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Spring 2013

# The process of self-becoming in the thought of Søren Kierkegaard and Carl Rogers

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*University of Iowa*

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THE PROCESS OF SELF-BECOMING IN THE THOUGHT OF  
SØREN KIERKEGAARD AND CARL ROGERS

by  
Susan Woolever

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the Master of  
Arts degree in Religious Studies  
in the Graduate College of  
The University of Iowa

May 2013

Thesis Supervisor: Professor Diana Fritz Cates

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CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

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MASTER'S THESIS

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This is to certify that the Master's thesis of

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has been approved by the Examining Committee  
for the thesis requirement for the Master of Arts  
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## INTRODUCTION

Carl Rogers and Søren Kierkegaard devoted their lives to thinking about what it means to be an authentic self. Rogers is known primarily in the fields of psychology and counseling, but his theories of personhood, authenticity, and personal relationships have influenced scholars, practitioners, human rights activists, and clients around the world. Kierkegaard was interested in stirring the hearts and minds of nineteenth century Danes. He did so mostly by engaging fellow philosophers and theologians in the public sphere. Yet his work continues to be studied by people from diverse cultures and backgrounds who want to reflect philosophically on the task of becoming—and helping other people to become—more fully human.

The goal of this thesis is to bring Rogers and Kierkegaard into productive conversation with each other, across disciplines, around the themes of self, authenticity, and relationality. The purpose is to show that people can still learn a great deal from these thinkers, particularly by reading each of them in light of the other. Rogers and Kierkegaard wrote in different historical periods and cultural settings. However, by identifying some cognate concepts (in English) we can appreciate how, for both of them, the central task of life is to promote human well-being, in community with each other, and in humble relation to a higher good or ideal.

This thesis shows more specifically that Rogers' theory of person-centeredness and Kierkegaard's theory of Christian neighbor-love both reflect the conviction that being an authentic self is necessary for sustaining good relationships with others. Both authors argue that being in right relationship with others is, in turn, essential to self-actualization and authenticity. An added value of reading Rogers and Kierkegaard together is

that, on one hand, Rogers may be more accessible to people who are not versed in nineteenth century philosophy, do not identify as Christians (but have an interest in spirituality), and have a more practical than an academic mindset. Kierkegaard, on the other hand, can help people with an interest in psychology and mental health to develop their ideas philosophically, ethically, and in light of theological reflection. In addition, Kierkegaard's writings are likely to appeal more to people who find creative literature a good vehicle for self-exploration, transformation, and indirect communication.

The thesis has three main sections, each of which focuses on a central concept or theme in the thought of Rogers and Kierkegaard. The first theme is that every self is unique and yet, at the same time, has something in common with every other self, namely, "selfhood." That is, every self has a certain internal and relational structure that can be identified by beings who regard themselves as fellow members of the human community. Because of this structure, every self tends to behave in certain predictable ways, albeit within diverse social contexts. Every self has capabilities and also a dynamism or a destiny of which it can become conscious and about which it can converse with others. While not all genetically human beings have the quality of being capable and self-conscious selves in this sense, most of them do, will in the future, or have in the past had this quality.

A second theme is that the self has a natural disposition to become, over time, more fully itself or more whole. If a person does not experience a general tendency toward greater fullness of life, this is often an indication that something has gone awry in his or her personal development, or something detrimental has occurred in his or her social milieu. Indeed, something often goes awry; yet even when it does, there remains the possibility of responding to it creatively, in freedom, in such a way that one

effectively integrates it in one's unfolding experience of continually opening to life and realizing the potential of the moment.

The third theme is that the self is both individual and constitutively relational: it exists and has the ability to thrive only in relation to other selves (and other beings), and only in relation to a variety of goods that are exchanged in the context of its many relationships.

With respect to each of these themes, this thesis analyzes the perspectives of Rogers and Kierkegaard in a way that illuminates both. It is intended for scholars who are interested in the study of human existence and the collaboration of psychology, philosophy, religion, and ethics. It also aims to enrich readers on a personal level by providing some compelling philosophical and psychological insights into the challenges of being human. I do not argue for the truth of what Kierkegaard and Rogers say, although I do express some opinions; rather, the point is simply to display their two views in a way that is accurate, while also being provocative and mutually illuminating.

It is noteworthy that Rogers (1980) describes experiencing feelings of personal liberation and professional validation when reading Kierkegaard; "I felt greatly supported in my new approach, which I found to my surprise was a home-grown brand of existential philosophy" (p. 39). In his introduction to "Persons or Science: A Philosophical Question", Rogers writes:

I first became acquainted with the work of Søren Kierkegaard...at the insistence of some of the theological students at Chicago who were taking work with me ...Though Kierkegaard lived one hundred years ago, I cannot help but regard him as a sensitive and highly perceptive friend. I think this paper shows my indebtedness to him, mostly in the fact that reading his work loosened me up and made me more willing to trust and express my own experience. (Kirshenbaum, p. 224)

By discussing Rogers and Kierkegaard in relation to each other, I hope to highlight some of their common insights, many of which may still hold

promise for people who want to think creatively about what it means to be a self.



CHAPTER I  
THE SELF IS UNIQUE AND UNIVERSAL

**Introduction**

Kierkegaard and Rogers argue that the self is both universal and singular. First, every self, as such, shares a certain form. This form includes a tendency to imagine future possibilities for itself and to choose, day by day, within limits, to realize at least some of these possibilities, so that the self is able to hope, over time, to approximate the version of itself that it would most like to become. This form is universal for beings who identify as persons or selves and are in the process of becoming more fully themselves. Second, each self has a unique history of experiences behind it (and thus within it), and it tends, through its continuing life experiences and choices, to become ever more uniquely itself.

This chapter explores Kierkegaard's understanding of the self as articulated by one of his pseudonyms, Anti-Climacus, in *The Sickness unto Death* (SUD; 1987). Given its place in the pseudonymous authorship, this text arguably includes many ideas of which Kierkegaard himself would have explicitly approved, but I will refer to the author of this text as Anti-Climacus. The analysis then turns in the direction of Rogers's 1959 conceptualization of self. Kierkegaard captures beautifully the way in which the individuated self is constituted, moment by moment, through self-conscious activity. Yet Rogers's conception adds something important. His terminology can help us to view selves and their behaviors from a more "organismic" perspective, illuminating what it means to be fully aware of one's own unfolding and emerging experience, as a whole, well-integrated organism.

## The Universality of the Self

Kierkegaard

Anti-Climacus offers an intriguing account of the structure of self:

A human being is spirit. But what is spirit? Spirit is the self. But what is the self? The self is a relation that relates itself to itself or is the relation's relating itself to itself in the relation; the self is not the relation but is the relation's relating itself to itself. A human being is a synthesis of the infinite and the finite, of the temporal and the eternal, of freedom and necessity, in short, a synthesis. A synthesis is a relation between two. Considered in this way, a human being is still not a self. (SUD, p. 13)

At first glance, Anti-Climacus says that a self can be defined as human being, spirit, relation, and/or synthesis. While his view of the self can indeed be articulated through the use of these concepts, the terms are not synonymous.

Regarding the concept of human being, Anti-Climacus does not wrestle with the question that is often raised today, namely, the relationship between genetically human entities (considered irrespective of their actual capabilities) and persons (who are identified largely by their capabilities or potentialities); he simply assumes that the human beings who are reading his words are most interested – and ought to be most interested – in understanding themselves *as* persons or selves with extraordinary capabilities, which they ought to be exercising fully. These capabilities include thinking, feeling, reasoning, choosing, and also reflecting on one's thinking, feeling, reasoning, and choosing.

The self is partly a synthesis of the finite and the infinite. It is a synthesis of necessity and possibility. In this project, these two constructions are considered to be parallel (Taylor, 1975), and they are used interchangeably. There are certain aspects of the self that are given, at a particular moment – aspects that are basically non-negotiable or have already been determined and cannot now be undone. These are aspects with

which one must come to terms or accept as conditions, if one is to move forward with one's life. At the same time, there are other aspects of the self that are open to the possibility of change, or aspects that have not yet been determined, but may be realized now or in the future, especially through the power of choice. In each moment, the typical self is composed, in part, of a synthesis between what is given or limited, and the possibilities that are realistically open to that particular self. More precisely, it is composed of the process of achieving a new synthesis of necessity and possibility, in every moment, through the activities of self-reflection and self-defining decision making, all of which occur in variable contexts. As Anti-Climacus puts it, "The human self is . . . a derived, established relation, a relation that relates itself to itself" (SUD, pp. 13-14).

Anti-Climacus also says that "The formula that describes the state of the self . . . is this: in relating itself to itself and in willing to be itself, the self rests transparently in the power that established it" (SUD, p. 14). Relating itself to itself is a matter of choosing, in light of who one currently is, and in light of the possibilities that are currently open to the self, to become a particular version of oneself that continues to exist in continuity with the past. For Anti-Climacus, "the power that established the self" is "God." Mostly what is meant by this term is whatever makes it possible for the unfolding activity of self-composing imagination and choice to occur at all, and to continue occurring through time. The term refers also to that which creates the possibility for a person to intend to become a particular sort of self that plays a unique role in the drama of creation.

Anti-Climacus says further that the "human being is spirit" (SUD, p. 13), which suggests an essential connection between the mysterious Power of creation and the human power of choice or self-determination. The human

self has the ability to compose itself, but it can do so successfully, in Anti-Climacus's view, only by choosing in light of what is necessary or given and what is realistically possible, and only by virtue of the fact that some Power grounds this process. When Anti-Climacus speaks of "resting transparently in the power that established [the self]" (SUD, p. 14), he refers to the activity of choosing, self-consciously and humbly, to accept the universe's invitation (or God's intention for the self) to discern and embrace the self's reason for being.

Anti-Climacus compares human beings to houses; humans serve as buildings that house "spirit" (SUD, p. 43). Thus, the self is objectively a human being with an ability to embody the activity of relating itself to itself and to another. The self is absolutely dependent on God—and relatively dependent on other selves—for its being and its future. Every choice it makes is a conditioned choice. Yet with each choice it makes, new possibilities appear, so that over time it is as though the possibilities of the self become limitless. For Kierkegaard these possibilities basically lead the self beyond the limits of temporal life and into eternal life. The ability to be responsible for one's own choices is what defines humanity. A human is set apart from other animals in the ability to synthesize the finite with the infinite in the moment of decision.

#### The Relation or Synthesis

The self-determining self needs to work within the bounds of finitude to realize various possibilities, which change with each decision that is made. One can think of this process as involving a kind of balance or equilibrium in which one "bears all the past as a present possibility" (SUD, p. 17). The task of maintaining equilibrium between the finite and the infinite may seem insurmountably difficult. How can one be conscious of the results of one's

past decisions, which cannot be undone, while opening up to a limited range of possibilities, in light of a future that is open, but which one cannot fully anticipate or control? How can one sustain this activity moment by moment, over a lifetime? The solution, for Anti-Climacus, is faith (SUD). Although he specifically has Christian faith in mind, it is possible for a wider audience to understand faith more generically as a trust that, with the help of the power that makes one to be, and implicitly calls one to take responsibility for oneself, one can find one's way through the continuous process of becoming – not with perfection, but also without being in a constant state of desperation. For Anti-Climacus, it is by believing in the possibility of an ongoing relationship to this power that the process of continuing to go on, in becoming oneself, becomes possible (SUD).

