

Humanistic and Existential Personality Theories

Introduction

Abraham H. Maslow coined the term *Third Force Psychology* to signal a departure from the first two major theories of human behavior: Freudianism and Behaviorism. While Freud emphasized the determinative role of inner drives in concurrence with psychological defense mechanisms¹, early behaviorists represented by B.F. Skinner² focused on the determinative role of the external environment in the stimulus-response mechanism of human behavior. Maslow's work explores and highlights the rich potential in human self-actualization – a major influence in the development of spiritual care and counselling. This perspective inspires the goal of liberating and actualizing the growth potential of individuals and their relationships in concert with humanizing communal and institutional life.

Howard Clinebell has been a leading proponent in the pastoral care and counselling movement of focusing on human potential rather than deficits and pathology. In his extensive writing career he emphasized key concepts and theological dimensions of human actualization prominent in the practice of growth counselling:

- *Potentializing* – that human creativity, intelligence, spirituality, and relational connections can be developed and enhanced to a life-transforming experience.
- *Hope* – that creative change and courage is centered in realistic hope, in seeing and pursuing the signs and promises of new life in the here and now.
- *Intentionality* – that there is freedom in choosing one's life direction and shaping one's attitude within the given limits and challenges of human existence.
- *Generativity & Outreach* – that growth pursued for its own sake is self-defeating in contrast to when it fosters the welfare of others and the common good.
- *Blocked Potentializing* – that sin and evil are subversions or distortions of human potentialities rather than evidence of an inherent and inevitable human condition.

The humanistic/existential psychologies covered in this module all share a human growth orientation. These perspectives aim at exploring the optimum of life rather than become preoccupied with the common weaknesses and failures in human functioning. Like religious systems and spiritual discourses these psychologies contrast the “two ways” – *the way of life and the way of death*:

- Erich Fromm highlights the “productive character” vs. an exploiting and consuming life style, and distinguishes humanistic from authoritarian religion,
- Carl Rogers contrasts the integrated growth process of being in motion and in a state of “changingness” with being stuck in fear and defensiveness,
- Fritz Perls calls psychology the study of creative adjustments and abnormal psychology the study of the inhibitions in creative adjustment between the human organism and its environment,
- Rollo May describes life in terms of love and will, and death as detachment and apathy,

- Paul Tillich charts the process of self-integration as the way of life over against disintegration as death,
- Irvin Yalom propounds that life is to confront death and own rather than deny the harsh existential truths of the human condition.

I. Pioneer Voices in Human Actualization

Alfred Adler is acknowledged by Maslow as a leading innovator of the “third force.” Adler was an early collaborator of Freud but he broke radically with biological determinism to focus on the autonomous, creative human self as the psychological center of life. He defined his theory as an “individual psychology” on account of its focus on the active role of the self:

Do not forget the most important fact that not heredity and not environment are determining factors. Both are giving only the frame and influences which are answered by the individual in regard to his styled creative power.³

Rather than a “drive” psychology Adler emphasized a motivational psychology of striving towards values and goals guided by the intentionality of growing up to one’s full potential:

It is through this urge towards processes directed to a given end that the whole mental life receives an impetus in a forward direction, and in this stream of processes all the categories and forces belonging to our minds receive their mold, their direction, and their characteristic form.⁴

To Adler, to be human means to feel inferior – an awareness that engenders the will to grow. The human “will to power” is rooted in our early infant experience of helplessness in the face of an intimidating, overwhelming world. These inferiority feelings are integral to the human condition and the impetus to understand and negotiate the complexities of life: The life of the human soul is not a “being” but a “becoming.”⁵

Adler has been acknowledged as one of the first humanistic psychologists on account of his phenomenological, goal-directed and holistic approach. Adler was influenced by Vaihinger’s philosophy of the role of human fictions and creative imagination in shaping what we see and do – the dynamic perspective that has led to the cognitive revolution in psychotherapy and present postmodern theories of constructivism.⁶

