

Integrity, Imagination, and the Christian Therapist

Kyle Isaacson

Fuller Theological Seminary

Abstract

The problem of integrity arises when the Christian therapist operates out of psychological theories that presuppose a view of human nature that conflicts with a Christian view. With this in mind, the initial question for the Christian therapist regards what view of human nature those theories hold, and how do those epistemological assumptions regarding the nature of human existence interact with a Christian interpretation. Rogers' humanistic approach and Bowlby's attachment theory illuminate two popular psychological models that espouse divergent views of human nature. Rogers' humanistic approach emphasizes the transcendent quality of human existence, while Bowlby's human ethological observations led him to construct a theory based on evolutionary theory and instinct. Niebuhr's interpretation of the Christian view of human nature as a tension between natural vitality and transcendent freedom critiques each of these perspectives as providing only half of the story of human experience. Niebuhr's paradigm criticizes Rogers' humanism as failing to grasp the finitude of human existence, and thus the presence of sin and the inclinations of the self towards turpitude rather than transcendence. In contrast, Niebuhr's paradigm criticizes Bowlby's perspective as overlooking the human ability to transcend impulse, thus thwarting imagination and human freedom. The result of this critique for clinical practice is not the realization of a need for new psychological theories or even new techniques, but rather a refined activity within those theories that accounts for the dialectical nature of human existence. More specifically, the Christian clinician possesses the advantages of possibility and imagination. These twin advantages promote compassion towards clients and an increased capacity to challenge them to grasp at a greater good. Finally, this epistemological shift requires that Christian therapists call their clients to a faith that compels them to live in the tension between rootedness and freedom.

The integration of psychology and theology has sometimes been approached as a process of mingling interventions or of noticing overlap in methods. However, this type of integration seems inadequate for the Christian clinician who ardently desires to approach the task of therapy with integrity—as a person knowledgeable in the practice of psychology, but true to his/her Christian worldview. This sort of integration requires purposefulness in the fundamental suppositions about the nature of humans and existence. For the Christian therapist, Niebuhr's (1941) dialectical understanding of human nature provides an ethical platform for the engagement of clinical practice with integrity and imagination.

The Problem of Integrity

The Christian clinician's concern with the integration of psychology and theology is primarily a concern regarding integrity. The first question in the process of integration is whether psychology and theology are the same. Shuman and Meador (2003) join most in the psychological and theological communities in suggesting that they are not, drawing into relief the nature of the relationship between the two from the Christian perspective. They suggest, "The health and healing of individual persons are and always have been significant concerns in Christianity. Yet those concerns have always been understood to occupy a particular, limited space within the tradition's larger concern for its members to participate faithfully in the entire scope of God's redemptive work" (Shuman & Meador, 2003, p. 7). The authors' contention is that health and healing fall under the broader umbrella of an understanding of the relationship of God and the world, of which a part is the health of humans. More specifically, the definition of health remains subject to a Christian theological understanding of the nature of human existence, and God's purposes for it.

The problem of integrity for the Christian clinician arises when the dictates of clinical theory, as derived from a variety of epistemological assumptions regarding the nature of human existence and its purpose, conflict with theological views. Even more distressing, is the often surreptitious presence of these conflicts. Shuman and Meador (2003) indict modern culture as “notoriously reductive”, indicating that a disregard for one’s assumptions about the nature of humans and the world is not only at conflict with traditional Christian theology, but in fact is a core assumption of the times (p. 10). Thus, despite Whitaker’s (1988) assertion that one typically chooses a theory that aligns best with what one already believes to be true, issues of integrity remain a concern. Furthermore, many clinicians adopt the pet theories of the programs in which they train or of the supervisors under whose guidance they develop as a clinician. These choices are additionally influenced by a third party payer system that holds fidelity to its own set of assumptions, including efficiency and cost-effectiveness. The problem then arises that Christians trained in the psychological tradition operate in a therapeutic capacity out of theories regarding human nature, existence, behavior, and health that are founded on philosophies in contradiction with the Christian perspective. The clandestine quality of these conflicts arises out of the fact that they occur at the foundational level. At the skills level, philosophical assumptions are opaque, and can even appear non-existent. As will become apparent, the emphasis on skills in clinical training itself reflects an epistemological bias, which, at its worst, assumes the philosophical contexts in which the interventions have been birthed matters little to their utilization.

