CARL ROGERS' 'CONGRUENCE' AS AN ORGANISMIC; NOT A FREUDIAN CONCEPT

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ABSTRACT. The principal purpose of this paper is to illumine the extent to which Carl Rogers' characterization of the central person-centered concept of congruence is couched in terms of a Cartesian-Newtonian, paradigmatic world-view mediated by the theoretical formulations of Sigmund Freud. Crucial problems in such a quasi-Freudian characterization of congruence are delineated demonstrative of a critical flaw in person-centered theory as a whole: its being a mix of concepts deriving from the discrepant Cartesian-Newtonian and organismic scientific paradigms. The re-formulation of congruence in organismic terms is envisaged as part of a general need to conceptualize all key person-centered concepts in such a fashion.

The sciences...are born under quite special conditions—when their key concepts reach a degree of abstraction and precision which makes them adequate to the demands of exact, powerful, and microscopically analytic thinking. (Susanne Langer, 1962, p. 13)

As the matrix of ideas that underpins and guides person-centered counseling/psychotherapy¹, and crafted almost entirely by Carl Rogers, person-centered theory is not merely unfinished (Mearns, 1997, p. 135), but in my estimation, is critically flawed.

The critical flaw intrinsic to person-centered theory has to do, I contend (cf. Ellingham, 1997b), with its being a mix of concepts deriving from two disparate paradigms, two fundamentally different guiding visions of the world: on the one hand, the Cartesian-Newtonian (C-N) paradigm which underlies Newtonian physics and our contemporary common-sense understanding of reality; on the other, a paradigm which is still in the process of emerging from the Cartesian-Newtonian, a paradigm variously labelled holistic, organismic, process, and from which has arisen field theory, general systems theory and eco-psychology (cf. Capra, 1982; 1996). A simple measure of the contrast between these two
paradigms is that the former employs the machine as its root metaphor, the latter uses the living organism.

On the following grounds, therefore, a) that Rogers developed person-centered theory in the attempt to generate scientific understanding of the phenomenon of c/p; b) that contemporary advance in scientific understanding embodies a shift from a C-N to an organismic view of the world; and c) that in any case person-centered theory is at its core organismic and not mechanistic in character (cf., Hall, Lindzey & Campbell, 1998, p. 454; Bozarth 1998, p. 28), I further contend that to remedy the critical flaw within person-centered theory and thus render it a self-consistent vehicle of more advanced scientific understanding (even a paradigm for the field of c/p as a whole), various of the theory’s key concepts need to be organismically purified. We should seek to define all person-centered concepts in exclusively organismic versus C-N terms—an intellectual exercise with which Rogers himself professed agreement (cf. Rogers, 1963, pp. 19ff.).

Rogers’ concept of congruence constitutes a prime candidate for this kind of organismic makeover. Supportive evidence for congruences’ candidacy is provided, in my view, by disquieting appraisals recently voiced by a number of person-centered thinkers. Barbara Brodley concludes that “the precise meaning of congruence [in Rogers’ writings] remains somewhat ambiguous” (1998, p. 83); Len Holdstock remarks that “the concept of congruence…seems to be in urgent need of attention” (1996, p. 48); Sheila Haugh avows that “understanding of the concept of congruence within person-centered theory and practice is at best blurred and at worst misinterpreted’ (1998, p. 44); and Gill Wyatt charges that “different practitioners are using different definitions of congruence and, related to their different theoretical position, they have a different stance with regard the place of congruence in therapeutic practice” (1998, p. 6).

In the present article, I aim to point up how particular problems relating to Rogers’ formulation of congruence arise from that formulation being shot through with C-N notions mediated by the theorizing of Sigmund Freud. As such, the article represents a deconstructive, stage-setting exercise preparatory to a constructive attempt to characterize congruence in an organically refined fashion. In what follows, I first highlight the C-N flavor to Freud’s classical conception of psychotherapeutic client change. Next, I consider how, in this regard, Rogers’ characterization of congruence bears the imprint of Freud’s theorizing. Thereafter, I identify crucial problems involved in Rogers’ Freudian characterization of congruence and briefly allude to an alternative organismic approach. Finally, I sketch the general context and character of an organismic re-visioning of congruence.

In the footsteps of Isaac Newton and Rene Descartes

It is hardly surprising that when Rogers came to theorize about the nature of c/p that his thinking should have been influenced by the views of Freud, the founder of the modern discipline of c/p as the talking cure. Indeed, Rogers had no qualms acknowledging that the development of non-directive or client-centered “would not have been possible without the appreciation of man’s unconscious strivings and complex emotional nature which was Freud’s contribution to our culture” (1951, p. 4).
But, as we shall shortly see, Rogers’ appreciation in this respect was not merely of a
general character. It involved explaining specific psychotherapeutic client change-
constructive self change effected by c/p-- in decidedly Freudian terms. As such, it expresses
a scheme grounded in the intellectual formulations of Isaac Newton and Rene Descartes, i.e.
the C-N paradigm.

Three features of the C-N paradigm to take note of with respect to Freud’s theorizing are:

1. a dualistic view of reality wherein the person is considered made up of
two fundamentally different and irreducible substances: Rene Descartes’
res cogitans, physically unextended, conscious mind; and res extensa,
physically extended, unconscious matter (the latter being, of course, the
body).
2. the notion that at its simplest level the physical realm of matter is
comprised of unchanging “bits of stuff” called atoms which get moved
around in the container of absolute space in the cause-effect manner of
parts of a clock or of billiard balls on a billiard table. Recall that it was
Isaac Newton who specified such movement with mathematical
precision.
3. the presumption that mind/consciousness operates according to the
principles of thought which are of a different order than those which
govern the workings of the physical domain.