Adler’s “individual psychology” is based on interpersonal theory. That explains why his theory has also been called a contextual or social psychology. His term *Gemeinschaftsgefühl* stands for a person’s social concern that marks the healthy personality. In contrast to his Viennese patriarchal society, Adler highlighted the need for equality and communal values as demonstrated in this vivid description of the debilitating human and social costs of sexist attitudes:

*The fallacy of the inferiority of woman, and its corollary, the superiority of man, constantly disturbs the harmony of the sexes. As a result, an unusual tension is introduced into all erotic relationships, thereby threatening, and often entirely annihilating, every chance for happiness between the sexes. Our whole love life is poisoned, distorted, and corroded by this tension.*⁷

With the use of non-technical, common-sense language, Adler combined ground-breaking psychological insights with active social involvement applied specifically in the field of education and the creation of child clinics.

Erich Fromm saw himself as a true Freudian by honoring the spirit rather than the letter of psychoanalytic theory. He highlighted Freud's mission of liberating people from oppressive forces emanating both from outside through society and from inside the psyche through the unconscious. These are the two principal stages where conflict blocks human actualization:

1. a fundamental tension between human nature and civilization
2. an inner "dialectic of rationality and irrationality" – with instinctual drives in the unconscious and the liberating truth of reason in the conscious mind.

Fromm's design for a "humanistic psychoanalysis" has theological depth and sports the missionary zeal of a social reformer:

*This revised psychoanalysis will continue to descend ever more deeply into the underworld of the unconscious, it will be critical of all social arrangements that warp and deform man, and it will be concerned with the processes that could lead to the adaptation of society to the needs of man, rather than man's adaptation to society. Specifically, it will examine the psychological phenomena which constitute the pathology of contemporary society: alienation, anxiety, loneliness, the fear of feeling deeply, lack of activeness, lack of joy...*⁸

Fromm adopts Karl Marx's evolutionary concept of "productive life," of life creating life. Production is not the mechanical and manipulative use of domination but the free flow of potential life. The "productive character" expresses the humanistic ethics of self-actualization:

*The ability of man to make productive use of his powers is his potency; the inability is his impotence. With his power of reason he can penetrate the surface of phenomena and understand their essence. With his power of love he can break through the wall which separates one person from another. With his power of imagination he can visualize things not yet existing; he can plan and thus begin to create.*⁹

For Reflection

How do you relate Fromm's humanistic ethics to the following critical note:

The real aim of human existence cannot be found in what is called self-actualization. Human existence is essentially self-transcendence rather than self-actualization...For only to the extent to which man commits himself to the fulfillment of his life's meaning, to this extent he also actualizes himself.

Victor Frankl, "Man's Search for Meaning" (1971,147).

Humanistic Religion

Fromm's theory of self-actualization is of special interest to the practice of spiritual care on account of its analysis of religious systems, whether theistic or non-theistic, focusing on the relation between faith and reason, and the meaning of love and hope. While Freud held a dim and reductionistic view of religion as infantile illusion and wish fulfillment, Fromm values religious thought as essential to being human: "the need for a system of orientation and devotion is an intrinsic part of human existence... there is no other more powerful source of energy in man."¹⁰ Negative religion for Fromm is "authoritarian religion" where "God is a symbol of power and force, He is supreme because He has supreme power, and man in juxtaposition is utterly powerless."¹¹ In contrast, "Man's aim in humanistic religion is to achieve the greatest strength, not the greatest powerlessness; virtue is self-realization, not obedience. Faith is certainty of conviction based on one's experience of thought and feeling."¹²

For Reflection

How do you relate Fromm's humanistic religion to the following critical note:

The trouble with the ideas of self-realization and self-actualization from a Calvinistic perspective is that they are self-propelled activities emanating from a center called "I" or "Self." They imply continuity of Self in the process of time, whereas the Calvinist (and in a wider sense all Christians) demand discontinuity of Self.
Paul Pruyser in "A Psychological Commentary," *Pastoral Psychology* (1968).