A careful review of two well-regarded psychological theories will illuminate more specifically the problem of integrity for the Christian clinician. An investigation of the humanist force behind Carl Rogers’ understanding of human nature, and, secondly, of the evolutionary influence on Bowlby’s Attachment Theory will support the current discussion. Despite more

recent theoretical overlap, these two theorists conceptualized human nature very differently in their early writings. More specifically, Niebuhr's dialectical theology will draw into relief the insufficiency of their unique implicit assumptions regarding the nature of human existence, while simultaneously casting a vision for compassion, imagination, and challenge, alongside a fundamental posture of Christian integrity.

Rogers: Humanism

Carl Rogers developed a clinical approach to therapeutic intervention that held as one of its core assumptions a humanistic understanding of human nature. He quotes Kierkegaard as the philosophical basis for his theoretical approach, citing as his foundation the idea that the highest goal of existence is to be the person that one is. Rogers does not intend stagnancy with this paradigm, but rather views the history of one's relationships as a story of interruption and impediment to personal growth and fulfillment. It is not that others always intend to abate an individual's personal growth, but rather that in the course of life fear and anxiety motivate counterfeit living. One example Rogers (1961) provides of this is the experience of "ought". When one person places demands on another, suggesting that experience and behavior should follow a prescribed path, that person, in Rogers' view, artificially constrains the positive development of another. One can impose these expectations on the self, as well, thus promoting anxiety and artificiality. Rogers observes that these messages originate not only in others, but also in culture and institutions.

The logic of Rogers' (1961) theoretical model of human growth inevitably leads inwards. He repeatedly vilifies the constraints imposed from other people, the environment, and the culture. As Rogers avers, healthy people do not choose "anything which is imposed, anything which is defined from without" (p. 170). This leaves one's inward experience as the pure source

of guidance, and affirms his a priori assumption, which is that the salubriousness of existence is found in one's self, as discovered through reflection on personal experience. The human self, in its pure state, guides one towards joy, assurance, and wellbeing. Rogers admits that the journey of 'being' requires courage and a steadfast disposition, and that it is multivalent, but never lapses in his confidence in the ability of the journey to wind towards goodness.

Here the relationship between intervention and theory gains vibrancy, as Rogers (1961) describes one of his primary interventions in allowing 'the space to be' as founded on the assumption that in humans there exists, "the urge...to expand, extend, become autonomous, develop, mature...to the extent that such activation enhances the organism or the self" (p. 35). In other words, Rogers expresses a belief in the innate qualities of human beings to strive towards health, towards what is good. He believes so ardently in this innate drive to maturity, that his entire approach to therapy relies on its presence in order to effectively mitigate the problems presented by the client. He further characterizes this assumption about the inherent urge in humans towards something better, and their attendant ability to achieve that good when given space to, as an attitude that, when given the full loyalty of the therapist, will produce positive results. His confidence in this possibility is theoretically consistent, for if the outside world typically serves to abate the growth of the pure internal self, the most facilitative posture of an other is one of acceptance. Rogers (1961) refers to this posture as "unconditional positive regard", and lauds it as the core disposition of a successful therapist (p. 47). His is a rational conclusion, for if goodness is the shy, precocious child of the inner self, then when working with others one must at the very least get out of the way, and at the very most affirm its impulses without judgment.

