

**The Gift of Death: Congruence and Finitude in Carl Rogers's  
Person-Centred Therapy**

By

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## ***Abstract***

*This thesis will critically explore Carl Rogers's understanding of human existence, self-formation and his notion of congruence. It will be argued that Rogers's theory does not sufficiently acknowledge the relevance of finitude (or mortality) in meaningful human being, despite the theory identifying a knowing relationship to finitude (understood as the potential for one's destruction) at the deepest level of the individual's existence.*

*The thesis aims to explore how this relationship to finitude plays out in the development of the self as understood by Rogers, as well as its relevance to Rogers's concepts of congruence and incongruence. Rogers's theory will also be brought into dialogue with some of the key teachings from the school of existentialism, particularly with regard to the role and importance of death in what it means to be human. In so doing, the thesis will investigate to what extent finitude, present but underdeveloped in Rogerian theory, can be enriched by the teachings of existentialism, while still remaining faithful to Rogers's understanding of existence, the self and congruent being.*

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## Introduction

The ubiquity of the psychotherapeutic approach developed by Carl Rogers is such that strands of his theory can be found woven into the fabric of a wide variety of latter-day psychotherapies. Key Rogerian ideas such as the necessity for an empathic approach to working with clients, the importance of maintaining ‘unconditional positive regard’, and of prioritising the client’s autonomy and frame of reference have now become staple ingredients in the most common psychotherapeutic disciplines.

Studies and assessments of Rogers’s techniques as they apply to psychotherapy, management, education and other contexts are by now legion – as such, they will not be rehashed in this paper. Instead, an exploration will be presented of Rogers’s theoretical understanding of the self, as well as a critical evaluation of his concept of ‘congruence’. Analysed in relation to the central tenets of existentialist thought, it will be argued that Rogerian theory overlooks the relevance and importance of finitude for human existence.

Given that Rogers saw his psychotherapeutic theory as broadly in harmony with the core aspects of phenomenology and existentialism, this omission is curious. Several explanations are possible; among the more credible, Rogers prioritised the *present* in human existence, rather than seeing the importance of the *futural* (including, ultimately, one’s death) in how the meanings of life play out (Winston, 2015). Another likely reason behind the lack of concern with finitude is the somewhat arbitrary tendency among US psychotherapists to remove the gloominess of existentialist thought and focus on a more optimistic understanding of existence (Tudor & Worrall, 2006).

Whatever the reasons for the omission, this thesis makes the point that Rogers's theory is impoverished without a consideration of the role that finitude plays in human being. One need only consider the importance accorded to human mortality in works of literature, philosophy, religion and psychology written over millennia, and emerging from all cultures and societies, to realise that death is a universal concern in human existence. A psychotherapeutic theory that fails to acknowledge this is remiss in its task of attending to the chief existential concerns that beset individuals – as such, the importance of introducing death to client-centred therapy is, ironically, *vital*.

This is not to say that Rogerian theory is, as it were, *fatally* compromised by its stopping short of a consideration of how finitude impacts on human existence. While the theory does stop short, Rogers developed his ideas sufficiently well for it to be possible to connect and further his work with the key insights of existentialism and existential psychotherapy. Rogers did in fact see that a concern with destruction and death lies at the heart of human 'organismic experience', that most fundamental way of being in the world. As such, it is possible to locate this concern within Rogerian theory and flesh it out, bringing it into the meaning of therapeutic change, self-awareness and the potential to live one's life authentically. These ideas will be explored as this thesis progresses.

Chapter One focuses on Rogers's idea of self-formation arising out of organismic experiencing. A close reading of Rogers's ideas will highlight some conceptual tensions between the different ways that he understands the self and embodied experience. The chapter will also try to locate a concern with death and/as destruction in Rogers's understanding of organismic experience, which in turn is fed into the developing self.

Chapter Two will explore what Rogers means by congruence. Attention will be paid to how this concept relates to the existentialist notion of authenticity.

Chapter Three will look at the role that finitude plays in existentialism and where it might be playing out in Rogers's own theory. The chapter will argue that a complete understanding of congruence must include an acknowledgement of finitude and of its importance for meaningful human existence.

Chapter Four will explore the difficulty in facing up to one's finitude, as well as suggesting that in important ways, *incongruence* as understood by Rogers is not only unavoidable in authentic existence, but in fact is to be welcomed.

Before moving to the first chapter, a brief review will be provided of the literature concerning Rogerian theory and its relationship with existentialism and finitude.

*(Note: For the sake of consistency, all spelling in the thesis, including book/article titles and quotations, has been converted to UK English format.)*

## Literature Review

Carl Rogers's person-centred approach has disseminated and been assimilated into many different 'schools' of psychotherapy in the last 60 years or so (Elliott & Freire, 2007), making Rogers one of the most influential psychotherapists of all time (Smith, 1982; Cook et al, 2009). The flexibility and adaptability of the Rogerian approach are important reasons for its widespread influence, as was Rogers's insistence that his theory was not complete. For him, it related to a "developing field of therapy" (Rogers, 1965/1951, p. 6), while the theory itself should undergo revision and modification towards the aim of becoming a "complete conceptual framework" (Ibid., p. 16) – a goal that Rogers stresses is "*never fully attained*" (Ibid. – italics added).

This theoretical/conceptual incompleteness in Rogers's work can be interpreted as an invitation to continue the evolution of the Rogerian approach, which would be in keeping with Rogers's idea of development as constant growth and forward momentum. Professors Dave Mearns and Brian Thorne regard it as a positive that person-centred therapy "is not [...] set in tablets of stone either as a theoretical system or as an applied science" (Mearns & Thorne, 2000, p. xi), while elsewhere, Mearns acknowledges Rogers's theory of personality as "unfinished" (Mearns, 1997, p. 135). As such, they suggest that it has more to offer as it is progressively refined.

However, the extent to which Rogers's original tenets can be preserved within the theory's subsequent evolution is debatable. For Ivan Ellingham, nothing short of a complete reconceptualisation is required of "all key person-centred concepts" (Ellingham, 1999, p. 121). In a complex critique, Ellingham sees Rogerian theory as "critically flawed" (Ibid.) because it confuses two distinct scientific paradigms, one of which implies a mechanistic

understanding of self. The theory as a whole, says Ellingham, needs to be “organismically purified” (Ibid., p. 122) to rid it of the mechanistic Newtonian and Freudian elements.

Darran Biles’s (Biles, 2016) passionate championing of a return to the original Rogerian teachings stands in sharp contrast to Ellingham – for Biles, contemporary uses of Rogerian theory are strangled by dogmatism. Biles proposes that Rogers’s teachings can be revitalised by understanding that the theory itself was meant to be questioned and further grown, while the focus for the therapist should be on how to *be* with a client authentically, rather than what one should *do* with a client.

Elsewhere, one can find concerted criticism of the idea of a ‘true’ or ‘authentic’ self, which is a fundamental constituent in Rogers’s understanding of the process of congruence. Roderick Anscombe (1989) criticises the idea as being so ambiguous that it encompasses several different kinds of disparate mental entity. He proposes that the idea of a ‘true self’ works best if viewed as a “fantasy, grounded on fact” (Ibid., p. 209) – precisely *not* the kind of true self envisaged by Rogers.

Separately, Campbell Purton tackles the “well-known theoretical difficulty” (Purton, 2013, p. 187) regarding Rogers’s conception of incongruence: namely, if incongruence refers to an experience kept below the level of awareness, how can an individual become *aware* of the (by definition *unaware*) incongruent experience? Ellingham also takes issue with Rogerian incongruence, maintaining that an “underlying feeling of which one is unaware [...] an ‘unfelt-feeling’, is logical nonsense” (Ellingham, 1999, p. 30). Purton’s not entirely convincing solution proposes that incongruent statements are in fact *behaviours*, such that “as words they do not express anything” (Purton, 2013, p. 195), while Ellingham argues that

congruence is better understood as a multi-level process involving being at one with oneself and with others.

Additionally, the *being* of this 'true' self that Rogers evokes remains open to question. McMullen's critique of humanistic psychology (McMullen, 1982) suggests that Rogers, despite his efforts not to, 'reifies' the self (Ibid., p. 224), while its use of vague terms such as 'self-actualisation' is an appeal to the "occult" (Ibid., p. 221). Robert Roberts proposes an interesting interpretation of Rogerian congruence as being fit for only pietists or beasts. He contends that achieving congruence requires either pure sainthood, "in which peace reigns because the struggles [involved in being human] are behind one" (Roberts, 1985, p. 270), or congruence is a theory "for 'organisms', who like other animals have an in-built self-actualising tendency which will achieve fulfilment, if only we do not restrict it artificially" (Ibid.). Further criticisms related to Rogers's allegedly reified notion of the self can be found in Leonard Geller (1982), among others.

Additionally, the client's journey to congruence may necessitate pain and even death for a certain 'way of being' one's self. As Geller writes, the process of becoming authentic/congruent for Rogers involves departure from "a false-self system, from 'what one is not'" (Geller, 1982, p. 58). This transition involves the recognition of a fundamental existential freedom in human being, a freedom to pursue a wide range of different possible ways to be because there is no *one way* that a client *has* to be.

Such freedom to be one's self in whatever way one wants to be can be frightening, particularly when it involves the renunciation of how one has existed up to the process of therapeutic change. Marsha Hewitt notes that for many people, "emotional change implies

abandonment and isolation” (Hewitt, 2004, p. 520). She adds that therapeutic change can be experienced by clients not only as loss of the familiar world, but a loss that “risks the very death of the self” (Ibid.)

James and Elizabeth Bugental have also explored the relationship between personal change and death. Describing the dynamics of choice, they contend that it “inflicts the endless burden of having to say ‘no’ to possibilities, of having to kill possible selves” (Bugental & Bugental, 1984, p. 547). Changing, then, involves relinquishing “one way of being, which is to say one identity, one life that might have been” (Ibid., p. 548). Clients may fear such change because “it threatens the very structures which [they] feel are [their] lives” (Ibid.).

While Rogers placed an emphasis on the need to embrace change as an element in congruent existence, he made only passing references to the ‘dying’ that makes change possible. For Rogers, the process of change “*is* life” (Rogers, 1980, p. 89), while an existence that clings to stasis is “living death” (Ibid.). A number of other writers and psychotherapists have provided explorations of death and change, which, while not directly responding to Rogers, can work to supplement Rogerian theory. Ernest Becker, for instance, notes that in order for the self to be born anew, such as through therapeutic change, “so much of one has to die” (Becker, 1973, p. 57). Irvin Yalom also saw the play of death in change, where “every choice involves a relinquishment” (Yalom, 2008, p. 58) and where “the more possibilities you close off, the smaller, shorter, and less vital your life appears” (Ibid., p. 59).