II. Humanistic Psychology and Human Actualization

Carl Rogers¹³ in the early days of 1951-52 wrote about *human actualization* as the surprise discovery that the core of personality is actually positive:

*One of the most revolutionary concepts to grow out of our clinical experience is the growing recognition that the innermost core of man's nature, the deepest layers of his personality, the base of his "animal nature," is positive in nature – is basically socialized, forward-moving, rational and realistic. This point of view is so foreign to our present culture that I do not expect it to be accepted.*¹⁴

For Reflection - can the assessment of human nature become too positive?

"A self-image which suggests that one is honest, loving, and trusting may indeed go far in calling forth this kind of behavior in oneself and one's neighbor. On the other hand, if carried too far it can also blind us to our own destructive ways and leave these ways outside our own awareness and beyond conscious control. Hence, the best self-image is the one that is differentiated – that can account for both the benign and malignant in ourselves and in the larger race." Don Browning.

Rogers based the positive image of the human person on two fundamental concepts:

1. the human *actualization tendency*:
The tendency in the human organism to grow simultaneously towards greater degrees of autonomy and greater degrees of social relatedness.
2. the human *organismic valuation*:
The capacity in the human organism to weigh and evaluate experience leading to choices of experience that will enhance growth.

Carl Rogers is generally acknowledged as the person who has most explicitly and elegantly developed a model of therapy/caring based on the positive perspective of human nature and potential. He initially chose the term *client-centered therapy*. The words emphasize that it is not the brilliance of theory, techniques or the therapist but the client who determines the course of therapy. The therapeutic growth process can be viewed from three interacting perspectives:

1) The Client

- The client is to be welcomed as a person who comes by his or her own volition as an active and responsible person in seeking help, rather than the stereotypical image of a passive patient.
- The client is to be valued for the person's worth and potential.
- The client is to be seen in dynamic rather than static terms: not just who the person is but what the person can become.

*Can I meet this other individual as a person who is in the process of becoming, or will I be bound by his past and by my past?...If I accept the other person as something fixed, already diagnosed and classified, already shaped by his past, then I am doing my part to confirm this limited hypothesis. If I accept him as a process of becoming, then I am doing what I can to confirm or make real his potentialities.*¹⁵

2) The Therapist/Care Provider

- a facilitator in the client's growth process towards becoming a "fully functioning person."
- a midwife "to a new personality – as I stand by with awe at the emergence of a self, a person, as I see a birth process in which I had an important and facilitating part."¹⁶

Being a midwife has two poles for the role of the therapist:

- getting out of the way: self-denial
- getting into a person-to-person encounter: self-assertion

For Reflection and Sharing

Between these two styles of “self-denial” and “self-assertion”:

- where do you see your own major strength?
- what examples/narratives come to mind?
- what difference does the patient/situation/context make for you?
- how do you develop a balance between clearing space and active interaction?
- where do you like to see yourself move in this balancing act?
- Where would be the challenge for you?

The early Rogers in *Client-Centered Therapy* emphasized self-denial:

The counselor says in effect, “to be of assistance to you I will put aside myself – the self of ordinary interaction – and enter into your world of perception as completely as I am able. I will become, in a sense, another self for you – an alter ego of your own attitudes and feelings...p.35

The strength of the therapist is in his or her self-effacement, the paradox being: the stronger the therapist the more self-effacement.