Finitude and infinitude exist in tension with each other within the human being (SUD, pp. 30-33). Each element signifies a kind of pull in the opposite direction. Part of the task of the self is to maintain this tension, rather than succumb to the pull of one factor over another. In Anti-Climacus's words, “. . . the progress of becoming must be an infinite moving away from itself in the infinitizing of the self, and an infinite coming back to itself in the finitizing process” (SUD, p. 30). If a person succumbs to the pull of one factor over another, she becomes absorbed in a frame of mind that is not conducive to self-becoming. If a person is absorbed in finitude, she makes only “earthly calculations” and may focus narrowly on one or another particular task. She may become preoccupied with things over which she has no control. If she limits her mind and imagination in this way, she will likely lose sight of the future and the possibilities of her life as a whole. On the other hand, if a person becomes too absorbed with infinitude, too lost in the exercise of her imagination and projections of the future, she may become

mentally lost in a world that does not yet exist and has no chance of existing unless and until she begins to make a series of well-considered choices.

“Imagination is the medium for the process of infinitizing” (SUD, p. 30); so the exercise of imagination is critical. However, if imagination and fantasy become excessive, the self is set adrift.

#### Consciousness of the Eternal Spirit

Hannay (1998) argues that, for Anti-Climacus, to be conscious of oneself as an unfolding process tending toward a possible fulfillment is, in part, to be conscious of the eternal aspect of the self. The eternal, in contrast to the temporal, refers to the aspect of the self that is constant or unchanging. The eternal reflects the self’s grounding in the reality of God, which is outside of time. Once a person awakens to the fact that she is a special, ongoing creation of this eternal reality, it begins to dawn on her that there is and must be more to her than she can now comprehend. There is more to her life than what could possibly be realized within the bounds of temporality. To embrace herself as spirit, that is, to seek the responsible exercise of her freedom, while acknowledging her absolute dependence on God, is the highest thing an individual can do, according to Anti-Climacus (SUD, p. 22). The existence of this form of spirit is distinctive to humans, and living as a conscious spirit entails claiming this distinction.

Consciousness of the eternal within the self can be achieved in a single moment; one can suddenly become aware that there is something unfathomable within the self, which makes a claim on the self (Taylor, 1975, p. 158). Yet in Anti-Climacus’s view, the eternal within the self demands that the self maintain this consciousness of itself and its God-relationship from one waking moment to the next (SUD). Self-consciousness may awaken at a specific point in history, but once it awakens one realizes that there is an

aspect of the self that transcends history, even as one realizes that one nonetheless has the responsibility to engage history, in order to become a particular self.

This view of the importance of consciousness is reflected in Anti-Climacus's discussion of despair (SUD, pp. 42-47). One form of despair is the state of failing to be conscious of the fact that one is spirit. Another form of despair is the state of wanting to be someone other than who one is, which is a matter of refusing to answer to the call of the eternal within. Anti-Climacus holds that a person who does not recognize herself as being established by an infinite source of being and love is not really a self: a self exists only where there is consciousness of self and of being more than one's finite, material self. Of course, some sort of the self exists on earth and interacts with real people and situations; it has a world that requires decision making. But the point is that the self is intended to become a particular sort of self, relying on the guidance of the eternal. A human self is greater possibility waiting to happen. The unconscious self is thus operating in a limited way according to limited, misleading notions and earthly expectations only.

Lack of consciousness of the eternal at the ground of the self can yield a life of hopelessness. To live in hope, for Anti-Climacus, is to be conscious that each moment is full of possibility, and each subsequent moment will also be full of possibility. Even the moment of death is full of possibility. The sort of hope that Anti-Climacus has in mind is a result of faith, which is a matter of believing that, for God, everything is possible, including eternal life for a temporal self. If a person has not recognized God as the ultimate source of life, there is a sense in which she has not really become the sort of being she is intended or destined to be. Once a person becomes conscious of herself and

of the eternal within the self, she may choose to become the self that God has “planned” for her to become; or the person may try not to become that self, or try to become a self that she is not created to be. Anti-Climacus argues that if a person chooses against realizing the best possibilities of her distinctive, God-related self, she is in despair, whether she recognizes it or not. If a person chooses to answer to the “name” that God has given her, she will slowly discover her name and find fullness of life. (SUD, pp. 19-47, esp. pp. 33-34)

The eternal within the self is a symbol of the ever-present possibility (for as long as God wills) of relating one’s current self to new forms of one’s unfolding self, in the activity of choosing to approximate one’s ideal self. We can think of the eternal within the self as a condition of the possibility for exercising human freedom. Again, Anti-Climacus recognizes that there is the possibility of behaving like a truncated self who “never [becomes] decisively and eternally conscious as spirit, as self, or what amounts to the same thing, never [becomes] aware and in the deepest sense never [gains] the impression that there is a God and that ‘he,’ he himself, his self, exists before this God – an infinite benefaction that is never gained except through despair” (SUD, pp. 26-27). It is also to be expected that most people will move into and out of states of acute awareness and trust of the eternal and its connection to their own freedom. Hannay (1987) indicates that “Spirit connotes a perpetual tension between faith and despair” (p. 30). In every moment, despair is a possibility; but then so is faith. The task of the self, for Anti-Climacus, is to repeatedly choose the way of faith.

### The Will

The choice to embody and reflect the eternal in each moment is a function of the will (Taylor, 1975, pp. 318-319). The will is the power of the



self that is most closely associated with the freedom to choose. Anti-Climacus holds that each moment is open to some sort of self-determining choice, if only the choice of how to respond to something that one cannot change (SUD). Each moment in time is a new opportunity to relate the necessities of the past to the viable possibilities of the present and future. With this freedom, there is an opportunity for the self to relate itself not only to itself but also to another. For Anti-Climacus, the decisive other in this process is God. For him, *faith* is thus a mode of choice (SUD). If the self chooses to align itself with God's will, or to become the particular lover that God has created the self to become, then the self is in a position to rest openly and honestly before its source.

What, more precisely, is the faith of which Anti-Climacus writes? Faith is partly an activity of being deliberately conscious of oneself as standing "before God" (SUD, p. 27). It is a matter of cultivating a clear awareness that one is dependent on God for one's daily life and for one's ultimate fulfillment or happiness. Second, faith is a matter of choosing to live each moment as spirit – as a power of free choice that is grounded in the eternal power of God (SUD). To live in faith is a choice, or an act of the will; yet it is an act that is made possible by the "choice" on the part of God to hold one in existence and call one into fullness of life. The divine act of grace is a necessary condition of faith (SUD, pp. 49, 82; Taylor, 1975, 314-315), but is not sufficient for faith. Choice is necessary as well.

Faith stands in contrast to sin (SUD, p. 109). Anti-Climacus describes sin as a denial or a misuse of the freedom that exists, in each new moment, to choose real and good possibilities (SUD). Sin separates a person from eternal blessedness. Through sin, one cuts the self off from its own best possibilities, which are also God's intention for its creation. The good news is that the

eternal within the self still exists for the person who sins. Despite sin, there is still, in any moment, a new choice to be made: to surrender or submit to God or to pursue some other, misguided path (Taylor, 1975, pp. 284-285).

### Rogers

Rogers's (1959) theory of personality is grounded in the assertion that each organism, or each living thing, has inherent within its being an actualizing tendency. For humans, this tendency is referred to as the self-actualizing tendency; for organisms in general it is simply the actualizing tendency; for the universe as a whole, it is the formative tendency (Rogers, 1959). (The formative tendency will be elaborated on in chapter three.) Rogers (1959) describes the actualizing tendency, both in general and specifically with regard to the self, as:

the inherent tendency of the organism to develop all its capacities in ways which serve to maintain or enhance the organism. . . . this basic actualizing tendency is the only motive which is postulated in this theoretical system. It should be noted that it is the organism as a whole, and only the organism as a whole, which exhibits this tendency. . . . the self, for example, is an important construct in our theory, but the self does not "do" anything. It is only one expression of the general tendency of the organism to behave in those ways which maintain and enhance itself.  
(p. 196)

The existence of this tendency is universal to all living things, but the way in which a given person expresses this tendency will be individual (Rogers, 1980). "The expression of the tendency is always unique to the individuals and at the same time it is a motivating tendency in all organisms" (Brodley, 2011, p. 155).

Rogers (1980) argues that acknowledgement of, respect for, and trust in the tendency to realize the potential that is inherent in *every* living thing, and every person, is helpful and healing across many professional settings. While Rogers's person-centered approach originated within the fields of

psychology and counseling, its application to nursing, education, and social work, among other fields, has been abundant. The successful utilization of this approach, in helping persons to find greater happiness in their lives, is arguably an indication that the self-actualizing tendency is, indeed, universal in persons.

Rogers (1961) argues that becoming a genuine or authentic self is a matter of becoming attuned to and accepting the self as a whole organism, and accepting also whatever is being experienced by the self, from moment to moment. Here “acceptance” is basically the choice to open to whatever is happening to the self, with the trust that one can deal with it in a suitable way, in a way that is life-giving. Rogers refers to the possibility of acceptance indirectly by reflecting on the problem of despair. He says:

I have been astonished to find how accurately the Danish philosopher, Søren Kierkegaard, pictured the dilemma of the individual more than a century ago, with deep psychological insight. He points out that the most common despair is to be in despair at not choosing, or willing, to be oneself; but that the deepest form of despair is to ‘choose to be another than himself.’ On the other hand ‘to will to be that self which one truly is, is indeed the opposite of despair,’ and this choice is the deepest responsibility of man. (p. 110)

While this choice of self-acceptance and the freedom to imagine and choose (further) what is indeed possible for the self is universal for Rogers and Kierkegaard, the process by which this self-activity takes place is unique to each person.

### **The Self is Distinctive to Each Person**

Kierkegaard

The self is always in the process of changing. The self is the activity of consciously and deliberately choosing to realize what is possible and appears desirable for itself (Taylor, 1975, p. 115). This activity is temporal; it occurs in time and is limited by the passage of time. With every choice one makes,

one cuts off certain possibilities and one opens up others. Moment by moment one becomes more and more defined or specified. Yet this very self, in the process of becoming, also has within it something that is unchanging and constant. The freedom or the power to choose, which remains constant so long as one is a self, is the eternal or the self's built-in relationship to what is eternal (Taylor, 1975, pp. 115-116).

Human freedom is not unlimited in the sense that one can realistically choose whatever one wants; yet it is an ever-present possibility waiting to be actualized in a particular, concrete way. Anti-Climacus thinks of the self as the activity of becoming definite, but always in light of the indefinable (SUD). The normative self, in this view, "is not the commonsensically grasped self" (Hannay, 1998, p. 336); rather, it is a process of becoming, or being transformed, decision by decision, into the particular self that one was created to be. The idea is not that there is some ideal, located in the distant future, that one is trying to attain; rather, the idea is that in every moment one is challenged to be aware of the self that is moving itself in a certain direction, as if in response to a call that one cannot comprehend, but for which one may listen. Thus, the self moves itself into the prospect of its own, distinctive goodness, with the trust that it has the power to do so, albeit imperfectly, when it is in touch with the power of God.

In summary, Anti-Climacus holds that all people are living beings who (ordinarily) have the capacity to become increasingly self-conscious and self-determining (SUD). Persons who are engaged in this creative process – and are doing well at it – seem to discover themselves as much as they choose themselves. Each person is a spirit; as a spirit, the person is privy to the eternal, and this eternal dimension of the self allows for the possibility of aligning oneself with God. At the same time, each person is an earthly being

who must manage the process of her own becoming within the realm of temporality, never knowing for sure that she is on the right track, yet always asking the question. The self that chooses faith is in the best position to accept and work effectively with the structure of its own being – its actuality (the past), its possibility (the future), the freedom to realize possibilities (the present), and dependence upon God” (Taylor, 1975, pp. 160-161).

### Rogers

Rogers (1959) views the self as the human organism’s symbolic representation of itself. The personal, self-actualizing tendency is the regenerative, internal dynamism that orients a person toward the realization of her optimal potential (Rogers, 1959; Rogers 1980). It is constructive and uplifting; it seeks to take the person toward growth and development. Every person has the basic tendency; that is, every person is inherently becoming a distinctive, developed organism (Rogers, 1959; Rogers, 1980; Bozarth, 1998; Brodley, 2011). Every person’s specific way of actualizing (some of) her potential will yield a unique, differentiated self.