Martin Van Kalmthout also relates client anxiety to personal change: the client shies away from “giving up their old self” and fears the “unfamiliarity of the new” (in Thorne & Lambers, 1998, pp 54-5). Mick Cooper, meanwhile, identifies in Rogerian theory the play of

birth and death in psychotherapeutic change. As Cooper sees it, Rogers is proposing that the individual inhabits a world “in which to actualise one potentiality – its ‘self’ – it must inhibit the actualisation of other potentialities” (Cooper, 2000, p. 88).

The journey to congruence in client-centred therapy arguably not only involves the demise of certain self possibilities, but also the acceptance of one’s finitude as such. Change of any sort involves being able to ‘let go’ of some possibilities and to choose others. Additionally, and following the teachings of existentialist thinkers over the past 200 years, acknowledging how one ‘really’ experiences one’s being in the world also involves acknowledging one’s mortality – surely an unavoidable confrontation in the pursuit of congruence, or what Rogers calls “increasingly existential living” (Rogers, 1961, p. 188).

Rogers did not explore this element of mortality in congruence, yet one can argue that it follows naturally if one adheres – as Rogers intended – to a phenomenological understanding of human existence. Devang Vaidya’s (2013) exploration of incongruence in client-centred therapy identifies “deeply existential” (Vaidya, 2013, p. 214) themes in the Rogerian approach. Part of the journey to congruence, Vaidya maintains, involves the client aiming to build their capacity to “bear experiences that arise out of not being able to hold on to a fixed self in the context of bodily (organismic) life” (Ibid.).

Ultimately, this would involve the capacity to authentically bear one’s inescapable finitude. Vaidya adds that the “vital process of living includes dying” (Ibid.). Such a realisation is “emotionally and psychologically incongruous with a self-concept that sustains in time through memory and appears to seek its own prolongation” (Ibid.). Becoming congruent,

then, involves accepting the vulnerability and finiteness of one's self, even if it "winces in its ongoing coming-apartness" (Ibid.).

The relevance of finitude for congruent being mirrors the relationship between the existentialist concept of authenticity and finitude, although far more has been written about the latter pairing. Considerable portions of the work of Martin Heidegger and Jean-Paul Sartre, among existentialist thinkers, are given over to a consideration of death and authentic being, while the growing field of existential psychotherapy includes sustained explorations of the importance of acknowledging one's mortality, particularly in the writings of Rollo May (May, 1981; May, 1983), Irvin Yalom (Yalom, 2008) and Emily Van Deurzen (Van Deurzen-Smith, 1997).

More broadly, useful considerations of the importance of confronting finitude in psychotherapy can be found in diverse collections of writings put together by Laura Barnett (Barnett, 2009), while thoughtful interpretations of Rogerian congruence in the context of finitude can be found in publications by Neville (Neville, 2013), Vaidya (Vaidya, 2013), Cooper (Cooper, 2003) and Bazzano (Bazzano, 2016), among others.

The more general cohesion between client-centred therapy and existential psychotherapy has been noted by May (e.g. May, 1983), Winston (2015), Cooper (2003), Vanhooren (in Bazzano [Ed.], 2018), Neville (2013) and others. Tudor and Worrall meanwhile make the point that from time to time, Rogers himself explicitly "aligns himself and his ideas with both existentialism and phenomenology" (Tudor & Worrall, 2006, p. 23), contributing to writings on existential psychology and debating with existential theologians.

The splicing of existential-phenomenological ideas into Rogers's client-centred therapy can make for a more grounded and nourished Rogerian theory, a point variously argued by Bazzano (2013), Moreira (2012) and Crisp (2015), among many others. Doing so brings Rogerian theory of necessity into an exploration of the role of pain, death of self and existential finitude in the context of congruence. Biles (2016) wonders what Rogers would make of person-centred counselling today and suggests that it has become a "serious betrayal" (Biles, 2016, p. 318) of Rogers's vision.

Biles puts forward several reasons for why he sees modern person-centred therapy as a betrayal. Among them, he argues that practitioners have "frozen" (p. 324) at Rogers's therapeutic conditions, treating them as dogma to be defended rather than as hypotheses to be continually tested. Biles adds that this deference to Rogers's theory as a completed edifice is unfaithful to Rogers's vision of therapy as an ongoing (and thus unfinished) phenomenological journey. It is also a betrayal of Rogers the mentor; for, as Nietzsche wrote, "one repays a teacher badly if one always remains nothing but a pupil" (Nietzsche, 1978/1892, p. 78).

While it can be rightly said that Rogers's therapeutic approach and existentialist thought contain key areas in common (most notably the influence of phenomenology on both), they do not completely overlap. Martin Milton (1993) also notes this, stating that "client-centred therapy and existentialism are not synonymous in either thought, practice or philosophical origin" (Milton, 1993, p. 247). However, he adds that Rogers's theory still has existential origins; moreover, Rogers acknowledges "an Existential epistemology despite not using the term 'Existential'" (Ibid., p. 248).

Elsewhere, critical analyses of the relationship between Rogers's work and specific thinkers in the existentialist canon, such as Heidegger, throw doubt on the utility of furnishing the former's theory with the latter's. Ross Crisp writes that Heidegger's insistence that the authentically existing individual be "open to the fragility and possible finitude of our chosen endeavours" (Crisp, 2015, p. 170) is in "sharp contrast" with Rogers's "emphasis on the client's self-healing and capacity for developing their potential in the here-and-now" (Ibid.).

In this case, however, it can be argued that the Heideggerian and Rogerian theories are not mutually exclusive – it is possible to situate the Rogerian understanding of developing potential within the larger context of one's finitude. Indeed, an existentialist perspective would say that this is *necessary*, since an individual's potential is not *infinite* – it is precisely this infantile sense of omnipotence, for example, that psychotherapists such as Donald Winnicott and Melanie Klein insist must be *overcome* for a child to develop. Moreover, Elza Dutra (2016) makes the case that Heideggerian thought can be of benefit to Rogerian theory, specifically in relation to this concept of self, by diluting Rogers's overly subjective understanding of human being.

A pertinent overview of the main points of convergence and divergence between the humanistic psychotherapies that include Rogerian theory and existentialism-focused psychotherapies can be found in Winston's 2015 paper (Winston, 2015). In this paper, Winston also suggests that the Rogerian approach towards congruence, which favours the 'here-and-now' of experience, differs from the (Heideggerian) understanding of authentic freedom, which requires a focus on the awareness of death as a future event "and its inevitability that gives the present meaning" (Winston, 2015, p. 48). However, while it is true that the emphasis differs between Rogers and Heidegger, this difference need not be

unbridgeable. Heidegger did not contextualise death merely as some event to take place in the future – rather, finitude continually influences one’s day-to-day being – while Rogers did not solely focus on the present, since a key tenet of his theory is that the subject is future-oriented – i.e. behaviour at the organic level is “goal-directed” (Rogers, 1965/1951, p. 493).

In terms of the available literature, there is a dearth of material specifically supplementing Rogerian theory with an existentialism-infused reckoning with finitude. This may be down to a mistaken fidelity to Rogers, i.e. by only focusing on the optimistic and positive aspects of existentialism (e.g. the focus on freedom and the embracing of possibility), much as Rogers did. Tudor and Worrall make the plausible claim that US thinkers – including Rogers – who identified with existential thinking “took selectively from the European tradition, and rendered it more optimistic and more pragmatic” (Tudor & Worrall, 2006, p. 30).

Thus, Rogers and others kept the existentialist ideas of individual freedom and authenticity, but overlooked or ignored the corollary that freedom also brings with it personal responsibility, and that, “in an isolated and meaning-free life that ends necessarily in death, responsibility is, potentially, as distressing as the idea of freedom is exhilarating” (Ibid.). The tendency to emphasise the positive aspects of existence is taken further by the British counsellor, writer and Carl Rogers devotee, Brian Thorne. He embraces the mystical, transcendental aspects of Rogers’s later writings (Thorne, 2003; Thorne, 2002), likening them to religious traditions that “while in no way denying the reality of death, point to a life force which is greater than death” (Thorne, 2002, p. 34). This interpretation of Rogers’s work emphasises the spiritual dimension ultimately to the detriment of the flesh-and-blood (i.e. finite) reality that is the ground of human being.

That said, much of the extant literature – including many of the papers and books referenced above – do enough of the groundwork to make this project both achievable and worthwhile. Even without a specifically existentialism-focused development of Rogers’s approach, acknowledging the role and significance of death in the context of therapeutic change (i.e. change as involving the ‘death’ of the old self, choosing certain possibilities that ‘give death’ to other possibilities etc) is a worthwhile supplement to the Rogerian approach. Several other therapists and writers have similarly acknowledged the play of death in therapeutic or existential change, among them Yalom (2008), Becker (1973), Cooper (2000) and Rachman (1975).

The dimension of death in human existence is a key element for existentialist thinkers towards an understanding of what being means for the individual and how it can be meaningful in an authentic fashion. Rogers’s focus on the here-and-now of experience achieves in a superficial fashion the ‘bracketing’ of finitude in human existence, but as surely as each passing moment in the here-and-now fades into non-existence, so too does the shadow of death fall over the limited moments yet to come in any individual’s existence.

## Chapter One: The Rogerian Self

In this chapter, Rogers's theoretical conception of the self will be explored and critiqued. It will be established that there is a tension between what Rogers calls 'organismic'<sup>1</sup> experience' and self awareness, particularly regarding the function of meaning.

The Rogerian understanding of the genesis of the self could be articulated as an inversion of the beginning of the Gospel of St John: "In the beginning was the flesh ... and the flesh became Word"<sup>2</sup>. For Rogers, individual existence begins with raw organismic experience, upon which is subsequently constructed the edifice of the self. The building blocks of this self are the symbolic structures – words, meanings, concepts and values – quarried from the world as shared with others.

Rogers's theoretical blueprint for the development of the self was always something of a work in progress; he was suspicious of psychotherapeutic theorising and he worried that such abstractions distracted from the practical work of being with clients. As such, detailed theoretical elaborations of the self are largely absent from Rogers's published work. The most comprehensive treatment of the development of the individual and the self is found in his early book *Client-Centred Therapy* (1965/1951).