In describing the process of self-actualization as multivalent, Rogers (1961) highlights another assumption of his approach regarding human nature, namely that it is bereft of a goal more specific than becoming what one is. Rogers is careful to characterize self-actualization as a process, but refuses to provide a vision for the goal, despite a indefatigable confidence in what Browning and Cooper (2004) describe as an ultimate harmony of discrete individuals in their actualized state. Again, he is to be congratulated for his theoretical consistency, for it follows that if good dwells within the individual and is inevitably transformative when given the space to emerge, then it is also the arbiter of its own destiny. Human destiny, in Rogers' model, is the unspecified, invariably triumphant destiny of the emancipated individual—which, importantly, integrates without conflict with the unique destinies of other emancipated selves. Although Rogers characterizes this stance as an attitude, his assertion is no less than a call to a particular belief about human nature and purpose. It can be ascertained from these texts, and others, that, in accordance with humanistic assumptions, Rogers assumes a foundational human goodness that innately strives towards the good in each circumstance.

Although Rogers (1961) identifies yearning for goodness with other natural, biological processes in nature, his conception of it possess a trans-biological quality to it that distinguishes it from a purely natural phenomenon. His hypothesis is that, “the basic nature of the human being, when functioning freely, is constructive and trustworthy” (Rogers, 1961, p. 194). This assumption moves beyond a biological or evolutionary process, and indicates a belief in the transcendent abilities of human nature, to experience, reflect on, and overcome impediments to self-actualization. In fact, greater scrutiny of the belief in the constructive nature of humans reveals a secondary assumption that the human will, when left unimpeded, consistently, perhaps ineluctably, chooses the good. The question for the Christian clinician is whether this view of

human nature and purpose aligns with biblical theological perspectives, and if it does not, how then she/he may operate out of this perspective with integrity.

Bowlby: Ethology and Evolutionary Biology

Another increasingly popular psychological theory is Attachment Theory, as developed by Bowlby (1969; 1973). Bowlby (1969) rooted his theory of attachment, which was controversial at the time of its inception for its criticism of psychoanalytic concepts, in the biological and evolutionary processes of humans. Bowlby (1979) promoted a human ethological approach to understanding parent-child relationships as a means of reclaiming in psychology the scientific rigor intended by its originator. His fascination with the findings wrought by direct observation of other species, including birds and primates, led him to believe that empirical observation of human relationships could prove equally fecund.

Bowlby (1988) organized the results of his observations of human interactions into a theory of attachment, which relied on innate biological processes for its foundation. Bowlby understood the parent-child relationship system as an evolutionary product that developed over time through natural selection, as it provided the circumstances most conducive to human survival. He posited that innate biological systems drew the child and parent together into a relational system that facilitated security through the amelioration of physiological and emotional anxiety. In fact, “diminishing the risk of the individual coming to harm” constitutes the primary function of the attachment system, though it takes on more complex and intricate expressions (Bowlby, 1988, p. 63).

Bowlby (1979) believed so fully in parent-child attachment as a product of evolutionary biology, that he defended it against the postulate of learning theorists that parents invoked the relational responses of their kin by means of unconscious instruction. While he was willing to

grant that learning and environmental factors play a role in the development and maintenance of the attachment system, Bowlby contended that relational propensities were innate and presently determined by means of natural selection in the evolutionary process. Bowlby labeled these relational processes “species specific”, as a way of recognizing their uniqueness in humans while retaining their biological foundation (p. 28).

Another aspect of attachment theory relevant to understanding its implicit view of human nature is that it regards the instinctual drive towards relational proximity as shaped over the course of one’s childhood experiences and constantly at work at a dispositional level as a sort of relational memory. Bowlby (1988) describes this as he applies attachment concepts to a case study, indicating that the interpersonal difficulties of a female client stem from childhood attachment experiences. Her experiences of abandonment as a little girl, in Bowlby’s view, promoted the shutdown of her innate relational inclinations, but left her with the emotional sequelae of having to face alone the fearful prospect of survival. His therapeutic prescription is that it is essential for the therapist to facilitate for her experiences of relationships that provide safety through accessibility and responsiveness. In highlighting this as a broad intervention, Bowlby affirms the biological basis of his thought by essentially relying on the postulates of learning theory, the persistent presence of the innate relational drive, and the strength of environmental factors to achieve security. While it would be easy to characterize Bowlby as a determinist, it is important to note that Attachment theory is not fundamentally deterministic. In characterizing the attachment system as instinctual, he does not condone the idea that a person’s trajectory is inevitably thrown in any one direction. In contrast, he affirms the many possibilities inherent in human development at its inception, but suggests that these possibilities narrow through nurturing experiences, or the absence thereof. Said another way, Bowlby emphasized

both nature and nurture, placing the latter in service of the former's instinctual inclination towards safety and security in relationship.

