

Carl Rogers and Martin Buber in Dialogue: The Meeting of Divergent Paths

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Abstract

This paper will explore the thinking of Carl Rogers and Martin Buber as related to confirmation, acceptance and dialogue. The work of these seminal thinkers seems more closely connected than at first glance. Each valued authentic relationship and expressed their views to each other in a 1957 conversation or dialogue. I have also brought myself into the paper in a personal way, sharing my experience with dialogue and of being accepted and confirmed in relationship.

Introduction

This paper is a reflective one in which I will share some thoughts about my experiences when considering the Martin Buber and Carl Rogers dialogue event that happened in April 1957 at the University of Michigan. The hour-and-a-half conversation was before a live audience of 400 people. Maurice Friedman moderated the dialogue, and it appears at the end of Buber's (1965) *The Knowledge of Man*. The dialogue is also published in *Carl Rogers: Dialogues* (Kirschenbaum & Henderson, 1989).

Anderson and Cissna (1997) have analyzed the dialogue in great detail from their perspectives as experts in communications analysis have analyzed the dialogue in detail. Much has been made of this seminal event where the two prominent men met for the first time.

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I wish to explore the meanings implied by the dialogue and how I have been affected by the ideas of Carl Rogers and the writings of Martin Buber. Both theorists were highly valued by their peers and developed large followings of professionals and students who studied their many writings and presentations. Rogers was open to being filmed while counseling clients and his warm and reflective style has helped many young beginning counselors build confidence to trust their own sense of what may be an effective intervention. I would like to mention that I am using *counseling* as equivalent with the more formal term *psychotherapy*. In the Rogerian approach, the person's inner experience is the central focus. His quiet facilitation helped the client to move closer to self-acceptance with a sense of freedom.

When I was completing my doctorate at the University of Florida in the late 1960s, I was casting about for a dissertation topic. Since the program's pedagogy and theoretical stance were based on existential and humanistic theory, I chose to conduct a qualitative study on Buber's idea of confirmation.

Confirmation

Rogers has used such terms such as *prizing*, *acceptance* and *trusting* what he called the "organismic valuing process." I was impressed with Buber's idea of when a person feels confirmed in his or her being by another, both may be enhanced from the meeting. My dissertation research showed that when one feels confirmed (as being valued as one is) by another, mood was elevated and a new sense of purpose emerged (Merrill, 1968).

Rogers thought that the counselor's task was to establish a climate for openness and self-exploration in which the person would feel accepted rather than judged or evaluated. Judgments were suspended and the person thrived in such a climate of genuine caring and acceptance. Persons may feel not only appreciated for what they were in that moment, but also for who they are becoming which may be experienced as both freeing and empowering.

I was intrigued by Buber's idea that confirmation is more than acceptance. Buber made the following statement about the nature of

confirmation during the meeting with Rogers: “Confirmation means accepting the whole potentiality of the other and making even a decisive difference in his potentiality...I not only accept the other as he is, but I confirm him, in myself, and then in him, in relation to this potentiality that is meant to become” (Anderson and Cissna, 1997, p. 90-91).

My understanding of that statement goes to the nature of contact between one person and another. In those rare times that one feels seen, heard, and experienced in his or her fullness, one is closer to realizing the potential of who one is and may become.

I am awed by the power of the economic marketing machine and how one is influenced to believe that the latest new model of automobile or the most recent clothing style will be fulfilling. My experience has been that the meaning behind most material acquisitions that I thought I must possess was short lived. I am with myself again but perhaps driving a newer car or wearing a shirt with a designer label on it. I may soon forget why I thought the purchase was so important at the time.