Rogers (1959) states that *self*, *concept of self*, and *self-structure* are synonymous. For him, the self is a gestalt; it is a composition of experienced symbols. The self is a configuration by which one part of an organism effectively sets itself apart from other parts of the organism, other organisms, and the rest of the universe, while viewing all of these factors as operating in relation to each other. As Rogers (1959) puts it,

*Self, Concept of self*, [and] *Self-structure* . . . refer to the organized, consistent conceptual gestalt composed of perceptions of the characteristics of the “I” or “me” and the perceptions of the relationships of the “I” or “me” to others and to various aspects of life, together with the values attached to these perceptions. . . It is a fluid and changing gestalt, a process. (p. 200)

The self is a representation of an organism's subjective experience, conceived in relation to what is experienced as other than self (Rogers, 1959). The self's experiences are the data that permit a person to project an image of herself that appears to be consistent with what she knows to be true. Some aspects of a person's existence – some of what is conditioning her subjective experience – can be beyond a person's awareness; it can be unconscious (Rogers, 1959). In that case, it will not be definitive of the self. Furthermore, people commonly respond to stimuli in ways that do not come to their conscious awareness (Rogers, 1959). For example, we may instinctively respond to a threat without spending time identifying what we are feeling. Accordingly, a person may behave in a way that suggests (at least to others) that a particular stimulus has impinged on her experience, but without the person being aware of that stimulus or its effects. Rogers (1959) describes this ability of the organism to be affected by various factors, without these effects entering into the gestalt of the self, as subception; some part of the organismic system triggers a behavior of which the self may not even be conscious.

Furthermore, persons generally act, in part, in reaction to what is in their awareness and thus is their consciousness of self. For Rogers (1959), perception and consciousness, or awareness, are both constitutive of the self, but the two concepts differ in the broadness of what they describe. Awareness encapsulates symbolic representations of internal or external stimuli and the significance these symbols have for the organism. With awareness, symbolic representations and their meanings emerge "as memory traces, visceral changes, and the like" (Rogers, 1959, p. 199). Perception nonetheless is a narrower term and stresses the significance of a particular stimulus for a given part of an organismic process in a specific moment in

time. A perception is defined as the “construction from our past experience and a hypothesis or prognosis for the future” (Rogers, 1959, p. 199).

The self-concept is organized around “the perceptions of ‘I’ or ‘me’ and the perceptions of the relationships of the ‘I’ or ‘me’ to others and to various aspects of life, together with the values attached to these perceptions” (Rogers, 1959, p. 200). For example, if a person is told she is not trustworthy, her organism is required to make sense of the information. The meaning of the experience and how it is integrated into her self-concept has infinite possibilities. Most likely, she generally reflects on whether she has been trustworthy in the past, but she also considers the history of this specific relationship. Maybe she acts in ways that are not trustworthy to this person, in particular. Possibly she was dishonest in the past but is no longer so. Maybe the accuser is the one that is not trustworthy. Maybe the statement was a joke. The history and memory of this person converge with the possibilities of the next moment or moments, both internally and in the relationship, and she uses knowledge from the past to inform herself about possible upcoming moments. Thus she organizes her self-concept. An experience has to be brought to consciousness and integrated into the gestalt. It is the person’s own understanding and constructive interpretation of what is in her own awareness that *is* her particular self.

The construct of the self is always changing. From moment to moment, the self may be experienced and represented in various ways. Rogers (1959) notes that a client may leave a counseling session feeling confident and armed with new skills, only to return to the next session unable to use those same skills. This changeability of the organism indicates that, although the human organism has a built-in tendency to realize growth and development, this actualization is not a given; rather, it is something

that must be achieved. It is achieved, in part, by becoming conscious of and choosing to conceive in a certain way what one is experiencing. The person's existence is not a compilation of building blocks that are stacked up, one atop the other, but rather an organism that is characterized by the influx of experiences and a changing sense of what those experiences mean.

Like Anti-Climacus, Rogers (1959) accentuates the significance of the growth of explicit awareness, and consciousness of the self in relation to the world beyond the self, for the realization of a person's potential. Anti-Climacus requires individuals to be conscious of themselves before God (SUD). Awareness of the self is an ongoing, motivated activity that, one must realize, is fundamentally dependent on something beyond the self. Similarly, Rogers (1959) develops the ideas of self and subjectivity. Subjectivity refers to a person's internal frame of reference, which implies an awareness of being in relationship to factors that lie beyond the self. The *internal frame of reference* encompasses everything that a person can be aware of in a given moment, within the self and beyond the self, but noticeably affecting the construction of the self in some way. "It includes the full range of sensations, perceptions, meanings, and memories" (Rogers, 1959, p. 210). The *ideal self*, for Rogers (1959), is an idea that can become part of a person's internal frame of reference; it is a concept that creates a conscious relationship between the presently experienced self and possibilities for future versions of the self. Interestingly, the self is, in part, its conception of the future that is possible for itself.

Rogers (1959) says that

Optimal psychological adjustment exists when the concept of the [present and future] self is such that all experiences are or may be assimilated on a symbolic level into the gestalt of the self structure. Optimal psychological adjustment is thus synonymous with complete congruence of self and experience, or complete openness to



experience. On the practical level, improvement in psychological adjustment is equivalent to progress toward this end point. (p. 18)

Rogers does not, like Kierkegaard (SUD; WOL), speak of becoming as nothing in the hands of God, but the end result of being increasingly open to experience and accepting of one's experience is similar: both enable a person to "find herself" in the midst of what is happening to her, and experience a vibrant life that is governed by trust and hope, rather than by fear.

### **Summary**

Both Kierkegaard and Rogers can be said to view the person holistically – as a complex activity that can, under certain circumstances, yield the experiences of being on target relative to some ideal, and enjoying an increased fullness of life in tending toward that ideal. Through *Anti-Climacus*, Kierkegaard presents a spiritual self that includes but also transcends the psychological and physical systems (SUD). *Anti-Climacus* envisions God as something that lies beyond the self and is in interaction with the self, giving rise to the possibility of new experiences of the self. God is the ground of reality as such. God is that by virtue of which all self-choosing and evolving, all experience, and all true fulfillment is possible. The eternal requires the self to both acknowledge real limits and choose in light of what is really possible for the self, where that which is possible (and that which can possibly yield human fulfillment) is conceived in terms of the concept of God.

Rogers (1959), too, speaks of an ideal self. He implies that this ideal is not simply a projection of the imagination, at a given point in time, but is a real possibility – a unique possibility for each self. That is, he argues that there is a state of openness and wholeness which, if realized or approximated, yields the ongoing experience of a free and satisfying human life. Rogers helpfully maintains that it is the total organism that receives inputs,

responds, and becomes conscious of how it is responding. In what follows, I use Rogers's organismic imagery to re-read and represent aspects of Anti-Climacus's concept of the self. If I interpret Kierkegaard's active and deliberate synthesis of the finite and the infinite through an organismic lens, then my understanding of the will is transformed. No longer is the will merely a self-directive act of the mind, a function of only one part of the self. Rather, the will and acts of the will are activities of the whole being, which is in constant interaction with its environment.

In discussing the challenge of honest self-integration, I am reminded of my experience of Christian meditation. In this form of meditation, a person opens to and reconnects with his or her core. The core is considered a mysterious depth that was created by God and is intended to become consciously aligned with God. Laurence Freeman (1989), Benedictine monk and Director of The World Community for Christian Meditation, states the following:

This is what meditation is about: being who we are by accepting the gift of our own being. Through prayer we are empowered to live as the unique and valued self that God has created from nothing, to know, love and serve him and to be happy with him in eternity. By being simply who we are, not by trying to be what we are not, we discover that perfection is not justification by the law of religious conformity. It is realizing our Christ-given potential . . . .  
(p. 67)

The process of meditation requires attention from the entire organism. The body must be alert but still. One's only task, in each moment, is to experience one's body and the whole of one's self in a way that does not inhibit one's opening to the loving core and its infinite ground. Distractions come in the form of thoughts. In the settling of the mind and body, one has the opportunity to become more aware of one's center and the vibrant source of that center. In the process of meditation, one does not seek spiritual

epiphanies in the form of concepts or images that provide sources of entertainment or inspiration. These types of realizations are also distractions from connecting with the true core of one's being.

Managing the tension between the finite and the infinite, and acknowledging the eternal within, while also engaging in the temporal world, and striving in that world to be who God intends one to be, seems to demand that a person be open to what he or she is experiencing – that a person open herself to what is happening, or what has already happened, and open herself to the possibility of integrating whatever that is into the gestalt of her self. This act of opening can be interpreted as a centering in whatever that power is, within the self, which makes it possible for one to become oneself and integrate all of one's experiences into one's experience of self. Rogers's theory helps explicate Kierkegaard's concept of the self in a way that more adequately indicates, in my view, the complete experience of the finite human being accepting herself in the conscious awareness of her infinite source.

## CHAPTER II

### THE NATURAL INCLINATION TO BECOME MORE FULLY ONESELF

#### Introduction

Rogers and Anti-Climacus have similar ideas about what it means to be a person. Most notably, both thinkers identify a motivating factor inherent in every person: the power of finite freedom or self-actualization. There is a sense in which the person is naturally oriented toward greater fullness of being and greater consciousness of the conditions and the possibility of this fullness. The person is also destined to become aware, at times, that she has gotten off track. Both thinkers discuss the self-determining choices that a person is impelled to make – either for good or for ill. Each moment is a point in time where the conditions of the past and the present converge with the imagined possibilities of the future. Whether these thoughts about the future are hypotheses about what will likely happen or they simply reflect an openness to the task of facing whatever happens, the past and possible future merge, and they present the opportunity for choice.

This chapter analyzes the self's natural disposition to become more fully itself or more whole. If a person does not experience a general tendency toward greater fullness of life, this is an indication that something has gone awry in his or her personal development or something detrimental has occurred in his or her social milieu. First, I discuss Rogers's concept of congruence. Second, I bring Anti-Climacus's emphasis on self-consciousness and the eternal into the conversation about congruence. Third, I consider despair as a form of incongruence. Finally, I bring Kierkegaard's duty to love (as expressed in *Works of Love* (WOL), to which Kierkegaard assigned his

own name) into the dialogue on the question of how to overcome incongruence and increase one's experience of self-actualization.

### **Rogers's Congruence**

Rogers's theory of personality asserts that every person has the ability to enjoy congruence, even though there are plenty of factors that make congruence difficult to achieve. Rogers (1959) asserts:

*Congruence, [or] congruence of self and experience*, . . . is a basic concept . . . in which the individual appears to be revising his concept of self to bring it into congruence with his experience, accurately symbolized. . . . when self-experiences are accurately symbolized, and are included in the self-concept in this accurately symbolized form, then the state is one of congruence of self and experience. (pp. 205-206)

He continues:

If this were completely true of all self-experiences, the individual would be a fully functioning person . . . . If it is true of some specific aspect of experience, such as the individuals' experience in a given relationship or in a given moment of time, then we can say that the individual is to this degree in a state of congruence. Other terms which are in a general way synonymous are these: integrated, whole, genuine. (p. 206)

Congruence is when a person experiences her own organism in the same way that it could objectively be perceived. She constructs her self-concept from material that really happened. Her perception of self, as self-concept, is informed by the self as her "own significant social other" (Rogers, 1959, p. 224) and/or another self. Ideally, a person conceives of her self to this point and also the self she is in the process of becoming as unconditionally valued and prized, whether or not she has received unconditional prizing from others. Her self-affirming self-concept is congruent with her organismic experience. If she is genuine in her self-concept, she experiences freedom in her way of being. If there is a dissonance between the organismic experience, the perceived reality of an experience, and the self-concept, then a person experiences incongruence. It can lead the

self to value in or about itself something that is partial, or something that is actually inconsistent with its self-actualizing tendency.