Turning then to these early theoretical elaborations, Rogers proposes that existence begins with organismic experiencing, which is already motivated by a desire to achieve greater independence, maintenance, enhancement and maturation (Ibid., p. 488). Existence at this

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<sup>1</sup> The terms 'organismic' and 'organic' will occasionally be used interchangeably in this thesis in reference to Rogerian theory. Both capture the level of embodied existence that Rogers was referring to, if one remembers that organic existence as used here refers to the *human organism* primarily.

<sup>2</sup> John's Gospel as usually translated reads: "In the beginning was the Word [... and] the Word became Flesh [...]" (John 1: 1-14)

fundamental, organic level for human being is equivalent for Rogers to the base existence of other animals and beings; it is the “directional force in organic life – a force which has been regarded as basic by many scientists” (Ibid.).

At this basic level, Rogers explains that existence is about maintenance: “assimilat[ing] food, behav[ing] defensively in the face of threat [...] mov[ing] in the direction of maturation, as maturation is defined for each species” (Ibid.). There is no organised self at this stage, although Rogers argues that the individual still experiences being from the perspective of a “private world” (Ibid., p. 483) of experience.

To what extent this ‘private world’ is present in the individual from earliest infancy is not clear in Rogers’s analysis. How, for example, can an individual be said to have such a *private* world without yet having a concept of separable self? Rogers seems to suggest this rudimentary sense of privacy is tied to ownership or possession, for “whether or not an object or an experience is regarded as a part of the self depends to a considerable extent upon whether or not it is perceived as within the control of the self” (Ibid., p. 497). However, there is no self at this point in human development, so the controlling agent is hard to pinpoint.

Conscious awareness is evidently not the facilitating or controlling element here, since the ‘private’ world of experience is demarcated “whether or not these experiences are consciously perceived” (Ibid., p. 483). A likely interpretation is that Rogers is trying to describe a fundamental ontological characteristic of human being that Martin Heidegger (1962/1927) called ‘mineness’ (*Jemeinigkeit*), which is the tendency to define existence from the primary perspective of one’s *own* existence. Indeed, Rogers stresses that one cannot get outside of one’s own perspective to perceive reality as such; “reality is, for the individual, his

perceptions” (Rogers, 1965/1951, p. 485). It follows for Roger that an individual’s behaviour is always a reaction to the world as perceived: “not to reality, but to the perception of reality” (Ibid., p. 492).

## **The Formation of the Self**

The construction of the self, Rogers explains, begins when the organism starts to more clearly define the boundaries of private and undifferentiated experiences. Thus, “a portion of the total private world becomes recognised as ‘me’, ‘I’, ‘myself’ (Ibid., p. 497). Again, Rogers is vague on how this process of *recognition* (from the Middle English term, *recognisen/recognizance*) occurs. Useful here is Donald Winnicott’s theory of disillusionment as a necessary stage in the child’s separation from the mother and recognition of his own individuality. Following a similar line to Winnicott, Rogers’s idea of recognition could be explained as a process of separation from primary caregivers that is effected by their inevitable failures in meeting an infant’s needs immediately and consistently – the child is left to, as it were, ‘resume possession of’ (*recognizance*) these needs and realise that they originate with him alone.

A necessary ingredient for Rogers in the formation of the self is *awareness* of one’s individuality. Accordingly, he writes that his deployment of the term ‘self’ is used in a “restricted sense” to mean “the *awareness* of being, of functioning” (Ibid., p. 498 – italics added). The development of a conscious self, then, is for Rogers “not necessarily coexistent with the physical organism” (Ibid., p. 497), since the latter precedes the self in existence. If the self’s foundation is constructed on the basis of increasing awareness of one’s being and

its organismic functioning, then its progressive enrichment is dependent on the symbolic and conceptual tools at the nascent individual's disposal.

Rogers vacillates on the problem of the exact constitution of the self and the extent of its dependence on meaning/language. In chapter 11 of *Client-Centred Therapy* he poses a series of questions that correctly identify the ambiguities involved but stops short of answering them. Among these essential questions, Rogers asks: "Is the self primarily a product of the process of symbolisation?" (Rogers, 1965/1951, p. 497). Rogers's response is that "shrewd research" (Ibid.) may be able to answer it.

Despite the lack of a definitive answer from Rogers, it seems clear that he does equate the self primarily with that symbolised dimension of existence. This follows from Rogers's insistence that his use of the term 'self' is reserved for the *awareness* of being. Awareness, for Rogers, is virtually synonymous with consciousness, while "consciousness consists of the symbolisation of some of our experience" (Ibid., p. 483). Moreover, symbolisation is the means by which elements of our organismic experience – e.g. desire – "become part of conscious awareness" (Ibid., p. 505).

Symbolisation here is equivalent to the meanings and contexts one gives to one's existence, meanings that are incorporated from the intersubjective world we are born into. Such meanings provide the framework and moulds with which we construct a stable and consistent 'self' – an edifice that is furnished with language, adorned with memories and possibilities, and sits upon the soil of organic/organismic experience. To put this in Rogers's language, the self is an "organised, [...] consistent conceptual pattern of perceptions of characteristics and relationships of the 'I'" (Ibid., p. 498).

The self, then, is a *construction* – organised and consistent, the place of habitation and meaning in one’s life. But the self’s solidity and rigidity can also make it a prison, something constrictive and alienating to the more fundamental, organismic existence that Rogers identifies. It might be helpful here to think of the self as a mask – Rogers in fact uses the idea of the self as a kind of mask in several of his publications (e.g. “To remove a mask which you had thought was part of your real self can be a deeply disturbing experience” (Rogers, 1961, p. 110)). The mask that represents the self is fabricated with the symbolic materials and meanings derived from the world we are born into. It sits upon the flesh of organismic experience; through this mask, an individual engages perceptively with the world.

For Rogers, this self is not constructed solely by the individual – how could it be, given that the symbolic materials used in the construction are sourced from the intersubjective world that transcends the individual. Moreover, the individual is actively *guided* by others in how to construct the self. Certain principles and values, meanings and injunctions are sprinkled by others into the symbolic mix from which one constructs the self. For example, primary caregivers might try to ensure that their child’s developing self values honesty or respect for others, so that the self blends these meanings into its structure and lives life through them. As the child grows, wider societal norms communicated by others will try to embed themselves into the still-soft and forming mask of the self.

For its part, Rogers sees the nascent individual as necessarily drawn towards these influential caregivers and others; “a core element of the structure of the self as it begins to form”, writes Rogers (Ibid., p. 499), is the perception that it is “loved by [its] parents” (Ibid.). The child will pursue this love and – crucially, for Rogers – will mould his self to better suit the

caregivers' demands upon him if it means that their love for him will be more freely given. Thus, at the level of organismic experience, when a child feels intense anger and the caregiver disapproves, the child's developing self will be impacted by this caregiver attitude in a significant way.

For the sake of the caregiver's continued love, Rogers explains how the child will take into his developing self the caregiver's evaluation that anger is unacceptable. Two important processes occur as a result. First, because the child prioritises and folds his caregivers' values and attitudes into his forming self, *their* values become distorted as *his* values, "*as if* based on the evidence of one's own sensory and visceral equipment" (Ibid., p. 500). As the developing self 'sets' and hardens into something more consistent and solid, these values that were introjected from caregivers and others remain in place, providing a symbolic filter through which one's ongoing being in the world is mediated.

Second, these values that help to form the self also distort the flow of organic experiencing, either forcing it into rigidified symbolic channels fashioned from the meanings/values of others, or preventing the organic experiential flow from coming into consciousness at all. Rogers contends that if – to continue the example of the feeling of anger – this anger finds its way into the conscious self, it will be diverted into "distorted symbolisation" (Ibid., p. 500) and "'experienced' as bad" (Ibid.), even though at its origin, the organic experience was closer to being "satisfying or enhancing" (Ibid.). The other possibility is that the self will close off the organic experience of anger altogether, repressing it from awareness so that "there is no symbolisation of this experience" (Ibid., p. 505).

This process of distortion/repression, where a disjunct occurs between organic experiencing and the self, is called ‘incongruence’ by Rogers (Ibid., p. 529). This concept will be explored in more detail later. Before doing so, it is necessary to take a closer look at the being of organic experience and the self.

### **Meaning, Experience and the Self**

Complications arise almost immediately with Rogers’s dualistic conception of human being. If the self is that portion of reflective awareness that emerges in and through symbolisation, then the possibility of *meaningful* existence – i.e. existence that (if only to a minimal degree) makes use of language, concepts and values to live within a horizon of understanding – is reserved for the self. The individual is not born with a priori meanings, values and guiding principles; rather, one *acquires* them through the process of forming a self out of the symbolic structures of the intersubjective world that one is born into.

Rogers, as noted earlier, implicitly works within this schema: for him, self means “the *awareness* of being, of functioning” (Ibid., p. 498 – italics added), awareness is equivalent to consciousness, and consciousness “consists of the symbolisation of some of our experience” (Ibid., p. 483). Through the conceptual tools, meanings and linguistic configurations provided by symbolisation, the intricately detailed mask of the perceiving self is made possible. This in turn makes possible the “perceptions of one’s characteristics and abilities; the percepts and concepts of the self in relation to others [...], value qualities [of] experiences and objects, [...] goals and ideals” (Ibid., p. 501) and the temporal contextualisation of past, present and future (Ibid.).

Rogers's theory must then situate the organismic experiencing register of human being, which he has argued is the more originary dimension of existence. It predates the symbolising self and, Rogers explains, continues to operate almost independently of the self as a wellspring of immediate experiencing, which may or may not be admitted to the self's awareness.

Following Rogers's logic, this base, organismic level of human being is outside of the symbolic structure of existence. It is the realm of biological functions, primal drives, emotions and desires. Ever in motion, this organic dimension of existence is at the mercy of the self – it cannot speak or take its place in awareness unless the self allows it to. Even if the self admits this experiencing into awareness, it must then somehow organise itself into the evaluating symbolic structures that define the self.

Yet, this primordial dimension of human being in Rogerian theory is *not* simply a non-symbolised flow of raw organic experience, a sort of brute biological factuality. Paradoxically, Rogers instead paints a portrait of it as a sophisticated, discriminating agent. Initially, he proposes that at the level of organic experiencing, motivation has no understanding of time as such: “all the effective elements exist in the present” (Ibid., p. 493) and “there is no behaviour except to meet a present need”. However, behaviour at the organic level is “goal-directed” (Ibid.), which suggests that at least one effective element is future-oriented and not exhausted by the present.

More importantly, Rogers maintains that the supposedly not-yet-symbolised organic experiencing being *understands values*. “*The values attached to experiences,*” Rogers explains, “*in some instances are values experienced directly by the organism*” (Ibid., p. 498).