In the realm of human communication and contact, my experience has been that when I fully confirm another with my full presence (and when I have experienced being accepted without judgment) I am open to being changed. Confirmation is a process of knowing one’s own being and identity. Carl Rogers (1980) quotes Ronald Laing (1965), “The sense of identity requires the existence of another by whom one is known (p. 139)” (p. 155). The quote by Laing supports the idea of confirmation in that the mutuality of communication affirms the existence of both persons. Rogers (1980) continues, “Buber has also spoken of the need to have our existence confirmed by another. Empathy gives that needed confirmation that one does exist as a separate, valued person with an identity” (p. 155). We can see that Rogers is working closely with Buber’s concept of confirming the person as valued in being the way he or she is. Empathic understanding facilitates the being of both persons. I know me through you and I can be with me alone knowing you have heard me and have seen me as me.

Acceptance

I was raised in a small rural Southwestern community where there was an unspoken acceptance of the other as a person. I did not know what to call it at the time, but I strongly felt accepted with a sense of place. I experienced empathy before I had a definition of what it meant. In fact, I had never heard of empathy or confirmation until I was in graduate school and read Carl Rogers and Martin Buber. Upon reflection, I now find that fact amazing. Rogers and Buber gave me a language for what I had experienced as a child and adolescent growing up close to nature and feeling accepted by my family and community.

I can remember sitting with older adults around an outdoor fire (in a barrel) while the men played competition croquet. It was fine for me to be there, and I felt accepted as myself and also as the son of my father. Basically, I felt valued and confirmed without expectations for being different. There was a sense of being known as me as well as my father's son.

Of course there were other early developmental experiences in which I was expected to conform to the expectations of others, such as some teachers, ministers, and parents. When I did experience moments of personal clarity, there seemed to have been another person with whom I had been communicating more openly, not just talking to hear myself. In other words, I felt I was heard. Sometimes there may have been a stimulus event, and at other times it seemed to simply exist independent of an external situation. There was an element of surprise when I experienced myself as being accepted rather than judged.

I and Thou

To return to the Buber and Rogers connection, Maurice Friedman (1994), the noted Buber scholar, stated, "Rogers clearly accepted Buber's I-Thou relationship and made it his own without plumbing the depth of the philosophical anthropologies...that Buber judges to be its necessary underpinnings" (p 46-65).

Although one could surmise that Friedman may have been critical of Rogers because of his different philosophical background, I

think he may have meant that Rogers was able to embrace the I-Thou relationship as a confirming one. Rogers based much of his tentative theorizing on his many hundreds of counseling hours with many types of clients. Development of his core conditions fit very well into the framework of a confirming experience.

As I have understood Rogers, he came from an inner-directed stance as he related to the individual person. He valued or prized the person and the potential for what that person could become. He also accepted the choice not to change or be other than who he or she is as a person. I find Rogers to be existential in his view of the human condition. The person is the final choice-maker, and authentic relationship with the other is highly valued.

Buber seems to be very interested in community (as was Rogers toward the end of his life as he worked toward bringing peace to the world), changing society, and also supporting one's spiritual as well as personal development. Both men theorized that change began with the individual and what happens in the relationship between persons. Buber's seminal work *I and Thou* (1958) and Rogers' *On Becoming A Person* (1961) both present their positions clearly and passionately. I sometimes think of Rogers as more tentative in his writings about his learning, but I have come to understand that he really was a quiet revolutionary and that he lived his passion for furthering freedom and personal choice. Buber spoke from a more theological and philosophical position, but he also held fast to his strong personal sense that humans know they exist as persons only as one is known by the other.

Dialogue

The above points lead me to bring up a challenging concept to grasp, and that is Buber's (1965) idea of dialogue. He is not the first to explore the nature of dialogue and the meanings associated with it. His idea that "so-called dialogue with one's self is possible only because of the basic fact of men's [and women's] speaking with each other; is the 'internalization' of this capacity" (p. 112).

Much of our communication and social interaction is far from *I and Thou* and more of *I and It*. We may be objectified by the

marketing machine mentioned earlier or by a high-pressure salesperson that wants to sell us the latest product. Dialogue is something totally different. My understanding and experience with dialogue has in it the confirmation of one by the other as already mentioned.