Thus it was that when Freud came upon patients who had no conscious idea of what was
causing their neuroses (certain disturbances of bodily, behavioral and mental functioning), he
at first sought to explain such disturbances neurologically. As a former student of Ernst
Brucke, this meant in terms of unconscious matter governed by Newtonian principles, i.e. in
tune with Brucke’s advocacy of mechanism, the reductionist doctrine that all mental
functioning could ultimately be explained in physico-chemical terms (cf. Appignanesi,
1979). Unsuccessful in this strictly mechanistic enterprise, Freud put to one side the question
of the mind’s relationship to the body, to matter, and came up instead with an explanatory
scheme which departed from strict C-N assumptions by positing the existence of a
psychological realm of which consciousness was not an attribute. Freud labeled this realm the
unconscious, further departing from a purist C-N view by conceiving both it and the mind as
a whole in quasi-mechanistic terms. Here Freud appears to have been influenced by the view
of Johann Herbart, who posited the existence of an unconscious mind, along with the notion
of ‘ideas’ as entities (cf. MacIntyre, 1958, chpt. 2). Thus, in his classical topographical or
spatial scheme, Freud conceived of the mind as consisting of the compartments of
consciousness, the unconscious, and entity-like mental contents-- akin to a C-N physical
apparatus.

Although Freud later developed a more complex scheme, as Janet Malcolm relates, it was
this “spatial arrangement of the unconscious and conscious states” (1982, p. 29) that guided
Freud when writing the papers elaborating the basic technique of psychoanalysis.
The crucial discovery that Freud explained on such a basis was that of patients' neurotic symptoms becoming alleviated when, aided by the psychoanalyst, they were able to verbally bring to mind a forgotten idea from their childhood, an idea of a particularly repugnant nature. Given that there seemed to be an associative link between the nature of the idea and the nature of the symptoms, Freud hypothesized that it was the idea itself that was pathogenic, in that it had previously been the underlying cause of the neurotic symptoms in the manner of a cancerous cell. What happened in childhood, Freud reasoned, was that when ideas arose expressive of the primitive infantile impulses of sexual lust and intense hate, they could not be countenanced and allowed entry into the compartment of consciousness. Consequently they became repelled from consciousness and confined in the chamber of the unconscious. Freud coined the term repression to denote the defense operation by which this took place.

Psychotherapy, for Freud, thus consisted of the reversal of repression, a restorative process involving the excision from the unconscious of pathogenic repressed ideas (conceived of as unchanging atomic mental entities, or things) and their concomitant passage into consciousness— their movement from one chamber of a quasi-mechanical system to another.

Insofar as the therapist's task was to facilitate the entry into consciousness of previously repressed ideas, or unconscious contents, Freud described the work of the therapist as that of making the patient's unconscious conscious to him (1973, p. 100). So construed, the effectiveness of the therapist depended on her or him being an expert on the unconscious, and an expert in diagnosing the nature of the underlying unconscious idea on the basis of its disguised or masked expression in the patient's behavioural symptoms and mental imagery. The therapist thus interpreted to the patient the nature of the idea which lay below the surface in the reservoir of their unconscious. This enabled the patient to know the repressed idea for what it was and through its having a place in consciousness to cease its subversive influence on the patient's mental functioning.

Overall, then, the psychotherapeutic process was roughly comparable to the hauling up of an anchor from the depths of the sea in order for it to assume its proper place on board ship, where it could be apprehended directly for what it was rather than being known indirectly through its previous anchorage effects. It was in such a fashion, therefore, that Freud developed a scheme in which the mind, and ipso facto, the enterprise of c/p, became "placed among the inhabitants of the 'billiard-ball universe' of Newtonian mechanics" (MacIntyre, 1958, p. 17).

In the footsteps of Sigmund Freud

It is Rogers' formulation of congruence as a concept integral to his explanation of psychotherapeutic change that sees this central person-centered notion being defined in a decidedly Freudian manner. Mirroring Freud's dualistic description of psychotherapeutic change as the unconscious becoming conscious, Rogers depicts such change as "a shift from incongruence to congruence" (1961, p. 157)— where congruence is associated with awareness and constitutes the state of a person who is genuine, whole, integrated, without facade, and adjusted (1959, p. 206; 1957, p. 224); while incongruence, congruences' polar opposite, is linked with "denial and distortion to awareness" and taken to represent "the basis of all
psychological pathology in man [sic.], and the basis of all his social pathology as well” (1959, p. 205; 1963, p. 21).

Furthermore, paralleling Freud’s comparison between the analyst, who is conscious of the unconscious, as against the patient, who is not, Rogers construes the effective therapist as an individual who “is congruent or integrated in the [therapeutic] relationship,” in contrast to the client who, by definition, “is in a state of incongruence” (Rogers, 1957, p. 221). These respective characterizations of congruent counselor versus incongruent client constitute two of Rogers’ “six...necessary and sufficient conditions for the initiation of a process of constructive personality [i.e. psychotherapeutic] change” (Rogers, 1957, p. 234).

Turning to the detail of Rogers’ formal descriptions of congruence and incongruence, not surprisingly we find a tendency to define congruence with reference to the therapist and incongruence with reference to the client-- albeit Rogers considers there to be a continuum from maximum incongruence to complete congruence of the fully functioning person (1961, p. 157; 1959, p. 235). The congruent therapist is not, however, expected to be a paragon of congruence outside the therapeutic relationship (Rogers, 1957, p. 224).

Common to all of Rogers’ formal definitions of congruence and incongruence is their specification, respectively, of a concordant or discordant relationship between two or more levels of a person’s psychological functioning (Rogers, 1961, p. 339). The two level definition linked with inner psychological change mainly appears with reference to clients. The three (or more) level version adds on to the two level definition an extra level(s) relating to outward behaviour and verbal communication, and mainly appears in connection with characterizing the state of the therapist (or persons in general, including infants).

The total picture is perhaps easiest to grasp if we start by considering a three level definition. Here, for instance, (inclusive of alternative terms found elsewhere) is one in which the levels are clearly identified as such, and where the concordant relationship between them is characterized as an ‘accurate matching’ (1959, p. 206; 1957, p. 97).

Congruence is the term we have used to indicate an accurate matching of experiencing and awareness. It may be still further extended to cover a matching of experience, awareness, and communication...He [the congruent individual] is one unified person all the way through, whether we tap his experience at the visceral [gut, organismic, or physiological] level, the level of his awareness [consciousness, or symbolization], or the level of communication (Rogers, 1961, p. 339).

