in Theory and Therapy, showed that all modern psychological theories of human motivation and personality assume that reward for the self (i.e., egoism) is the only functional ethical principle. In short, psychology's deep commitment to narcissism, egoism, self-worship, the individual, isolated self—or, as I call it, "selfism"—has been thoroughly demonstrated.

Along with these books came a raft of more general criticisms of psychology, especially psychotherapy. These critiques often ignored the problems of the self to focus on many other weaknesses of psychology. Strong secular criticisms came from Thomas Szasz, The Myth of Psychotherapy (1978), Martin L. Gross, The Psychological Society (1978), and Bernie Zilbergeld's The Shrinking of America (1983). The secular attack on psychology in general has continued unabated through Psychobabble (1979) to Freudian Fraud (1991). This now powerful critical tradition was begun by Philip Rieff's still well-known The Triumph of the Therapeutic (1966).

Meanwhile, Christian critics of psychology also went into high gear. Martin and Deidre Bobgan's The Psychological Way/The Spiritual Way (1978) represented an all-out rejection of psychology for Christians. A more scholarly but still very effective critique came from Mary Stewart Van Leeuwen in The Sorcerer's Apprentice (1982). W. Kirk Kilpatrick waded in with two popular and insightful critical treatments: Psychological Seduction (1982) and The Emperor's New Clothes (1985). Sometimes too extreme but usually cogent was Dave Hunt's and T. A. McMahon's best-selling The Seduction of Christianity (1985). Don S. Browning came out with Religious Thought and the Modern Psychologies, an outstanding and scholarly critical analysis of the ethical and philosophical assumptions made by the major modern psychologies. And religious critiques of psychology are still coming out—for example, Os Guinness


and John Seel, *No God but God* (1992). The granddaddy of these Christian critiques is probably Jay Adams's *Competent to Counsel* (1972).4

In many ways, then, much has happened to our understanding of psychology since 1977. And yet little has actually changed in how psychology functions in our society, or how it is taught in our colleges and universities. Psychology is probably less talked about in the popular media and somewhat less popular than in the mid-1970s. But we are still very much what Rieff called a “therapeutic society.” Self-actualization, self-fulfillment, etc., are standard explanations for the purpose of everything from college education to life itself. Countless Christians worry more about losing their self-esteem than about losing their souls.

In university psychology departments, hundreds of thousands of students every year still take courses in which the books and critical analyses cited above are almost never, if ever, mentioned. Far from being concerned with scholarly and intellectual debate, our psychology departments and their courses focus on supporting the profession, keeping student enrollment up and faculty morale high. Hence there is a need for a new and revised edition of *Psychology as Religion* to make many of the same points as the first edition, but taking into consideration work that has appeared since the book first appeared.

As the title suggests, it will be argued that psychology has become a religion: a secular cult of the self. By this I mean an intensely held worldview, a philosophy of life or ideology. More specifically, contemporary psychology is a form of secular humanism based on the rejection of God and the worship of the self. A good deal of what follows by way of criticism, however, does not presuppose a religious orientation, and devotees of humanistic psychology (e.g., of such concepts as self-actualization) are challenged to confront a psychologist's criticism of their widely accepted wisdom.

The major critical orientation of this book is Christian. This will be made most explicit in the later chapters. Christianity, like all traditional religions, has a great deal at stake in this discussion. It may be noted that in those cases in which critical arguments are based on Christian theology, my conclusion is usually identical with or close to that which could be made by other theistic religions. The present work is offered in a spirit of cooperation with other faiths, particularly Judaism, in the common struggle against the influence of today's psychology.

Specifically, I shall argue for five theses:

1. Psychology as religion exists, and it exists in strength throughout the United States.
2. Psychology as religion can be criticized on many grounds quite independent of religion.
3. Psychology as religion is deeply anti-Christian.
4. Psychology as religion is extensively supported by schools, universities, and social programs that are financed by taxes collected from millions of Christians. This use of tax money to support what has become a secular ideology raises grave political and legal issues.
5. Psychology as religion has for years been destroying individuals, families, and communities. But in recent years the destructive logic of this secular system is beginning to be understood, and as more and more people discover the emptiness of self-worship Christianity is presented with a major historical opportunity to provide meaning and life.

