

Paul Tillich and Carl Rogers Conversation: Review with Commentary

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is the review of the content of the conversation—and not of the “dialogue” as I think—held in 1965 between Paul Tillich, the German existential theologian and philosopher, and Carl Rogers, the American psychologist and creator of the person-centered approach¹. By using qualitative methodology and presenting their views, I would like to explore six topics all pursued by Rogers with Tillich: (1) the importance of self-affirmation, (2) the nature of man, (3) the basic alienation and estrangement of man, (4) Tillich’s theological language and terminology, (5) the acceptance in interpersonal relations, and (6) what constitutes the optimal person. Finally, I conclude with a commentary regarding their discussion, and I trace the similarities and differences between them.

Introduction

The meeting between Paul Tillich (1886-1965) and Carl Rogers (1902-1987) took place in San Diego State College on March 7, 1965. It was recorded on audiotape and published in a 23-page booklet

¹ Dialogue is differentiated by the discussion, because dialogue is mutuality, openness, immediacy, spontaneity, honesty, lack of pretence, good will, sharing, intensity and love, with responsibility of one to the other (Johannesen, 1971).

(Tillich & Rogers, 1966) that was reprinted in 1990 in Carl Rogers: Dialogues (Kirschenbaum & Henderson, 1990). This meeting was Tillich's last public appearance; he died on October 22, 1965. Both men enjoyed recognition in their fields. At the age of 79, Tillich was one of the most prominent figures in existential thought. After Tillich retired from the Union Theological Seminary in 1955, he became a university professor at Harvard University. In 1962, he moved again and took a post as the Nuveen professor of theology at the University of Chicago, where he stayed until his death. Rogers, at 63, four years after publication of his book *On Becoming a Person* (1961), was recognized as a prominent figure in counseling and psychotherapy. In 1956, he received the first of the awards of the American Psychology Association for his scientific contribution in psychology. One year earlier, in 1964, he left his position at the University of Wisconsin for a joint appointment at the Western Behavioral Studies Institute (WBSI) in La Jolla, California, until 1968 (Rogers, 1967; Rogers, 1974).

Review of the Conversation between Tillich and Rogers

The conversation between the two men has never been analyzed and till now has only partially occupied scholars' thinking (Elkins, 1999; Hawtin & Moore, 1998; Milton, 1993; Schmid, 1998). I report and comment on their discussion by using the 10 steps of Potter and Wetherell's (1987) Discourse Analysis: (1) decide the research question, (2) select the sample of data, (3) collect records, (4) interviews, (5) transcribe, (6) coding, (7) analyze, (8) go through the data again, (9) validate, and (10) write up. Following the previous approach, the quotations from the conversation come from my review of the audiotape and are keyed to perceived turns taken by the principals. For example, (T5, 70) would indicate Tillich's fifth turn and page 70 in the published transcript of the dialogue (Kirschenbaum &

Henderson, 1990)². To organize our discussion, I will consider the dialogue as it developed, using the six questions, all asked of Tillich by Rogers: (1) the importance of self-affirmation, (2) the nature of man, (3) human being's basic estrangement, (4) Tillich's usage of theological language and religious terminology, (5) acceptance in interpersonal relations, and (6) what constitutes the optimal person.

The conversation was 50 minutes long with an intermission. Each part lasted 25 minutes. Tillich dominated the speaking time—34 minutes compared to 16 minutes for Rogers. The philosopher spoke slowly, and he knew that some people might have trouble understanding his English (Driver, 1996), so he dominated the speaking time as such. In addition, Tillich injects humor: “But we poor theologians, in contrast to you happy psychologists...” (T10, 73). Rogers keeps a “low profile,” perhaps due to his respect for Tillich's age or his personal stance of valuing the importance of the other. He is speaking in the first person: “I like that phrase because I think it could be...” (R13, 78); “well I realized as you were talking”; “I feel we're not very far apart in our thinking about the value approach; I thought we might be further apart than we seem to be” (R14, 78). Furthermore, he asks open-ended and tentative questions, allowing more space for Tillich to express his ideas: “I don't know whether you want to comment on that...” (R5, 70); “I wonder how that sounds to you” (R6, 71); Rogers makes overtures toward communication with Tillich: “...when either of us talks about the courage to be or the tendency to become oneself...” (R6, 71); “...your thinking—which certainly is very congenial to that of a number of psychologists these days...” (R8, 72).

²I wish to acknowledge the assistance of others on this project. Firstly, Carl Rogers' biographer Dr. Howard Kirschenbaum. In addition, his research assistant Dr. Steve Demanchick and Dr. Ralph Blair Olson from Henderson State University, Arkadelphia, who provided me with two copies of the audiotape.