Complementing this three level characterization of congruence is a three level depiction of incongruence. So conceptualized, incongruence comes in two forms, “incongruence A” and “incongruence B,” as Mearns and Thorne (1988, p. 84) dub them: “incongruence between experience and awareness...usually spoken of as defensiveness, or denial [or distortion] to awareness”; and “between awareness and communication...usually thought of as falseness or deceit” (Rogers, 1961, p. 341).

How congruence might conceivably involve more than three levels is suggested by two definitions relating to the therapist. As “emotionally toned experiences...within the envelope
of the organism” (Rogers, 1959, pp. 198, 197), ‘feelings’ have something of an unchanging ‘thing-like’ character: “By this [congruence] we mean that the feelings the therapist is experiencing are available to him [sic.], available to his awareness, and he is able to live these feelings, be them, able to communicate them if appropriate” (Rogers, 1961, p. 61). And, “Thus whether he [the therapist] is angry or affectionate or ashamed or enthusiastic, we sense that he is the same at all levels—in what he is experiencing at an organismic level, in his awareness at the conscious level, and in his words and communications” (Rogers, 1961, p. 283).

To complete the portrayal and begin to gain a sense of how in Rogers’ view a psychotherapeutic shift from incongruence to congruence entails constructive self-change, consider Rogers’ depiction of both congruence and incongruence as two-level notions; the relationship between the two levels specified as “accurate symbolization” or “accurate representation.”

Focusing first on incongruence, according to Rogers, “It refers to a discrepancy between the actual experience of the organism and the self picture of the individual insofar as it represents that experience” (1957, p. 222). By contrast, “when self-experiences are accurately symbolized [in awareness] and are included in the self-concept [self picture] in this accurately symbolized form, then the state is one of congruence of self and experience” (1959, p. 206).

Especially strong evidence that this two level conception of congruence leads to a depiction of psychotherapeutic increase in congruence that bears the hallmarks of Freud’s conception of the unconscious becoming conscious is supplied by Rogers in the following declaration. “In client-centered therapy,” states Rogers:

...our theory is that in the psychological safety of the therapeutic relationship the client is able to permit in his awareness feelings and experiences which ordinarily would be repressed, or denied to awareness. These previously denied experiences may be incorporated into the self. For example, a client who has repressed all feelings of hostility may come, during therapy, to experience his hostility freely. His concept of himself then becomes reorganized to include this realization that he has at times hostile feelings to others. His self-picture becomes to that degree a more accurate map or representation of the totality of his experience (1961, p. 237).

Here, accentuated by Rogers’ deployment of the technical Freudian term of repression and the entity-like nature of feelings and experiences, we appear to encounter a similarity between Rogers and Freud that is to the point of identity, a judgement confirmed by Calvin Hall, Gardner Lindzey and John Campbell (1998). “Explicitly recognized in Rogers’ theory,” they say,

is the concept of an organism that has many experiences of which the person is not aware. Some of these unsymbolized experiences are denied entrance to consciousness because they are inconsistent with the self-image. If
this is not repression, in the psychoanalytic sense, then the distinction between it and repression is so slight as to be negligible (p. 488).

Given this apparent concordance between the views of Rogers and Freud, are we to say, then, that Rogers’ formulations relating to congruence are merely the masked representation of an underlying Freudian scheme? Is Rogers himself being incongruent in failing to symbolize to awareness unconscious Freudian ideas?

A number of other features in Rogers’ theorizing would seem to indicate that the correspondence between his views and those of Freud is some way from being an identity. To gauge the closeness of this correspondence, consider the following five points: First, Rogers, as revealed already, did not conceptualize congruence and psychotherapeutic change solely in terms of two levels but of three, or more, so that it might be said that whereas Freud’s scheme is dualistic Rogers’ is not. Countering this claim, though, are the arguments of Brodley (1998) and Haugh (1998) that it is Rogers’ two level formulation found in his (1957) and (1959) theory statements which provide us with the authoritative and delimiting definition of congruence. Back to pure Freud is their implied message.

Also, there is the question of the character of the levels in Rogers’ three level version of congruence. Organismic experience, awareness, and communication can hardly be said to be levels in the sense of being relatively higher and lower categories on a single ladder-like scale of psychological functioning. Certainly, insofar as Rogers associates “organismic experience” with the functioning of animals, and “symbolization to awareness” with adult humans (1961, p. 105), we can readily see how the latter can be considered to be on a higher level than the former. But what case can be made that communication is indeed a higher mode of functioning than symbolization to awareness? If there is indeed a ladder linking symbolization to awareness to communication (and from a developmental perspective this would seem hardly to be the case), then it would not seem to be the same one that links organismic experience to symbolization to awareness.

Overall, therefore, a strong case can be made in relation to the definition of congruence that we are still dealing with a Freudian style dualistic system, of organismic experience and symbolization to awareness, in relation to which symbolization to awareness and communication represent different articulations of the same developmental level. Secondly, in spite of the fact that “Rogers seems to assume that feelings have a ‘thing-like’ quality” (Wexler, 1974, p. 53), Rogers’ account of feelings “bubbling through into awareness” (cf. Rogers, 1961, p. 156) is different from Freud’s depiction involving a billiard ball feeling moving from one chamber in the mind to the other. For his part, Rogers appears to posit that denied feelings come to enjoy a presence at the levels of awareness and communication in tandem with their continued presence at an organismic level. Whereas an incongruent individual’s feelings are “denied to awareness,” the congruent person “is the same at all levels” (Rogers, 1961, p. 61), such that what he or she “is feeling at an experiential or visceral level is clearly present in awareness, and is available for direct communication” (Rogers & Sanford, 1989, p. 1490).

This interpretation of the same “thing” being present at all levels in the congruent person fits with Rogers having adopted the term congruence “based on the geometric concept of
congruent triangles” (Kirschenbaum, 1979, p. 196), i.e. the notion of triangles “coinciding exactly when superimposed” (Bozarth, 1998, p. 71), of their being identical clones, “things” which are no different from one another.