I make no apology for the intensity of some of my criticism. The issues involved are still only beginning to be acknowledged, and in any case they are very serious. The time has more than come for Christian academics and intellectuals to speak out publicly in defense of the faith, regardless of the professional risk and isolation this may entail. Many of us are in strategic positions to observe and analyze anti-Christian trends in society that escape the theologians, who are often so secularized in today's seminars that they would be the last to notice.

Here a few autobiographical words are in order. Much of the subsequent analysis comes directly out of my personal experience as a student and as an academic psychologist during the last thirty-five years. I was an undergraduate at the University of Michigan from 1953 to 1957, a psychology major for the last three years. At college I followed a familiar script by rebelling against my nominally Christian upbringing. (This probably happens in high school now.) I read Bertrand Russell, announced that I was an atheist, and took instant pride in my “hard-won” independence. The only disappointment was that my announcement of it was met by others with what can best be described as a yawn.

My vague, superficial Christianity had been such weak stuff that its rejection had less psychological importance than, say, breaking up with my girlfriend. In consequence, my period of active hostility to Christianity was quite brief: a few months (appropriately enough) in my sophomore year. After this began a long agnostic indifference to religion. It was a time I devoted fully to becoming a psychologist by concentrating on my graduate (1957-62) and post-graduate (1964-65) studies at Stanford University. Here I majored in the subjects of motivation and personality, which included learning and teaching the views of the self-theorists.

In graduate school, religion was treated as a pathetic anachronism. Occasionally a person’s religious beliefs were “measured” in personality tests. The common interpretation was that people holding traditional religious views were fascist-authoritarian types. There was also some interest in religion on the part of social psychologists who wanted to study exotic belief systems. My contacts with the disciplines of anthropology and sociology suggested that similar attitudes were typical of people in these fields.

A year or so after I received my doctorate, my interests began to shift to experimental psychology, particularly the topics of perception, cognition, and aesthetics. This shift of interest was partly occasioned by a growing awareness that I found much humanistic personality theory intellectually confused and rather silly. Many of the arguments presented here first occurred to me in the mid-1960s. I still remember moments in

attempts to develop a type of positive "Christian psychology." This includes work on a narrative model of counseling, my book on Sigmund Freud, with Jesus as the anti-Oedipus; and the use of psychoanalytic concepts to support the notion of original sin. Although I do think that important aspects of psychology can be effectively baptized, it is still difficult to distinguish what can be safely incorporated from what cannot. The problem is complicated still further by strong secular attacks on the basic legitimacy of psychology both as a therapeutic and as an explanatory discipline. In addition, recent decades have seen an enormous increase in the biological understanding and control of behavior, while on the other hand New Age spirituality has made it clear to many who would not listen to a Christian critique that secular psychology's interpretation of religion, and dismissal of the spiritual life, was grossly mistaken. Psychology has been losing much intellectual ground both to biology and to spirituality over the last twenty years or so. In short, psychology is no longer a young "science"; it is now a mature discipline, and it is becoming less self-confident and imperialistic than it was not so long ago.

Nevertheless, the hostility of most psychologists to Christianity is still very real. For years I was part of that sentiment; today it continues to surround me. It is a curious hostility, for psychologists are rarely consciously aware of it. Their lack of awareness is due mostly to sheer ignorance of what Christianity is — for that matter, of what any religion is. The universities are so deeply secularized that most academics can no longer articulate why they are opposed to Christianity. They merely assume that for all rational people the question of being a Christian was settled — negatively — at some time in the past.

There is one interesting difference in this hostility that has arisen since the mid-1970s. In the years since then, it has become obvious that, throughout the world, religion is alive and well. The energy of Islam is still very real. For years I was part of that sentiment; today it continues.