If a person prizes herself or is prized by others in ways that are not satisfying to the organism as a whole – in ways that do not open the self to the conscious integration of all new experiences – the self develops conditional forms of self-affirmation, which stand in tension with the experience of unconditional, whole-organism affirmation (Rogers, 1959). As a result of this conditioned affirmation, a person's self-actualizing tendency is inhibited; it cannot serve, as it ideally does, as a touchstone to goodness. It is never demolished; Rogers (1980) claims that as long as an organism is living, the self-actualizing tendency is at work and difficulties can be negotiated. However, in order for a self to function fully, there must be congruence between this tendency toward wholeness and the actual experience of self (Rogers, 1959). If someone is fully functioning, her self-actualizing is uninhibited, and she has the experience of living into her unique potential through time (Rogers 1959; Rogers 1980).

Rogers envisions a process by which an organism engages in the unconditional affirmation of its basic openness to experience (Rogers 1959). This way of living out of one's conscious, self-actualizing center can be contrasted with a way of living more out of one's intellect and viewing one's experience in either "absolute" terms or in complete abstraction (Rogers, 1959, p. 205). A person who genuinely affirms her actualizing potential, is able, in any given moment, to balance the facts grounded in reality with the possibilities of her imagined future, and then act according to this openness to an integrated experience. Rogers seems to be describing a relationship between finitude and infinitude similar to Anti-Climacus. Both Rogers and Anti-Climacus recognize the need to maintain a fruitful tension between

actuality and possibility, grounded in the experience of the spirit of self-actualization.

Creating a balance between actuality and possibility, and living in a way that yields self-actualization, can be a complex achievement. It tends to be limited by a variety of social, environmental, or biological factors. Brodley (2011) states that “the circumstances lived by many persons, probably most persons, are not appropriate for full development of many of their potentialities” (p. 159). Many people’s social situations make it likely that they will experience considerable incongruence between their self-experience and complete organismic experience. Warner (2011), a developmental psychologist and practicing person-centered clinician, argues that trauma and/or a dysfunctional social world can create limiting conditions for self-actualization. For example, Warner (2005) describes a process where an individual who failed to experience empathy from caretakers as a child, as an adult seems to experience struggles in dealing with her experience. An adult who had a difficult upbringing may “have difficulty starting and stopping experiences that are personally significant or emotionally connected” (Warner, 2005, p. 11). Similarly, Kierkegaard recognizes the individual’s vulnerability on a social level (WOL). A person’s choices can be constrained by past experiences that leave their mark on her way of looking at the world and herself. In short, it is quite common for a person’s potential for self-actualization to be stunted. However, Rogers and Kierkegaard both argue that in every moment there are new choices to be made about how to relate to these conditions and limits.

### **Anti-Climacus’s Despair and Consciousness**

Anti-Climacus’s holds that one can experience despair in not being conscious of the self as a finitely free activity of relating itself to itself and

being responsible for itself (SUD). A person who is without reflective self-awareness tends to get lost in immediacy – a mode of being that is “completely dominated by sensate and the sensate-physical” (SUD, p. 43). She tends to be interested only in whether some finite object is pleasurable or not.

Ironically, with increased self-consciousness come more complex forms of despair. For example, Anti-Climacus describes one form of despair as a state of being willing to be oneself, but being too focused, in one’s self-envisioning, on either the earthly or the infinite (SUD). He describes also a state of willing to be a self – but being unwilling to be the self that one is “primitively intended” to be (SUD, p. 33). Anti-Climacus describes various forms of despair in gradation. The growth of self-consciousness brings with it the growth of transformative possibilities; yet there is no guarantee that one will awaken to one’s despair and choose a different path.

Generally speaking, despair is a consequence of not being conscious of the self as spirit, and not choosing the self as spirit (SUD, p. 42-74). In the absence of proper self-consciousness and choice, the self experiences alienation of its current self from its ideal self, where the latter is understood, not as a mere mental projection, and not as a finished product, but as the ongoing activity of realizing the self whom God has called one to become, and doing so in view of who one currently is. A person can become conscious of herself as spirit, but nonetheless despair of the eternal within; she can fail to trust that her future is, indeed, open to choices, and she has the power, with the help of God, to choose herself anew.

A person who pays special attention to the eternal, yet despairs of its power to help her transform her life can keep this despair so contained that the person becomes self-consumed and tragically closes in on herself (SUD,



pp. 60-67). In this circumstance, the eternal ceases to function as that which continually makes it possible for the self to begin again. Whether one despairs over the earthly or over the eternal, a person basically misunderstands the sort of being she is and the idea of the particular being she is intended to become. She suffers loss inasmuch as she fails to experience herself as being “transparent” to the power that established her.

On the basis of my professional experience, I agree with Anti-Climacus that most psychological and spiritual suffering occurs as a result of a failure to affirm oneself as the particular self whom one is potentiated and destined to become, and the failure to *live* with others out of the experience of radical openness to this life and to the possibility of full self-actualization. Suffering occurs when one operates with a truncated view of the self, often formed by reliance on the mistaken opinions of others, and one repeatedly makes choices that reflect this misunderstanding, causing one to fall away from the experience of being centered or “on target.”

For Anti-Climacus, when a person recognizes the self as spirit, she is opened to the possibility of faith (SUD). In faith, the self deliberately relates itself to God as its source. If one becomes aware of the fact that one stands before God, both empowered and held accountable by God, but one is nonetheless unwilling to be the self whom one is called to become, then one enters deeper and deeper into the territory of sin (SUD). One may experience despair in the *form* of sin. Moreover, one may despair *over* one’s sin: here the self is aware of its moral failure and the fact that it cannot rescue itself from the cumulative effects of its failure. One may trust in God’s grace and mercy as compelling answers to the problem of one’s sinfulness; but one may alternatively despair over the possibility of the forgiveness of sins. One may go so far as to denounce Christianity or the possibility that, despite one’s

repeated failure, it is possible by virtue of the power of God to be renewed in one's journey toward selfhood. In this case, the self recognizes itself as spirit, and it is conscious of God as designer and purported savior, but chooses to pronounce all of this untrue.

### **Despair is Incongruence**

All of these forms of despair could be characterized as forms of incongruence. Recall the basic definition of the self provided by Anti-Climacus: an activity that relates itself (its current way of synthesizing the finite and the infinite) to itself (an ideal mode of synthesizing the finite and the infinite, which is to be approximated in every moment of choice) (SUD). In relating itself to itself, in a way that reflects the grace of God, the current self is opened naturally to its own beatitude.

In all types of despair one can find the presence of anxiety (SUD). Rogers too used the word anxiety to explain the experience of incongruence. Anxiety, for Rogers (1959), is the state of the organism/person when there is a disconnect between the current self and the prospect of a more complete or fulfilled organism – a blockage of some kind. This strain is not yet consciously known, in anxiety, but it is impinging on awareness. If this tension is not allowed to come into complete awareness, the self-structure will organize in a way that is incongruent with the good of the organism as whole. As a result, the person could be described as experiencing “psychological maladjustment” (Rogers, 1959, p. 204).

For both Anti-Climacus and Rogers, the self is manifested – to itself – as a self that may often be anxious and have trouble integrating its experiences, but is destined for such integration, and it realizes itself to the extent that it freely wills to be itself and thus “rests transparently in the power that establishes it” (SUD, 14). In each moment, a person has the

opportunity to choose between being herself or effectively avoiding herself, her past, and her unique, personal destiny. In each moment, the past informs the present and the future, but it does not dictate them. A person is not imprisoned by moments from the past nor is she to feel constrained and thus diminished by the self she is created to become. Instead, she is invited to realize that the self she is called to become is the same self that she most wants to become – the self that she will experience and conceive as complete and vibrant.

Anti Climacus argues that the self can and ought to take responsibility for its own becoming (SUD). This responsibility is what (in principle) defines humanity. A typical human being is set apart from other animals in her ability to imagine her future self and to choose, each moment, to approximate her own best self in light of ongoing reflection on who she has been to this point, and a growing consciousness of God as the hidden ground of her being.

### **Overcoming Incongruence**

Anti-Climacus indicates that every self has the unconditional love of God – and thus an invitation to love self and others, in turn – at the core of its being (SUD). If we pursue anything in life apart from a consciousness of this fact, we are bound to experience incongruence between who we think we are and the self we are intended to become.

Anti-Climacus defines God as the criterion of the self (SUD, pp. 79-82). In other words, God's life-giving and creative intentions for the self are the standard for the self's full realization. Rogers (1959) defines the self-actualizing tendency as the criterion for the organismic valuing process. The connection between the idea of God and the idea of a self-actualizing tendency is worth examining. In both cases, the self relates itself to itself, while always relating itself to another; in the process, it may discover a

particular other that surprisingly communicates something of what makes it possible for the self to be and to become more fully itself. In relating to certain others, the self has the chance to experience a reflection and a confirmation of its fundamental value.

Rogers (1959) describes the self as always relating to that which is other than itself, as it experiences the gestalt of self. In relating itself to another, the self tends to see itself partly from the other's point of view. Inasmuch as it integrates the other's view of the self into its gestalt, the other becomes a dimension of the self. There is at least the possibility of the receipt of positive regard and valuing. Out of this possibility grows the related possibility of increased congruence and self-affirmation.

We are always relating ourselves to others. Accordingly, we are always seeking to coordinate others' views of the self and their appraisal of the self with our own perception and experience of the self. It is part of our own, organismic process to relate ourselves to ourselves as we encounter ourselves partly in the eyes of others. In order to be congruent as an entire organism, however, without conditions of worth, we must relate the self to something or someone that communicates unconditional love. This unconditional love can be experienced as coming from other persons; however, it is best if we can get to the point where we regularly experience unconditional self-affirmation, alone and in at least some of our relationships with others, despite the fact that other people from our past or in our present may affirm the self only in conditional ways – or may not affirm it at all.

Anti-Climacus holds that God is the only source of true unconditionality (SUD). If God is held to be the unconditional source of love at the root of every self, then whenever we related ourselves to others, who project to us their images and evaluations of us, we are in fact relating to

something complex: we are relating to the finite perceptions of others, but we are relating also to the notion of a power of unconditional love within them, whose nature is to project unconditional love to others. We can choose, then, to attend to this unconditional love and to affirm its affirmation of us, despite the fact that the person to whom we are relating may be quite limited in his or her current ability to love us.

In summary, Rogers's organismic valuing process can be considered parallel to Anti-Climacus's activity of self-becoming. In both cases, the organism or self has a motivating tendency that pulls a self toward new possibilities. We can think of this as a built-in tendency – something that is inherent in the human being by virtue of its humanity. Or we can take a further step mentally and think of this inherent tendency as being created by God, and created for a reason, namely to guide each person toward her full humanity. We can look at the actualizing tendency as a reflection of the power of God. Here Rogers's and Anti-Climacus's language collides. God and the actualizing tendency are both described as the criterion for the self's process of becoming and relating.

#### A Vignette

Consider a story that exemplifies the idea that a human being has the ability, in every moment, to respond to the conditions of life in a way that moves from incongruence toward congruence – or involves taking responsibility for what she has done and what she must do in the future to become more happily herself, informed by a searching awareness of God. A female colleague and I worked as fellow clinicians and supervisors of an urban residential facility, where we provided individual and group therapy to children and adolescents in the child welfare system. This woman identified as a Christian, and over time she came to believe that she had a special gift

of “hearing.” This gift included an openness to understanding God’s will for others, discernment, wisdom, etc. She viewed her role as a psychologist as a calling. Her career was intertwined with this gift of hearing, and she worked daily to understand the struggles of her clients and the staff.