The later Rogers emphasized the personal encounter (note his involvement in the encounter group movement of the 1960's¹⁷):

Can I be strong enough as a person to be separate from the other? Can I own and, if need be, express my own feelings as something belonging to me and separate from his feelings.¹⁸

At this time Rogers prioritized the genuineness and congruence of the therapist:

What about the times when the counselor's real feelings toward his client is one of annoyance, or boredom, or dislike? My tentative answer is that even with such feelings as these, which we all have from time to time, it is preferable for the counselor to be real than to put up a facade of interest and concern and liking which he does not feel.¹⁹

3) The Therapy Process

The therapeutic core conditions of *congruence, acceptance and empathy*²⁰ set a climate where growth and change will naturally follow. This therapy process leads to fuller realization and actualization of the organism's potentialities. This process conception of psychotherapy is one of growing awareness and expression of the self. It is a movement from a point of fixity to a process of fluidity in the person. At first the client disowns her or his basic feelings, immobilized by defenses and conflicts. When movement takes hold, it is from experience to awareness, from past to present, from other people to self. The process leads to accepting responsibility and finding creative ways to productive change:

Thus as the process reaches this point, the person becomes a unity of flow, or motion. He has changed, but what seems most significant, he has become an integrated process of changingness.²¹

Frederick Perls, a contemporary of Carl Rogers, popularized *Gestalt Therapy* as a psychology similarly based on human potential rather than pathology:

*Psychology is the study of creative adjustments. Its theme is the ever-renewed transition between novelty and routine, resulting in assimilation and growth. Correspondingly, abnormal psychology is the study of the interruption, inhibition, or other accidents in the course of creative adjustment.*²²

The concept of *gestalt* stands for a structural relationship or organized whole: the color lilac looks bluish against a red background, red against a blue background. The context in which an element appears is called the “ground” against which the “figure” stands out. The self, rather than having substance in and by itself, is what organizes and shapes the interaction between the human organism and its environment:

*Let us call the “self” the system of contacts at any moment. As such, the self is flexibly various for it varies with the dominant organic needs and the pressing environmental stimuli...The self is the contact-boundary at work; its activity is forming figures and ground.*²³

*The self is the artist of life. It is only a small factor in the total organism/environment interaction, but it plays the crucial role of finding and making the meanings that we grow by.*²⁴

The human organism has the capacity in regulating itself. It is the wisdom of the body that tells you “to get out of your head and come to your senses.” Change occurs by becoming fully aware of the senses in the here and now.

For Theological Reflection: Gestalt Psychology and Process Theology

- There is continuity and an essential unity between the person and his/her environment. Alfred North Whitehead, a major influence and originator in process philosophy, states: “Our knowledge of the body places it as a complex unity of happenings within the larger field of nature.”²⁵
- Gestalt psychology rejects dualistic splits between the self and the body. Whitehead similarly stresses the one reality: “While we exist, body and soul are inescapable elements in our being, each with the full reality of our immediate self.”²⁶
- The term “process” in both Gestalt and Process thought rejects a separate and static existence of the self by asserting that all actuality is process. For Whitehead the soul represents a continuing sequence of moments in which the self has a conscious experience of the world: “The soul is nothing else than the succession of my occasions of experience, extending from birth to the present moment,” hence ‘the world is in the soul’.”²⁷

- In spiritual care, a process-oriented approach counteracts fatalistic and determinative beliefs of “that’s me,” and promotes active challenge and openness to novelty. The process theologian John Cobb states that the soul “becomes only in this receiving. The more it receives, the more it can become. Insofar as it is closed to its world, it impoverishes itself.”²⁸

