BY **JOHN ANDERSEN**

Peter and Genevieve Milnes wrote a series of provoking articles for last year's CCAA Journal Counselling Across Australia. I found their first article "A Theological Trilogy of Relationship Counselling: Part I: Are Other People Hell?" so stimulating that I crafted this article in reply.

Are Other People H

What made other people hell in Sartre's play No Exit? There was no exit from relationship with the others, there was no prospect for change, and other people were objects. This article addresses the issue of regarding other people as objects. While the article A Theological Trilogy of Relationship Counselling: Part I: Are Other People Hell? provided an analysis of the dilemma of the "hellishness" of no exit from I-It relationships, the analysis can be taken further by identifying it as an outworking of the huge extent to which Descartes' conception of the person as an autonomous self has influenced our expression of personhood in the West.

Sartre and Descartes

The dilemma that Sartre explored in No Exit has its origins in Descartes' description of the human person as an autonomous self. Descartes described the human person as a thinker, stating, "I am a thinking thing" - Sum res cognitans.1 Descartes identified personhood with our rational self-consciousness. He therefore concluded, "that I was a substance whose whole essence or nature consists only in thinking, and which, that it may exist, has need of no place, nor is dependent on any material thing."2 An implication of Descartes' identification of the person as a completely detached autonomous "thinking thing" is that there is no need for relationship with other persons. The social outworking of this is social detachment gave rise to the predominance of functional I-It relationships that came to characterize Western society.

This autonomous thinking self was completely independent from others. The only other thing this autonomous self is dependent upon is God, simply because God created this self, not because there is any ongoing reliance upon

assumed that as a result of the scientist's objective observations, we are able to derive objective scientific knowledge.

Descartes' conception of the self allowed no place for personal relationships with other people. To this "thinking thing" people were just other objects of observation. Sartre identified this. In Being and Nothingness, Sartre described the self as an autonomous self-conscious thing. He described the Other as a particular object in a person's world.4 The presence of this object posed a threat to the person's unlimited existential freedom to choose whatever way of life he or she pleases. On the one hand, the unlimited freedom of the Other threatens my freedom with enslavement to the Other. On the other hand, the assertion of my own unlimited freedom in the presence of the Other involves establishing control over the Other and making the Other a slave to my desires. Sartre recognized that the presence of the Other forces a person to choose between love that involves sacrificing my freedom to make room for the freedom of the other, or indifference, desire, hate, or control in an attempt to assert my freedom at the expense of reducing

the presence of another person demands of me. That is, he refused to go the way of willing kenosis the emptying of oneself as an expression of love that gives space for the other person.

Objectification in the Therapeutic Relation

Sartre insightfully identified that the Cartesian conception of the autonomous self inevitably results in an interpersonal tension where I either reduce the other person to an object, or allow myself to be reduced to an object. This dilemma of whether I reduce myself or the other to an object has a greater influence on the therapeutic relationship than we immediately realize.

This dilemma can be represented by Freud on the one hand and the psychiatrist on the other hand. Freud reduced the therapist to an object in the way he fashioned the therapeutic relationship of the psychoanalyst. The Freudian psychoanalyst positions himself as an unobtrusive object in the therapeutic space. The psychoanalyst

Hell or Just Objects?

God to sustain our personal being.3 Descartes described the fundamental relationship of the thinking self to the world as a detached observer – object of observation relationship. This fundamental relation gave rise to scientific method that depicted the scientist as the objective observer who is separate from the phenomena under observation. The scientific method

the Other to an object I can utilize and control.5

Sartre recognized that love demands a significant modification of freedom, where it is in effect surrendered. Love must be freely consented to, yet love also constituted the limits of personal freedom.6 Sartre's dilemma arises out of an unwillingness to embrace the limitation upon of my own freedom that

sits out of view, and does minimal engagement with the client, and works to minimize any distraction from the interior focus of attention that the client has. Psychoanalysis is not a place of person-to-person engagement, but a place of introspection where the autonomous self reflects upon itself. The psychoanalyst functions as a therapeutic object that facilitates that self-reflective process of the client as unobtrusively as possible.