On the strength of scientific findings that suggested interpersonal comfort trumped biological drives for food or procreation, Bowlby and his colleagues developed a theory of human relating that urges connection, responsiveness, accessibility, and safety. While most Christian clinicians would likely affirm these outcomes as important, it is necessary to once again review the biological or, in this case, evolutionary suppositions that the theory makes and inquire as to whether those epistemological beliefs align with Christian thought, or whether they leave something to be desired. In attempting to provide empirical foundation for his theory, Bowlby emphasized the drives towards relationship as innate biological factors. Relationships, rather than surplus aspects of existence, lie at the center of it, and shape one's personality and actions throughout the lifespan. Extension of this perspective into human interpersonal dynamics, while allowing for the presence of interpersonal hurts, reveals that the explanation for human behavior always returns to biological needs and evolutionary drives for survival. This assumption facilitates an understanding of human interpersonal behavior as not necessarily good or bad, but rather instinctual. While not morally specious, attachment theory must return to its evolutionary base for explanation of behaviors, a practice which deems them nearly unavoidable, thus obviating any moral implications. Again, the question for Christian clinicians is whether this view of human nature, as purely biological and subject to evolutionary progress, satisfies the need for harmony in epistemological assumption with biblical theological perspectives.

A Christian Perspective on Human Nature: Niebuhr

The problem of integrity arose out of the conflict of assumption regarding the nature of human existence between theological and psychological thought, a conflict that would surely

express itself in the practical interventions and activities of the Christian Therapist. It seems, then, that one major task of integration of psychology and theology is to arrive at a solid understanding of a Christian view of human nature, and then to examine its interaction with the psychological theories of Rogers and Bowlby. In his two-volume work, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Reinhold Niebuhr (1941a; 1941b) presents a Christian interpretation of human nature, one that provides a solid platform from which to tackle the problem of integrity.

Niebuhr (1941a) presents a dialectical perspective on the nature of humanity, suggesting that humans exist as beings who are subject to natural processes, but are also able to transcend them. This account of existence, Niebuhr argues, best explains the human experience. History reveals that humans have not always acted towards health and maturity, as a purely transcendent nature might suggest, but neither have they found satisfaction in the resolution to live as common beasts, with their only rudder the whims of biological impulse. In terms of Christian theology, Niebuhr asserts that the two polarities are either that humans try unsuccessfully to be god, or they invest too little effort in being like Him. It will prove helpful to review each of these qualities in turn.

The biblical basis given for humanity's transcendent quality are that, according scripture, humans are made in God's image, and thus carry the faculty of transcendence, including the capacities for self-reflection and reason. Furthermore, it is not simply that humans possess these transcendent qualities because their nature is thus, but it is also discernable from the divine injunction in the Gospel of Matthew to "love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind...and...love your neighbor as you love yourself" (NIV). In other words, transcendence is not only given, but also required by God. Niebuhr (1941a) explains that as image bearers of God, humans may discern between good and evil, using both

revelation and reason. This ability to discern good and evil, combined with the divine love imperative, indicates that humans are both able and required to transcend the tensions of earthly circumstance as they reach towards the divine example of self-denying love. However, this capacity for transcendence always stands in tension with the biological nature of humans.