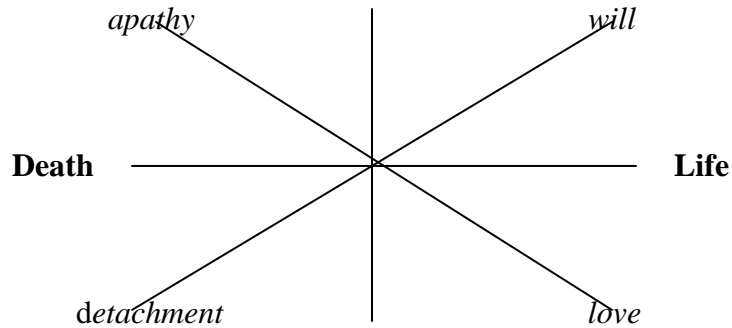
III. Existential Psychotherapy

Rollo May in contrast to the human potential movement sees evil and violence at the core of each human being – it is the *daimonic* in us that when left as an impersonal force will come out as rage and abusive sex. Consciousness can integrate the daimonic, make it personal through exercising our “capacities to love in an active, outgoing concern for the other’s welfare, for the sharing of pleasure and delight as an I with a Thou, for a communion of consciousness with his fellows.”²⁹

His book *Love and Will*, published in 1969, contains a comprehensive description of his psychology of human nature and the human potential for an authentic and meaningful life. The following themes map May’s existential analysis and personality theory:

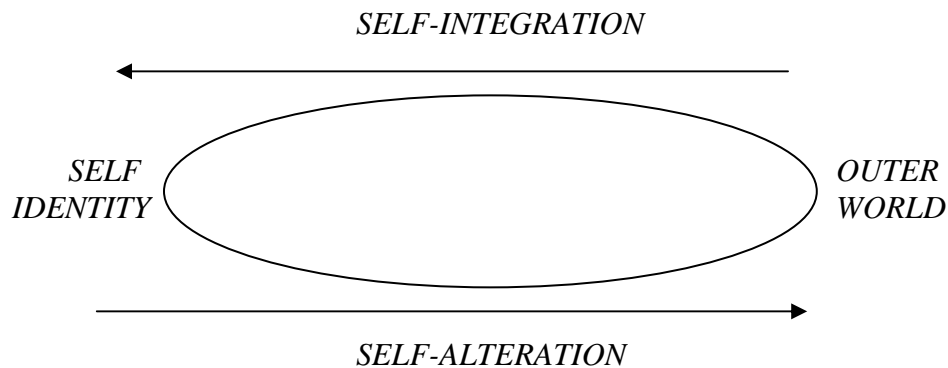
- consciousness of self
 - self-awareness and awareness of one’s possibilities
 - being in touch with one’s true essence
- the struggle to be
human growth is overcoming incestuous ties and become free. The driving force is *eros* :
*eros is the drive toward union with what we belong to – union with our own possibilities, union with significant other persons in our world in relation to whom we discover our own self-fulfillment*³⁰
- the freedom and will to be
our freedom is the capacity to choose from the options available and thus to create one’s own world and take responsibility for one’s being in the world:
*man is distinguished by his capacity to know that he is determined, and to choose his relationship to what determines him.*³¹
- the love and will to relate
love and will are the dynamics that stand for relationship rather than detachment:
*the interrelation of love and will inheres in the fact that both describe a person in the process of reaching out, moving toward the world, seeking to affect others or the inanimate world, and opening himself to be affected.*³²

Figure 1: Love and Will



Paul Tillich does not speak of self-actualization but describes the self in a relational process through the emerging concepts of *self-identity*, *self-alteration*, *self-integration*, *self-creation*, and lastly *self-transcendence*. Here too the self is not a distinct, separate entity but in a growth process of interaction with its surrounding world. The polarity of individualization and participation charts the circle dance of the self and its world in connecting to and disconnecting from each other. In the process of self-integration, “the center of self-identity is established, drawn into self-alteration and re-established with the contents of that into which it has been altered.”³³

Figure 2 – The Self-World Circle Dance³⁴



This graphic description depicts the cyclical movement of the self reaching out, participating in its world, connecting with its possibilities and being changed in that encounter, then returning to its center of identity. One’s place in the world is not static but, rather, a dance of constantly balancing one’s participation in the world with one’s personal center of identity. Tillich calls this the process of self-integration as it moves between the personal center and the manifoldness of its surrounding world that is taken into the self.