Finally, it is important to identify certain psychologies that will be explicitly excluded from our discussion. First, experimental psychology — the study of sensation, perception, cognition, memory, problem solving, and related questions — is not included. This kind of psychology, primarily found in universities and research centers, is a branch of natural science composed of various amounts of biology, physics, mathematics, and so forth. Second, the theory or philosophy of psychology known as behaviorism (the best-known example is probably that of B. F. Skinner) is not treated here, since it has little in common with humanistic self-psychology, and criticism of it would carry our discussion quite far afield. There already has been criticism of behaviorism, to which I have little to add. Similarly, the therapeutic offspring of behaviorism known as behavior modification is excluded, since its techniques and principles are part of experimental psychology and its philosophy part of behaviorism.

A third omission is psychoanalysis, since much of self-psychology is a reaction against the more complex, unconscious, "pessimistic," conservative, and disciplined Freudian theories and methods. To criticize psychoanalysis with any thoroughness would require technical discussion of much material that is unrelated to the self. This would lengthen the present discussion greatly and blur its major focus.

When I first wrote this book, I did not include transpersonal psychology, since it was very new and it was hard to know what it might be. But now it has become so widespread that to omit it would be misleading. The past two decades have seen a proliferation of forms of transpersonal psychology, primarily in psychology courses and published works. Many of these can now be seen as a return to the original goals of psychology and an attempt to add a Christian perspective to psychology. This book will not deal with transpersonal psychology. But to understand the future of psychology, we must consider it.


One final group is excluded, namely, those psychologists who recognize, respect, and respond to genuine religious issues in the lives of their patients. This group is not large, nor is it easily categorized. It includes psychologists who are personally committed to a religion, who integrate their faith, when appropriate, into therapy. But it also includes secular psychologists whose insights lead them to reject the contemporary religion of psychology as a superficial substitute for something genuine and a corruption of the important but limited function of psychotherapy. It is this group of psychologists who provide a basis for the hope that a strong, honest partnership may eventually develop between psychology and religion.

In spite of these exclusions, a large amount of modern psychology remains. In fact, most psychologists practicing today have been strongly affected by humanistic self-theories. Many American psychoanalysts have accepted so much of self-psychology that it is difficult to identify them as Freudian at all. Likewise, behavior modification therapists frequently espouse various self-actualizing or self-esteem philosophies in their own lives and as part of their professional ethic. Educational psychology has long been saturated with concepts like "self-esteem" and "self-actualization." In short, America's eclectic tradition has meant that almost every form of psychology today comes with a large dose of the theories criticized here.

I shall begin by documenting the strong religious nature of much of today's psychology. This chapter presents, in brief form, the relevant theoretical positions of Carl Jung—the originator of much self-psychology—and then the positions of more recent self-theorists: Erich Fromm, Carl Rogers, Abraham Maslow, and Rollo May (May being important primarily as a representative of existential psychology). The popularization of these and other self-theorists will be described briefly and critiqued in the next chapter. More detailed criticisms of the common assumptions of the self-theory position will be taken up in later chapters.

Jung, Fromm, Rogers, Maslow, and May have been selected as the most influential self-theorists. Other psychologists have contributed to self-theory, but in general they have not been as completely committed to the concept of the self. The psychoanalytic ego-psychologists, for example, with their notions of the conflict-free ego sphere and ego mechanisms of defense, which were developed in the 1930s and 1940s by Heinz Hartmann and Anna Freud and others, are not pure self-psychologists, since they remained committed to much of traditional Freudian theory. Emphasis on the self is present but is not very strong in the works of famous earlier deviants from orthodox Freudianism such as Rank, Adler, and Horney. Nevertheless, to the extent that these theorists whom we have omitted do emphasize the self (for example, Adler with his notion of the creative self, and Horney with her concern

It was born in Switzerland in 1875. His father was a pastor in the Swiss Reformed Church, and he rebelled against his father and his father's religion. Jung obtained a medical degree in 1900 and then specialized in psychiatry. A short time later he met Sigmund Freud, and they had a few years of collaboration, followed by a serious and permanent break. Jung was critical of Freud's extreme emphasis on sexuality; he was also much less interested in psychopathology and more concerned with people's spiritual needs.

