way street.

But there is far less recognition of, or emphasis on, the even more important formative tendency which can be equally well observed at every level of the universe. After all, every form which we see or know emerged from a simpler, less complex, form. This is a phenomenon which stands as being at least as significant as entropy. Examples could be given from every form of inorganic or organic life. Let me illustrate with just a few.

It appears that every galaxy, every star, every planet, including our own, was formed from a less organized whirling storm of particles. Many of these stellar objects are themselves formative. In the atmosphere of our sun, hydrogen nuclei collide to form molecules of helium, more complex in nature. It is hypothesized that in other stars even heavier molecules are formed by such interactions.

I understand that when the simple materials of the earth's atmosphere which were present before life began (e.g., water and ammonia) are infused by electric charges or by radiation heavier molecules begin to form and are converted into amino acids. We seem only a step away from the formation of viruses and more complex living organisms. It is a creative, not a disintegrative, process at work.

Another fascinating example is the formation of crystals. In every case, from less ordered and less symmetrical fluid matter, there emerges the startlingly unique, ordered, symmetrical and often beautiful crystalline form. All of us have marvelled at the perfection and complexity of the snowflake.
When we consider the single living cell, we discover that it often forms more complex colonies, as in the coral reef. Even more order enters the picture as the cell emerges into an organism of many cells with specialized functions.

I don't need to picture the whole gradual process of organic evolution. We are familiar with the steadily increasing complexity of organisms. They are not always successful in their ability to cope with the changing environment, but the trend toward complexity is always evident.

Perhaps for most of us the process of organic evolution is best recognized as we consider the development of the single fertilized human ovum through the simplest stages—the aquatic gill stage, and on to the vastly complex, highly organized human infant. As Jonas Salk has said, there is a manifest and increasing order in evolution.

Thus, without ignoring the tendency toward deterioration, we need to recognize fully what Whyte (1974) calls the "morphic tendency," the ever operating trend toward increased order and interrelated complexity evident at the inorganic, the organic, and the human level. The universe is always building and creating as well as deteriorating.

Jonas Salk points out that consciousness has a very small part in all this. I would agree. A number of years ago I used the metaphor of the human organism as a pyramid of organic functioning, partly suffused by an unconscious knowing, with only the tip of the pyramid being fleetingly illuminated by the flickering light of fully conscious awareness. We are thus much wiser (organismically speaking) than our intellects, than our consciousness. It seems, however, that the human organism has been moving toward the more complete development of awareness, perhaps the highest of the human functions.

Some of my colleagues have said that organismic choice—the nonverbal, subconscious choice of being—is guided by the evolutionary flow. I would agree and go one step further. I would point out that in psychotherapy we have learned something about the psychological conditions which are most conducive to self-awareness. With greater self-awareness a more informed choice is possible, a choice freer from introjects, a conscious choice which is even more in tune with the evolutionary flow. There is (to use Claudio Naranjo's term) an organismic convergence with that directional evolutionary process.

I would like to use Gregory Bateson's statement as an example. He says that he has never made a choice in his life, that he floats like a cork on the interrelated network of ongoing ideas both inside and outside his skin. I would be so bold as to suggest that the more Gregory's cork is aware, not only of the ideas inside and outside his skin, but of the ongoing flow of
feathers and emotions and physiological reactions which he senses in himself and in others, the more surely he will float in a direction consonant with the directional evolutionary flow. Thus consciousness can participate in this creative, formative tendency.

But then Stan Grof and Joan Halifax (and others) have taken us beyond the ordinary level of consciousness. Their studies appear to reveal that in altered states of consciousness persons feel they are in touch with, and grasp the meaning of, this evolutionary flow, and that it tends toward a transcending experience of unity. The individual self seems dissolved in a whole area of higher values, especially beauty and harmony.

Thus, overall, I would like to state a hypothesis, very tentative in nature, but which for the sake of clarity I will state in definite terms.

It is hypothesized that there is a formative directional tendency in the universe, which can be traced and observed in stellar space, in crystals, in microorganisms, in organic life, in human beings. This is an evolutionary tendency toward greater order, greater interrelatedness, greater complexity. In humankind it extends from a single cell origin to complex organic functioning, to an awareness and sensing below the level of consciousness, to a conscious awareness of the organism and the external world, to a transcendent awareness of the unity of the cosmic system including people.

It seems to me just possible that this hypothesis could be a base upon which we could begin to build a theory for humanistic psychology.

REFERENCE


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