Following figure 2, the self's connection to the world can be plotted on a continuum between two polar ends, each becoming terminal when not balanced by the other. In Tillich's description, the one terminal end is the death of *mere self-identity*, the other, the death of *mere self-alteration*. Mere self-identity is to be bound in an immovable centre without a process of adaptation to the surrounding world. The opposite is mere self-alteration with no return to the centre in self-integration, resulting in a lost centre due to the dispersing impact of the manifoldness in the surrounding world.

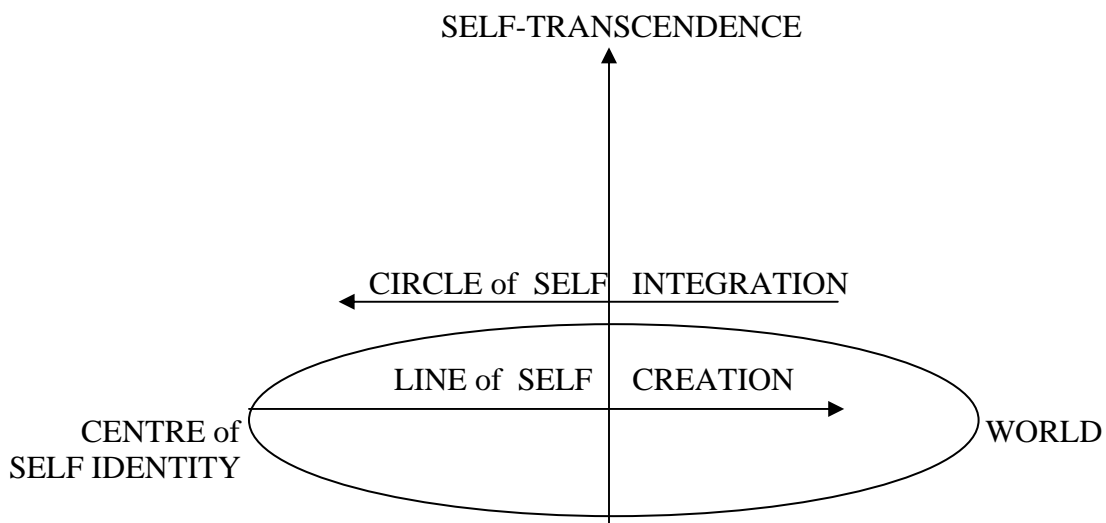
Reflection

- Can you give concrete examples of these two ways of death?
- Can the two ways of death be used as a schema in personality assessments?
- How do the two ways of death make for diverse spiritual care interventions?
- Where between the two do you see yourself best suited in the practice of care?
- Where in this balance do you experience yourself most alive or most dead?

In Tillich's schema, the self-integration schema emphasizes an ongoing and reciprocal cycle in which the self lets go of itself in self-alteration only to re-establish itself as a centered self. This is the function of *self-creation* – that is “growth within the circular movement of a self-centered being and growth in the creation of new centers beyond this circle.”³⁵ The self never returns to the same center after having connected with its possibilities and challenges and the world is never the same as the self returns to it.

Tillich adds the dimension of *self-transcendence* that strives “in the vertical direction toward ultimate and infinite being.”³⁶ In a visual representation, “the vertical transcends both the circular line of centeredness and the horizontal line of growth.”³⁷

Figure 3 – Dimensions of Human Growth and Spirituality³⁸



Irvin Yalom has written what is generally considered a classic volume on existential therapy (1980). He is also known for a definitive text on group psychotherapy³⁹ and his work in the practice of hospice and end of life care. Yalom has identified four existential truths, the “facts of life,” that emerge in the therapeutic encounter:

1. the inevitability of death for each of us and for those we love
2. the freedom to make our lives as we will
3. our ultimate aloneness
4. the absence of any obvious meaning or sense of life

These are the four parts that comprise his 1980 text *Existential Psychotherapy*. In another book, *Love's Executioner & Other Tales of Psychotherapy* (1989) he describes how these four givens of human existence shape personal lives and consequently the practice of existential psychotherapy. In these psychotherapy tales Yalom shares his belief and clinical experience that “however grim these givens may seem, they contain the seeds of wisdom and redemption,” and “that it is possible to confront the truths of existence and harness their power in the service of personal change and growth” (p.5).