Indeed, Jung was quite aware of the religious nature of psychotherapy, and the theological cast of much of his writing is apparent. For example, *An Answer to Job* is an extensive, but heterodox, exercise in scriptural interpretation. Jung's explicit awareness of the religious issue is stated when he writes: "Patients force the psychotherapist into the role of priest, and expect and demand that he shall free them from distress. That is why we psychotherapists must occupy ourselves with problems which strictly speaking belong to the Theologian."3 Jung's psychology—unlike Freud's—provided positive, synthetic concepts that could serve as a conscious goal not only for therapy but also for life as a whole. Jung responded far more to the patient's demand for general relief from distress than did Freud.4 Jung's positive answer to the patient's basic religious needs is summarized by Jacobi, a prominent student of his:

Jungian psychotherapy is . . . a *Heilsweg* in the twofold sense of the German word: a way of healing and a way of salvation. It has the power to cure . . . in addition it knows the way and has the means to lead the individual to his 'salvation,' to the knowledge and fulfillment of his personality, which have always been the aim of spiritual striving. Jung's system of thought can be explained theoretically only up to a certain point; to understand it fully one must have experienced or, better still, 'suffered' its living action in oneself. Apart from its medical aspect, Jungian psychotherapy is thus a system of education and spiritual guidance.5

The process of Jungian movement on this path is, Jacobi continues, "both ethically and intellectually an extremely difficult task, which can be successfully performed only by the fortunate few, those elected and favored by grace."6 The last stage, really a process, on the Jungian path of individuation is called self-realization. This goal of self-realization or self-actualization is at heart a gnostic one, in which the commandment "Know and express thyself" has replaced the Judeo-Christian commandment "Love God and others." (In many respects, all modern psychology of whatever theoretical persuasion, because of the emphasis on special, somewhat esoteric knowledge, can be interpreted as part of a vast gnostic heresy.)7

Very briefly, this process of self-realization involves (1) the patient's discovery and understanding of the archetypes (i.e., structures and desires) in his or her collective and personal unconscious and (2) the interpretation and expression of these archetypes in the patient's life. In

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5. Freud was quite aware of the religious character of Jungian and Adlerian psychology, whence derives much of the psychology used in selfism. Freud made a sharp distinction between religion and psychoanalysis, and he claimed that analysts "cannot guide patients in their synthesis; we can by analytic work only prepare them for it." And he declared: "We do not seek to bring him [the patient] relief by receiving him into the catholic, protestant or socialist community." Freud saw the Adlerians as "buffoons . . .
any case, the Jungian model simply assumes that the goal of life is self-realization. As a goal or purpose of life, self-actualization cannot be scientifically justified; it is based on unexamined philosophical and moral assumptions.

Much Jungian psychology is not explicitly focused on individuation (self-realization) but is concerned with the symbolic interpretation of the patient's dreams, writings, drawings, etc. Here Jung's analysis is focused on the collective and personal unconscious of the patient and on archetypes and other concepts. Jung acknowledges the patient's basic religious concerns, and Jungian psychology is directly applied to the expression of the patient's archetypal religious motives—for example, in dreams about the wise old man (a God archetype), dreams about rebirth, and so on. Jung's discovery of the psychology of religious symbols is important, but there is with all this focusing on one's inner life a real danger of substituting the psychological experience of one's religious unconscious for genuine religious experience that comes through a transcendent God who acts in history. Those who make this mistake have truly treated psychology as religion.9

ERICH FROMM

Erich Fromm was born in 1900, educated at Heidelberg, Frankfurt, and Munich, received psychoanalytic training in Berlin, and came to the United States in 1933. He lived in the United States and Mexico for much of the rest of his life. Fromm was originally a Freudian psychoanalyst, but he broke from this tradition in the 1930s. Fromm rejected Freud's emphasis on the biological nature of humankind, especially disputing Freud's inclusion of aggression (the death instinct) as a basic part of human nature. Freud gave aggression the same importance as sex (the life instinct), while Fromm, in contrast, emphasized society as the major determinant of human personality. In particular, Fromm described human nature as intrinsically and naturally good and attributed anything bad—evil—to society, especially when society causes the self to deny its own potential for growth and expression. Except for the unconscious influence of society, Fromm came to neglect the traditional psychoanalytic theory of the unconscious—for instance, dreams.