This organism can also “build up concepts about himself, about the environment, and about himself in relation to the environment” (Ibid.), which are “nonverbal” (Ibid.) and can act as “guiding principles” (Ibid.).

Rogers suggests that this “*direct organismic valuing*” (Ibid.) involves a process he calls “subception” (Ibid., p. 507) and which he describes as “a discriminating evaluative physiological organismic response to experience” (Ibid.). This capability is clearly a reflexive and sophisticated ability for what is ostensibly a dimension of existence below the level of symbolisation and not dependent on consciousness.

One wonders how Rogers imagines that the processes of discrimination and evaluation can occur at all without relying on symbolisation, i.e. meaning; evaluating surely *requires* symbolic context, conceptual elements and the ability to critically assess ranges of possibility, so as to prioritise some and discard others (a point also noted by Geller (1982)). At the level of organismic experience, Rogers argues that the individual can do all of this without the benefit of perceptual awareness, “initiat[ing] and carry[ing] on complex behaviour to meet its needs” (Ibid., p. 510).

In later works, Rogers builds out this organismic experiencing dimension of being so that it becomes the “real self” (1961, p. 114), “which is comfortably discovered in one’s experiences” (Ibid.). It is “the stranger who has been living behind [...] masks, the stranger who is himself” (Ibid., pp 123-4). The level of organic experiencing is thus understood by Rogers as in fact far more than something animal, a selfless and unaware biological entity, for “there is no beast in man[;] there is only man in man” (Ibid., p. 105).

Criticisms of Rogers's theory of the self draw attention to this ambiguous division of organismic experiencing being and its supplemental perceiving self. J. Patrick Schmitt (1980) contends that Rogers erroneously lumps psychological values with biological preferences "into a total organismic valuing process" (p. 242). Ivan Ellingham's trenchant critique (1999) of Rogers's theory points out that organismic experience – which includes emotions – is understood by Rogers to be fully formed, thing-like facets of human being "[Ellingham is quoting Gendlin here] unaffected in their nature by 'coming into' awareness" (Ellingham, 2001, p. 322). Symbolisation, then, would be passive, a "simple labelling process [...] of opening up our awareness to what is already present at the level of organismic experience, [...] a pre-existing, previously hidden 'thing'" (Ibid.). Other criticisms that focus specifically on this 'thing-like' Rogerian conception of organismic experience/true self are offered by Van Kalmthout (in Thorne, B. & Lambers, E., (1998)), Geller (1982) and Vaidya (2013) among others.

### **The Inescapability of Meaning**

It seems clear from Rogers's work that he was keen to stress the *ongoing* nature of human being as fluid, in flow. Being congruent, then, involves a movement away from the fixed mask of introjected self-concepts and values, and a recognition of *possibility* at the level of embodied being-in-the-world. But possibilities of being for an organism such as human being need to be *meaningful* and contextualised in a symbolic order for them to have any sense for us; as Heidegger stresses, our existence "is an issue" for us (1962/1927, p. 67), it "matters" to us (Ibid.).

Meaning is not an optional add-on for human existence – rather, insofar as one exists at all, one exists in a world overflowing with meaning; “we are condemned to meaning”, Merleau-Ponty wrote (2002/1945, p. xxii). Rogers’s description of existence at the organismic level already implies this, given that he imputes to such existence the ability to discriminate, hold and pursue values, build up reflexive concepts about itself and/in the world, etc. All of these existential possibilities require a symbolic dimension in order to be meaningful, particularly as Rogers promotes the idea that the self should strive to be more in tune with existence at this embodied, fundamental level.

This does not preclude a still more primordial dimension of human existence, one of base drives, mute flesh, genetic predispositions and other aspects of raw reality. Psychoanalysts such as Lacan have identified this dimension of the ‘real’ of embodied human existence as that which escapes the process of symbolisation, while Ernest Becker (1973, p. 29) argues that “the two dimensions of human existence—the body and the self—can never be reconciled seamlessly”.

Nevertheless, congruence for Rogers involves bringing what one can of one’s embodied experience fully and honestly into one’s self perception, thereby acknowledging its meaning for the individual. Those elements of experience that are repressed from awareness are not relegated to a void of non-meaning; rather, they are *significant* – they have meaning – and they operate to distort and disturb the meanings that one’s self gives priority to.

Among Rogers’s examples of this is one describing a pilot who is anxious about embarking on a risky mission; “fear” and a “need to escape” (Rogers, 1965/1951, p. 508) are experienced. These experiences are repressed from awareness but still retain their meaning

for the pilot in this context, since otherwise there would be no sense of what the pilot wishes to escape from. Moreover, the *meaning* of this fear and need to escape directly influence the (distorted) sense he is willing to give to these experiences in awareness: he is fearful not because of the danger of the mission itself but rather because “the engine is not running properly” (Ibid.). The distorted meaning given to the experience is founded on the meaning of the repressed fear itself, if only to distort and disguise the latter.

A *vital* characteristic of embodied existence that is frequently pushed outside of self awareness is one that Rogers notes but does not develop: the human organism ‘*knows*’ *death*, or hearkens to its possibility. In a sense, it is the most personal of existential possibilities; the possibility of my own impossibility. At this fundamental level of existence, Rogers maintains that it is possible to ‘subceive’ “that the symbolisation of certain experiences would be destructive of the [self]” (1965/1951, p. 507). The human organism strives to avoid “great risk” (Ibid., p. 508) as might be involved, for example, in a dangerous journey.

It stands to reason that a more ‘congruent’ connection between one’s self and one’s existence at the fundamental, embodied level would involve a *recognition* of this vulnerability in being human – of one’s capacity to be destroyed and, indeed, of the *inevitability* of destruction, i.e. one’s finitude. Rogers, however, did not join the dots and include this crucial aspect of finitude into congruent existence. The next chapter will attempt to explain how this is so, spelling out in more detail the journey from the fixity of self to congruent, finite human being.

## Chapter Two: The Self and Congruence

This chapter will explore the idea of congruence in Rogerian theory and why this way of being is regarded by Rogers as the truest way for an individual to ‘be themselves’. Similarities will be drawn between congruence and the existentialist notion of authenticity as a means of highlighting the connections between the two theories. The exploration of congruence will also lay the groundwork for an analysis of where Rogers’s theory stops short in his portrayal of the full nature of human existence, particularly regarding the meaning and import of finitude, which will be discussed in more detail in chapter three.

Rogers’s concept of congruence is a key element connecting his understanding of human being and his theory of the self. At first glance, congruence appears to refer to a straightforward potential characteristic of human being (‘potential’ because an individual can exist without *being* congruent – in fact, client *incongruence* is regarded by Rogers as one of six ‘necessary and sufficient’ conditions required for therapeutic personality change to be possible [Rogers, 1957]). However, congruence as a process or existential possibility in Rogers’s theory is more nuanced and load-bearing than it initially appears to be. Rogers also held a consistent understanding of the phenomenon he called congruence (Rogers also referred to it by other terms, including ‘genuineness’, ‘integration’ and ‘realness’) that remained largely unchanged throughout his writings<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> Barbara Temaner Brodley contests this, maintaining that “the meaning of congruence in Rogers’ writings changed somewhat over the years” (Brodley, 1998, p. 83). Brodley’s paper offers some useful analyses of Rogerian congruence. However, in it she claims that Rogers did not use the terms congruence or incongruence in *Client-Centred Therapy*. This is inaccurate; in the book, Rogers uses the terms several times – e.g. he writes that “the result of therapy would appear to be a greater *congruence* between self and ideal” (Rogers, 1965/1951, p. 151 – italics added).

Congruence involves permitting one's ongoing experiences of being-in-the-world – positive and negative – into awareness and into the idea one has of oneself. This means opening one's self (i.e. one's awareness of self, one's self-concept, one's ideas about oneself etc) up to experiences, thoughts and feelings as they occur in one's existence, so that the self accurately reflects the nuances of one's individuality. In congruence, one accepts one's experiences and their meanings *as they are*, or as they emerge from embodied being-in-the-world, without distortion or repression, even if they threaten or contradict prevailing ideas one has about oneself.

### **Rogers's Adoption of Congruence**

Rogers began using the term 'congruence' in the 1950s (Purton, 2004) but the process that congruence refers to is present in Rogers's earlier work. Thus, in a 1946 paper, Rogers describes how a client's achieving insight "involves the acceptance of hitherto denied elements of the self, and a reformulating of the self-concept" (Rogers, 1946, p. 5). In 1952, Rogers described how a client could use the therapeutic relationship to fully experience attitudes and feelings, "clear to the limit of what they are [...] so that for the moment the person *is* his fear, or he *is* his anger, or he *is* his tenderness, or whatever" (Rogers, 1952, p. 346). Rogers goes on to describe this process as a "genuine and pretty complete matching between the feelings that exist at the organismic, visceral level, and the cognitive or symbolic representation of those" (Ibid., p. 351), such that the person "for once in his life *knows* what he is really *feeling*" (Ibid.).

The use of the term 'congruence' becomes established with works such as *Client-Centred Therapy*, where Rogers describes "the end-point of personality development" (Rogers,

1965/51, p. 532) as being “a basic congruence between the phenomenal field of experience and the conceptual structure of the self” (Ibid.). In *On Becoming a Person* (1961), Rogers defines congruence simply as “the accurate matching of experience with awareness” (Rogers, 1961, p. 282<sup>4</sup>), while in *A Way of Being*, published in 1980, congruence is variously described as occurring when “my experiencing of this moment is present in my awareness” (Rogers, 1980, p. 15), when I am “openly being the feelings and attitudes that are flowing within at the moment” (Ibid., p. 115), and when “there is a close matching [...] between what is being experienced at the gut level [and] what is present in awareness” (Ibid., p. 116).

In chapter one, it was explained that ‘self’ for Rogers refers to the ongoing reflective awareness of the ‘I’ whose being is that of being-in-the-world. The self is the place of meaning – what Rogers calls the “symbolisation of some of our experiences” (Rogers, 1965/51, p. 483). It is constructed from meanings, values, precepts and contexts incorporated from the intersubjective world, including principles and values, meanings and injunctions placed upon us by primary caregivers. As such, the self is not only relating to and filtering ‘inner’ experiences emerging into awareness, but is also handling the meanings that are associated with one’s ‘outer’ being-in-the-world with others – for example, the self’s intersection with social roles and how best to occupy them.