Brodney, on the other hand, draws attention to Rogers’ writings supporting a somewhat different interpretation of the above circumstance. Writing from her two level position, she is forceful in asserting that “The theoretical definition of congruence as accurate representation of experience by inner symbols is about the [accurate] relation between the contents of experience and the symbols [in awareness] representing the contents” (1998, pp. 87 & 92). This view of matters would seem to have in mind contents (unchanging things) existing at an experiential level with symbolization involving the simultaneous presence at the level of awareness of a representative mark or label, in the way a mark on a map represents a feature of the real territory. Given the point, though, emphasized by Rogers himself, that the map is not the territory (cf. Rogers, 1951, p. 485), a difficulty which arises for this interpretation is how to square it with the notion of a congruent person being “the same at all levels.”

In relation to feelings being things, a further scenario somewhat at variance with Freud arises from Rogers’ conception of accurate symbolization as simply involving an openness to experience, i.e. the individual is “openly aware of his [sic.] feelings and attitudes as they exist in him at an organic [i.e. organicistic] level” (Rogers, 1961, p. 115). It is as if the process of accurate symbolization is equivalent to the cleaning of a glass panel to enable open apprehension of whatever lies beyond it. So envisaged, feelings denied to awareness are like fish swimming beneath a glass-bottomed boat which cannot be apprehended as such due to the dirty glass. Once the glass is cleaned, though, the fish can be accurately perceived for what they are. In such a characterization, then, with the development of congruence the individual comes to enjoy the gift of a free and undistorted awareness of previously denied thing-like feelings which all the time continue to reside at the organicistic level (Rogers, 1961, p. 105).

Thirdly, leaving aside the question of the distorted conscious representation of a denied feeling, which is common to both Freud’s and Rogers’ accounts, Rogers’ conception of feelings coming to awareness incorporates a complexity not found in Freud’s equivalent formulation. For Rogers, it is not only a matter of a previously denied feeling suddenly being consciously apprehended in its full glory in a sudden moment of insight, but of such a feeling being capable of becoming apprehended “with varying degrees of sharpness, from dim awareness of something existing as ground, to a sharp focus of something which is in focus as figure” (Rogers, 1959, p. 198). There is thus a continuum in relation to being conscious of a feeling, from a complete “denial to awareness” to the condition of “experiencing a feeling fully,” i.e. with optimal “richness” (Rogers, 1961, p. 151).

Again, though, it is questionable in this instance just how different Rogers’ views are from those of Freud. David Wexler, for example, points up that given that feelings have a thing-like quality for him, “Rogers must assume that a richness of feelings exists outside awareness prior to symbolization”, and thereby “that outside of awareness there is some kind of reservoir, not unlike the Freudian unconscious, where a richness of feelings resides and exists” (1974, pp. 53 & 54).
Fourthly, if, in Rogers' theorizing, there is indeed an implicit reservoir of denied feelings, then we would have to say that it is certainly different from Freud's with regard to both its contents and its structure. For a start, we would have to presume that located within it are not only destructive and negative feelings (equivalent to the repressed contents of Freud's unconscious), but also those of both a neutral and a positive nature, with the more positive and constructive to be found at the greatest depth, at the person's essential core. Thus, in relation to the case of his client "Mrs. Oak," Rogers reports that underneath the bitterness and hatred and the desire to get back at the world which has cheated her, is a much less anti-social feeling, a deep experience of having been hurt; while "underneath the bitterness, underneath the hurt, is a self that is without hate" (1961, pp. 96 & 101).

A similar picture also emerges with respect to another client of Rogers. Rogers relates that in his therapeutic work with this second client he was "responsive both to the anger and the pain that was discovered to be underlying it" (1982, p. 253). Directly referring to the client, Rogers reports that in the course of therapy the client's "armor begins to crack" such that "We find the upper layer is anger, but further down in the slime are the unspeakable hurts" (in Farber, Brink & Raskin, 1996, p.308).

According to Rogers' own hypothesis, what we see in these instances is a process wherein "only when a gut-level experience is fully accepted and accurately labeled in awareness can it be completed. Then the person can move on" (1980, p. 158).

With congruence resulting from gut-level experience becoming accurately labeled in awareness, the client's moving on-- of becoming more congruent-- appears to entail the symbolization to awareness of increasingly positive feelings, a descending step-wise process that presumably continues until the hypothetical end-point of complete congruence, of being fully functioning, is reached. As we have seen, it is this congruent condition which is epitomized by the effective therapist in the therapeutic relationship, as one who feels and communicates unconditional positive regard towards the client. What we have is a scenario in which there appear to be different storage levels for feelings denied to awareness such that as one delves down the layers one passes from negative to positive feelings.

Fifthly, in the face of criticism from Eugene Gendlin (1962; 1964), Rogers' later writings can be said to show a shift away from a C-N, Freudian style of conceiving psychotherapeutic change towards a more organismic or process orientated conception. It might be argued that Rogers' final position regarding the definition of congruence shifted away from that of his earlier quasi-Freudian conception. Whatever the truth of such a claim, there nevertheless remains clear evidence that in his final writings Rogers still continued to characterize congruence and psychotherapeutic change in a Freudian manner.

We have already seen how in his later years Rogers spoke of discovering feelings at layers "down in the slime," but note too how he refers to his own personal satisfaction at being able to be congruent, to "get close to himself," as he idiosyncratically puts it. "So it is a very satisfying thing," he says, "when I sense that I have gotten close to me, to the feelings and hidden aspects that live below the surface"(author's emphasis) (1980, p. 16).
Note how in the same later period Rogers declares that the role of the therapist is not that of “trying to uncover totally unconscious feelings” (1980, p. 142). And finally, note how, close to the end of his life in a work written jointly with Ruth Sanford, Rogers appraises “Ben’s” account of an experience of personal psychotherapeutic change. “Ben,” Rogers and Sanford comment, 


gives a beautiful description of defensiveness—a denial to awareness of his anger—and the dissolving of that defensiveness in the safe and trusting environment initiated by the facilitator of learning. His masked feelings become unmasked. He can accept himself as angry. (1989, p. 1487).

Get thee behind me Sigmund Freud!

To this point my primary concern has been to lay bear the extent to which Rogers’ concept of congruence and, ipso facto, his conception of psychotherapeutic change, correspond to Freud’s C-N formulations. I move on now to briefly consider certain basic problems involved in conceiving congruence in a Freudian fashion.