Finally, he can be heard several times vocalizing indications of his focused listening to Tillich (“M-hmmm” or “Uh huh”) and checking his understandings of the philosopher’s positions: “I wonder if you feel that we’re in some agreement on issues of that sort?” (R1, 66); “...I don’t know whether this is essentially or existentially...” (R3, 68); “I wonder if your thinking about the demonic aspect...” (R4, 68). What follows is an outline of Rogers’ questions as posed to Tillich.

Question 1: Self-affirmation

In their conversation, Rogers introduces the significance of self-affirmation (R1, 66). By this he means the extent that one man experiences himself an acceptance of each part of his existence. This means Tillich’s response is the shortest in their conversation; he agrees, and Rogers shifts to another topic, the nature of man (T1, 66).

Question 2: The nature of man

Rogers asserts that man’s nature is inherently social, that he has a deep need for relations and tends to be directional (R2, 66). Tillich agrees that man has two inherent natures: (1) true nature, meaning essential nature or, theologically speaking, his created nature (“being as is good”) and (2) existential nature, meaning the opposite of man’s essential nature, or the distortion of man’s essential nature (T2, 67). Rogers moves on by stating that “in a relationship of real freedom the individual tends to move not only toward deeper self-understanding, but toward more social behavior” (R3, 68). But the philosopher poses “a question mark” (T3, 68) and raises two reservations: (1) It’s almost impossible the creation of a situation of freedom, due to the nature of man, and (2) he doesn’t believe in the power of the individuals who are in such a situation to use their freedom (T3, 68).

Although Rogers agrees on the difficulty of achieving complete freedom, he maintains his own view, introducing the concepts of acceptance and understanding: He insists that “even imperfect attempts to create a climate of freedom and acceptance and understanding seem to liberate the person toward really social goals” (R4, 68). Also, he does not comment on Tillich’s distinction between

true or essential nature and existential nature. Finally, he empathetically asks Tillich, who didn't believe in the power of the free individual to use his freedom in constructive ways (T3, 68), about the philosopher's concept of the demonic.

Question 3: Human being's basic estrangement

Tillich agrees on the significance of love in the earliest years of a child's development, and he poses an open question: "Where are the forces which create a situation in which the child receives that love which gives him, later on the freedom to face life and not to escape from life into neuroses and psychoses?" (T4, 69). He defines and explicates the meaning of demonic as "...a force, under a force, which is stronger than the individual good will" (T4, 69)³. Rogers approves of and connects with Tillich's definition from the point of view of power in the world. For Rogers "alienation" and "estrangement" are matters of learning in the child. He seems to equate estrangement with his own psychological terminology of "the incongruence between the self and experience" (R, 70). Rogers then asks for the philosopher's opinion on that. Tillich said that "every man, is in the process of transition from dreaming innocence to conscious self-actualization" (T5, 70)⁴. Estrangement and fulfilment take place simultaneously in this process—this is his concept of ambiguity (T5, 70). Rogers agrees,

³ "The mysterious character of the holy produces an ambiguity in man's ways of experiencing it. The holy can appear as creative and as destructive... One can call this ambiguity divine-demonic, whereby divine is characterized by the victory of the creative over the destructive possibility of the holy, and the demonic is characterized by the victory of the destructive over the creative possibility of the holy..." (Tillich, 1957, 4).

⁴ Tillich explains the term "dreaming innocence" by using as an example the couple of Adam and Eve before the fall.

equating Tillich's courage to be with his tendency to become oneself (R6, 71). He also asserts that this can be achieved: "The person can only accept the unacceptable in himself when he is in a close relationship in which he experiences acceptance" (R6, 71). Then he introduces the fourth topic, the importance of acceptance.

Question 4: Acceptance in interpersonal relations

Tillich agrees that "acceptance of the unacceptable is a very necessary precondition for self-affirmation" (T7, 72). Also, he differentiates acceptance from the Christian term of forgiveness: "I have not used often anymore the word 'forgiveness', because this often produces a bad superiority in him who forgives and the humiliation of him who is forgiven. Therefore, I prefer the concept of acceptance" (T6, 71-72). Rogers agrees about the importance of acceptance (R7, 72) and the philosopher approves of him using religious language: "...I believe that this is really the center of what we call the 'good news' in the Christian message" (T7, 72).

