

Transcendence of Opposites¹

Robert A. C. Stewart

Massey University, Palmerston North, New Zealand

It has been found (Maslow, 1954, 1962; and Rogers, 1942, 1961) that as people become more psychologically healthy (fully functioning, self actualizing), they become more tolerant of "opposites" within themselves, and become more able to accept others with all their uniqueness. Rogers (1961) describes this as an increasing "openness to experience." The individual can "afford" to be more sensitive to himself and others.

Maslow (1962) has suggested that, ". . . The more we understand the whole of Being, the more we can tolerate the simultaneous existence and perceptions of inconsistencies, of opposites and of flat contradictions. These seem to be products of partial cognition, and fade away with cognition of the whole."

In this paper, I want to look at three dichotomies of major importance which seem to be transcended in the "self actualizing" individual. (a) love of self-love for others, (b) childlike behavior-adult behavior, and (c) subject-object.

(a) *Love of self — love for others*

Fromm (1956), in an investigation of the selfishness-unselfishness dilemma, suggests, "The doctrine that love for oneself is identical with 'selfishness' and an alternative to love for others has pervaded theology, philosophy and popular thought . . . On the contrary, an attitude of love toward themselves will be found in all those who are capable of loving others."

Fromm considers the case of the "unselfish" mother, who believes that by her unselfishness her children will experience what it means to love. The children, however, become imbued with their mother's hidden hostility against life, yet are prevented by the mother's "unselfishness" from criticizing her. The effect, however, of a mother with genuine self love is dramatically different.

Fromm believes that people are not concerned enough with the interest of their real selves. They are not selfish in the right way. We are being supremely selfish in the right way when we seek self-actualization, yet the behavior that we manifest is called unselfish by our society.

(b) *Childlike behavior-adult behavior*

Maslow found that his self actualizing people had the ability to "gaze" in a non-evaluative way at another person or fact. They had the ability to lose themselves completely as they drank in the experience. Children have this

ability to a marked degree (that is healthy children). A child gazing at a coveted toy is completely fascinated by it. Self actualizing people are childlike in this sense—they were able to experience common everyday things as though they had happened for the first time. They were able to enjoy the wonderful symmetry of a snow flake as though they had never seen it before—they marvelled at the purity and stillness of freshly fallen snow. In therapy the therapist seeks to enable the client to become more spontaneous, more open, less defensive. What is more spontaneous, more open, less defensive than a baby? Here we have a human being who is completely and utterly himself—his expressions of pleasure and pain are so completely open and unveiled. I think too, this is part of why people like to have animal pets. An animal is himself without pretense or defense. It is perhaps tragic that people have to turn to animals to find an organism that will really express what it feels.

The less fearful and defensive adults are, the more they recognize the wealth of learning that they can gain from their children—they discover the falseness of the child-adult dichotomy. They learn to encourage the creativity of the child, and nurture his free flow of ideas. The "openness to experience" of which Carl Rogers speaks, is most clearly seen in both children (as long as they are healthy), and in fully functioning adults.

Benedict (1938) stresses the way our culture characteristically emphasizes the contrasts between child and adult. ". . . The child is sexless, the adult estimates his virility by his sexual activities, the child must be protected from the ugly facts of life, the adult must meet them without psychic catastrophe: the child must obey, the adult must command this obedience. These are all dogmas of our culture, dogmas which, in spite of the facts of nature, other cultures commonly do not share.

(c) *Subject-object*

May (1958) traces the compartmentalization and inner breakdown in the Victorian period. "The Victorian man saw himself as segmented into reason, will and emotions and found the picture good." Kierkegaard was to speak out against the lack of commitment in the religion of the day, and to plead that *objective* truth be balanced by *subjective* truth.

May considers that Kierkegaard's assertion of "truth as relationship" foretells the view point of Bohr, Heisenberg and other contemporary physicists that the Copernican view that nature can be separated from man is no longer tenable. He is the forerunner of relativity, and the other viewpoints which affirm that the human being who is engaged in studying the natural phenomena is in a particular and significant relationship to the objects studied



and he must make himself part of his equation. That is to say, the *subject*, man, can never be separated from the object which he observes.

“Truth as relationship” has major implications for psychotherapy. One cannot ever hope to gain any deep and vital knowledge (or truth) about other people without relationship (caring or empathic relationship). Namache (1961) distinguishes between “caring” and “cold” cognition. “Caring” cognition refers to a knowing that involves the whole individual. It is characterized by a warm positive feeling and an intimate global relation to what is known. It involves something of the union of the knower and the known. Sorokin calls it a fusion of the perceiver and the perceived. The subject-object split is temporarily overcome. “Cold” cognition, by contrast, is analytical, detached, objective. It entails a separation of the knower and the known.

Obviously not all our relationships can be caring relationships. The tragedy, however, is that man quite easily seems to lose the ability to establish and maintain relationships of this nature. They are never able to transcend the subject-object split for themselves.

FOOTNOTE

1 Material from this article included in *Delta II*, organ of Massey University Education Association. New Zealand. Published here with permission.

REFERENCES

- Benedict, Ruth. *Continuities and Discontinuities in Cultural Conditioning*. In Dyal, J. A. *Readings in Psychology: Understanding Human Behavior*. New York: McGraw-Hill. 1962.
- Fromm, E. *Selfishness, Self love and Self interest*, in Moustakas, C. E., *The Self: Explorations in Personal Growth*. New York: Harper and Row. 1956.
- Maslow, A. H. *Motivation and Personality*. New York: Harper. 1954.
- Maslow, A. H., *Toward a Psychology of Being*. Princeton, N. J.: Van Nostrand. 1962.
- May, R., *Existence: A New Dimension in Psychiatry and Psychology*. New York: Basic Books. 1958.
- Namache, G. F., Two Pictures of Man. *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*, 1961, 1, 1.
- Rogers, C. R., *Client-Centered Therapy*. Boston: Houghton. 1912.
- Rogers, C. R., *On Becoming a Person*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin. 1961.
- Stewart, R. A. C., *Some operational definitions of “intolerance of ambiguity,” and their relationship to ego strength and dominance*, presented at Xavier University Psychology Symposium, U.S.A., 1964.