Chapter one also explained how introjected values and injunctions can create a dissonance or incongruence between one’s concept of oneself and the visceral experiences of one’s fundamental being-in-the-world, particularly when the latter do not accord with the role expectations and value judgements that one introjects from caregivers or society at large. As Rogers explains, a person tends to cleave to the constructed self and either disavow or distort

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<sup>4</sup> The chapter referenced here is based on a paper Rogers gave in 1958 but he was clearly happy to include unchanged the definition of congruence contained therein for this publication three years later.

feelings, experiences or thoughts that do not fit the conscious picture one has fabricated of *how* one is. Rogers writes that when this happens, “there is a fundamental discrepancy between the experienced meaning of the situation as it registers in his organism and the symbolic representation of that experience in awareness” (Rogers, 1957, p. 2).

Examples that Rogers provides of such incongruence include the loving mother who denies to awareness her feelings of dislike towards her child because society dictates that good mothers do not have such feelings in their maternal role (Rogers, 1965/51, pp 511-2). Another example given by Rogers is that of a man in a group discussion who exhibits all of the characteristics of being angry, but denies that he *is* angry when it is pointed out to him, because out of defensiveness and potential vulnerability, his self-awareness will not allow the acceptance of this evident experience of anger at a visceral level (Rogers, 1961, pp 339-40).

### **Congruence, Being and Openness**

Being congruent, then, involves keeping one’s self open to the experiences and meanings arising from one’s ‘being-in-the-world’ – i.e. the fundamental, embodied existence that always already *matters* to the individual, is meaningful for him. As such, congruence involves more than a detached observance of the physical behaviours of this thing called ‘body’. In other words, it is not enough to simply note feelings or thoughts that might be at odds with the values and ideas one has of one’s self; one has to *become* them, to *become what one is*, to refashion one’s idea of one’s self to accommodate them. Hence Rogers’s insistence, quoted above, that in being congruent “the person *is* his fear, or he *is* his anger, or he *is* his tenderness ...” (Rogers, 1952, p. 346).

These *meaningful* feelings, thoughts or experiences that gush up from one's being-in-the-world are, when one strives to be congruent, poured into the ongoing creation of the self, which is thus required to remain malleable, open to change, unfinished. The self then becomes less of a rigid mask, less an alienating construction of introjected values pushed onto one's being, and more of an unfolding story one tells about how one is – a story always open to correction and reformulation.

Congruence for Rogers does not therefore point to a completed, static state. Rather, in keeping with the nature of human being as ongoing and open, Rogers writes that “no one fully achieves this condition” (Rogers, 1962, p. 420); congruence is a way of being that one must continually strive to inhabit. It is also the case that congruence will still have to be articulated or *lived* within the shared world of predefined meanings and roles – one cannot avoid having to occupy these varying roles, but one can strive to acknowledge one's being as irreducible to them, as being opened by possibility rather than being a static actuality.

Feelings, thoughts and experiences are meaningful because they signify more than their brute physicality – e.g. I am not just experiencing a rapid pulse, flushed face and tense muscles: *I am furious* right now, because.... The visceral experiences are caught up in webs of meaning and as such, bringing them into awareness involves reorganising one's conception of one's self to accommodate what and how they are signifying.

Rogers captures this duality of physicality and meaning nicely in a passage in *Client-Centred Therapy*, where he writes that “we try to twist the sensation of vision, of hearing, of muscle tension, of heart beat, of gastric constriction to fit the partly true and partly false formulations which we have already built up in our consciousness” (Rogers, 1965/51, p. 96). However,

Rogers adds that if we “could but let experience *tell us its own meaning* [...] and assimilate those basic meanings into our own structure of self, then there would be none of the inner strain which is so common to us all” (Ibid. – italics added). This is not to say that what is brought into the concept of self through congruence will be sweetness and light. On the contrary, the full spectrum of meaningful experiences, dark and light, are given passage to the self in congruence. Whether “appropriate, crazy, achievement-oriented, sexual, murderous”, Rogers stresses that in congruence “I want to accept all of these feelings, ideas, and impulses as an enriching part of me” (Rogers, 1980, p. 43).

### **Congruence, Existentialism and Authenticity**

The Rogerian understanding of congruence also provides a means of connecting his theory with key aspects of the philosophical-literary school of existentialism. Definitions of existentialism vary but what they all have in common is a commitment to the idea that human existence is not to be understood in traditional substantial terms, i.e. not as the being of a thing called ‘human’, the same way we might describe the being of a thing called a ‘rock’ or ‘tree’, or any other entity.

Rather, existentialism envisages human being as *possibility* – standing out (in Latin, *existere*) in existence as an entity in process, unfinished, which has its being ‘to be’. Several attendant characteristics accompany this understanding of existence, including the fundamental responsibility that each individual has to work its existence out for itself, to uniquely *own* its range of existential possibilities, and press into them in a way that is authentic and faithful to *how* one is as a human being – including one’s feelings, experiences and the meanings one clings to.

Existentialism also stresses the importance of understanding and accepting one's finitude. It encourages embracing one's fears and anxieties around death, because doing so brings into sharper focus the limited range of existential possibilities one has as one's own during the course of one's life. Filling these possibilities with the whole of one's being, including one's emotions, visceral experiences and thoughts, is the way in which to make these possibilities authentically one's own.

Ultimately, death becomes the existential possibility that is most one's own, because from the moment of one's birth one begins dying. Moreover, each person must go to their death alone – they must also at some point reckon with the meaning of finitude in their lives, even if that reckoning is (as is commonly the case) a *fleeing* from the acknowledgment of one's mortality. The existential psychotherapist Irvin Yalom used finitude as a fulcrum, around which he added three related aspects of human existence that in a sense define what it means to be human. His definition of existentialism is concise and useful: existentialism explores the individual's "*confrontation with the givens of existence [...]: death, freedom, isolation, and meaninglessness*" (Yalom, 1980, p. 8). These 'givens', Yalom explains, are "ultimate concerns" (Ibid.) for human being, "intrinsic properties that are [...] an inescapable part, of the human being's existence in the world" (Ibid.).

Rogers was interested in existentialism and saw it as mirroring his own theory of human being in important ways. In *On Becoming A Person*, Rogers professed his astonishment at how accurately Soren Kierkegaard, the Danish philosopher considered to be a major precursor to 20th century existentialist thinking, "pictured the dilemma of the individual more than a century ago" (Rogers, 1961, p. 110). This dilemma, as Rogers sees it, is that of

choosing to be truly oneself, in the manner described above, instead of living and behaving “in the way that others believe he ought to think, and feel and behave” (Ibid.).

Congruence can be seen as the attempt to truly *be* one’s self by accepting into one’s awareness and one’s idea of self the full register of one’s being-in-the-world. In existentialism, this process would be called *authenticity* – in fact, Rogers also described the desire for authenticity as a key personality trait of his ideal “person of tomorrow” (Rogers, 1980, p. 350). Authenticity for existentialist thinkers such as Soren Kierkegaard, Martin Heidegger and Jean-Paul Sartre involved *owning* possibilities of being in a way that is faithful to who and how one really is in the world.

In Heidegger’s writings, authentic/authenticity is denoted by the German words *eigentlich/eigentlichkeit*, which carry the idea of ‘owning’ (*eigen-*) one’s ways of being. Sartre described (Sartre, 1992/1943) how authenticity involves accepting that one’s being transcends that of mere things and generic roles because it is opened by possibility. A human is not a thing closed off, ‘in-itself’, complete – rather, human being is characterised by a transcendence beyond this static way of being; it is ‘for-itself’, its being is given over to itself *to be*.

Sartre describes how humans can choose to ignore this characteristic of their being and instead try to define their being through static roles, such as ‘waiter’, ‘loving mother’, ‘student’ etc. In so doing, they overlook their essential freedom ‘to be’ and adopt an artificial, static set of behaviours typically associated with the anonymous role ‘waiter’, for example. “In vain do I fulfil the functions of a cafe waiter,” Sartre writes. “I can be he only in the

neutralised mode, as the actor is Hamlet, by mechanically making the *typical gestures* of my state...” (Ibid., p. 103).

For Kierkegaard, the individual has a tendency to cleave to socially esteemed attributes and roles as a means of achieving a stable self-concept and keeping the ubiquity of change and decay at bay. Kierkegaard describes this as an example of an individual “clinging to his selfishness” (quoted in Heuscher, 1986, p. 311), which Heuscher interprets to mean a reluctance to let go of the “set of prejudices and presuppositions upon which we have built an objective identity and an image of the world that offers a semblance of reasonableness and security” (Ibid.). This is equivalent to inauthentic existence because it ignores the fragility implied in finitude, which threatens at every stage the illusion of existential permanence. Elsewhere, Kierkegaard writes that “it would be better to reflect about death [...] this uncertainty [...] must be involved in everything that is thought” (Ibid., p. 310).

Human being is not reducible to that of a thing, such as a generic role, since our being as being-possible keeps our existence open beyond who or what we at any stage appear to be. Thus, a fixed role or static descriptions of a person fail to encapsulate him, for he “transcend[s] it on every side” and constitutes himself as “one *beyond* [his] condition” (Sartre, 1992/1943, p. 60). One may still be (indeed, may *inevitably* be in a codified and shared world) occupying a role but one should not regard oneself as identical with it.

Rogers’s understanding of incongruence follows very similar lines, which lends weight to the contention that the idea of congruence originates in existential notions of authenticity and good faith (Grafanski & McLeod, 2002). Much as the Sartrean waiter adopts the facade of his rigid and generic role as if it were a true reflection of his existence, an incongruent person

fashions a rigid self constructed of introjected values, goals and characteristics derived from others and incompatible with how he truly is. Congruence, then, is for Rogers “the opposite of presenting a facade” (Rogers, 1957, p. 2).

The fixed, alienating mask of the self is the obstacle in congruence; the person needs to “remove a mask which you had thought was part of your real self” (Rogers, 1961, p. 110). What lies behind the mask is the individual’s more fundamental and authentic being-in-the-world: “a living, breathing, feeling, fluctuating process” (Ibid., p. 114). In permitting this fundamental dimension of one’s being to flow into and through the self, the individual “becomes a person<sup>5</sup>” (Ibid., p. 114), writes Rogers<sup>6</sup>. The link between congruence and authenticity is also proposed by James Bugental, who wrote that “the person who is genuinely authentic in his being-in-the-world is congruent within himself” (quoted in Rowan, 2016, p. 52).

Chapter three will explore the relationship between the Rogerian concept of congruence and finitude, arguing that the former is best understood and pursued as an existential ideal via a fundamental acknowledgement of the latter.

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<sup>5</sup> Ironically, ‘person’ derives from the Latin *persona*, which means ‘mask’.