At this point, the first half of the conversation comes to an end and an intermission follows. At the beginning of the second part, Tillich asserts that "the minister, who represents the ultimate meaning of life, can have much skill unconsciously, although he is unskilled, but even then he should not established himself as a second-rate psychotherapist" (T8, 72).

Question 5: Tillich's usage of theological language and religious terminology

Rogers asks the philosopher why he puts his thinking in theological and religious terminology and simultaneously expresses his objection toward that (R8, 72). Tillich seems to dispute this: "Now, I think that is a very large question..." (T9, 72), and Rogers interrupts him: "Yes it is" (R9, 72). Then, Tillich continues by explaining the term "vertical line" of human being as "something which is infinite, unconditional, ultimate" (T10, 73). Furthermore, he comes back to his theological language and expresses his contradiction: "We need a

translation and interpretation of this symbol, but not as you seem to indicate, a replacement” (T10, 73).

Rogers insists on the usage of humanistic language and terminology and parallels Tillich’s “vertical line” with something approximating the I-Thou relation as experienced in his psychotherapeutic practice: “I feel as though I am somehow in tune with the forces of the universe or that forces are operating through me in regard to this helping relationship” (R10, 74). In addition, his reference to the vertical dimension as “not going up, but going down” (R10, 73), provides the stimulus for the existential theologian and philosopher to talk about his ground of being as an analogy for God. Tillich emphasizes that the ground of being is down, while the creative ground is up and experienced in everything which is rooted in the creative ground⁵. He mentions the person to person encounters he had experienced with other human beings: For him in these “special moments” exist both the “presence of the holy” and the “scientists’ vertical line” (T11, 74-75).

Tillich’s disagreement with Rogers’s view is concrete and clear: “I could go far away with you when you use the term ‘universe’, forces of the universe...” (T11, 74). Rogers avoids commenting on the philosopher’s view, particularly about the presence of the holy, and shifts to what constitutes the optimal person, a topic that has a special interest for him. This 11th of Rogers’ turns is the longest in their discussion, occupying almost three minutes.

Question 6: What constitutes the optimal person

Likewise, Tillich’s answer to this question is the longest in their conversation, occupying more than six minutes. The optimal person for him is characterized by openness and aim. Socialization is part of

⁵The philosopher perhaps at this point means the *ground of being*.

the greater concept of love, agape in Greek (T12, 75-77). Then, he explains two terms: (1) faith, “not in the sense of beliefs but in the sense of being related to the ultimate,” and (2) love, “in a sense of affirming the other person and even one’s own person” (T12, 77). The philosopher concludes this segment of the discussion underlining the importance of self-affirmation and self-acceptance as “one of the most difficult things to reach” (T12, 77). Rogers in his answer says that he likes the philosopher when he becomes concrete, and agrees with his notions of faith and love (R12, 77). Furthermore, the creator of the person-centered approach defines the optimal person as characterized by openness to experience and continuous valuing process (R12, 77). Tillich agrees with the personal understanding of meanings (T13, 77) and also connects his terms of agape, listening love, namely listening with love, with the “concrete situation” and not the “abstract valuations” (T13, 77-78).

Rogers adopts Tillich’s term “listening love” and defines it further as a quality both for the self and the other (R13, 78). It becomes clear here that the precondition for the acceptance of the other is the acceptance of the self. Then Rogers uses the example of the small infant as a paradigm of the continuous “organismic valuing process” of the human being (R14, 78). The philosopher replies that according to him this is not “an intellectual evaluation, but an evaluation with his whole being” (T15, 78) and concludes their discussion with his agreement.

Commentary

In this section, I turn to a brief consideration of Tillich’s and Rogers’s views in order to clarify how they are similar to one another and how they differ. From my review of the conversation, both men agree about the personal understanding of meanings and about the importance of acceptance as a precondition for self-affirmation. Regarding the latter point, it is worthwhile mentioning a shift in Tillich’s thought in the last years of his life. This change concerns the differentiation of acceptance from the Christian term of forgiveness. Two years earlier in the spring 1963, Tillich had participated in a series

of discussions that took place at the University of California, Santa Barbara. When questioned by Professor Mackenzie Brown about his view regarding the problem of pride, Tillich used the two terms synonymously: “Now it has to be looked at in the light of the principle of forgiveness, or acceptance of the unacceptable” (Tillich & Mackenzie Brown, 1965).