In his treatise on ethics, Niebuhr (1935) suggests that in every situation God has called humans to the highest good that is possible. Once again, he ties this responsibility into the love command, for the highest good that is possible is to embody the call to love God completely, and to love one's neighbor and self in simultaneous perfection. Just as in the exodus when God provided Moses with a vision for Israel's impossible emancipation, imagination is the atmosphere in which the Christian soars towards transcendence over the biological necessity that would render the divine love imperative a cruel administration. Nevertheless, human history and experience together reveal that this is not the whole of the story of human nature.

Niebuhr (1941a) also seeks to take seriously the biological rootedness of humanity and the capacity for sin. As Kierkegaard (1989) explains, "God and man are two qualities separated by an infinite difference in kind" (p. 159). Tillich (1957) further adds, "we are never able to bridge the infinite distance between the infinite and the finite from the side of the finite" (p. 122). This suggests that, despite the transcendent qualities of human nature, humans remain physical, biological, finite beings who rely on the Earth for sustenance and who are subject to natural forces and influences. Niebuhr (1941a) indicates that biology, and by extension perhaps even evolutionary processes, are valid troves of information about the nature of humans. The only caveat is that these aspects of human existence can only be understood in relationship with the transcendent qualities of human existence, and perhaps even more importantly, in view of the love command. As Niebuhr (1935) explains, although in every situation humans are called to

fulfill the love imperative, in every instance what one accomplishes falls short of a higher expression of love that could have been realized. He relates this back to the human ability to transcend the possibilities of ordinary circumstance by means of imagination. Humans can imagine better outcomes than they can sublimate in each given instance, thus demonstrating the dialectical nature of existence and the presence of sin.

The importance of one's understanding of the nature of human existence, and the relationship of this epistemological assumption to the problem of integrity for the Christian therapist, is that it relates directly to one's actions in the world, or in other words, to ethics. Gadamer (2004) in discussing the human sciences argues that, rather than the pursuit of a static truth such as those in mathematics, psychology understands humans as dynamic in their existence, such that "an active being, rather, is concerned with what is not always the same but can also be different" (p. 312). Furthermore, in discussing the relationship of theology to psychology, Murphy (2005) draws a similar distinction, suggesting that psychology as a field cannot speak to the question of what humans ought to be like, but instead, that it is the task of theology. In terms of the current conversation, even though Bowlby's theory and Rogers' hypotheses may imply certain beliefs about the nature of human existence, and thus by extension the proper direction of human action, they fail to adequately address the question of ethics because they are inherently the work of observation. Rogers (1961) indicates that his ideas are rooted in the observations of his clients throughout his long engagement in the work of therapy. Bowlby (1979) similarly supports his theory of attachment with observation, albeit in a more formal empirical setting, by systematizing interpersonal and emotional phenomenon. As a clinician and an ethological scientist, respectively, both Rogers and Bowlby arrived at their conceptions of human nature by considering human behavioral and emotional tendencies, and

then prescribed those findings as the logical ethical trajectory. For example, Rogers arrived at the realization that when his clients grappled with the realities of their internal emotional experience, they acquired new insights into their experience. He further noted that these insights promoted a greater sense of wellbeing, and thus began to prescribe those behaviors that promote experience and expression of the self as proper ethical conduct. This is evident in his ironical “ought” to avoid the impinging forces of external demands. Although Rogers attempts to avoid this by framing his theory as a proposition open to rejection, he cannot avoid making epistemological, and subsequently ethical, statements. This is the manner of psychology as a social science.

Theology, in contrast, relies on revelation for explication of human nature and the proper direction of human action. Niebuhr (1941a) notes that God reveals to humankind the nature of human existence, and then this revelation is tested against the observation of human experience when he states, “we must seek to validate the Christian view by measuring the adequacy of its answer for human problems” (p. 151). As Kierkegaard (1989) further explains, “Christianity begins another way, by saying that for man to learn what sin is there must be a revelation from God, that sin does not consist in man’s not having understood what is right, but in his not wanting to understand it, and in his unwillingness to do what is right” (p. 127).