Whether or not they are considered to move from one location to another, as I see it, the central problem endemic to Rogers’ quasi-Freudian conception of congruence arises from the treatment of mental events (feelings, in particular) as things or contents which explicitly or implicitly are assumed to dwell in some kind of psychological container or envelope. When leading person-centered authorities Dave Mearns and Brian Thorne (1988) inform me that my congruence as a therapist depends on my ability to “[f]eel the feelings that are within me” (p. 75); and when in explicating congruence they draw a diagram with a square area housing “[t]he counselor’s underlying feelings in response to a client” of which the counselor may be “unaware” (pp. 84f), there can be no doubt that Cartesian-Newtonian, topographical Freudianism is alive and well within the person-centered approach. It is a situation in relation to which a suitably augmented observation of Eugene Gendlin is entirely apt. “Whether,” says Gendlin, “they are ‘in’ awareness or ‘in’ the unconscious [or at the organismic level], the contents [feelings] are viewed as already defined, fully formed, and unaffected in their nature by ‘coming into’ awareness” (1962, p. 30).

As it happens, though, it doesn’t take too much thought apropos this jack-in-the-box scenario to realize that the idea of an unconscious feeling, an underlying feeling of which one is unaware, i.e. an unfelt feeling, is logical nonsense.

“‘Incongruence A’,” declare Mearns and Thorne, “is where the counselor has underlying feelings in response to the client, but is unaware of these” (1988, p. 85)– a case in point being the counselor whose “incongruence was due to a lack of awareness of the anger within her” (p. 84).

Pause for a moment to consider the kind of notion that is being suggested here: that I am experiencing an unfelt feeling of anger of which I would be aware… would be feeling, if only I wasn’t actually feeling a feeling of anxiety, of depression, or of exhilaration—or, indeed, were feeling no feeling at all.
Just what at the moment of my not feeling it is a feeling of which I am unaware? Perhaps, like an unseen sighting, I am to equate it with the emotional hurt I would be feeling if I were not on Prozac, or to the pain I would be feeling under the dentist’s drill were it not for the anaesthetic, or self-hypnosis? A feeling of pain where I have no feeling of pain? That is something I definitely think I can handle! In fact, “sock it to me one more time!” A feeling is what I feel, not what I do not feel.

Relevant to such reflections, social constructionist Rom Harre (1986) fittingly pours scorn on the notion of an already fully-formed feeling of anger existing “within the envelope of the organism” prior to our awareness of it. On Harre’s testimony,

there is a relatively new anger language game that is played in T-groups and Rogerian therapy sessions. “Let’s let all that anger out!” This kind of talk suggests that there is a buried affective state, a kind of emotional boil, that can be lanced and the poison removed. But even a brief encounter with encounter groups shows that there is almost certainly no such thing as buried anger. The anger displayed by the members seems to be created by the therapy session itself (p. 7).

Feelings of anger or of other emotions, Harre thus points up, are always a social construction, very much a product of our cultural values and language system. Not only, too, are they about some societal circumstance, but most importantly they are created in the here and now—our feelings being, in Eugene Gendlin’s phrase, “newly produced each moment” (1981, p. 97).

Such a conception of the momentary and creative formation of feelings highlights, in particular, Rogers’ unavoidably passive conception of symbolization. For him symbolization can only be a simple labeling process, a process of opening up our awareness to what is already present at the level of organismic experience, a shining-the-light upon a pre-existing, previously hidden thing.

With the contemporary awareness that individuals from different cultures live in different worlds, thanks to the modes and schemes of symbolization passed on as part of their cultural heritage, we see that whatever may be going on at an organismic level, the feelings we become aware of are the result of a creative act involving our cultural values. It is for this reason, as Len Holdstock recounts in his specific discussion of anger and congruence, that “very little anger is elicited in some...cultures” (1996, p. 50). It is not that there are feelings of anger dwelling inside us which some cultures let out whereas other cultures keep them in or repress, but that what actually is felt is a function of the culturally specific way a person interprets certain configurations of the total field of events relevant to their life, events both ‘internal’ and external.

Such a social constructionist approach to the experiencing of feelings also sheds light, in my view, on another difficulty intrinsic to Rogers’ Freudianesque conception of congruence—a difficulty related to the notion of feelings of which we are unaware dwelling at different organismic layers or levels according to how negative or positive they are.
The precise definition of congruence and incongruence becomes more than problematic when we envisage positive feelings of affection and regard, say, underlying more negative ones like anger. For, under such circumstances, a person might be said to become congruent by accurately symbolizing feelings of anger to awareness, but yet remain incongruent in terms of not yet having accurately symbolized feelings of positive regard. To resolve this difficulty, one can decide to characterize congruence solely in terms of accurately symbolizing to awareness the positive feelings at the core of the person. This would mean, however, that the conscious awareness and expression of anger, say, would be regarded as an instance of incongruence; that anger itself became interpreted as an incongruent emotion.

Certainly such an approach could prove helpful in combating the psychologically damaging situation of therapists expressing therapeutically destructive negative feelings in the name of congruence. But, even so, it still leaves us with a bizarre picture where “out of awareness at the organismic level,” and “stacked in order of positivity,” there exist different ready-made feelings patiently waiting to step up in turn into surface consciousness. And in any case, aside from the bizarreness, there is still the issue of feelings being conceived as things.

An alternative explanation of such a progressive experiencing of increasingly positive feelings, one influenced by social constructionism, would relate whatever feelings a person experiences to the sociocultural context in which they occur, with the therapeutic relationship itself constituting such a context. So, for example, with two different therapists, the same incongruent client might become aware of feeling anger, or of feeling deeply hurt. Through the quality of the relationship that she offers, the second therapist may have facilitated expressing feelings arising from the client’s core incongruence, whereas the first therapist facilitated experiencing feelings expressing less fundamental incongruence.