Another point of agreement between the two men is the significance of love in human life. For Tillich (1954), “love is the tension between union and separation” (p. 25). Rogers underlines the importance of love in human life; he wrote about it in 1956 in a review of Reinhold Niebuhr’s book *The Self and the Dramas of History*: “Actually it is only in the experience of relationship in which he is loved (something very close, I believe to the theologian’s agape), that the individual can begin to feel a dawning respect for, acceptance of, and, finally, a fondness for himself” (Rogers, 1990, p. 211). He paralleled the quality of “unconditional positive regard” with the concept of love but with a meaning equivalent “to the theologian’s term agape, and not in its usual romantic or possessive meanings” (Rogers & Stevens, 1967, p. 94). Since then the significance of love is often reported in his texts: He perceives love as an element “that makes interpersonal communication enriching and enhancing” (Rogers, 1980, p. 26) and “the strongest force in our universe” (Rogers, 1980, p. 204).

The last issue of agreement between the two thinkers is the importance of empathic understanding. But this issue arises towards the closing of the conversation and is not discussed enough, possibly due to time restrictions. The eminent Norwegian person-centered scholar and therapist Leif Braaten (1963) criticized Tillich for disregard of empathic understanding. However, the existential theologian concretely values this qualitative attitude, which can happen not only between men and men, but sometimes between men and animals to a certain degree (Tillich & Mackenzie Brown, 1965).

My impression is that during their conversation, Rogers and Tillich do not seem to fulfill my own subjective need for them to address the immediacy of their meeting and what a meeting of two people of their caliber might mean for those listening to them. This leaves me with the unfulfilled wish—that they would have encountered

each other. This might be due to mutual understanding of their disparities early on and hence a mutual and unarticulated agreement not to go deeper in their interaction. In addition, and as far as I can discern, Tillich actually did not communicate with Rogers within a common understanding, even acceptance, with Rogers. It is worth mentioning Rogers' interview 20 years after this conversation in 1965, which reveals his opinion about Tillich at this event. Rogers was quite critical of him: "Tillich was a very difficult person to get to personally... I would try to really engage Tillich, but I could just see him mentally pulling out of his card file lecture number seventy-seven and giving it... I think it had to do with his personality. He was a very Germanic scholar... He had covered every point, in his thinking, and so no matter what point I raised, he could go back to something he'd done and respond in quite an academic fashion" (Rogers & Russell, 2002, 207). I agree with Rogers' perception of Tillich's participation in their communication as a scholar and not as a person. Although the philosopher mentions more than nine times that he agrees with Rogers, this agreement is rather dubious if one follows both his outwardly expressed thinking patterns and his way of treating Rogers when replying to or commenting on what has just been said. A closer study of their conversation reveals at least four significant differences, which I explore next.

1. The use of theological (Tillich) versus humanistic (Rogers) language and terminology.

As the discussion develops, both men persist in using their respective theological and humanistic terminologies. Tillich is an intense devotee of the idea that the ultimate Other is God. Rogers is an intense devotee of the idea that everything in psychotherapy originates from the Other. What Tillich verbally asserts as an agreement with Rogers is actually a series of subtle statements that are profoundly contrasted with Rogers' thought. Indeed, Tillich's thinking is on theological grounds and is very remote from Rogers' psychotherapeutic thinking. More specifically, in the second half of their conversation, Tillich, in using the word down, means to grasp the

heightened meaning God gave to the human existence from its roots upwards. In contrast, Rogers uses the word down to mean reaching the roots of a problem or the roots of a creative relationship with the client—the achieved depth of a heightened experience of togetherness. In contrast to Rogers’ interpretation of down, I feel that Tillich would attribute the opposite “direction” of the humble, impoverished human attempt to reach their subjective being, instead of extending themselves to the altitude of “being aware” of God’s presence.

Also, Tillich refers to key concepts of the person-centered approach, such as the optimal person, encounter, acceptance and self-actualization. However, the substance of these notions for Tillich remains essentially religious. Hence, these notions cannot be taken as acceptable by him, as they are essentially driven away from Rogers’ conceptualizations of these notions. Although Rogers’ formulations of his person-centered theory were inspired by or emerged almost directly from theological readings (Schmid, 2001), he formed a progressively independent view and renounced every religious doctrine. Two years later (1967), during an interview he said with explicitness: “I’m too religious to be religious” (Rogers & Berwick, 1969, p. 17). In the conversation with Tillich, it is clear that he prefers to use humanistic terms over Tillich’s usage of religious language.