In spite of his break with the Freudian tradition, Fromm remained deeply influenced by Freud, often citing or criticizing him. He shared Freud's penchant for characterizing cultural belief systems and those who believe them in terms of psychological types, such as the "exploitative" and "marketing" character types of capitalist society or the "authoritative" and "regressive" beliefs characterizing the Christian doctrine of the Trinity.10 The following remarks are typical of Fromm:

A spirit of pride and optimism has distinguished Western culture in the last few centuries. . . . Man's pride has been justified. By virtue of his reason he has built a material world the reality of which surpasses even the dreams and visions of fairy tales and utopias. He harnesses physical energies which will enable the human race to secure the material conditions necessary for a dignified and productive existence, and although many of his goals have not yet been attained there is hardly any doubt that they are within reach and that the problem of production—which was the problem in the past—is, in principle, solved.11

Elsewhere in the same book he speaks in the same optimistic vein of human character:

I shall attempt to show that the character structure of the mature and integrated personality, the productive character, constitutes the source and basis of "virtue," and that "vice," in the last analysis, is indifference to one's own self and self-mutilation. Not self-renunciation nor selfishness but the affirmation of his truly human self, are the supreme values of humanistic ethics. If man is to have confidence in values, he must know himself and the capacity of his nature for goodness and productiveness.12


12. Fromm, Man for Himself, p. 17.
In this view, a value such as love for one's neighbor is not viewed as a phenomenon transcending man;

it is something inherent and radiating from him. Love is not a higher power which descends upon man nor a duty which is imposed upon him; it is his own power by which he relates himself to the world and makes it truly his.  

This of course has consequences for one's idea of what human nature is in itself:

The position taken by humanistic ethics that man is able to know what is good and to act accordingly on the strength of his natural potentialities and of his reason would be untenable if the dogma of man's innate natural evilness were true.

Fromm's hostility to Christianity is clear in *The Dogma of Christ*, where he argues that belief in God always functions as "the ally of the rulers." (This is a position he must have found difficult to reconcile with the persecution of Christian believers by atheistic rulers in, say, the Soviet Union, Albania, or China; and after the fall of Communism in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, his claim looks simply stupid.) Fromm claims that Christianity arose from a proletariat class so frustrated in its hopes for political and social change that it turned to salvation in a fantasy world of the supernatural. His own religious position is quite explicit in *You Shall Be as Gods*: the concept of god has evolved to the point that humankind is God, and if the sacred exists, its center is in the self and the selves of others. Fromm's ideal society is humanistic, communitarian socialism, which he presents in considerable detail in *The Sane Society* (1955).

Throughout Fromm's works, his atheism and materialism, his political views, and other values so permeate his psychology that it is hard even to identify those contributions which might reasonably be considered scientific.

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**CARL ROGERS**

Carl Rogers, a Midwestern American, was born in 1902. He describes himself as "the middle child in a large, close-knit family where hard work and a highly conservative Protestant Christianity were about equally revered." He was graduated in 1924 from the University of Wisconsin, having switched from agricultural science to preparation for the ministry. He attended Union Theological Seminary in New York City, where he was exposed to a liberal philosophical viewpoint regarding religion. After a short visit abroad he broke from Christianity, deciding that he wanted to help humanity without being inhibited by any prior commitment to a fixed set of beliefs whose truth was not obvious to him. He transferred to the Teachers College at Columbia University, where he was influenced by John Dewey's thought, and received the Ph.D. degree in 1928.

From Rogers's varied exposure to different psychological theories he developed his own position, which has become highly influential. We shall omit discussion of his technique of therapy called "non-directive," or "client-centered," and concentrate on his theory of personality and the goals of therapy. The central work for our purposes is *On Becoming a Person*. Here Rogers states the goal of therapy as follows:

If I can create a relationship characterized on my part: by a genuineness and transparency, in which I am my real feelings; by a warm acceptance of and prizing of the other person as a separate individual; by a sensitive ability to see his world and himself as he sees them; then the other individual in the relationship: will experience and understand aspects of himself which previously he has repressed; will find himself becoming better integrated, more able to function effectively; will become more similar to the person he would like to be; will be more self-directing and more self-confident; will become more of a person, more unique and more self-expressive; will be more understanding, more acceptant of others; will be able to cope with the problems of life more adequately and more comfortably.