Anderson, Cissna and Arnett (1994) define dialogue as a process that “implies more than a simple back-and-forthness of messages in interaction; it points to a particular process and quality of communication in which the participants ‘meet,’ which allows for changing and being changed” (p. 10).

When a person enters into a dialogic process, the outcome could go in more than one direction. In the relational exchange, meaning may be discovered between the two persons. When I have experienced dialogue, I have been surprised with the range of feelings and thoughts that emerge from the process. I have also been surprised by the outcome when I was willing to let go pressing for a desired outcome. I am not speaking of pushing an agenda, but communication of a different order.

As with other confirming experiences, the dialogue process grounds each person in himself or herself. It is quite different from a debate or formal argument in which there is likely not an entering into the world of the other. In dialogue there is no loser or winner, but two persons who may see each other more clearly in their shared humanity.

I accept Rogers and Buber in their formulations of acceptance and confirmation and see their work as foundational concerning the human condition. Rogers’ way of being was confirming to individual clients and later to persons in groups (small and large). He engendered honest and open trust in his clear and somewhat modest communication of “this is me with you now.” Buber was not a psychotherapist, and yet he did study psychology during his years as a young man and did have a sense of what is involved in that special relationship. From his writings, I have a greater understanding about how he communicated respect and valuing of the other person in his or her uniqueness through dialogue.

There is always risk when one enters into the dialogic realm because the process is one that may change one or both persons. Rogers (1951, 1961, 1980) has written considerably about the therapist being open to being changed by the client. Buber (1958, 1965) has also

written much about being changed by the exchange between two persons who are open to dialogue. In dialogue, people learn about a different person and a different perspective on reality that may lead to an internal shift or change. When one feels changed by a dialogue, there may be a perceptual shift in how that person sees their personal and interpersonal world.

Buber (1965) speaks to the point of change more in his view of the “in between.” When two people are in dialogue, the quality of the interaction depends on the “in between” space. In other words, the change that happens inside each person is connected to the quality of the relating between the two individuals. A notable difference between Rogers and Buber is that for Rogers (1961), the locus of value or being is within the person. For Buber (1965), the locus of value is “the between” two persons.

If one is trying to convince another to see things his or her way, the experience may be a debate, an argument, or a negotiation. Debate may be a part of dialogue and affirming in its own right. If both parties feel enhanced by their different positions or poles, the experience may be confirming for each person. If the “between” space is diminished, the debate is likely to be experienced as disconfirming. Dialogue, including debate, is derived from the “here and now” moment in which both parties feel enlivened by the process.

Experiencing the full impact of being seen in dialogue, and seeing oneself as a freely choosing person, may be quite empowering. One is able to make meaningful choices based on his or her unique perception of a human situation rather than trying to gain approval or exercising power over another.

If you have ever been with someone who wants to sell you a product or service (which most of us have), then you know that it can be a challenging negotiation. Both parties to the negotiation want to feel like it’s a win-win transaction and may experience the closure of the sale as positive and perhaps even exciting. Sometimes there is a letdown from a purchase that felt good at the time. Clearly, this is not dialogue but a two-party negotiation in which one or both persons may feel slightly objectified. Buber (1958) would say we have entered a transaction that may be closer to “*I and It*.”

Confirming “*I and Thou*” experiences may not be predictable in our interactions, but to remain open to those times when they do occur helps one to feel more human.

Closing Remarks

In this paper I have attempted to explore how Carl Rogers and Martin Buber came to value each other and how their work and writing was complementary. Buber was a noted philosopher, theologian, and teacher, and Rogers was an innovative psychologist, psychotherapist, researcher, and educator. Both valued what may be learned from authentic relationships.

Their respective societies were very different as well. Rogers came from American Midwestern rural beginnings, while Buber came from a deeply rooted European historical past with considerable prejudice and oppression toward Jews. Their personal experiences could not have been more different, but they both valued personal freedom and authentic choice in the context of genuine relationship.

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