One question which arises from such an interpretation, therefore, is whether or not clients in either individual or group therapy must necessarily first get in touch with negative feelings before they can experience more positive ones. A further question is whether or not Truax and Carkhuff (1968) were right in the judgment they formed when in a particular study of client-centered therapists it was observed “that the client-centered process of therapy somehow avoids the expected and usual patient expressions of negative, hostile, or aggressive feelings” (p. 503). Truax and Carkhuff’s judgment was that “the client-centered therapist for some reason seems less open to receiving negative, hostile, or aggressive feelings” (Truax & Carkhuff, 1968, p. 503). Might it not be possible that such unpleasant feelings only existed for the practitioners of other therapeutic approaches?; that person-centered practitioners did not act in such as way as to create them for the client?

In a lively dialogue with Rogers, we find Rollo May endorsing the same judgment of person-centered therapists as Truax and Carkhuff. May pronounces that “aspects of evil--anger, hostility against the therapist, destructiveness-- need to be brought out in therapy” (1982, p. 246), even as much as to generate the experiencing and expression of evil by the client. We seem to be back to the same old blaming the victim/transference game to which psychoanalysts are prone. The client’s present problem in relating to the therapist has nothing to do with the therapists behavior toward the client, but is entirely the result of the nasty, unfelt feelings which lie within the client.
When person-centered authority Germain Lietaer (1998) employs a Truax and Carlhuff sort of judgment to warn that “training within a certain therapeutic orientation may sharpen or blunt our sensitivity to certain types of experiential content” (p. 70), I, for one, would want to be reassured that such a warning was not being issued from a quasi-Freudian point of view.

In concluding this discussion of problems arising when congruence is defined in a Freudian fashion, I wish to remind the reader of the inherent Cartesian mind/body dualism in such a definition. That is to say, in a situation in which persons’ mental phenomenon— ideas, thoughts, feelings, etc.-- are conceived as “bits of stuff,” the question as to how these elements form a unity with physical counterparts composed of a fundamentally different kind of stuff/substance continues to remain unanswered. It is the question, in other words, of how one goes about resolving the notorious mind-body problem.

Instead of speaking of feelings being experienced at an organismic level, Rogers sometimes refers to such experiencing taking place at a physiological level (1961, p. 340). For instance, an incongruent man is said to be experiencing anger at a physiological level when “[c]onsciously he is not experiencing anger” (Rogers, 1961, p. 340). In such a context, Rogers certainly seems to be bringing the physical body into the equation.

However, what needs to be remembered here is that for Rogers, feelings are a special type of experience (of the emotionally toned variety), where experience itself is defined by Rogers “as all that is going on in the envelope of the organism at any given moment which is potentially available to awareness” (1959, p. 197). In Rogers’ scheme, it is thus “a psychological, not a physiological definition” (1959, p. 197).

Just as Freud set to one side the question of the relationship of mind and body, so it seems the same can largely though perhaps not entirely be said of Rogers. For in proposing that we can read from physiological and behavioral activity that what a person is feeling is anger— viz. the flushed face, voice tone, shaking (Rogers, 1961, p. 339)— Rogers seems to be advocating the ‘James-Lange’ theory of emotions that proposes that for each emotion we feel there is a specific physiological pattern of skeletal and visceral changes (cf. Gross, 1996, p. 123). Whether Rogers is advocating such a theory or not, certainly contemporary psychologists are in general skeptical of such a notion (cf. Ginsburg and Harrison, 1996). In particular, they point to empirical evidence demonstrating that different individuals interpret the same physiological and behavioral events according to their idiosyncratic sociocultural context, and thereby experience different feelings (cf. Gross, 1996, pp. 127ff.).

From the preceding discussion of problems that arise from characterizing congruence in a quasi-Freudian, Cartesian-Newtonian manner, it should be clear by now that any adequate formulation of this central person-centered notion will necessarily involve resolving certain fundamental issues regarding the nature of human mental functioning and the nature of the human being as a unity of mental and physical happenings. In my final remarks I present the paradigmatic context by which I believe these fundamental issues can be adequately dealt with, along with some discussion of how congruence might be more precisely defined.
Epilogue and Prologue

According to Susanne Langer,

Among all the facts with which psychologists deal, the one they seem least able to handle is the fact that we feel our own activity and the impingements of the world around us. The metaphysical status of ‘feelings’, ‘contents of consciousness’, ‘subjectivity’, or of the private aspects of experience, generally, has been an asses’ bridge... ever since Descartes treated res extensa and res cogitans as irreducible and incommensurable substances (1962, p. 11).

In discussing Carl Rogers’ concept of congruence I have sought to convey how his characterization is couched in Cartesian-Newtonian terms derived from Freud. I have endeavored to make plain how a C-N world-scheme underlies certain crucial problems to do with both Rogers’ definition of congruence and his interrelated conception of psychotherapeutic change. Insofar as these formulations of Rogers involve the treatment of feelings as substantive bits of stuff, the Cartesian asses’ bridge to which Langer refers has definitely lived up to its name. As to how we might circumvent this bridge, I have already postulated that for this to be achieved congruence and other key person-centered concepts need to be defined in exclusively organismic/process terms. In the preceding section, I touched upon certain aspects of such an organismic re-visioning of congruence in indicating the relevance of field theory perspective of social constructionist thought.

Beyond this, through incorporating the conceptual features I have specified elsewhere as the basis for a future paradigm of c/p (Ellingham, 1996; 1997a), the whole task, as I see it, will involve giving concrete expression to the radical process-view of the world articulated most profoundly by Alfred North Whitehead. A world-vision holds that “the process is the reality,” and that we best think of ourselves as “process immersed in process beyond ourselves” (Whitehead, 1925, p. 72; 1938, p. 8). Thereby with mental and physical ‘stuff’ construed in terms of differing expressions of patterned activity (process), we humans, as complex rounds of process (organisms), become portrayed in a unitary fashion-- with the creative self-actualization of our individual-being caught up in an interrelationship with every other organism courtesy of the all-embracing creative advance and actualization of that organism that constitutes the universe as a whole. So conceived, “[t]he process of creation is the form of unity of the universe” (Whitehead, 1933, p. 179).