I believe this statement holds whether I am speaking of my relationship with a client, with a group of students or staff members, with my family or children. It seems to me that we have here a general hypothesis...
which offers exciting possibilities for the development of creative, adaptive, autonomous persons.18

Psychotherapy, once a restricted and specialized activity, is now generalized to all of life’s relations. Rogers’s writings are much more oriented toward the process of therapy than Fromm’s, and he tends to ignore large cultural and historical themes. He interprets therapy as a process of the changing and growing self:

I shall assume that the client experiences himself as being fully received. By this I mean that whatever his feelings—fear, despair, insecurity, anger; whatever his mode of expression—silence, gestures, tears, or words; whatever he finds himself being in this moment, he senses that he is psychologically received, just as he is, by the therapist.19

More explicitly, Rogers describes his theory of therapy as follows:

Individuals move, I began to see, not from a fixity or homeostasis through change to a new fixity, though such a process is indeed possible. But much the more significant continuum is from fixity to changingness, from rigid structure to flow, from stasis to process.20

At the first stage of the therapeutic process, the person is fixed, static, completely blocked; he is either unaware of his feelings and emotions or attributes them to objective external circumstances. By the second or third stage (out of seven), we have people described as follows:

“And yet there is the matter of, well, how much do you leave yourself open to marriage, and if your professional vocation is important, and that’s the one thing that’s really yourself at this point, it does place a limitation on your contact.”

In this excerpt the self is such a remote object that this would probably best be classified as being between stages two and three.

There is also expression about the self as a reflected object, existing primarily in others.

There is much expression about or description of feelings and personal meanings not now present.

19. Rogers, On Becoming a Person, p. 130; italics added.

There is very little acceptance of feelings. For the most part feelings are revealed as something shameful, bad, or abnormal, or unacceptable in other ways.21

The fifth stage Rogers describes as follows:

Feelings are expressed freely as in the present.

“I expect kinda to get a severe rejection—this I expect all the time... somehow I guess I even feel it with you... It’s hard to talk about because I want to be the best I can possibly be with you.”

Feelings are very close to being fully experienced. They “bubble up,” “seep through,” in spite of the fear and distrust which the client feels at experiencing them with fullness and immediacy.

“That kinda came out and I just don’t understand it. (Long pause) I’m trying to get hold of what that terror is.”

Client is talking about an external event. Suddenly she gets a pained, stricken look.

Therapist: “What—what’s hitting you now?”

Client: “I don’t know. (She cries)... I must have been getting a little too close to something I didn’t want to talk about, or something.”22

The culmination of Rogerian therapy is the seventh and highest stage, which is summarized as follows:

The process moves from a point of fixity, where all the elements and threads described are separately discernible and separately understandable, to the flowing peak moments of therapy in which all these threads become inseparably woven together. In the new experiencing with immediacy which occurs at such moments, feeling and cognition interpenetrate, self is subjectively present in the experience, volition is simply the subjective following of a harmonious balance of organismic direction. . . . [T]he person becomes a unity of flow, or motion. . . . [H]e has become an integrated process of changingness.23

21. Rogers, On Becoming a Person, pp. 135-36; italics in original.
22. Rogers, On Becoming a Person, pp. 139-40; italics in original.
23. Rogers, On Becoming a Person, p. 158.
ABRAHAM MASLOW

Abraham Maslow was born in 1908 and grew up in Brooklyn. He was primarily educated at the University of Wisconsin. He then spent his early professional years in New York City at Columbia Teachers College and Brooklyn College. His independently developed theory of the self is close to Rogers's, but his distinctive concepts deserve mention.

