

SOME COMPARISONS BETWEEN TAOISM AND PERSON-CENTERED THERAPY

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ABSTRACT. *This brief article discusses the author's perceptions of the meaningful parallels between Taoism and Person-Centered Therapy.*

I read with interest a recent article in *The Person-Centered Journal* by Barry Grant (1995) on client-centered therapy as a spiritual discipline. The main idea of the paper was that if one *does not* accept the Rogerian concept of an actualizing tendency and if one wants to become a better client-centered therapist, then one must actively work to develop specific therapeutic attitudes (e.g., empathy, acceptance, respect, responsiveness) in oneself.

But how exactly does one change oneself so that one will often respond to others with acceptance, respect, empathy, and sincerity? According to Grant (1995), client-centered therapy becomes a spiritual discipline when a counselor addresses this question. Client-centered therapy as a spiritual discipline is a training and an activity that develops character and that has to do with the self-perfection of the therapist in the attitudes.

The development of the practice of client-centered therapy as a spiritual discipline begins with thinking with and through the basic attitudes and orientation of client-centered therapy. As one then seeks an understanding of these ideas and of how to implement them, one looks for connections to similar ideas and broader contexts (Grant, 1995). To help deepen one's understanding of the therapeutic attitudes, one can turn to readings in religion, literature, and philosophy.

I turned my attention to readings in philosophy, specifically, the philosophy of Taoism. My understanding and appreciation of person-centered therapy is now more profound and intense since my introduction to the Eastern philosophy of Taoism (cf. Cleary, 1991; Tao, 1993; Tzu, 1990). What I should now like to do is present a brief explanation of the Tao followed by what I perceive to be a number of important similarities between person-centered therapy and Taoism.

Tao is a word full of meaning. It may mean a path, a way, a principle, a method, a doctrine, a system of order. Tao may be an idea an order – a kind of complete reality within the universe. The Tao is the ultimate union of one's innermost being with the creative, spontaneous life-force of the universe (Cleary, 1991).

Tao is an "experience" rather than a "thought." The person-centered corollary to this Taoist idea is the emphasis placed on the *process* of therapy, the "experience" which occurs when two individuals become inseparably connected to each other within the context of a counseling relationship. The notion that each individual is his or her unique process is central to person-centered therapy (cf. Bozarth, 1995). In fact, much of the research literature on psychotherapy suggests that the greatest contributors to the effectiveness of therapy are "experience" variables

(i.e., client and relationship variables) (Norcross, 1993). Client-centered therapy is, after all, not a school of thought, as much as it is a way of being, an experience.

The Tao way of enacting change is through "inaction." Within person-centered therapy, the seat of power rests within the individual. As a therapist, I must not interfere with the client's natural process of change; at times I even need to get out of my client's way! According to Rogers and Sanford (1984), there is clearly a drive in living matter to perfect itself. For it is the client who knows best where to go, when to go, and how to get there. Client solutions will emerge ultimately by themselves within the client's subjective world so long as I am patient, listen carefully, respond empathically, and attend fully to my client.

According to the Tao, deliberate interventions result in resistance. The person-centered corollary to this belief rests in the fundamental attitude that it is the client who is the expert. It is the client who will solve ultimately his or her own problems. The more I "intervene," the more I force the client in one direction or the other, the more resistance I will encounter. I have long felt that "brief psychotherapy" would be much briefer if therapists would only slow down! I have found that if I can just be as open as possible and at the deepest level possible (cf. Rogers, 1976), then client resistance is much less likely.

The principles of Yin (e.g., darkness, cold, withdrawal, passivity) and Yang (e.g., light, heat, expansion, activity) govern the behavior of all beings. The person-centered corollary to this principle is the unconditional acceptance of clients in an undivided way (e.g., to accept the dark side and the light side equally). To understand the polarities of humanness is truly the realization of the Tao. According to Rogers (1959), unconditional positive regard is experienced when no client utterance can be discriminated as more or less worthy of positive regard than any other. To "prize" my clients means being able to accept their support and their cruelty as one state. As a therapist, I simply do not have "norms" (i.e., valuing clients based on their behavior). When I interact with my clients, I accept them "as is."

According to the Tao, one must be totally receptive to that which wells up from within the heart of hearts. Within person-centered therapy, the therapist learns to trust him or herself. Trust the process and trust the client. Often when I remain still and silent something redeeming from deep within the client (i.e., "heart of hearts") emerges. I begin to notice that somehow my client becomes more open, honest, loving. Using client-centered terminology, it is the actualizing tendency – the one natural, constructive, growth-directed motivational force in all humans – that slowly begins to emerge.

I am sure more resemblances exist between the Tao and person-centered therapy, and the points I discuss in this paper probably overlap to some degree. It is the similarities between the two, however, that have deepened my understanding of what takes place within a therapeutic encounter. As Grant (1995) correctly predicted, the result of engaging in readings from outside the person-centered literature furthers one's appreciation of a philosophy of life articulated by Carl Rogers years ago.

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