Such a radical process view, I contend, is entirely at one with the core thrust of Rogers’ theorizing. As Harry Van Belle (1980) attests in his explication of the entire range of Rogers’ thought, “Rogers thinks principally in terms of process, dynamics, movement and change,” the person being defined “as a tendency, a process, an activity or functioning,” not as “something other than this activity, as a substance that is itself to itself regardless of how it functions” (p. 71). “[F]or Rogers,” declares Van Belle, “man [sic.] is always and everywhere an organismic actualizing process” (1980, p. 71). Moreover, in that the actualizing tendency powering this personified growth process is part and parcel of a “formative tendency at work in the universe, which can be observed at every level” (Rogers, 1980, p. 124), Rogers espouses a doctrine in close accord with Whitehead-- one wherein “everything that exists,
including human beings, is taken up into this total evolutionary process of becoming" (Van Belle, 1990, p. 49).

To approach the task of re-conceptualizing congruence and psychotherapeutic change is in many ways to proceed along a path already roughly trodden by Eugene Gendlin and others who have forged a form of therapy termed "experiential psychotherapy," an approach which has its roots in person-centered theory and which many see as falling within the compass of the person-centered approach. Gendlin's own focusing-oriented/experiential psychotherapy originated when Gendlin, "coming from the philosophical tradition of Dilthey, Dewey, Merleau-Ponty, and McKeon developed a Philosophy of the 'Implicit' and applied it to the work that Rogers was doing" (Hendricks-Gendlin, 1999, p. 2). Beyond Gendlin, another major development of experiential psychotherapy is that associated with psychologists at York University in Canada, the main principals being Laura North Rice and more recently Leslie Greenberg. Building upon the ideas of Gendlin, this brand of experiential psychotherapy has taken ideas from contemporary cognitive psychology—initially from information processing theory; latterly from neo-Piagetian cognitive developmental theory— in formulating a "dialectical constructivist model of experiential therapy" (Greenberg & Van Balen, 1998, p. 42). However, as part of the present attempt to sketch the general outlines of this organismic endeavour, allow me to comment briefly on how my views both accord with and differ from those of Gendlin and Greenberg.

According to Mary Hendricks-Gendlin (1998), during his period of collaboration with Rogers Gendlin made a "move to speak in terms of process, using a different underlying philosophical model than Rogers had access to" (p. 1). The point for Gendlin, in Hendricks-Gendlin's words, was that in defining congruence Rogers employed terms which "use a reductive unit model which has been extremely powerful in the realm of physical science [i.e. in Newtonian physics], but not so good for human process" (Hendricks-Gendlin, 1998, p. 1).

Gendlin has made clear that "Rogers' formulations imply that experience sits there first outside of awareness waiting to be more or less accurately perceived, as though it were something already separately formed apart from the perceiving" (Hendricks-Gendlin, 1998, p. 1). As is already evident, I therefore generally agree with Gendlin regarding Rogers' scheme as "like the 'flashlight' model that Freud used with the unconscious id impulses sitting there in the person and the work of therapy [being] to shine the light of awareness or consciousness on them" (Hendricks-Gendlin, 1998, p. 1).

I am in agreement with Gendlin, too, insofar as he puts "activity, or interaction [i.e. process] as the basic, first term [i.e. root concept]" (Hendricks-Gendlin, 1998, p. 2). However, I am at odds with Gendlin in his seeming inability to completely free himself from Cartesian dualism and think in entirely process terms. For instance, Gendlin hangs on to the body as a base concept, employing it to denote "the vast number of interactional aspects that we live" (1974, p. 236). If the body is "a term Gendlin uses to mean the total brain-mind environment as we sense it," as Marilyn Ferguson (1981, p. ix) attests, he is certainly deploying it in a highly idiosyncratic and strange way. It is as though, on the one hand, he concurs with Whitehead in affirming that "the process is the reality" and we are "process immersed in process beyond ourselves," but on the other, still wants to retain the notion of a substantive body, as a basic, first term.
Perhaps what motivates Gendlin to retain reference to the body in this fashion (rather than purely construe the person as an organism, i.e. as a system of patterned activity) is his desire to legitimize his concept of experiencing in the guise of a bodily felt sense. For to Gendlin, "experiencing," i.e. "all 'experience' viewed in terms of the process framework," is the "process of concrete bodily feeling which constitutes the basic matter of psychological and personality phenomena" (1964, p. 111).

As summarized by Greet Vanaerschot, "[t]wo levels of interaction can be distinguished in the experiencing process" (1997, p. 142). "The first level," she says, "refers to the bodily felt whole concerning a situation and originates in the person and situation or environment" (1997, p. 142). "This leads us to the second level of interaction, which is the one between bodily sensing and symbols (such as words) through which explicit meanings are formed from preconceptual, implicit, and incomplete meanings" (Vanaerschot, 1997, p. 143). Important for our present discussion is the fact that "[t]he explicit meaning is not a previously hidden or repressed one that now becomes clear, but one that is formed in the interaction between felt sense and symbols" (1997, p. 143). Thus, prior to symbolization, what the counseling client can become aware of through a quasi-meditational technique called focusing is a vague, global, holistic, fuzzy bodily felt sense of a problem situation at "the edge of awareness" (Gendlin, 1984), a mode of knowing akin to that possessed by animals (Gendlin, 1991). When symbolization occurs in relation to such a mode of knowing, according to Gendlin, an experiential "felt shift" occurs, a process of "carrying forward" whereby an implicit meaning becomes explicit. On Hendricks-Gendlin’s (1998) testimony, such a felt shift constitutes our becoming congruent (p. 2). It is also this shift from implicit to explicit meaning that explains “the striking way in which the individual during psychotherapy becomes aware of what (so he now says) he has long felt but has not known that he felt” (Gendlin, 1964, p. 105).