2. The relation between freedom and the nature of man.

A huge issue arises when Rogers brings up Tillich’s term demonic. This is the topic that uncovers the ultimate disparity between the thinking of these two men, exposing an unbridgeable gap between them. By demonic Tillich means all human activity that is performed under the impression or fallacy of “being possessed.” However, it seems unclear both in this conversation with Rogers and in his own writings whether any positive passion of becoming engaged in any activity might not also be, in his terms, easily characterized as a “possessed” condition. PCA, on the other hand, begins with the assumption that human nature is essentially good and emerges in a climate “of safety, absence of threat, and complete freedom to be and to choose” (Rogers, 1962, p. 93). In other words, we see its expression when the person is free of the restriction of evaluative terms used by others, namely “conditions of worth.” Rogers’ view of human nature is

quite misunderstood, and he is accused wrongly of being naïve. He responds to this accusation by asserting: “I do not have a Pollyanna view of human nature. I am quite aware that out of defensiveness and inner fear individuals can and do behave in ways which are incredibly cruel, horribly destructive, immature, regressive, anti-social, hurtful” (Rogers, 1961, p. 27). But his psychotherapeutic experiences, even in such individuals, led him “to discover the strongly positive directional tendencies which exist in them, as in all of us, at the deepest levels” (Rogers, 1961, p. 27). Barbara Brodley (2006), in studying many transcripts of Rogers, actually found that Rogers tends to over-respond to the evil, painful, and dark sides of people’s messages, further refuting the Pollyanna view.

3. Socialization.

Tillich’s thinking appears subtly but consistently disparate from Rogers’ in his searches for an appropriate word to describe the process of humankind towards socialization that leads man even deeper into conflict with society. Also, Tillich found the term demonic as the most apt to reflect a rather foggy—I would say—view of the evolutionary process. According to Rogers, socialization is psychologically essential for growth—the human being tends to move toward deeper self-understanding and more social behavior. Also, for Rogers, the tendency toward experiencing constitutes the basis of the social nature of the person. While Rogers perceives contact with the other as the pathway that holds the most promise in helping the other toward self-discovery, Tillich perceives self-discovery as arising through resisting the other. Furthermore, Rogers is quite critical of the pessimism of European existentialism: “Indeed, I am not very congenial with the somewhat despairing existentialist, particularly those in France” (Evans, 1975, p. 70).

4. Encounter.

While Rogers perceives encounter as the special event of contacting the unique reality of the different Other, Tillich perceives encounter as the cognitive intersection of considering the various

layers of reality until reaching the ultimate realization of the ground of all grounds, as established by holiness (Tillich, 1951, p. 18-19). Tillich seems to ignore the work and the changes that Rogers brought to the fields of counseling and psychotherapy and the major differences between psychoanalyst and client-centered psychotherapist. Although in the discussion Tillich twice mentions the term “psychoanalyst” (T6, 72) and once the term “analyst” (T11, 74), I would say that due to his ignorance, he portrays the client-centered psychotherapist as an analyst. By his words, [the psychoanalyst] “not judging him, not telling him first he should be good, otherwise I cannot accept you, but accepting him just because he is not good, but he has something within himself that wants to be good” (T6, 72). His references to “a psychoanalyst” instead of a “psychotherapist” may be due to his friendships and personal relations with “heretical” psychoanalysts (e.g. Erich Fromm, Karen Horney, Rollo May) and their influences on his views from depth psychology as the mainstream force for psychotherapy at that time in Europe.

Tillich’s death seven months after this meeting was unfortunate. Perhaps we would have seen movement in his thought due to the influence of this meeting with Rogers, as we see in Martin Buber after his encounter with Rogers. As it is known from the excellent work of Rob Anderson and Kenneth Cissna, Buber considered as almost impossible the authenticity of participants in a public conversation (Anderson & Cissna 1997; Cissna & Anderson, 1996, 193). However, he was impressed by his own dialogue with Rogers held in University of Michigan on April 18, 1957. A few years later, and as a result of this positive impression, Buber changed his opinion about the nonmutual and genuine involvement of the participants in a public dialogue. Because of this shift, he recommended his student and coordinator Maurice Friedman remove such a paragraph at the re-edition of his book *The knowledge of Man*, in which there is a transcript of his dialogue with Rogers (Buber, 1965, 184).

It is my impression that Rogers addresses Tillich’s ideas having a good grasp of his theory. The entire contact between the two men appears to offer us an opportunity to comprehend precisely the disparities between two worlds of the psychotherapeutic and the

theological. The psychotherapeutic does not necessarily contradict divinity. At the same time, the theological is not necessarily indistinguishable from the sanctified. Moreover, if one examines parts of their conversation in a comparative way, the logical conclusion is that each of these men's backgrounds is distinct in a way that cannot be understood easily as changeable, adjustable, or flexible. I bring this disparity to light in this paper, with the hope of spurring continued inquiries and future exploration.

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