One day, this colleague’s ears became plugged, and she experienced a dizzy spell that left her nauseous and unable to function for two days. Sinus infections were common to her, but the ringing and dizziness did not cease under the influence of antibiotics. Even though the nausea soon passed, the disorienting ringing and dizziness persisted for six months. Something was happening in her entire organism that required a serious self-assessment and re-adjustment. Consulting with physicians, praying, changing her diet, and getting more sleep all failed to eliminate the symptoms. The interventions inspired by rational thought sometimes reduced the ringing and dizziness, but did not fully alleviate them. Thus, the difficulty hearing became a condition that influenced her entire life; in order to hear others clearly and thus respond to them well, she would have to alter her physical body and, perhaps, go beyond that.

My colleague began reading about and pursuing a way of being that sought increased awareness of the presence of God. In this season of confusion about what was going on with her body, and strain in doing her job with a serious disability, my colleague sought actively to understand God’s will for her and accept it gracefully. She found herself talking about the condition of her ears with many people. Friends and strangers were moved to offer prayers of intervention. This colleague was most often the person on whom others relied to listen and console. The symptoms in her ears required her to come out of her comfort zone, so to speak, and open herself with greater vulnerability to receiving help from others. While I would describe

this colleague as a woman of faith before, during, and after the time of ear ringing and dizziness, her dramatic change in bodily condition become an aspect of her finitude to which she responded with increasing curiosity about her destiny and the form that her contributions to humanity would now take. She went imaginatively into her core self, a self that is capable of managing the finite and the infinite, a self that she felt was originally designed by God and given for a purpose. My colleague, in her crying out to God, confused and frustrated, learned that her ability to “hear” God is not as reliant as she had thought upon her physical ability to hear. The loss of hearing and consequential psychological reactions required my colleague to re-organize her self-concept. In envisioning her future with the new physical limitations, she evaluated her organism in its entirety, and re-created a more complex, integrated self-structure that included her physical abilities and intended spirit.

It seems that my colleague had certain beliefs about her capacity for communication and hearing, in relation to other persons and to God. She had come to accept herself and her value largely in light of her special gifts of discernment. Her debilitated organism, however, “told” her that there was something incongruent between the person she had been to this point and the limitations that she now suffered. As the physical manifestations led to a symbolic self-representation that was inconsistent with her previous way of representing herself, she seized upon this opportunity to imagine something different for herself, a deeper form of hearing and understanding. Her organism increased consciousness over the several months, and she was able to become more and more congruent with a different way of being, a different process of communication. Her entire organism was reaching for a new level of understanding.

As my colleague assessed her perceptions of her loss of hearing, she became increasingly conscious of her organismic ability to “hear” God. She held on to that realization in her entire being. I would argue that, during this process, her organism integrated the new information that came to her through her debilitation, along with the new information that came to her from the help of others. In this process, she reorganized her self-concept in a way that was more congruent with her present experience and also opened her up to a new mode of being. While she did not articulate a change in her therapeutic relationships, other than the need to shift her body to improve hearing, I speculate that her attention to her client’s entire organismic presentation increased; verbal communication became only one of many ways to have contact between two organisms and transfer understanding and acceptance. With more time, the dizziness and difficulty in hearing other people subsided, and in light of her evolved self, the ability to clearly hear other people communicate became a newly received gift that was not necessary but a source of delight. As my colleague allowed for her actualizing tendency to freely motivate her organism, her capability to love herself, God, and another was transformed.

According to Thorne (2002), the innate ability to love is at the core of a person’s ability to actualize her full potential. Here “love” refers especially to an affirmation of the whole organism, which allows it to open to experience and respond with trust and flexibility to new situations. The conventional love that we receive from other persons often leads to judgment, rejection, and abuse. The ability to give and receive genuine love, despite the wounds of the past, is “evidence of human resilience and creativity . . . . [It] demonstrate[s] the capacity of the human spirit to be re-born to new hope and new possibilities. The determining factor, it seems, is the quality of



relationship they are offered and the chance to discover their own innate ability to love” (p. 15). Thorne describes human life as a project that is perpetually unfinished. He conceives of this unfinished-ness, however, as a gift not a curse. To access the power of unconditional self-affirmation is to grow in the direction of flourishing. “Could it be that hope for the evolution of the human race depends upon an ability to catch the movements of love within ourselves and within others and to ensure that they are never squandered no matter how difficult it may be to give them expression or to receive them without fear?” (Thorne, 2002, p. 17).

Thorne (2002) argues that despair is evident in many of the ways that we treat ourselves and others, and in many of the ways that our societies operate. Thorne appreciates Rogers’s attention to the prevalence of despair in human life. Thorne describes despair as a mode of indifference resulting from fear, defensive tendencies, and simply having “little sense of our own worth” (p. 12). A person who is cut off from the source of her own vibrant life suffers isolation and becomes destructive toward herself or others. The despair of this situation can be remedied only by re-prizing the self as unique and ever-unfolding – by responding to self and others in a way that respects and celebrates their common humanity.

### Love of Self

#### Works of Love – Duty to Love Self

In *Works of Love*, we see a related similarity between Kierkegaard’s view of love and Rogers’s view of congruence. “You Shall Love” (WOL, pp. 17-43). Kierkegaard claims that the command to love is an eternal law (WOL). It is the law at the heart of the universe, and it demands obedience from humans. It is the law given by God, and it signals that a person has a duty to love God, self, and others, whether she feels like it, at a given moment, or not.

The entire text of *Works of Love* specifies what it means to follow this unconditional duty or what the fulfillment of this duty might look like. Actions completed out of obedience to the law of love are by definition works of love. The command “You Shall Love” will be explicated so that the command can be understood as it relates Kierkegaard’s conception of the self, as articulated by Anti-Climacus in *The Sickness unto Death*.

The phrase “You Shall Love” is drawn from the Great Commandment found in the Gospel of Matthew, Chapter 22. This commandment has two parts: (1) love God “with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind” (ref. WOL, p. 19) and (2) “love your neighbor as yourself” (ref. WOL, p. 17). A person must awaken to the presence of God at the ground of the self, and to the unconditionality of God’s love for her and for every other self, before she can grasp the unconditionality of the *demand* to love. This awakening can be described as a becoming increasingly conscious of God as the source of goodness and the source of the true affirmation of goodness, whose nature is to demand the further recognition and affirmation of goodness. Kierkegaard claims that a person has a false or reduced way of being until she experiences an internal change that is associated with submission to the eternal source and demand of love within. A person’s attempts to be an ethical person are seriously limited until she becomes consciously related to the eternal. In entering a life of faith, a person becomes more than she previously experienced herself to be; a person realizes that she is bound for more than she previously imagined possible (WOL, pp. 19-27).

As a result of this encounter with God, a person becomes conscious of being responsible for fulfilling the law of love in her own, unique way. The law to love is fulfilled in two parts, as described above. First, individuals are

to love God with all their being. To love God is to approach God with complete reverence, adoration, trust, and obedience. Recognizing, accepting, and believing in Christ as savior is essential to this kind of love, from Kierkegaard's perspective. People are not necessarily loving on their own or by their own limited power; they need a savior to teach them how to give and receive love beyond the bounds of their self-preoccupation and sin. A person is to love God for saving her in this sense and for offering her the opportunity for a unique destiny, which she can discover through an ongoing relationship with God (WOL, pp. 19-27).

Recall the definition of faith from *The Sickness unto Death*: to will to live in accordance with God and acceptance of God's grace, or to will to become the self whom God has created and called one to become. The self is nothing more – and nothing less – than an ongoing activity that is intended to become an unconditional lover. Fulfillment of the first part of the law is a matter of recognizing the goodness of God and becoming “as nothing” in the hands of God (WOL, pp. 44-60, 264-279). It is also a matter of opening oneself to the God who is the ground of everything. It is a matter of opening to God's demands, and it is also a matter of opening to the gracious power by which the fulfillment of these demands become possible. In opening oneself to God and becoming as nothing in the hands of God, one is being her authentic self.

The second part of the commandment, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (ref. WOL, p. 17), has two intertwining elements: love of self and love of others. It implies that a person must love herself in order to love another. More specifically, Kierkegaard says that a person must learn to love herself in the right way (WOL, pp. 22-23). What he means is that a person must learn to love herself fundamentally in her humanity, as a creation of

God who is intended to become a lover: a person who answers, as a matter of obedience, to the command to love. All people are essentially the same in this respect, and all are worthy of being affirmed and also served on account of what they hold in common. All humans are properly regarded as neighbors. Thus, ideally, “. . . the neighbor comes as close to self-love as possible” (WOL, p. 21). The neighbor, to clarify, can include friends, lovers, or family members, but it also includes every other human being whom one encounters or could possibly encounter; neighbor-love has no preferences, and it knows no conditions. The self is a neighbor to itself, just as it is a neighbor to others. To love yourself and your neighbor, for Kierkegaard, you must love God and let God serve as the ground and the essential reality of the love relationship (WOL, pp. 19-39).

Quinn (1998) addresses the duty to love. He connects it to Anti-Climacus’s discussion of despair and faith:

. . . one who is in despair cleaves to a particular finite and temporal good with an infinite passion only properly directed to an eternal good. The only security against being in despair is to undergo the change of eternity by investing infinite passion in the eternal and in obedience to the Law of eternity. (p. 356)

Quinn reiterates the importance of viewing self and others as created in the image of God (pp. 364-365). Part of what is included in the image of God is a deep, built-in connection to the reality of God. The sense of being, along with everyone else, the recipient of infinite and unconditional love is inseparable from the recognition that one is bound, along with everyone else, by the duty to extend this love to others.

Andic (1999) develops the ideas of self-love and neighbor-love with reference to Kierkegaard’s concept of redoubling. To love your neighbor as yourself, you must first recognize yourself as something that is fundamentally lovable and actually loved. In other words, you must view

yourself as a spirit before God and believe that you are perceived by God as a being with exquisite possibilities. You must choose to believe in and acknowledge the constant presence of God in yourself. But in doing this, you just *will* recognize the same thing sin everyone else. In loving yourself in the right way, you will find yourself doing the same thing in relation to others. If you do not, then this will be evidence that you are loving yourself in the wrong way.

Referring to *The Sickness unto Death* (pp. 13-14) and drawing on the concept of redoubling found in *Works of Love*, Andic (1999) explains that:

. . . to become oneself is to become spirit, relating oneself subjectively to all that one temporally is, but to oneself as spirit transparently related to God by God who is relationship. Kierkegaard would therefore say that it is not oneself that redoubles a human being but God; or rather it is the Divine that redoubles itself in someone who consents that it be done in one and thus becomes nothing but this consent. The spirit or deeper self that one is to become is the other and the doubling of one's natural self, and you whom the Divine has called into being and to whom it forever speaks. It is the image of the Divine in one, the possibility of relationship with it and through it with every other human being as one's neighbor and equal before it. (p. 21)

To be spirit is to be grounded in the love of God and a reflection of that love, a walking manifestation of it.

Being transparent to the love of God is both an active and a passive process (Andic 1999, p. 26). Actively, a person must detach from the world, from the temporal, in the sense of recognizing that the temporal is (merely) what it is; it is not properly made the object of one's infinite devotion. Such devotion could only and always disappoint. Detaching from the world also requires actively submitting to God, confiding in God, resting in God, and believing in the eternal possibilities through God. Passively, a person experiences God's love being revealed in his or her life; he or she becomes a medium of the movement of God in and through her. Andic (1999) urges that

this passivity is important because it allows one to pass the love that one has received from God on to others. Thus, by receiving God's love, choosing to be a lover, and surrendering to the indwelling presence of God, a person loves herself truly, and she is poised to experience her life as a unique person with distinctive purpose.