A Christian View of Human Nature and The Work of the Therapist

Taking seriously a Christian account of human nature by Niebuhr (1941) as dialectical and inhabiting the tension between transcendence and biological necessity provides a path for Christian therapist out of the problem of integrity when operating therapeutically out of secular theories such as Rogers’ (1961) humanistic approach or Bowlby’s (1969; 1973) attachment theory. This path out of the problem of integrity relies on a belief in possibility that is unique to a Christian view of human nature and ethics. From within a Christian frame, both in ethics and in

existence, the impossible remains possible. Niebuhr (1935) deems this the “impossible possibility” (p. 71). Kierkegaard (1989) discusses it in the negative, suggesting that for the Christian despair is a sickness, for in Jesus Christ’s resurrection a permanent hope has been established. Having set the frame for a Christian view of human nature, it will help to view Rogers’ humanism and Bowlby’s evolutionary biology from Niebuhr’s theological paradigm.

For the Rogerian therapist possibility fails to root itself in historical necessity in that it promotes an overly optimistic view of human nature which fails to take into account the reality of humankind’s flawed will. It is surprising that Rogers failed to capture the dialectical tension of human existence given that he cited Kierkegaard as his primary source for the emphasis on being who one is. Kierkegaard (1989) did, in fact, proffer that one should be oneself, but Rogers redacts from the intention of Kierkegaard’s statement any of the Christian context that supplies it with meaning. More specifically, Kierkegaard argues that one really is oneself in the truest sense when in relationship with God. Rogers rests his humanistic confidence in the innate goodness of the self on Kierkegaard’s shoulders, daring to usurp Kierkegaard’s argument that despair is the lot of those who would wish to be someone else, or in Rogers’ terms, those who would succumb to external contingencies. In making this move, however, Rogers ironically undermines his system of thought, for Kierkegaard (1989), in anachronistic accord with Niebuhr, affirms the dialectical nature of human existence as both biological and spiritual, and asserts, to Rogers’ posthumous chagrin, “the only life wasted is the life of one who so lived it, deceived by life’s pleasures or its sorrows, that he never became decisively, eternally, conscious of himself as spirit, as self, or, what is the same, he never became aware—and gained in the deepest sense the impression—that there is a God there and that ‘he’, himself, his self, exists before this God” (p. 57). The self Rogers wishes all others to find within themselves, is the self that Kierkegaard

claims can only be found in the wholly Other. This distinction draws into relief the error of Rogers' humanism, from the Christian perspective, to consider in isolation the transcendent quality of human nature, for the God that Kierkegaard places the individual before, Rogers places inside the individual. This movement inevitably leads to the dismissal of the biological rootedness of humanity. More specifically, it fails to account for humanity's sinful nature; that the human will would, as Kierkegaard later states in the same work, choose something either than a known good. In Rogerian terms, that the self, when give the space to 'become', would not follow an irresistible course towards goodness and maturity, but would at times choose despair. This is the insufficiency of the humanistic view of human nature, per Rogers' formulation, not that it is specious, but that it only captures one half of the equation.

For the therapist working under Bowlby's suppositions, possibility fails to break free of the biological chains of learning and natural existence, and thus is relegated to what would be, in Kierkegaard's terms, despair. In approaching a theory of human relating from an ethological perspective, and by rooting it in evolutionary biology, Bowlby fails to make space for the transcendent quality of human nature. Kierkegaard (1989) suggests that to fail to recognize oneself as spirit, as well as physical, is a terminal illness. The Christian view of human nature critiques Bowlby's view, as evinced by his ethological approach and emphasis on ontogeny, as lacking a proper understanding of the human ability to transcend the dictates of biological impulse. Humans can both imagine and attain a higher good than is allowed by a strictly biological view of the human species. Bowlby's reliance on natural selection and on attachment as primarily an instinct that functions to provide safety, highlights the tension of life against life in a world with limited resources, where survival is paramount. It leaves no room, however, for the self-sacrificing love that transcends the impulse towards safety, procreation, and survival,

and that ultimately reflects the divine image. Furthermore, in forfeiting the transcendent qualities of human nature, Bowlby's purely biological perspective further fails to acknowledge the human ability to discern right and wrong outside of the acute criteria of survival and safety. This is the insufficiency of the evolutionary biological perspective as given by Bowlby, not that it is useless, but that it only assumes as normative one half of the dialectical reality of human nature.