Maslow postulates a hierarchy of human needs. This hierarchy, whose basis is assumed to be innate, requires that needs must be satisfied in a relatively fixed order, starting with basic physiological and safety needs, proceeding to needs for belonging and love, for self-esteem and status, and finally reaching the highest need, the need for self-realization, or self-actualization, as Maslow calls it. This last need is the most distinctively human, although it depends for fulfillment on the prior satisfaction of the lower needs. The person in whom this final need is satisfied is the self-actualized person, an ideal type with the following distinctive characteristics:

1. efficient perception of reality and comfortableness with it;
2. acceptance of self and others;
3. spontaneity;
4. an autonomous self independent of culture;
5. creativity (a universal hallmark of the ideal person among self-theorists);
6. having "peak" experiences, that is, oceanic or mystic experiences (a peak experience is, however, a natural phenomenon, not a supernatural one according to Maslow);
7. democratic, egalitarian, and humanitarian character structure and values.

Maslow's description of the essential quality of these self-actualized types is revealing:

A few centuries ago these would all have been described as men who walk in the path of God or as godly men. A few say that they believe in God, but describe this God more as a metaphysical concept than as a personal figure. If religion is defined only in social-behavioral terms, then these are all religious people, the atheist included. But if more conservatively we use the term religion so as to include and stress the supernatural element and institutional orthodoxy (certainly the more common usage) then our answer must be quite different, for then almost none of them is religious.

[Creativeness] is a universal characteristic of all the people studied or observed. There is no exception. Each one shows in one way or another a special kind of creativeness or originality or inventiveness that has certain peculiar characteristics . . . For one thing, it is different from the special creativeness of the Mozart type. We may as well face the fact that so-called geniuses display ability that we do not understand. . . . Such talent we have no concern with here since it does not rest upon psychic health or basic satisfaction. The creativeness of the self-actualized man seems rather to be kin to the naive and universal creativeness of unspoiled children.

Maslow names some of these secular saints — Lincoln in his last days, Thomas Jefferson, Einstein, Eleanor Roosevelt, Jane Addams, William James, Spinoza, and aspects of Walt Whitman, Thoreau, Beethoven, George Washington Carver, Goethe, Eugene V. Debs, Albert Schweitzer, and so on.

ROLLO MAY AND EXISTENTIAL PSYCHOLOGY

Our last theorist is Rollo May, who is important for us because he exemplifies the influence of existential philosophy on American self-psychology. Born in 1909, he received the Bachelor of Arts degree from Oberlin, a Bachelor of Divinity from Union Theological Seminary, and the Ph.D. at Columbia Teachers College. (Thus his educational background is remarkably similar to that of Rogers and Maslow: all moved from states in the Great Lakes area to New York City and Columbia Teachers College — and in two cases attended Union Seminary across the street.) May's special contribution to self-theory comes from the European influence of existentialism, which he first encountered in his psychotherapeutic studies in Vienna.


Existentialism as a philosophy is notoriously hard to characterize rigorously, and existential therapy has the same difficulty. It is, however, possible to isolate some special themes in existential therapy that represent a distinctive strand in the framework of self-theory.

The central concept is probably that of “being there” (Dasein), by which is meant the intense fundamental awareness of one’s existence. This basic experience is described by a patient of May’s, a young woman who reported:

Then what is left? What is left is this, “I am.” This act of contact and acceptance with “I am,” once gotten hold of, gave me (what I think was for me the first time) the experience since I am, I have the right to be.

What is this experience like? . . . It is the experience of my own aliveness . . . . It is my saying to Descartes, “I AM, therefore, I think, I feel, I do.”

This “I am” experience is the basic experience of being, and although it is not itself a solution to a patient’s problem, May claims that it is a necessary precondition for successful analysis.

One important property of being is that it rejects the distinction between the knowing or experiencing subject and the known or experienced object. Instead, the concept of being is a basic part of the existentialist “endeavor to understand man by cutting below the cleavage between subject and object which has bedeviled Western thought and science since shortly after the Renaissance.” This condition of being is inseparable from its opposite — the condition of nonbeing or nothingness. Awareness of and confrontation with nonbeing, especially in the form of death, gives rise to the powerful and pervasive emotion of angst (dread or anxiety). Therefore, at the very center of existentialist thought is the common modern condition of pervasive anxiety that is “the experience of the threat of imminent non-being.”