In summary, Kierkegaard's emphasis on "you shall love" encompasses love of God, self, and neighbor. To be fully oneself as defined by Kierkegaard, one must recognize God as the source of life and source of one's own, unique self. When one acknowledges God at the source of the self, one affirms what is most essential about oneself. And this becomes the foundation for a life journey in which one seeks, one day at a time, to live out the implications of being a subject of God's infinite and unconditional love. Through embracing the eternal within oneself, one is potentiated to embrace the same things within others. One loves oneself and others in the same way and at the same time, such that one is being oneself, becoming oneself, and loving others in their process of being and becoming (Andic, 1999, p. 28).

#### Works of Love – Assessment of the Self

In essence, both the act of self-affirmation and the act of answering to the call of one's destiny are works of love. Kierkegaard offers insight into how to assess if someone is in the process of becoming her authentic self – if her works of love are rooted in an adequate affirmation of herself and her potential. *The Sickness unto Death* and *Works of Love* both provide guidelines for such an evaluation.

In *The Sickness unto Death*, Anti-Climacus points to the transformative power of a person's explicit God-consciousness:

. . . the consciousness of the self is within the category of the human self, or the self whose criterion is man. But this self takes on a new quality and qualification by being a self directly before God. . . . And what infinite reality the self

gains by being conscious of existing before God, by becoming a human self whose criterion is God! . . . The criterion for the self is always: that directly before which it is a self, but this in turn is the definition of 'criterion.' Just as only entities of the same kind can be added, so everything is qualitatively that by which it is measured, and that which is its qualitative criterion is ethically its goal; the criterion and the goal are what define something . . . . (p. 79)

The criterion and the goal of the self are the same. They are both God.

All elements of the self, in this view, point in some way toward God.

First, the tension in the polarities of selfhood leaves a person striving for equilibrium, the management of the earthly and the spiritual. The best possibilities of one's life, in each moment, come from an awareness of one's limits and one's possibilities, along with an awareness that God can make the seemingly impossible possible. Second, willing to be the self involves recognizing the self as spirit, created in the image of God and called to submit to God and thus become transparent to the source of life. Finally, the resting in God as the source of all life is an affirming of the self as fundamentally affirmed by God. God is the common denominator of each aspect of the self and serves as the primary reference point for becoming one's best self.

In *Works of Love*, Kierkegaard says that a person's love can be assessed only by attending to its source. The source of genuine love is God, and God is the Absolute. Thus, there is nothing conditional about the love that is – and reflects – the reality of God. If, for example, one ceases to love another person as a child of God, then this is an indication that one has never loved her as a neighbor, for neighbor-love is everlasting. There is no change in others or in the self that can ever justify the withdrawal of unconditional love (WOL, pp. 5-16). The same cannot be said for all forms of love; but the concern here is with a form of love that is understood precisely as a manifestation of the perfect goodness of God.

Kierkegaard's stages or spheres of existence can serve as a tool for reflecting on whether one currently loves humans in a way that reveals the mystery at the heart of one's being (Glenn, 1987; Taylor, 1975). There are three stages of existence: the aesthetic, the ethical, and the religious. As a self develops and differentiates, it will ideally progress through all three stages. It will not leave the aesthetic and the ethical behind altogether, but these modes of being will slowly be transformed as one achieves a growing awareness of God's love and its unconditional demand. As a self becomes more conscious of itself before God, it becomes increasingly aware of its dependence on God. Whether a person has realized her dependence may not be obvious from the outside, from the perspective of others (Taylor, 1975, pp. 344-346). It may not even be obvious to the person herself. Assessment of a self and its level of development is subject to error. Kierkegaard challenges a person always to come back to the source to wonder and consider honestly whether she is on track. He challenges a person also to examine the fruit of her love.

Kierkegaard characterizes this life task with moving metaphors in *Works of Love*. For example, he refers to the Gospel of Luke, chapter six verse four: "Every tree is known by its own fruit, for the figs are not gathered from thorns, nor are grapes picked from a bramble bush" (WOL, p. 5). A person's love is recognized by the fruit it produces; that is, a person's works of love become an indication of the unconditionality of her love. As Kierkegaard says, "when we say that love is known by its fruits, we are also saying that in a certain sense love itself is hidden and therefore is known only by its revealing fruits. . . . Every life, love's life also, is as such hidden but is made manifest in something else. The life of a plant is hidden; the fruit is the manifestation" (WOL, p. 8). Love cannot be known by the plant alone nor by



the flowers that bloom. Flowers may wither or not even bloom in the first place, but when a flower develops into fruit, then the criterion of the plant is revealed; its point and purpose are fulfilled (WOL, pp. 7-8).

Kierkegaard recognizes that some fruit may appear perfect but lack taste or, on the other hand, some fruit may taste the most delectable while being visually the least appealing; what is going on “behind” or “beneath” a particular work of love is not always evident, and people can be mistaken about it (WOL, pp. 5-16). People can be intentionally or unintentionally deceptive towards themselves. If a fruit is bitter or bruised, then it is likely that the life source is obstructed in some way. For the fruit to be perfect, the source of life must first flow freely and manifestly through the plant. Similarly, if a person’s love is not stable and unchanging, rooted in the awareness of the stable and unchanging love of God, then that love is not true, and it will not produce the kind of fruit that people really need.

Kierkegaard also describes a quiet lake to communicate the essence of love and its ultimate source.

Love’s hidden life is the innermost being, unfathomable, and then in turn is in an unfathomable connectedness with all existence. Just as the quiet lake originates deep down in hidden springs no eye has seen, so also does a person’s love originate even more deeply in God’s love. If there were no gushing spring at the bottom, if God were not love, then there would be neither the little lake nor a human being’s love. Just as the quiet lake originates darkly in the deep spring, so a human being’s love originates mysteriously in God’s love. Just as the quiet lake invites you to contemplate it but by the reflected image of darkness prevents you from seeing through it, so also the mysterious origin of love in God’s love prevents you from seeing its ground. (WOL, pp. 9-10)

Kierkegaard warns that a person can be deceived by the lake: it may appear still on the surface. Yet a source of flowing water must exist in order for the lake to be maintained. Kierkegaard recognizes that lakes can indeed dry up. He claims that, in this way, a lake is different from love. The life of love

cannot dry up because God is love, and God's presence at the ground of human being is everlasting.

### Summary

Commentaries on "You shall Love" reference a journal entry by Kierkegaard in which he describes his understanding of a complete life (Martens, 1999; Hong & Hong, 1998). In this entry, Kierkegaard expresses the notion that an authentic life is one that strives to fulfill the commandments laid out by God. In this pursuit, one will not necessarily succeed. Indeed, given the problem of sin, one will surely come up short. One may even fail miserably. Attaining perfection is not really what is expected of the self. The passionate commitment to engage in the pursuit is what is essential, along with the trust that God will take the lead and also make up for one's failure. All one has to do, in a sense, is get one's limited views of self and love out of the way.

Kierkegaard states that the fulfillment of the commandment should be sought with humility, grace, and gratitude (WOL). The reverence for God and infinite willingness to respond in obedience to the gifts of God are what define a self, normatively. In Rogers's terms, a person must be aware of her full organismic experience while realizing the freedom that she has, in each moment, to open to her own future in a way that continues to hold the promise of her well-being. If she holds the truth of the past in tension with the possibilities of the future, while relying on the infinite goodness at the core of her being, and she is moved to act accordingly, then she is being congruent. In being congruent, she experiences fullness of life, and at the same time, she sees herself having this experience, and she is grateful for it.

## CHAPTER III

### THE RELATIONALITY OF THE SELF

#### **Introduction**

The self is both individual and constitutively relational. From the day it is born, it has the ability to thrive only by virtue of certain beneficial actions on the part of others. In this chapter, I first explore this inherent relationality of the self. Second, I discuss the significance of interpersonal relationships for personal thriving. Both of these points reflect the acknowledgement of the human being as spectacular and worthy of respect; this is a fundamental belief of Rogers and Kierkegaard. Both authors hold that the holistic existence of a person has remarkable possibilities that ought to be affirmed. Social and contextual factors can serve either to affirm or to deny human dignity. They can inhibit and nurture this potential.

#### **The Self is Relational**

For Rogers and Kierkegaard, the self is constitutively relational in the sense that “others” are factors that set limits to our choices and also open up possibilities for us, just as “we” are factors that affect the choices and experiences of others. Each of us, in being who we are, is continually setting at least some of the terms by which other people are potentiated to make the choices that define their lives. Yet we are not determining others; in the final analysis, everyone has the choice to determine how they respond to the infinite factors in their lives.

Rogers and Kierkegaard emphasize the need for self-acceptance and acceptance of others. What they have in mind is acceptance of the ever-present possibility for goodness and well-being. It is through the development of the hope in goodness and human flourishing that positive growth can occur. It is impossible to see the future, and it is impossible to

define in detail what is best for a person over time. Yet it is possible, moment by moment, to believe that such a future is possible, and that the person will recognize it when it arrives. Acceptance of self and others are intertwined. If we believe in goodness within ourselves, then we will see that the same goodness exists in others, and vice versa.

Kierkegaard emphasizes the value of self-acceptance as a deliberate response to one's life source and its never-ending demand that one learn to love oneself and others in the right way, as fellow humans who have remarkable potential (SUD; WOL). Rogers stresses self-acceptance as a response to the self-actualizing tendency and its invitation to recognize this tendency in other humans, too (Rogers 1959; Rogers 1980; Bozarth 2001). The ideal is to accept one's inherent potential and believe that it is possible to open to – and integrate – whatever one's life may bring. It is fair to say that both of these thinkers had the interest of the self as a distinct person and a social individual in mind. Selves are always opportunities for every other self to practice the affirmation of humanity. A term that is synonymous with acceptance, for Kierkegaard, is proper self-love (WOL). A term that is synonymous for Rogers is unconditional positive regard (Rogers, 1959). Interestingly, unconditional positive regard is one way of defining agape or Christian love.

Many critics of Kierkegaard have argued that Anti-Climacus's conception of the self is overly individualistic. They argue also that it is insufficiently concerned with the impact that broad social patterns have on the possibilities of the self. It is my interpretation that Anti-Climacus's self is duly individual and relational – that individuality emerges, above all, in the choices a person makes to interact with others, either with love, or instead, with an inattentiveness to the demands of love. The self's structure

is inherently one of relating. Just as I argued that becoming oneself, in a Kierkegaardian perspective, is a work of love, I argue that loving your neighbor is a part of becoming yourself. With God as the link between all things, the work of loving yourself and others converges. Similarly to the way in which I challenged us to think of the equilibrium between the finite and the infinite as being wrought by something that transcends both, so we can think of love between persons as ultimately being wrought by something that transcends both. In relating to the self and the other through the eternal, earthly distinctions fade, revealing a deeper unity.

The ability to engage in self-realization and self-determination is the essence of humanity. Warner (2011) describes this universal human functioning as the capacity to process experiences. Here she is thinking of “processing” normatively, as “processing well.” Processing and integration are, of course, not a given. Yet they are always a possibility with each new moment. We have an innate motivating tendency to be fully alive and to enjoy our lives, and this tendency cannot be utterly destroyed without destroying the person.

Thorne (2002) describes the person-centered way of being as a releasing force. He argues that being congruent is embodying complete self-love. In being person-centered, one then releases oneself to the other person. It is through surrendering one’s self to another that the self is able to genuinely connect with the other. By surrendering oneself I think Thorne is referring to the act of turning one’s attention freely toward the other, letting go of unproductive self-preoccupation, and making one’s affirmation of life and goodness available to the other.

Rogers’s formative tendency is helpful in understanding this process of release or surrender. He regards the universe to always unfolding and

developing. Even as things are destroyed and appear to be deteriorating, new developments evolve from this destruction; as a result, the universe becomes more complex and ultimately more orderly in both organic and inorganic material. Rogers (1980) uses multiple examples to illustrate his point, such as crystal formation: “In every case, from less ordered and less symmetrical fluid matter there emerges the startlingly unique, ordered symmetrical and often beautiful crystalline form” (pp. 125-126).