<sup>6</sup> The extent to which Rogers prioritises the fluidity of human being has prompted criticism. Van Kalmthout points out that some critics “have wondered whether change was more important to him than the sense of a coherent identity” (Thorne & Lambers, 1998, p. 59).

### Chapter Three: Congruence and Finitude

There can be no doubt that awareness of finitude – i.e. that one is mortal – is a fundamental characteristic of being human. Reflections on the inevitability of death, what meanings might be given to it and what life lessons might be learned from it permeate human cultures in all regions throughout history.

Douglas Davies, in his *A Brief History of Death*, suggests that the history of death “is a history of self-reflection. Who are we? Whence do we come, and whither go after death?” (Davies, 2005, p. 1). These questions cut right to the core of what it means to be human, and perhaps for that very reason can be unsettling to dwell on. In Thomas Laqueur’s fascinating book *The Work of the Dead*, which looks at the history of how cultures and societies treated mortal remains, he notes that “we cannot bear to live at the borders of our mortality” (Laqueur, 2015, p. 1), yet death “is always there, a part of being human that is so basic that it cannot be dissected out from the rest of life as we know it.” (Ibid., p. xiv).

Reflections on human finitude are also fundamental to the existence of religions and they have fuelled a long history of literature (Skelton, 2003); death has “always permeated our thoughts at all levels” (Ibid., p. 216). Philosophical works too have investigated human attitudes towards mortality, while major schools of psychotherapy, notably psychoanalysis and existential psychotherapy, address mortality/finitude and the role it plays in psychic development.

## **Finitude and Existentialism**

In the 19th and 20th centuries in particular, philosophical explorations of human existence against the backdrop of finitude and meaning took off, in what is collectively called existentialist thought. Soren Kierkegaard – whom Rogers admired – exemplifies this finitude-focused direction in thought; following him, other important figures to have regarded finitude as an essential element in the meaning of human being include Martin Heidegger.

A key idea to extract from these existentialist writings is the idea that ‘reckoning’ with one’s finitude – i.e. fully acknowledging death and situating it in one’s life as *the* inevitable, non-substitutable possibility each individual will embody – is a core element of ‘authentic’ existence. Existential authenticity, as explained in chapter two, is in many ways synonymous with Rogerian congruence (Grafanski & McLeod, 2002; Charura & Paul, 2014; Dutra, 2016); it names a way of living that consciously chooses possibilities on the basis of how one truly feels, thinks and *is* as an individual, beyond the generic dictates of authority and convention. Existential authenticity also involves a sober engagement with the givens of existence, such as death, individuation, meaning(lessness) and freedom.

Being authentic/congruent, then, involves an openness of self to the flesh-and-blood reality of being-in-the-world. Concomitant with this is a responsibility to ‘own up to’ – or simply to *own* – one’s finitude. Death is the inevitable limit placed on one’s existence; it means that life is finite, as are the choices one can make while alive. For existential thinkers, finitude, when situated knowingly within one’s existence, adds an urgency and honesty to the life choices one can make – finitude snaps one back to one’s individuality, as that possibility of being that is uniquely one’s own.

Thus, as Patrick Stokes and Adam Buben note (Stokes & Buben, 2011), the task of human being for Kierkegaard was to “think death into every moment of life in order to get to grips with the irreducibly first-personal quality *my* death has for me” (Ibid., p. 8). Thinking death, writes Kierkegaard, “gives the earnest person the right momentum in life and the right goal” (quoted in Stokes & Buben, 2011, p. 176). The right goal for Kierkegaard – and for Rogers, who directly quotes Kierkegaard’s goal to define his own understanding of the aim of life – is “to be that self which one truly is” (Kierkegaard, quoted in Rogers, 1961, p. 166). Above all else, one truly is finite and one’s death is most truly one’s own.

For Heidegger, authentic being-in-the-world also necessitates a conscious acceptance of one’s finitude. He writes that a person “can be *authentically itself* only if it makes [the individualising character of death] possible for itself of its own accord” (Heidegger, 1962/1927, p. 308). For Heidegger, finitude brings home the realisation that one cannot appropriate *every* possible way to be into one’s life – instead one must choose a limited range of possibilities for ‘how’ one is to be, “which are determined by the *end* and so are understood as *finite*” (Ibid.).

The more knowingly one lives within the awareness of one’s finitude and the more closely the possibilities one chooses align with how one is (i.e. uniquely feels, thinks and exists) in the world, the more authentic is one’s existence. Thus, Heidegger explains that when one “becomes free *for* one’s own death”, one no longer gets lost in aimless possibilities, but rather, “for the first time one can authentically understand and choose among [...] possibilities” (Ibid.).

## Congruence's Shortcomings

Rogerian theory, which follows many of the same paths in understanding human being as the existentialist and phenomenological<sup>7</sup> theories of Kierkegaard, Heidegger, Jean-Paul Sartre and others (Johnson, 1967; Milton, 1993), is curiously quiet on how death factors in to congruent human being. Arguably, the omission amounts to a theoretical deficiency in Rogers's work for a number of reasons.

Firstly, one cannot justifiably ignore, in a psychotherapeutic theory of the human condition, the wealth of writings that intimately connect self, the goals of life and human finitude, amassed across all genres and over a time span of millennia. The sheer volume and persistence of these reflections suggest something approaching a universal truth of human being: that a conscious acceptance of one's finitude is an essential element in what it means to truly *be* human – authentically, congruently human.

Secondly – as noted in chapter one – Rogers in fact identifies an aversion to death (articulated in Rogerian theory as destruction of the self) as a fundamental characteristic in the embodied reality of human being (i.e. what Rogers calls organismic experience). In *Client-Centred Therapy*, Rogers associates the phenomenon of anxiety with the realisation that “certain experiences would be destructive of the organisation [of self]” (Rogers, 1965/1951, p. 507).

Again and again in this book, Rogers notes that the human being orients itself relative to possible threats to the self (e.g. Rogers, 1965/1951, p. 144, p. 217, p. 218, p. 419, p. 502, p. 517) – reacting to or retreating from, becoming defensive or carefully integrating these

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<sup>7</sup> In *Client-Centred Therapy*, Rogers explains that the theory of personality and behaviour that accords with client-centred therapy “is basically phenomenological in character” (Rogers, 1965/1951, p. 532).

threats to how it understands its being. The motive force for this appreciation of threats to self evidently emerges from the most fundamental (because situated at the organismic level) appreciation of the possibility of own's own impossibility, of one's destruction.

However, while Rogers notes this shadow of threat and destruction that accompanies human being, he does not develop it within his theory of congruence. One only sees *life* in Rogerian congruence: the forward momentum of growth and 'actualisation' seemingly without end. The absence of death here as the essential polarity that contextualises life is problematic, because it ignores what is the existential fact *par excellence*: from the moment of our birth, we are hurtling towards death, and we know and flee from this reality at a fundamental level.

Thirdly, knowledge of (and reflection on) mortality is unsettling for human being. The existentialist thinkers all identify *anxiety* as emerging from this awareness of finitude (Stolorow, 1973). For example, Heidegger describes anxiety as bringing the individual "*face to face* with the 'nothing' of the possible impossibility of its existence" (Heidegger, 1962/1927, p. 310). Sartre, in developing Kierkegaard's explorations of death, considers death as a source of anxiety because death's inevitability "provides a foundation for the experience of freedom" (Stolorow, 1973, p. 478).

The relationship between fear/anxiety and death is also comprehensively explored in Ernest Becker's persuasive book, *The Denial of Death* (1973); in it, he describes anxiety as "a natural, organismic fear of annihilation" (Ibid., p. 13). Elsewhere, psychotherapist Irvin Yalom has written extensively on the ubiquity of death anxiety in his book, *Staring at the Sun: Overcoming the Terror of Death* (Yalom, 2008).

Yalom, too, embraces the existentialist teachings on anxiety and death: influenced by Kierkegaard, he maintains that “anxiety is the result of the perception of the truth of one’s condition [...] to know that one is food for worms” (Ibid., p. 87). However, for Rogers, congruence brings “a *decreased* amount of anxiety” (Rogers, 1965/1951, p. 178 – italics added), presumably due to less conflict between one’s self-concept and the fundamental experiences that bubble up from one’s being-in-the-world. The ‘bigger’, more existential anxiety emerging from one’s freedom and finitude is not identified by Rogers here.

Fourthly, Rogers’s failure to acknowledge the pervasive play of death in human existence overlooks the experiences of death ‘writ small’, as it were, in relation to existential change. “The process of change”, writes Rogers, “*is* life” (Rogers, 1980, p. 89) – to the extent that stability and being static in existence is, for Rogers, “living death” (Ibid.). However, existential change *necessitates* dying of a sort: the death of certain possibilities now foreclosed by the adoption of other possibilities, the death of certain perspectives and outlooks in favour of alternative viewpoints, and, ultimately, the death of (a particular form of) self (i.e. self-concepts, self-ideals) that presages the creation of new ways to be through (therapeutic) change.

## **Death and Change**

Seneca’s adage that every new beginning comes from some other beginning’s end is apposite here and its meaning carries existential weight when applied to human beings and change. Yalom notes that “for every yes there must be a no, and every positive choice means you have to relinquish others” (Yalom, 2008, p. 93). Gestalt therapy founder Fritz Perls also notes the interplay of death and change within the self: “To suffer one’s death and to be reborn is

not easy” (quoted in Becker, 1973, p. 57), while Van Kalmthout also identifies client anxiety in the context of the client “giving up their old self” and the “unfamiliarity of the new” (Thorne & Lambers, 1998, pp 54-5) when altering intrapsychic and interpersonal patterns. Separately, Cooper, in assessing Rogers’s theory of self-development, also identifies a tension between beginnings and endings: he states that for the organism (or individual) in Rogers’s theory “to actualise one potentiality – its ‘self’ – it must inhibit the actualisation of other potentialities” (Cooper, 2000, p. 88). Rachman (1975) also acknowledges the role of death in personal breakthroughs and change; he recommends that therapists be aware of the need in this instances to help clients deal with “‘the death of the old self’ and subsequent feelings of mourning, emptiness, loss, and fear of the unknown” (Rachman, 1975, p. 253).

Change, authenticity, anxiety and death: these phenomena are intertwined in so many explorations of human existence. Rogers, too, uncovered their presence in his client work and in his explorations of congruence, but he did not comprehensively articulate death’s pivotal place in the meaning of congruent/authentic being-in-the-world. In *Client-Centred Therapy*, Rogers rejects the Freudian idea of the death instinct in favour of the individual with “almost unlimited potential” (Rogers, 1965/1951, p. 167). Elsewhere, Cooper notes that Rogers tended not to acknowledge “the unavoidable limitations of human existence” (Cooper, 2003, p. 48) – indeed, Rogers reportedly stated that “such issues as death and loneliness were no subjects to be dwelt upon” (Ibid.).