The Christian therapist who understands human existence dialectically lives in the tension of finitude and transcendence, while maintaining a hope established in the historical person of Jesus the Christ. Because God in Christ has overcome the impossible, the Christian therapist possesses an impossible hope that the impossible can be realized against the vicissitudes of natural existence. However, this is an inchoate hope that recognizes that the impossible, though realizable on the strength of the Divine-in-history, remains a partial actualization of an eschatological vision.

Not a Christian Approach, but a Christian Epistemology

What the Christian therapist needs to resolve the problem of integrity is not a new theoretical approach to counseling. Rather, the Christian therapist needs to take seriously a Christian view of human nature as dialectical and focused on the truth that with God nothing is impossible. In this way, the Christian view of human nature both affirms and criticizes existing theories. It affirms the transcendent qualities echoed in the belief of Roger's humanism that goodness will manifest itself, as it does the importance of human biological processes explicated in Bowlby's theory of attachment. But it criticizes both, each for over emphasizing one aspect of human nature, and together for lacking the imagination engendered by a belief in a God who makes the impossible possible. With this in mind, the Christian therapist must march forward

with a sure understanding of the nature of human existence, the command to love, and an imagination for the realization of the impossible.

Practically speaking, the transition from a unimodal view of human nature to a Christian, dialectical view facilitates two main postures in the Christian therapist: possibility and imagination. It facilitates possibility in the sense that a view of humans as both finite and creative promotes the application of both compassion and challenge in the therapeutic context. Furthermore, in regards to imagination, a dialectical view that takes seriously the twin realities of the incarnation and the divine love imperative enables a clinician to reasonably hold hope in the absurd on behalf of the client. It will prove helpful to explore each of these, possibility and imagination, as they impact the work of the therapist.

Possibility: Compassion and Challenge

The therapist who operates with a Christian view of human nature is able to offer clients both compassion and challenge, whereas epistemologies that affirm either humanity's natural vitality or transcendent qualities, to the exclusion of the other, cannot warrant their simultaneous presence. Taking seriously Niebuhr's (1935) assertion that human efforts towards good always fail the possibilities for good suggests that clients consistently need both compassion and challenge. Clients require compassion because in each situation their experience, of failure or suffering or other forms of imperfection, is a normative experience. Human sinfulness results in failures of the individual and common good, whereby the self in its preoccupation with its own interests subverts creative mutuality. This stands in stark contrast with the humanist supposition that the pursuit of self-interest as 'being who one is' will lead inevitably towards a greater good. If the humanist therapist offers compassion, it is to ameliorate the strife of striving after external contingencies. However, human experience suggests that psychological struggle is not merely

the consequence of a stifling external environment, but rather can also originate from the self. If this is the case, then Kierkegaard's (1989) evaluation is correct, that another form of despair, a despair for which the current argument suggests the humanist therapists possesses no basis for compassion, is "to be the self he himself has chanced upon" (p. 50). Kierkegaard draws a distinction between truly being the person God created and being the self one wants to, as an individual detached from God. Drawing God into the self thwarts the potential for compassion in this way, for it can have no conception of compassion for the self-defeating self—or in theological terms, for sin. Sin falls within the frame of a Christian view of human nature, affirming the finitude of human existence as a universal quality that assures conflict of life with life. Safe in this assuredness, the Christian therapist may offer compassion for failures originating within and without, and in so doing, normalize insufficiency in light of the yearning for pure transcendence. Thus, one mark of the therapist who operates with a Christian view of human nature is the capacity for greater compassion, as it is rooted in a deeper, more complex understanding of the dialectical nature of existence.