Similarly, Cornelius-White and Kriz (2007) write:

The formative person-centered approach is the practice of the truth and diversity of life, including each person, each group, each species, and the overall web itself. It is a profound relinquishment of control, not only over individual persons, but over all life. While implicit in the actualizing tendency, the formative tendency helps us realize that ‘everythingisconnectedtoeverythingelse’ in such a way that our ethical obligation must be greater than to the individual. (p. 137)

The language is different, but Kierkegaard insists that, as the source of being and of life, God is present in all things (WOL). Furthermore, God is present in the form of love, and God’s love is unending. The infinitude of love is manifested in nature and the creativity that is always overflowing in nature.

Let us for a moment look at nature. With what infinite love nature or God in nature encompasses all the diverse things that have life and existence! Just recollect what you yourself have so often delighted in looking at, recollect the beauty of the meadows! There is no difference in the love, no, none – yet what a difference in the flowers! Even the least, the most insignificant, the most unimpressive, the poor little flower disregarded by even its immediate surroundings, the flower you can hardly find without looking carefully – it is as if this, too, had said to love: Let me become something in myself, something distinctive. And then love has helped it to become its own distinctiveness, but far more beautiful than the poor little flower had ever dared to hope for. (WOL, p. 270)

While Kierkegaard believes that the human condition is marred by sin, he trusts that it has not been completely abandoned to sin (WOL). In Kierkegaard’s Christian view, all of nature, including human nature, was

created good and it has been redeemed by Christ, such that it is possible even in the midst of horrible evil to believe in the possibility of goodness. For a person who believes in love, the despairing tendencies of human life can be transformed: one can become capable of reconceiving every negative actuality as a positive possibility.

Every action toward another person or thing is partly an act toward God, in this view. Attention is given to the individual, and we are to act out of love for this particular person; but it is the God within the individual or at the ground of the individual's being that we are to keep in view at all times. God's power is that by virtue of which the process of selfhood and the possibility of goodness exist at all. The task in helping another is thus, above all, to help the other to realize this – within herself and also within others. Similar to Cornelius-White's and Kriz's understanding of the formative tendency, Kierkegaard's conceptualization of love encourages a person to view other persons through an expansive and inclusive lens, a lens that views life as a web that exists only because of God and in God.

### **Thriving through Relationship**

In *Carl Rogers on Encounter Groups*, Rogers (1970) describes the interest that many people take in encounter groups, an environment where individuals seek personal growth and development. A healthy person:  
 Hunger[s] for relationships which are close and real; in which feelings and emotions can be spontaneously expressed without first being carefully censored or bottled up; where deep experiences – disappointments and joys – can be shared; where new ways of behaving can be risked and tried out; where, in a word, he approaches the state where all is known and all accepted, and thus further growth becomes possible. (p. 11)

Motivated by a tendency toward growth and a simultaneous tendency to be congruent, a person is drawn deeper into certain relationships. According to Brodley's (2011) interpretation of Rogers, the human self is not only

grounded in the hypothesis that human behavior is motivated by the actualizing tendency but also that the self is pro-social. The self-actualization process is significantly shaped by socialization; moreover, when the actualization process is uninhibited, an individual is actualized in socially constructive ways. “If humans did not possess a pro-social nature, the freeing effects of client-centered therapy would tend to result in self-centered and self-seeking solutions and behaviors” (Brodley, 2011, p. 164). Rather, persons appear to develop “greater social consciousness” (Brodley, 2011, p. 164), displaying greater awareness of and concern for others and making decisions that take others into consideration.

#### A Self-Releasing Relationship

In order to understand Rogers’s relational process of healing, I will turn to the defining conditions of a good helping relationship. Rogers (1959) identifies six conditions for the therapeutic process. Over time, he came to believe that these conditions are applicable to all helping relationships, including supervisor/employee, friend/friend, parent/child, etc (Rogers, 1980).

The conditions are as follows:

- 1) That two persons are in contact.
- 2) That the first person, whom we shall term the [person receiving help], is in a state of incongruence, being vulnerable, or anxious.
- 3) That the second person, whom we shall term the [helper], is congruent in the relationship.
- 4) That the therapist is experiencing unconditional positive regard toward the [person receiving help].
- 5) That the therapist is experiencing an empathic understanding of the [person receiving help]’s internal frame of reference.
- 6) That the [person receiving help] perceives, at least to a minimal degree, condition 4 and 5, the unconditional positive regard of the [helper] for him, and the empathic understanding of the [helper]. (Rogers, 1959, p. 213)

If these conditions are present, and the helping person acts in a way that promotes these conditions, then the actualizing tendency is strengthened.



Moreover, the self-actualizing tendency of the person being helped “is promoted in a way that is harmonious with the experiencing of the actualizing organism; thus, the self-concept of the individual is altered” (Bozarth 1998, p. 97).

Warner (2011) emphasizes the power of relationship in the achievement of a positive restructuring of the self. She clarifies that talking is not the essence of a relational encounter. Words and concepts cannot serve as the measure of experience. Particular contextual and environmental factors, often intangible, must be present in order for the actualizing tendency to function freely and fully. Biologically, a person needs “Air, water, food, and often clothing and shelter to survive. But biological survival requires another condition - nurturing, caring and loving by another person (Spitz, 1945; Lynch, 1977) . . . . These are the conditions provided in client-centered therapy” (Patterson, 1990, pp. 428-29).

While the conditions of a helping relationship are interconnected, I want to give brief attention to congruence, unconditional positive regard, and empathic understanding in effort to more thoroughly explain what happens in the best of relational encounters. This deliberation may be useful in understanding Kierkegaard’s emphasis on cultivating relationships of love toward God, self, and other.

### Congruence

With respect to condition three, above, Rogers (1959) emphasizes *in the relationship* for condition three; he recognizes that it is nearly impossible for a person to always be congruent with herself at all times, in all situations. Still, the goal is to seek coherence within the context of the helping relationship of the moment. If a helper is experiencing anxiety in that relationship but is consciously aware of only unconditional positive regard,

then the helper is incongruent. It is most valuable for the helper to be aware of the anxiety; articulating such feelings to the person receiving help is not essential but being conscious of the organismic experience is. Bozarth (2001) emphasizes that congruence “must be represented by high unconditional positive self-regard” (p. 185). In striving to be congruent with oneself, a person must approach their entire organismic experience with openness and acceptance.

Witty (2007) described the dynamics of congruence in this way: “The essence of client-centered [approach] is a relationship between two sovereign human persons. . . . It involves the complexity of reflexive awareness of one’s being-in-relation with oneself and the [person receiving help] . . . (p. 37).” In being congruent with oneself, in the presence of another, a person is being genuine and is likely to be transparent with the other (Bozarth, 1998; Witty, 2007). It is not that the person receiving help will have access to everything the helper is thinking, just as a lover does not know everything Kierkegaard’s God is thinking; rather the point is that the person receiving help will have access to what is essential and most important. What will be most evident to the person receiving help as she interacts with the helper – the thing that will shine through the most – will be the latter’s unconditional positive regard for herself, for the one being helped, and for the experience they are currently sharing. In turn, through witnessing genuineness and unconditional affirmation from another, the person being helped will learn how to be genuine and affirm herself.

#### Unconditional Positive Regard

Thorne (2002) argues that despair is frequently manifested in the way we treat others and the ongoing construction of our society. This despair can be remedied by

two core beliefs and in the way of being which springs from them. The first belief is that every human being is of infinite worth with a built-in actualizing tendency which if accessed and trusted can lead to the flowering of an uniquely fashioned humanness. The second belief is that we have a capacity to relate to ourselves and to others in such a way that our unique differences can be celebrated and that our corporate life can be enhanced. We can rejoice at one and the same time both in our individual uniqueness and in our corporate identity. From these two central beliefs there springs a way of being which is exemplified in the behavior of the person-centered therapist and which also offers a blueprint for human relating and human community building in general. (Thorne, 2002, p. 12)

In applying his theory of personality and relationships to encounters outside of the therapeutic context, Rogers (1959) states that the more unconditional positive regard a child receives from a caregiver, the greater the potential of the child to thrive. In chapter II, I discussed the evolution of the organismic valuing process. A person learns how to prize herself partly by experiencing unconditional positive regard from others, and privileging these experiences over the experiences of conditionality and judgment. It is only through experiencing love from another that a person is able to learn what love is, and she is able to recognize when she feels it for someone else. For Kierkegaard, the sort of love that builds people's sense of their own self-worth is a window to the divine (WOL). The person who loves is not conceived as a deity; yet the deity is encountered regularly in the love that we both receive from and return to the other.

### Empathic Understanding

Remember that Thorne (2002) describes the person-centered way of being as a releasing force for the self. Through empathic understanding, one can gain insight into another person's internal frame of reference, and one can join another in her subjective assessment of herself.

Rogers (1980) explores in some depth the nature of empathy. It includes being confident in oneself (or congruent) so that one can join another

in their internal experience. In striving to be empathic of another's subjective experience, a person works to understand the "felt meaning" (Rogers, 1980, p. 141) of it. The "felt meaning" of the other's experience includes her entire organismic experience. Empathy thus requires giving full attention to the perceptive world of the other, including but also going beyond the verbal expression. "You are a confident companion to the person in his or her inner world" (Rogers, 1980, p. 142).

Three consequences of experienced empathy are outlined by Rogers (1980). "First, empathy dissolves alienation" (Rogers, 1980, p. 151). Through the experience of companionship in her subjective world, a person is likely to feel more connected to other people. A person is no longer left alone with her experience. Second, a person "feels valued, cared for, accepted as the person that he or she is" (Rogers, 1980, p. 152). As a person feels that someone else has entered her internal frame of reference, and the other affirms her *in* this experience, the person learns to trust her own perceptual world, or organismic experience, and she becomes increasingly convinced that her life and her mode of being are worth exploring. Third, a person arrives at "a sense of personhood, of identity" because empathy provides "confirmation that one does exist as a separate, valued person with an identity" (Rogers, 1980, p. 155).

Rogers (1980) argues that being empathic towards another is not something that requires "academic brilliance [or] diagnostic skill" (p. 150). Moreover, attention to technique can interfere with a person's empathic way of being; emphasizing skills and tools for understanding another become the focus rather than the other herself; attention to skills and techniques causes the therapist to forget "that the individual is the source of his or her own resources and expertise when empathically understood and unconditionally

accepted by a congruent person” (Bozarth, 1998, p. 132). Rogers (1980) further states that empathy is best learned through the experience of empathy, that is, through practice. It is possible to train ourselves to be empathic. If we want to be more understanding persons (friends, teachers, clergy, parents), we can place ourselves in an “empathic climate,” learn from it, and gradually develop a tendency toward this mode of being.

I find this information about empathy helpful in understanding Kierkegaard. If God is the criterion for existing as a self, then God can be thought of as being empathic toward us in our experiences of being human. In allowing ourselves to recognize God as present within us, we can experience an intimate closeness to goodness, and this can empower us to risk the ongoing work of becoming ourselves. Additionally, through experiencing this empathy from God, a person is likely to become more empathic toward other persons.

### Social Consciousness

When I examine human social consciousness from a person-centered approach, I am drawn to Kierkegaard’s duty to love and the idea that love stems from a consciousness of the indestructible human potential for goodness. In a person’s inclination to become more congruent with herself, a person is also inclined to become more conscious of others’ potential. As a result, non-judgmental attitudes are more natural. As a self is more conscious of itself as having unique, infinite possibilities, the self begins to view others in the same way. Brodley (2011) identifies a few “universal pro-social potentialities” (p. 164) that emerge in the process: “sympathy, empathy, care-taking, social affiliation, communication, cooperation and sense of morality or ethics” (p. 164).