Little wonder then that Rogers failed to sufficiently note the relevance of the individual’s flight from threats of destruction, the presence of anxiety in therapeutic situations involving personality change and the tendency for his clients to speak of finitude in their sessions.

However, to an attentive ear, all of these strands are present and connected intimately in the existential reality of human being.

In *Client-Centred Therapy*, Rogers includes detailed post-session writings from a client he called Miss Cam, which record the process of her becoming more congruent. In one piece of writing, Miss Cam reflects on the role of death in life, accurately capturing the sort of anxiety that the existentialists describe. “It’s difficult to convey the peculiar quality of hopelessness, of *deadness*,” Miss Cam writes, “as if the whole universe were really and truly senseless—no point in trying to solve the mystery of yourself, no point in *anything*, because if life is meaningless, it can only end in frustration and death” (Rogers, 1965/1951, p. 115). Rogers notes that such fatalistic musings can “accompany the strenuous process of alteration of self” (Ibid., p. 116), but he does not situate death anxiety in a more fundamental way – here, it seems as though Rogers considered it to be something secondary and accidental.

However, finitude and death anxiety continued to occupy Miss Cam’s thoughts through writings for the next several sessions – again, this was not identified as a separable theme by Rogers. Miss Cam could not be more explicit about it in the reflections she wrote following a session some days later: struck by a fear that she could not place, Miss Cam wrote that “just when I thought I couldn’t endure it another minute, it suddenly burst upon me—why, I’m afraid of death! That revelation was utterly surprising to me!” (Rogers, 1965/1951, p. 120). Again, Rogers fails to identify or acknowledge his client’s fear of death for what it is – in his comments following this excerpt, no mention is made of it, let alone how or why death figures in Miss Cam’s burgeoning congruence.

Other client-focused passages in Rogers's writings highlight a similar significance for death/finitude in the difficulties endured by clients. 'Ellen' perceives "death as a glorious woman" (Rogers, 1980, p. 168) and longs for it, while the hypothetical client in Rogers's office is "struggling to be himself, yet [is] deathly afraid of being himself (Rogers, 1961, p. 4). Elsewhere, Rogers documents the suicidal despair of a man called James Brown, who wanted to "run away and die" (Rogers et al, 1967) – Rogers does not deep dive into the man's thoughts around death, preferring instead to clarify if he'd heard Brown's statements and sentiments correctly.

Rogers also equates anxiety with creativity and individuality (Rogers, 1961) – two characteristics that accompany the process of being congruent. Describing what he calls "the anxiety of separateness" (Ibid., p. 356), Rogers writes that he does not believe that many "significantly creative products are formed without the feeling 'I am alone' [...], 'I have ventured into territory where no one else has been' (Ibid.). It is only a short step beyond this observation to the place of aloneness in uncharted territory par excellence: one's journey towards one's eventual death.

It can be said that the process of becoming a congruent self is a significantly *creative* process within the Rogerian framework, one where anxiety individualises precisely because there is no guarantee of life success. There is also no hope of infinitely sustaining such a life – death stalks the individual every step of the way and will eventually swallow up that life in oblivion. Perhaps this is the source of the 'deathly fear' described by Rogers in his hypothetical client (quoted above). Bernie Neville takes up a similar interpretation of Rogerian congruence, writing that "awareness of our anxiety may best be thought of as an aspect of congruence" (Neville, 2013, p. 224). Links between anxiety, death and Rogerian

congruence are also articulated in works by Vaidya (2013), Tomer (1992) and Bazzano (2016), among others.

Yet, despite uncovering all of the elements necessary for inscribing finitude in the heart of authentic human existence, and despite the printed testimony of his clients who wrestled with death anxiety in the process of becoming congruent, Rogers failed to bring the pieces together in his theory of self and congruence. While this is lamentable, it is possible to bolster Roger's theory with acknowledgment of the role and meaning of finitude in congruent human existence. Ultimately, one only needs to *hear* what is already present in the client's predicament: an encounter with mortality, even (and especially) if that encounter is attested to by the client's *fleeing* from the reality of finitude.

In the final chapter, the idea of Rogerian congruence will be explored within the context of how an individual lives with finitude. It will be argued that fear of death might *necessitate* incongruence or inauthenticity, as the individual seeks safety in the anonymous social world of introjected meanings and values. Moreover, one cannot but live in a world that is always already shared with others, and which provides only a limited range of public roles, attitudes and ways 'to be'. Necessarily generic and impersonal, these roles require individuals to shape their individuality to fit – concomitant with this is the requirement to introject values, attitudes and other characteristics associated with public roles into one's self-concept. Rogers argues that congruence is never fully attainable; perhaps what stands in the way is this necessary incongruent 'supplement' to shared existence.

## Chapter Four: Living in the Shadow of Death

True to Rogers's understanding of being as a *process*, characterised by change and forward momentum, congruence cannot be equivalent to a promised land, a static telos for authentic existence. In other words, it is not the case that one achieves congruence and then remains that way, frozen in a deathless bliss. Rogers points out that “nobody fully achieves this condition [i.e. congruence]”, (Rogers, 1961, p. 61), as there will always be at least some “temporary incongruence between experiencing and awareness” (Ibid., p. 157). For the most part, Rogers adds, “everyone [...] exhibits[s] some degree of incongruence” (Rogers, 1980, p. 15).

However, Rogers does not elaborate on this identification of incongruence as a necessary *supplement* to congruence. Indeed, it can be argued that the principal theme in Rogerian theory is an exploration of the journey *from* incongruence *to* congruence – the implication here is that the former can/should be left behind, overcome, even if threads of incongruence will always cling to the individual as they journey along the congruent way of being. It is as if Rogers is paying lip service to the persistence of incongruence, when the ultimate existential goal as he sees it is the relegation of incongruence to one's past.

Being with others is also discussed by Rogers in the context of congruence; again, the general theme of Rogers's discussion is that congruence facilitates more respect for others and improved sociability generally, whereas incongruence is associated with suspicion, social isolation and untrustworthiness. Thus, the congruent person will develop “notably better interpersonal relationships” (Rogers, 1965/1951, p. 520); he will “necessarily improve his relationship with those with whom he has personal contact” (Ibid., p. 522). Conversely, incongruent people, those who operate “behind a front”, or who are “playing a role”, are to be

kept at a distance by others; “we do not reveal ourselves too deeply to such people,” writes Rogers (Rogers, 1962, p. 232).

Rogers’s conception of incongruence describes a process that occurs primarily via the introjection of values, roles and meanings from ‘outside’ – i.e. from one’s being-with others (Rogers, 1965/1951). Incongruent being, then, is one of assuming “false fronts”, “masks” or “roles, with which [one] has faced life” (Rogers, 1961, p. 109). As noted in Chapter Two, incongruence is similar in many ways to the existentialist notion of inauthenticity and bad faith, as articulated respectively by Martin Heidegger and Jean-Paul Sartre.

Heidegger described the sense of self possessed by a person in everyday existence as the ‘Anyone-self’ (*Man-Selbst*), in no way significantly different or distinguishable from anyone else’s ‘self’. The person is identical, for the most part, with the role he plays – he is found firstly in “*what* [he] does” (Heidegger, 1962/1927, p. 155). Similarly for Sartre, the human being of bad faith often equates himself with generic roles, wherein his being as *possibility* is hidden in the static factuality of the social role.

### **Congruently Incongruent**

The crucial difference between the Heideggerian and Sartrean accounts of this kind of inauthentic existence when compared with Rogerian incongruence is that authenticity includes a *recognition and reappropriation* of inauthenticity, not its transcendence. Heidegger writes that authentic existence “is not something which floats above” (Ibid., p. 224) the person’s everyday absorption into generic roles; rather, “existentially, it is only a modified way in which such everydayness is seized upon” (Ibid.).

This Heideggerian argument offers an important explanation of how practical being-in-the-world is possible in authenticity. One still has to live in a world of predefined roles, existential opportunities and extant value systems characterised by the generic, inauthentic, ‘Anyone-self’; the difference is that when one authentically ‘seizes upon’ them, one does so in the way that best reflects who they are as unique, finite individuals. Heidegger can thus describe as faithful to authentic existence a situation where a person ‘leaps ahead’ (*vorausspringen*) of the other (Ibid., pp 158-9) in order to give the other the freedom to seize his own being as possibility.

Typically, this requires the occupation of roles, such as is found for example in the relationship of the mentoring father ‘leaping ahead’ of his child to open up the latter’s life choices for him, or even the empathic therapist leaping ahead to hold open a safe space for the client to move into. In such cases, generic roles are occupied not to reduce the other to a ‘what’, but rather to help him “become transparent to himself” (Ibid., p. 159) and free to assume the true nature of his existence as an individual opened up by possibility.

Heidegger’s understanding of the necessity of ‘playing roles’ even in authentic existence offers a level of nuance to his analysis that Rogers’s articulation of congruence-incongruence arguably lacks. After all, roles are unavoidable in the shared world structured societally, which is not the same as saying that one should be *reducible* to those roles. Ronald Arnett argues along a similar path by drawing attention to Rogers’s theoretical advocacy of the obliteration of roles (1981). Arnett contrasts this with the teachings of Martin Buber, Roderick Hart and Don Burks, all of whom recognise “the importance of playing one’s part or role” (Arnett, 1981, p. 205).

For Buber, Arnett notes that this importance of roles is epitomised in the teacher-student relationship. “For the instructor to forego the one-up role of teacher is to forget his or her function,” Arnett suggests (Ibid.). “An individual can be authentic within genuine constraints of a role,” he adds (Ibid.). Even sticking strictly to the Rogerian conception of incongruence as reflecting an *internal* dissonance between the one’s embodied being and one’s self-concept or self-awareness, the usefulness of incongruence for congruent existence still obtains. For example, Friedman contends that honestly answering an invited dialogue from the other might require that a person give up his or her potential, in order to do what is right for that situation (Ibid., p. 204).

This in turn may mean that congruence more properly entails “perseverance, courage and self-control” (Robert, 1985, p. 270), where one is “*struggling* with oneself” (Ibid.) in the context of a world that is always already shared with others. It may be that playing a role *for the sake of the other* necessitates incongruence between one’s experience and what one permits to enter one’s awareness. Arguably, there are *no* socially defined roles in which one is free to act in whatever way one chooses. There is always a trade-off between absolute personal freedom of expression and the dictates of social mores, respect for others and the stability of established roles.