Allied to Gendlin’s curious way of conceptualizing the body is the peculiar manner in which he characterizes the bodily and physical vis-à-vis what is mental and of the mind. “A felt sense,” he declares, “is not a mental experience but a physical one (1981, p. 32); “... is body and mind before they are split apart” (p. 165). My own felt sense of what is at play is a failure on Gendlin’s part to appreciate the Whiteheadian insight that from a process perspective, body, mind, spirit, etc. are discursively symbolized construals of certain facets of process-constituted reality. To my mind, the “fuzziness” in Gendlin’s own theorizing apropos what is body, what is mind, etc., can be overcome by paying heed not only to the formulations of Whitehead, but to those of other organismic theorists, principally of Whitehead’s former student Susanne Langer; and of her other mentor Ernst Cassirer. Specifically, this involves:

a) thinking more thoroughly in process terms in the manner of Whitehead.

b) employing Langer’s and Whitehead’s notion of feeling rather than Gendlin’s concept of experiencing to denote the fundamental constituent of subjective awareness. Here it is not simply a matter of employing a roughly synonymous term, given that “in natural language feeling is usually a synonym for ‘experiencing’” (Bohart, 1993, p. 58), but of adopting Langer’s and Whitehead’s technical definition of feeling as “felt
process;" that is, as analogous to the sound given off by the patterned activity of a vibrating guitar string (cf. Langer, 1967, pp. 20ff).

c) joining with Cassirer and Langer in conceiving the human being as "animal symbolicum," the symbolizing animal (Cassirer, 1944, p. 28), and so making use of their conceptualization of the process of symbolization to shed light on the psychotherapeutic symbolization process and ipso facto on the nature of congruence.

Introducing the thoughts of Cassirer, Langer and Whitehead in this fashion also provides a fruitful link with the formulations of Leslie Greenberg. Greenberg’s model of experiential therapy is one in which “a person is seen as a symbolizing, meaning-creating being who acts as a dynamic system constantly synthesizing information from many levels of processing and from both internal and external sources into a conscious experience” (Greenberg & Van Balen, 1998, p. 42). In Greenberg’s scheme, principally “[t]hree levels of processing—innate sensory motor, emotional schematic memory, and conceptual level processing—are identified” (Greenberg & Van Balen, 1998, p. 42).

Important as I consider Greenberg’s model to be-- in particular in its incorporation of organismic, neo-Piagetian schemes in a multi-level developmental formulation-- in my view it suffers from being based on an information-processing machine model and thereby on the assumed analogy between hardware/software and body/mind. Thus, though he is at pains not to do so, Greenberg does tend at times to treat feelings and emotions in a substantive sense in accord with Cartesian dualism and so raise the specter of the existence of unconscious emotion (cf. Greenberg & Safran, 1987, p. 165; Greenberg & Paivio, 1997, pp. 43; 48). Further, growing out of Gendlin’s theorizing as it does, Greenberg attempts (not particularly successfully, in my view) to integrate into his model Gendlin’s notions of experiencing and of a bodily felt sense (cf. Greenberg & Paivio, 1997, p. 39; Greenberg, Rice & Elliott, 1993, chpt. 9).

These matters aside, by comparison with Gendlin’s two level scheme, part of the value of Greenberg’s model is his presentation of not just two, but three or more levels of organismic sense-making (information processing) as constitutive of human awareness. Thus, given the importance that Greenberg attaches to the person as “a symbolizing, meaning-creating being,” deserving of special attention, in my opinion, is a developmental scheme of levels of sense-making/symbolization that derives from Cassirer and Langer (cf. Cassirer, 1955a, 1955b, 1957; Langer, 1967, 1972, 1982). In accord with Greenberg and Gendlin, such a scheme connotes a basic, global affective-cognitive level of sense-making becoming progressively refined from one level to the next. Not too different from Greenberg, the levels identified by Cassirer and Langer are as follows: a bodily, sensori-motor level (exhibited by animals and human infants); an iconic, non-discursive mode of symbolizing (found in mythic consciousness and older infants, i.e. Freud’s primary process) and the level of conceptual thought, of discursive symbolization.

With such a scenario, an organismically refined formulation of congruence would be couched in multi-level developmental terms, congruence being said to exist where a higher level pattern of process validly symbolizes... has a congruent pattern with... is a structural
component of the level below. For, as Langer (1953, p. 27) attests, "...formal analogy, or congruence of logical structures, is the prime requisite for the relationship between a symbol and whatever it is to mean. The symbol and the object symbolized must have the same common logical form."

Further, insofar as feeling subjective awareness is taken to be the felt quality of a particular pattern of process, it becomes possible to explain why there is a before-after sameness, as against identity, between what the client feels prior to the felt-shift of the psychotherapeutic process and what he or she feels afterwards. For, even though the pattern of process intrinsic to the higher level of sense-making is more complex and qualitatively different from that of the preceding lower level, there is nevertheless a congruency of pattern, and thereby a common feeling, between the two—as say, when different guitar strings play the same note in different octaves.

Both Gendlin and Greenberg, especially Greenberg (cf. Greenberg & Van Balen, 1998, p. 36), being mindful that Rogers' definition of congruence implies awareness of experience that is outside of awareness, effectively sideline congruence in their own theorizing. Even so, both relate the harmonic functioning of the individual to the condition of being psychologically healthy, with Greenberg proposing a "principle of coherence...as supplanting the principle of congruence or consistency in explaining healthy functioning" (p. 43). "In this view," according to Greenberg, "aspects of experience as well as levels of processing are coordinated to fit together in an affiliative relationship with each other, integrated into a coherent whole" (p. 43).

Such a conception is, I believe, in accord with my own supposition that in order to adequately define congruence organically, we will have to characterize it in a multi-level process fashion—in terms, that is, of increasingly complex and differentiated modes of sense-making. So construed, congruence will become defined in the same manner that Bernie Neville (1996) has proposed we define empathy, as a multi-level, developmental affair.

Insofar, therefore, as empathy involves "an emotional response...that is congruent with the other's emotional state or situation" (author's emphasis) (Eisenberg & Strayer, 1987, p. 5), this raises the question of whether the road ahead in the organismic refinement of Rogers' concept of congruence is one whereby empathy becomes defined as "congruence-between-organisms," and congruence is conceived as "intra-organismic" empathy, possibly as "self-empathy" (cf. Barrett-Lennard, 1997). For, for Rogers, deep empathy involved "resonance"—congruence of patterned activity, between himself and the client "at all levels" (1980, p. 9). The resonance between himself and the other thus involved resonance, congruence, between all levels within himself. The love and unconditional positive he radiated was nothing less than being one with himself and the other in this way.

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