Note Tillich’s view of anxiety as the awareness of finitude, experienced as one’s own finitude. Neurotic anxiety, in contrast to existential anxiety, is pathological since it is fixed to a limited self-affirmation, thus avoiding the existential truths of reality. Like Yalom, Tillich is suspicious of “much enthusiastic reaction to religious appeal:”

*Much courage to be, created by religion, is nothing else than the desire to limit one’s own being and to strengthen this limitation through the power of religion. And even if religion does not lead to or does not directly support pathological self-reduction, it can reduce the openness of man to reality, above all to the reality which is himself. In this way religion can protect and feed a potentially neurotic state. These dangers must be realized by the minister and met with the help of the physician and psychotherapist.*⁴⁰

For Conversation

what can you say for and against the following existential theses:

- that religious views often promote strategies to deny the “facts of life”
- that spiritual care provides encounters with the “truths of existence”
- that religious reality and spiritual reality are to be differentiated
- that “spiritual truth” and “factual truth” are of one piece.

For Yalom the roots of everyday human problems are “existence pain.” In his tales the cry “I want” emerges as the organizing theme:

One patient cried, “I want my dead darling daughter back,” as she neglected her two living sons. Another insisted, “I want to fuck every woman I see,” as his lymphatic cancer invaded the crawl spaces of his body. And another pleaded, “I want the parents, the childhood I never had,” as he agonized over three letters he could not bring himself to open. And another declared, “I want to be young forever,” as she, an old woman, could not relinquish her obsessive love for a man thirty-five years younger.

For Reflection

- Are there narratives in your practice of care that fit the “I want” theme?
- Are there other universal “organizing themes” in tales of human pain?
- What theme stands out for you?

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Notes

¹ See Module III,i

² See Module I,vi

³ See the Introduction in Ansbacher & Ansbacher (Eds.) 1964.

⁴ Ibid.,94.

⁵ Adler. 1963. *The Practice and Theory of Individual Psychology*. P. ix

⁶ See Peter VanKatwyk. 2008. "Seeing the Same Different" in *The Spiritual Care Giver's Guide*.

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⁷ Miller, J.B. (Ed.) *Psychoanalysis and Women*, 40

⁸ *The Crisis of Psychoanalysis*, 40,41

⁹ *Man for Himself*, 94,95

¹⁰ Ibid., 58

¹¹ *Psychoanalysis and Religion*, 36

¹² Ibid., 37

¹³ See Module I,v

¹⁴ Carl Rogers in "Some Directions Evident in Therapy" later published in *On Becoming a Person* (1961).

¹⁵ *On Becoming a Person*, 55

¹⁶ Ibid., 5

¹⁷ See Module II,v

¹⁸ *On Becoming a Person*, 52

¹⁹ *Harvard Educational Review*, Fall 1962.

²⁰ See Module I,v

²¹ *On Becoming a Person*, 158

²² Perls, Hefferline, Goodman. 1951, 230-31

²³ Perls. 1969, 115

²⁴ Ibid., 235

²⁵ *Modes of Thought*, 161

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid. 163

²⁸ *A Christian Natural Theology*, 54

²⁹ *Love and Will*, 148

³⁰ Ibid., 73

³¹ Ibid., 268

³² Ibid. 29

³³ Paul Tillich.1963, 30.

³⁴ This diagram is taken from PeterVanKatwyk, 2003. p.12

³⁵ Ibid.,31

³⁶ Ibid., 86

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ This diagram is taken from PeterVanKatwyk, 2003. p.17

³⁹ See Module II,v

⁴⁰ *The Courage to Be*, 73