Donald Winnicott argued similarly in the 1960s. He proposed that the false self is necessitated by the organisation of the “polite and mannered society”, exemplified in a stance of “not wearing the heart on the sleeve” (Winnicott, 1965, p. 143). For Winnicott, this adoption of incongruence is done *in health*, “the gain being the place in society which can never be attained or maintained by the True Self alone” (Ibid.).

## The Terror of Finite Being

Perhaps this is the point at which the Rogerian account of in/congruence stands most in need of further development. Rogers fails to adequately capture just how *terrifying* an exploration of one's truest being – in all of its vulnerability, uncertainty and finitude – can be. As a result, it fails to see how incongruence can be both an inevitable and *ever-present* element of existence as partly defined by one's being with others, and why repression and the welcoming anonymity of the crowd is so intoxicating.

Freud explored the 'oceanic' feeling of eternity or unbounded existence, such as is encouraged in religions, as an echo of the pre-subjective life of the infant, when he is still fused to his mother and lacking an understanding of his own individuality. Freud suggests that the lure of religion even in adult – one might add 'authentic' – existence is "another way taken by the ego of denying the dangers it sees threatening it in the external world" (Freud, 2001/1930, p. 72). For Heidegger, as well as offering stability and security in everyday existence, assuming generic social roles and identifying oneself with them 'disburdens' (*entlastet* [Heidegger, 1962/1927, p. 165/127] – also meaning 'exonerates', 'acquits', etc.) and 'accommodates' the individual (Ibid.), relieving the weight of existence by divesting the person of the obligation to properly choose how it is 'to be'.

Ernest Becker's compelling account of the existential truths of human being can also flesh out what Rogers's theory lacks. For example, Rogers does not acknowledge how unsettling one's subjective existence can appear to one looking inwards. Man's self, writes Becker, is foreign to him. "He doesn't know who he is, why he was born, what he is doing on the planet, what he is supposed to do, what he can expect" (Becker, 1973, p. 51); yet, this is precisely what Rogerian congruence places the individual in relation to. These mysteries of

one's being are "closer to him, right near his pounding heart, but for that reason all the more strange" (Ibid.).

### **Fleeing to Incongruence**

Everyone is born into a world – and a world of meanings – that precedes and transcends them. Becker notes the disorientation and alienation associated with this, where the world carries on without regard for the plight of any individual as such. This reality might force the individual to retreat from the uncaring world back to itself, fearful and alone, were it not for the fact that this world also provides one with a means of escaping the burden of subjective choice and responsibility for one's own life. As such, it is not only the case that incongruence happens first when a child seeks to appeal to his parents for love and in so doing represses from awareness his subjective experiences that might prevent this love from being given. Rather, our subjection to existence itself – in all of its uncertainty – is something that we always seek to flee from.

Heidegger suggests this too in his depiction of the role of the generic – the 'they', the 'one' or 'anyone' (translating the Heideggerian term *das Man*) – in existing with others. One can always, as it were, flee from the responsibility of having to choose how one will live one's own life and instead follow the crowd, liking what they like, acting in the way that they prefer, etc. The 'they' (*das Man*) can even take one's finitude away: "one dies [..., but] but in no case is it I myself"; it "belongs to nobody in particular" (Heidegger, 1962/1927, p. 297). Everyday life as shared with others, then, operates "like a comfortable web" (Becker, 1973, p. 55), which "keeps a person buoyed up and ignorant of himself" (Ibid.).

A key question posed by Becker is what one should do with 'self-actualisation', if it means bringing one's most deep-seated experiences of being to awareness in the pursuit of a more fully human existence. What if the truth of "full humanness" means the primary *misadjustment* to the world? [...] Full humanness means full fear and trembling, at least some of the waking day" (Ibid., pp. 58-9), Becker writes.

Abraham Maslow, whose ideas around self-actualisation mirror much of Rogers's work, also highlights another obstruction to congruence. Congruence for Rogers involves connecting back into our actual experiences of being, as well as consciously acknowledging the nature of our being as possibility. However, Maslow points out that "we fear our highest possibility (as well as our lowest ones)" (Maslow, 1976/1971, p. 34); we fear to "become that which we can glimpse in our most perfect moments", shivering "with weakness, awe and fear before these very same possibilities" (Ibid.).

In their various ways, thinkers such as Heidegger, Winnicott, Maslow, Becker and others all see the *meaning* and *persistence* of incongruence in a way that Rogers did/could not. For each of them, authenticity or congruence has to be understood as including incongruence not as a relic of past failings overcome, but as an ongoing resource and refuge to manage the burden of congruence. Becker turns to Otto Rank to succinctly capture this; he explains that Rank saw the need for man to "project the meaning of his life outward, the reason for it, even the blame for it" (Becker, 1973, p. 158).

The carefully constructed sense of self that each individual resides in is perhaps an unavoidable buffer against the absurdity of existence, of a life lived in daily uncertainty, edging ever closer to the finality of death. The fundamental anxieties and vulnerabilities that

come with organismic experience can indeed serve to bring a person back to who and how they really are.

However, one cannot sustain such congruence indefinitely – self-actualisation is as much a reckoning with death as it is an embrace of life. One cannot live the latter authentically without bringing the former into one’s frame of reference too. Moreover, one cannot *be* congruently without accepting too the incongruence of repression, of ‘playing roles’ and finding social masks that fit at least some of the time, if only to make “an untenable live liveable” (Becker, 1973, p. 269). To congruence, then, one must add incongruence and death as its constant companions.

## Concluding Remarks

The purpose of this thesis was to explore Rogers's concepts of human being, selfhood and congruence in relation to finitude, particularly from an existentialist perspective. The point was made in the preceding chapters that Rogers himself aligned his theory with existentialist and phenomenological thought. However, an essential aspect of existentialism involves the acknowledgement of finitude as a fundamental determinant in the meaning of existence for human beings. Death is the shadow thrown by life and it follows every individual as long as they exist – whether they want to admit it or not, mortality pervades every facet of human being.

Rogers's work, while faithful to the idea of human being as something in motion, in process, has virtually nothing to say about finitude; Rogers wanted to emphasise only the living actuality of human being, while ignoring the concomitant role of finitude as life's inevitable limit, where all human possibilities cease and where self-actualisation is obliterated. Moreover, he failed to appreciate the anxiety and fear involved in the *anticipation* of this end, which thrums beneath the surface in every individual. The entire corpus of thought, art and writing produced by humanity bears witness in one form or another to the importance of the recognition of finitude in existence – as such, finitude is conspicuous by its absence in Rogers's writings.

However, this thesis also tries to show that Rogers's theory does have an appreciation, albeit undeveloped, of the role of finitude in human being. At the most fundamental level of being – what Rogers calls organismic experience – there is an understanding of the potential for the individual's destruction and there is ordinarily a constant effort to avoid such a demise. In

short, Rogers has identified here that the individual understands their vulnerability and finitude, and tries to avoid possibilities of being that might end in destruction.

What Rogers neglected to do, however, was to acknowledge that every individual inevitably *fails* to avoid destruction in the end. Rogers also neglected to realise that something of this ‘fatal’ inevitability plays into the life of every individual in a meaningful way – at the deepest level, they *know of their own finitude* and the way they live their lives reflects this (if only as a fleeing/forgetting of this knowledge). As Yalom, May, Becker and others have pointed out, psychotherapy is most effective when finitude is allowed into the frame of reference of the client – and when the fears and anxieties it provokes are attested and attended to.

For Rogers’s theories, then, finitude should be accorded its rightful place in the complex dynamics of human existence. Rogers did not do so explicitly, yet still uncovered, through his analyses of self-formation and organismic experience, the fear of destruction at the core of humanity. Rogers imagined that his theory would be one that continued to grow and evolve, so the development of this fundamental human relationship with finitude – buttressed with the teachings of existentialism, phenomenology and existential psychotherapy – is one such way to continue its growth.

Bringing death back into congruent existence, to use Rogers’s term, also changes the notion of congruence itself, this thesis has argued, such that congruence and incongruence need no longer be seen as mutually exclusive. Rather, the individual can be authentically itself while *also* occupying generic roles that do not accommodate all of the individual’s uniqueness. Moreover, incongruence can also be better understood in terms of the constant temptation to flee from one’s subjective responsibility for one’s existence – which sits in the context of

limit and finitude – towards the anonymity of the crowd, of introjected values and beliefs of the generic, one-size-fits all variety.

Ultimately, this thesis aims to point to areas in Rogers's theory that are either underdeveloped (fear of death) or overstated (life without end), in order to suggest that these areas are not dead ends, but rather are full of *potential* for further growth. Rogers himself did not clear away the conceptual undergrowth and follow these paths in his writings. Rather, he stopped short, content merely to point them out before hurrying back to the path that led to a life of seemingly unlimited potential. However, as existentialist theory well knows, such mystical paths to endless life veer inexorably towards death – which, as Heidegger notes, is “nonrelational”, “individualising” and “*not to be bypassed*” (Heidegger, 1996/1927, p. 243).

When the part played by death/finitude in human existence is explicitly acknowledged by psychotherapeutic theory – as it is in the teachings of Freud and Yalom, for example – the spectrum of possible therapeutic encounters between therapist and client is enriched, rather than dulled by gloom and blackness. Several of Rogers's own clients explicitly revealed a preoccupation with death or dying, but Rogers did not take up the invitation, as it were, to walk with these clients along that unsettling path. He listened but did not *hear* where his clients were treading.

Death as the absolute limit of human existence can, through the lens of existentialist thinking, become the facilitator for profound change and authentic living. Quite apart from the idea that all change involves the ‘death’ of some possible ways to be in favour of others, existentialist theory also proposes that acknowledging one's finitude frees the individual from the forgetfulness of the anonymous crowd and brings him face to face with the uniqueness of

his own existence. Connected with this is the recognition on the part of the individual that he is responsible for his own existence – it is up to him which of the possible ways to be he will choose. That is the gift of freedom *and* the acknowledgement of limit that comes with the recognition of one's finitude: anxiety around one's death brings urgency to the choices one makes in life, while the understanding that one's life itself is limited and finite helps to eradicate the lingering fantasies of omnipotence that one retains from childhood.

Rogers laid the groundwork for this existentialist supplement to his theory when he identified an aversion to destruction at the heart of human organismic being. Existentialism can provide a blueprint for continuing on where Rogers left off, constructing a fuller theory of the nature of human being. And just as any construction relies as much on the empty space between its walls to complete it, a full, psychotherapeutically focused theory of human existence needs the recognition of finitude – as death, absence, loss or limit – to complete what it means to *be* human.

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