In regards to challenge, the truly evolutionary therapist must refrain from offering challenge, for it is precisely one's own instincts that contribute to behavior that is justified by survival. It is as if in any given situation the good that is accomplished is equal to the good that is possible, for any alternative is constrained by biological necessity. This view prohibits challenge, as an instrument of possibility. The transcendent qualities of human existence, including the capacity for humans to judge self-reflectively, as if outside of themselves, allow the therapist in each client circumstance to dream of more excellent outcomes. When constrained by biological necessity, the ideal of loving others as one loves oneself falls into irrelevance. As Niebuhr (1941a) states, "[romantic positivism]...fails to recognize that the freedom of [hu]man[ity] is the

source of all [its] creativity as well as of [its] vices” (p. 104). Even if a client can no longer cast a vision for a better scenario, the therapist hears behind each doleful expression the whisper of possibility. Thus, a second mark of the therapist who understands human nature from a Christian perspective is an increased capacity to challenge clients towards the realization of a greater good in their lives and relationships.

Imagination

When the epistemology of human existence as nature and spirit is taken seriously, the true desire of the Christian therapist for all clients is that they would have faith. In discussing the Christian view of existence, Kierkegaard (1989) proffers, “the real reason why people are offended by Christianity is that it is too elevated, that its standard of measurement is not the human standard, that it wants to make man into something so extraordinary that he cannot grasp the thought of it” (p. 116). This is the crux of the issue, that the Christian therapist with a dialectical view of human nature desires for her/his clients “something so extraordinary that he cannot grasp the thought of it”. This extraordinary outcome, this great reconciliation between marital partners, this spectacular emancipation from the throes of anxiety, this absurd progress takes form in the imagination of the therapist as that therapist lives in faith before God. Pragmatically, this means that the therapist calls the client to faith, which Kierkegaard describes as the opposite of sin. This is not the faith of giving assent to the propositions of twenty-first century evangelical Christianity, but rather a beckoning towards an understanding of one’s life as lived in the tension between the contingencies of survival and the freedom and creativity of human existence. In other words, that the way through pain and pathology requires the insights of psychology in its naturalistic and humanistic observations, but only as they settle into a fuller understanding of a life lived before God—a life that is both finite and spirit.

References

- Bowlby, J. (1969). *Attachment and loss: Vol 1. Attachment*. New York, NY: Basic Books.
- Bowlby, J. (1973). *Attachment and loss Vol. 2. Separation: Anxiety and anger*. New York: Basic Books.
- Bowlby, J. (1979). *The making and breaking of affectional bonds*. London: Tavistock Publications.
- Bowlby, J. (1988). *A secure base: Parent-child attachment and healthy human development*. USA: Basic Books.
- Browning, D. S., & Cooper, T. D. (2004). *Religious thought and the modern psychologies*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press.
- Gadamer, H. G. (2004). *Truth and method* (2nd Rev. ed.). New York, NY: Continuum International Publishing Group.
- Kierkegaard, S. (1989). *The sickness unto death*. New York, NY: Penguin Books.
- Murphy, N. (2005). Theological resources for integration. In A. Dueck, & C. Lee (Eds.) *Why Psychology Needs Theology*. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company.
- Niebuhr, R. (1935). *An interpretation of Christian ethics*. San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco.
- Niebuhr, R. (1941a). *The nature and destiny of man (Vol. 1)*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press.
- Niebuhr, R. (1941b). *The nature and destiny of man (Vol. 2)*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press.

Rogers, C. R. (1961). *On becoming a person: A therapist's view of psychotherapy*. New York, NY: Houghton Mifflin Company.

Shuman, J. J., & Meador, K. G. (2003). *Heal thyself: Spirituality, medicine, and the distortion of Christianity*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

Tillich, P. (1957). *The dynamics of faith*. New York, NY: HarperCollins.

Whitaker, C. A., & Bumberry, W. M. (1988). *Dancing with the family: A symbolic-experiential approach*. Levittown, PA: Brunner/Mazel.