The tendency to reduce the therapist to an object has a wider influence than simply Freudian psychoanalysis. The emphasis on the minimal self-disclosure of the therapist, and the advocacy of

1   René Descartes *Meditations on First Philosophy, (Trans. John Cottingham; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 19.*

2   Rene Descartes, *Discourse on Method, Meditations and Principles, (trans. John Veitch; London: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1912), 27.*

3   Descartes, *Discourse on Method, Meditations and Principles, 28-31.*

4   Jean Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology, (trans. Hazel E. Barnes; London: Methuen, 1958, 232-257.*

5   Sartre, *Being and Nothingness, 379-397.*

6   Sartre, *Being and Nothingness, 366-67.*

a stance of therapeutic neutrality that requires minimal expression of the therapist's own values and viewpoint all reflect the same tendency to reduce the therapist to an object, so as to minimize the infringement of the Other upon the client's freedom and autonomy. We recognize that therapeutic neutrality is in practice unachievable. This is because a person simply cannot be reduced to an object within another person's field. The notion of the therapist-as-object goes hand in hand with the notion of the psychologist as scientific observer. Both notions reflect the pervasive influence of the Cartesian conception of the person as a detached autonomous observer.

We also see the reverse tendency to reduce the client to an object. This is most clear in the medical terminology that presents the client as a patient who is the object of psychological treatment. We see a subtle reduction of the patient to an object to the extent to which the therapist focuses upon the person's psychological symptoms as an object of treatment. A focus on applying therapeutic techniques and structured therapeutic approaches such as behaviour therapy or some forms of cognitive therapy, also inadvertently reduce the patient to an object of treatment. To the extent that a psychologist or a counsellor focuses on the symptoms or the disorder and focuses on treating that disorder, that therapist is inadvertently reducing the client to an object of treatment.

Inadvertent reduction of a client to an object of treatment fundamentally undermines the therapeutic relationship. A vital therapeutic relationship is inherently a person-to-person encounter, where neither party is objectified. An approach in the initial appointment that focuses on assessment rather than personal engagement runs the risk of inadvertently objectifying the client. A client who feels objectified in this initial appointment is likely not to return. In contrast, a client who feels understood and personally engaged with is likely to return. A therapeutic relationship must remain an essentially person-to-person relationship. This emphasis on the

necessity of the therapeutic relationship being a place of mutual personal encounter finds philosophical support in Buber's conception of personhood.

Buber: The Person-in-Relationship

Martin Buber maintained that personhood is inherently social. His recognition that personhood is social and that persons exist as persons-in-relationship amounts to a radical rejection of Descartes' conception of the person as an autonomous thinking thing. Buber does not present an exit from where there is "no exit" as much as an alternative starting point.

Buber maintained that a person is literally summoned into existence through relational encounter with another person. He emphasized that human existence cannot take the form of an isolated individual. Human existence consists in the mutual existence of human beings with one another. He stated that, "A person becomes a self when he becomes present as a self to me, or with me."7 A person is literally summoned into existence through relationships of mutual encounter in that when I become present to the Other, I simultaneously become present to myself. The experiential outworking of this is that we all need to be confirmed in our personal being by another and to exist in the presence of another. Personhood is inherently and essentially social.

Being human involves living in relationships of genuine encounter with others that are characterized by respect and acceptance, based upon a mutual recognition of the other's personhood. These personal encounters with others confirm my existence as a person.8 A relationship of mutual encounter is one where we see one another as "one

who sees us", and we mutually behold and influence one another.9 Mutual encounter excludes regarding the Other as an object. This amounts to a radical rejection of the Cartesian notion that humanity exists in the person of the individual.