This existence takes place in a world or universe characterized as “Being-in-the-world.” The three aspects of the existential world are the Umwelt (the “world around,” the environment), the Mitwelt (the “world with” others, our life of social and interpersonal relations), and, most central, the Eigenwelt (the “own world,” the world of the self and relationships to one’s self). Two or all three of these worlds may be experienced at the same time, but taken together they are the only arenas within which our existence takes place.

An important existential concept is “becoming,” the process of self-development or fulfilling one’s potential. This process unfolds by way of the self’s choosing its own course of self-fulfillment. Acts of choice bring the self from initial existence into an actualized self, with a nature or essence created by its choice. Thus, the self first exists (i.e., “I am”), but without any a priori nature or essence. Instead, through acts of choice the self’s essence is created. These choices are courageously made in the face of the self’s awareness of nonbeing and its experience of angst. Guilt arises through failure to develop the self’s potential, through blocking or ignoring one’s chance to become one’s potential. Transcendence is the name of the important capacity of the existential self to surpass or climb beyond the prior level of self-development. Thus, as self-potential is developed, each new stage is a transcending of the earlier stages; this process often is called “becoming.”

Rollo May points out that Carl Rogers, although he never had direct contact with existentialism, developed a therapy with important existential aspects, especially in Rogers’s emphases on becoming and on the therapist’s direct experience of himself and of the patient.

I launch myself into the therapeutic relationship having a hypothesis, or a faith, that my liking, my confidence, and my understanding of the other person’s inner world, will lead to a significant process of becoming. I enter the relationship not as a scientist, not as a physician who can accurately diagnose and cure, but as a person, entering into a personal relationship. Insofar as I see him only as an object, the client will tend to become only an object.

A final significant point is the claim of existential psychology that a natural science of human beings is not possible. Jean-Paul Sartre expresses this as a refusal “to consider man as capable of being analyzed and reduced to original givens, to determined desires (or drives), supported by the subject as properties [are] by an object.”

In summary, existential therapy—like existential philosophy—starts with the isolated self, aware of its basic existence, but confronted by nonexistence and the associated emotion of dread. This self, valued and accepted directly by the therapist, is encouraged, in the face of nonbeing, courageously to develop self-defined decisions that will bring its potential to fulfillment. This transcendent activity, or becoming-through-choosing, also creates the essence of the individual. On the other hand, failure to fulfill self-potential causes guilt. When this process succeeds, an individual who initially had only an existence has now created his or her own essence.

This self-knowledge is arrived at by the patient’s learning the meaning of his or her experienced states on their own terms, that is, phenomenologically and not via some “objective” subject-object philosophy, as found in natural science. All of this takes place in a universe that excludes God and is limited to three aspects: the external environment, the social and interpersonal environment, and the self and its relation to itself.

2. Self-Theory for Everybody

Jung, Fromm, Rogers, Maslow, and May were all theoreticians. Their concepts—however influential with intellectuals and students—had to be translated into popular form before they could reach large numbers of people. Some of those who have done this job of translation have pushed the ideas of these theorists to extremes for which they should not be held responsible. Yet it should be borne in mind that the popularizers are primarily professional psychologists or psychiatrists, and their works do represent a legitimate presentation or logical extension of self-theory. Actually the line between “theorist” and “popularizer” cannot be drawn all that precisely. With the exception of Jung, none of the preceding theorists is likely to merit classification as a major thinker. At best, they introduced interesting and useful but limited concepts. At worst, they simply marketed already existing ideas like self-actualization, and a good number of their works are indistinguishable from popularization. I am thinking especially of Rogers’s *Carl Rogers on Encounter Groups* and *Becoming Partners: Marriage and Its Alternatives*, both of which are discussed below.

Keep in mind that many of the particular expressions of self-theory, such as those we shall describe, are apt to be very short-lived. Despite their prominence a few years ago, encounter groups, for instance, seem to have all but disappeared. But new forms of popularized self-theory continually arise—for example, today’s great concern with self-esteem.

SELF-ESTEEM

Historically speaking, the concept of self-esteem has no clear intellectual origins; no major theorist has made it a central concept. Many psychol-