To illustrate the development of social consciousness, I would like to introduce the reader to one of my past clients. This person lives in a residential facility. The person often has “bad days”: fights at school, incidents of stealing, and cussing. The person struggles with being honest and has minimal self-worth. Often, when I go to pick the person up, at the residential unit, I am briefed about the person’s day and week. By the time we walk back to my office, I am open to letting the person lead the sessions. All the while, I strive to be empathic to the person’s experience of life and to what is happening between us. I prize the person unconditionally, and I am congruent with myself. My primary focus is on being present to the other in a way that invites the best of the person to come forward, so it can be recognized and integrated into the person’s gestalt.

There are plenty of moments when I would feel surges of anxiety; I often respond to these experiences explicitly, in the company of the person. While I have pointed out that being congruent does not require articulating anxieties in the relationship, my anxiety often comes with concerns about the client being honest or safe, emotionally and physically. To express this concern is to communicate how much the person matters, personally.

This person knows that I am open to a lot of different activities, so often we will roam around outside and look for treasures. I will never forget one afternoon in particular: together, the client and I journeyed from the unit, to my office, and then outside for a treasure hunt. We are roaming in a residential alley with our heads down, hoping to find a penny or cool bug, and commenting on what we saw. I empathically respond to the person’s expressions of excitement and disappointment, from moment to moment. Then, after about 20 minutes of being together, the person spontaneously says, “So, how’s your day going?” In this moment, the person’s self is not

smothered with traumatic flashbacks, anxieties about a hopeless future, or feelings of self-hatred; rather, the self has become congruent with its core – love – in the context of a simple, affirmative human relating. Then, from the organismic awareness of the relationship, the person is potentiated to act in a socially constructive manner.

The ethical views of Kierkegaard and Rogers can be brought together, just as their views of the constitutively relational nature of the self can be brought together.

. . . Kierkegaard's conception of love, especially his emphasis on the triadic structure of love as a relation between the lover, God and the beloved, reveals a clear appreciation of the fellowship and presupposes an understanding of the self as fundamentally relational . . . . The individual, for Kierkegaard, becomes a self always in a social context . . . . (Sousa, 2012, p. 46)

It is our relationships with others and our selves that make either congruence or incongruence possible. Social relationships are what organize our being. They can pull us away from and stunt our natural inclinations or they can open us to life. Realizing this ought to motivate people to be fully aware of the impact that their words, actions, and expressions of concern have on others, in every moment of human interaction.

#### A Pursuit of Equality

Given the fact that both Kierkegaard and Rogers assert the fundamental and equal dignity of human beings, it is important to examine what they say about contingent inequalities and the experience of differences. While I find Kierkegaard's and Rogers's regard for each individual, as special and worthy of respect, to be a powerful force for overcoming oppression based on race, gender, income, and physical and mental abilities, I understand that other interpreters disagree. For example, person-centered scholar Wolter-Gustafson (2000) states, "Rogers was greatly influenced by the thinking of Kierkegaard, taking up his phrase *To be the self one truly is*. Yet, if I read

further, I find that the self which might be taken to mean the person, generic and gender neutral . . . . only really applies to men” (p. 100). Wolter-Gustafson quotes Kierkegaard’s pseudonymous authorship *Either/Or*, arguing that Kierkegaard views women’s identity only in relationship to a superior man. However, *Either/Or* is intended as an expression of an aesthetic mode of life; hence, it is problematic to associate “its” judgment with that of Kierkegaard.

I find statements made in *Works of Love* more helpful in understanding Kierkegaard’s own position. His words seem to me to promote mutual understanding and respect.

To love the neighbor is, while remaining in the earthly dissimilarity allotted to one, essentially to will to exist equally for unconditionally every human being . . . . He [the true lover] neither cravenly avoids the more powerful but loves the neighbor, nor superiorly avoids the more lowly but loves the neighbor and wishes essentially to exist equally for all people, whether in actuality he is known by many or not. (WOL, pp. 83-84)

Kierkegaard also argues that it is not the duty of a person to assess others or judge the authenticity of others (WOL). The act of judging is an action contradictory to the task of loving others indiscriminately. As a result, it is not our task to judge if others are truly becoming as God has created them to be. The only person’s authenticity Kierkegaard declares we can assess is our own: “. . . one person cannot actually judge another, but the one judging only becomes disclosed himself . . .” (WOL, p. 244). One who judges another becomes disclosed as someone who does not, in fact, know how to love without conditions.

In a preface to *A Way of Being*, Rogers (1980) writes:

Thanks to my daughter and to other friends with feminist leanings, I have become more and more sensitive to the linguistic inequality between the sexes. I have, I believe, treated women as equals, but only in more recent years have I been clearly aware of the put-down involved in the



use of only masculine pronouns in states with generic meaning. (p. xvii)

Rogers, in his writing, displayed a shift in social consciousness. I am curious if Kierkegaard's word choice would have been different had he been living in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, rather than the nineteenth. In any case, in *Works of Love*, he promotes non-discriminatory love because this is the only way to mirror the love of God, which is universal and unconditional.

## CONCLUSION

I have presented the Kierkegaardian and Rogerian concepts of the self. According to both, a self has universal tendencies that are uniquely manifested in each individual. Rogers's theory provides a more explicit description of the whole self and the growth of the consciousness of the whole self. Rogers's emphasis on the self as an evolving organism recognizes that the entire organism is affected by experience (internal and external). Since the entire organism experiences and is influenced by factors in its life, it is the entire organism that has the ability to realize its potential. Thus, consciousness and choice are not limited to operations of the mind; rather, the entire person experiences and responds.

While Kierkegaard recognizes that the self as spirit transcends the psychological and physical conceptualization of self, he still emphasizes consciousness of experience as a function of the thought and will. Just as Kierkegaard accounts for God in the unique beauty of the flower and the meadow, he advocates that the same presence of God can be found in a person. If a flower and a potato have the capability to actualize their greatest potential, despite the unpredictable environmental conditions of light, weather, and nutrients, than a person as an established organism does also. However, Anti-Climacus overemphasizes the spiritual as the seat of this power and does not clarify the spirit's intricate engagement with the body. Rogers recognizes an actualizing tendency in all living things, but his emphasis is on a holistic organismic process. This imagery provides a way to extend Anti-Climacus's theory and more explicitly understand Kierkegaard. There is a value of prizing each person, with our whole persons, as deeply human and holistically distinct.

In my previous work with traumatized children, my co-workers and I worked under many assumptions about the human body. Trauma therapy relies heavily on the study of neuroscience. As Kierkegaard and Rogers argue, the human body is designed to function a certain way. As I have presented, however, several factors can influence this functioning. When a person experiences physical, emotional, or sexual trauma, her whole organism is reorganized against her will or apart from the direct control of her will. The brain is an organ that sends messages all over the body. Neurological connections are made that result in a “psychologically maladjusted” self-structure. Thus, in working to help the child reorganize her organism in a way that reduces experiences of threat, despair, and anxiety, my team and I made a variety of resources available to our clients. In tossing a ball back and forth, a person begins to reorganize her organism in a way that is collaborative versus anti-social.

The use of neuro-feedback helps the persons retrain their brains regarding how to focus and concentrate. This helps with symptoms of impulsivity, anxiety, and depression. The use of art therapy, talk therapy, drama therapy, a diet with nutrients, transitional periods, time for rest, and time for exercise are also significant to the process of restructuring. By having opportunities for attending to these different aspects of life, a child is able to imagine and explore new possibilities for herself. In the process, the child can examine and overcome her conditions of worth and experience unconditionality toward herself. It is the entire organism that is inhibited in experience positive regard, and it is the entire organism that needs to be prized.

I have argued that Kierkegaard’s self in relationship to God can be understood as the self in a state of congruence. In order for a person to come

to know God and be conscious of herself as established by God, loved by God, and potentiated to *be* love for others, her entire organism must be attended to. I think Kierkegaard's love ethic promotes such care. The way of being human that is advocated by Kierkegaard is a way of believing that the self is the recipient of unconditional love who is called, in every moment, to pass that love on. This requires taking care of the self so that one is not distracted by the needs of the body-self.

It is the process of being and becoming that I most value in Kierkegaard's and Rogers's understanding of life. The emphasis is on caring for oneself in a way that attends to both the humanity and the uniqueness of the self. In viewing oneself as a distinctive person with individual potential, one can shed the conditions of trying to be another person, or trying to be what someone else wants one to be. Reciprocally, one can view others with the same generosity. Thus, one can become more powerfully connected to the goodness in others and in the universe as a whole. Rogers observes, if the conditions are optimal, persons will generally actualize in a constructive fashion. Kierkegaard argues that by living within the condition of love, one is built up in one's ability to love others. It is in the space of loving that one can prize oneself and others and in turn, be free to be honest with oneself and regard others in a non-judgmental manner. Bozarth (1998) emphasizes that existing relationally in this way is not active in the sense that one is "doing" love, empathy, congruency, or unconditional prizing, in order to bring about a preset outcome; rather, one is simply being oneself in light of the attitude that each person is special in his or her own right and thus deserves care.

In reading Rogers and Kierkegaard together, we can see that Rogers's description of the person as a living organism – one could say reflexive organism – extends Kierkegaard's conception of the self as a being that is

conscious of itself before God. Perhaps, persons who are in touch with their entire being and value their lives as complex organisms that are always in the process of unfolding are acting out of consciousness for God as love, even if they do not use this sort of language. Kierkegaard's promotion of God and love as the criterion for realizing one actualizing potential provides a way of understanding Rogers's general actualizing tendency. Rogers (1980) articulates a curiosity about a greater "potent creative tendency which has formed our universe, from the smallest snowflake to the largest galaxy, from the lowly amoeba to the most sensitive and gifted of persons" (p. 134). In the next sentence, Rogers (1980) comments, "And perhaps we are touching the cutting edge of our ability to transcend ourselves, to create new and more spiritual directions in human evolution. This kind of formulation is, for me, a philosophical base for a person-centered approach" (p. 134).

Rogers was raised a Christian and attended seminary, but left the faith and chose a career that he found less exclusivist (Kirschenbaum, 2009). As stated, Rogers read Kierkegaard and felt validated by Kierkegaard, felt as if Kierkegaard's way of understanding persons was so similar to his own that it was as if Kierkegaard was in the counseling room with Rogers. Perhaps Kierkegaard's philosophical understanding of God and of love as the criterion for living and becoming oneself informed Rogers's observations about the self and its relationships. Perhaps Rogers's person-centered theory was infiltrated with a positive understanding of love, or God, as Kierkegaard argues that God is love and love is God.

Anti-Climacus's conception of despair can be understood in relation to the Rogerian notion of living an incongruent life that is based on conditions of worth. Rogers's theory challenges me to understand Kierkegaard's understanding of sin and despair in a broader and yet more concise manner.

Despair and sin can generally be understood as influenced by anything contextual – birth rights, economic status, genetics, relationships, etc.

Responding to them requires awareness of these specific factors, but the point is to become aware of their conditionality and the fact that they do not begin to get at the foundation of who one is, so that limits in one's ability to affirm oneself can be transcended and a person can experience unconditional respect and regard, not only for self, but also for others.

Also, I find helpful Kierkegaard's notion that, for a person to love another person, she must effectively see the face of God in the other. That is to say, she must see through the other to the unfathomable love that resides at the core of the other's being. She must connect with the power of that love, which courses through everything. Perhaps all sincere care for oneself and another and good intentions are acts that flow from this power. Perhaps it is this power, whatever one chooses to call it, that allows a person to be as genuinely herself as a given moment of possibility allows. Studying both Kierkegaard and Rogers can provide us with the language to articulate the chief ethical task of life: to enter into each other's "moments of possibility" in ways that are most likely to encourage self-acceptance and self-actualization on the part of all.

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