Buber's emphasis that a humane relationship is one of mutual encounter between persons finds its closest therapeutic expression in the psychology of Carl Rogers. He emphasized that the therapeutic relationship was a place of mutual person to person encounter, rather than a place of treatment. He resisted any attempt to regard his thought a therapeutic theory. Behind this resistance was an awareness that theories that result in clinical applications in the counselling room inevitably reduce the client to an object of treatment to some degree, and this amounts to a violation of their dignity as persons. So he emphasized that a therapist offers a relationship. Rogers stated, "If I can provide a certain type of relationship, the other person will discover within himself the capacity, to use the relationship for growth, and change and personal development will occur."10

Roger's emphasis upon the relationship and his insistence that it must be characterized by acceptance (or unconditional positive regard), genuineness (or congruence), and understanding (or empathy) is consistent with Buber's depiction of the person. Roger's helping relationship has the key features that Buber's notion of mutual encounter has: understanding, acceptance, and genuineness.

That a therapeutic relationship, however, is not simply one of mutual encounter. It has an asymmetrical aspect in that the client is seeking help and the therapist is the helper, and the focus of the encounter is primarily upon

7   Martin Buber. *The Knowledge of Man. (translated by Maurice Friedman and Ronald Gregor Smith)*. London: George Allen & Unwin, 1965, 71.

8   Buber, *The Knowledge of Man, 69.*

9   Martin Buber, *I and Thou, (trans. Walter Kaufmann; New York: Simon & Schuster, 1970/1996, 67-69.*

10   Rogers, C. *On Becoming a Person: A therapist's view of psychotherapy, rev. Ed., (Constable & Co., London, 1967), 33.*

the life and world of the client. A therapeutic relationship is simultaneously a functional relationship and a space of mutual personal encounter. This inherent ambiguity in the nature of the therapeutic relationship creates a subtle pressure upon the therapist to still objectify himself or herself even in the act of personally encountering the client.
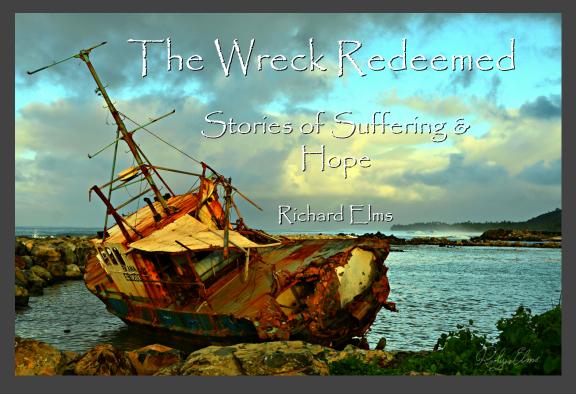
This objectification occurs to the extent that the therapist hides behind a therapeutic persona. If a genuine personal relationship must be one of mutual encounter, then this requires the therapist to be present to the client as a person, not merely as a professional. It demands that I myself in my own personhood enter into the room, and that I allow my clients to encounter me as a person, not merely as the therapist. I need to allow myself to be known and encountered. They need to experience me as being personally present. For a transformative relationship that is conducive to personal growth to exist, Buber and Rogers, both maintain, it

MUST be a place of genuine personal encounter.

This has practical implications with respect to the degree to which I allow personal self-disclosure, and allow my own personal reactions, perspectives, opinions, questions, and viewpoints, and my uncertain vulnerabilities to be present in the relational space. It demands a personal openness and engagement with my client as a human being, from one human being to another, rather than as the therapist.

You have heard it said that the main tool the therapist utilizes is the deployment of the self. The deployment of oneself is not in the persona of the therapist. Rather, it needs to be the deliberate presence of myself in the counselling room as a person. The heart and soul of the therapeutic relationship is the mutual personal encounter between therapist and client as between one person and another. This requirement is personally challenging, because I need to be

present as the person-for-the-other in my personal encounters with them.

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