

# Carl Rogers, Martin Buber, and Relationship

by Ian Woods

## Abstract

This article gives a brief biographical sketch of Carl Rogers (1902-1987) and Martin Buber (1878-1965) and summarises their respective views on relationship before outlining the public dialogue in which they engaged in 1957. The outline concentrates on the part of the dialogue dealing with the therapist-client relationship and indicates some of the essential points of the exchanges between the two men, drawing out their differing perspectives. As well as commenting also on Brian Thorne's view of the dialogue, the author's own views are indicated both on the content of the dialogue and its implications for practice.



## The two men.

Carl Rogers and Martin Buber met in public dialogue on 18 April 1957 in the University of Michigan, U.S.A. There was an age difference of 24 years between them, Buber being 79 and Rogers 55 at the time. The difference in background between the two men was even more considerable.

Buber had been born in Vienna in 1878, grown up in a wealthy Jewish family in Poland and returned to Vienna to attend university as a young man. Following further studies at other universities, in 1923 he became professor of Jewish theology, history of religion, and ethics at the University of Frankfurt until the Nazi

assumption of power in 1933. He had by then become the leading interpreter of Hasidism and Jewish mysticism and had begun what became a lifetime's large literary output including more than sixty volumes on religious, philosophical and related subjects. In 1923 he published "Ich und Du" which in

1937 was published in English as "I and Thou".

Following an enforced departure from Germany in 1938 (the same year as Freud's move to England), Buber became professor at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem until his retirement in 1951. During the early years of the State of Israel, he

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worked in assisting the assimilation of the many Jewish immigrants to the new State. Like Rogers, he enjoyed a life-long marriage and family life. During retirement, he travelled and lectured widely including in the U.S. and his work achieved international recognition in both Jewish and Christian circles. At his funeral in 1965, his mourners included Arab students of the Hebrew University whose rights he had consistently advocated.

Rogers, having been born in Chicago in 1902, from the age of 12 grew up on the family farm, deep in the countryside west of the city. The family was close knit, characterised by a strict Evangelical moral code including no alcohol, much hard work, and little social contact with the outside world... though also a setting in which the young Rogers developed a close interest in the life of the natural world.

Following the liberating experience of his undergraduate years at the University of Wisconsin, Rogers spent two years at Union Theological Seminary in New York during which, as well as his difficulty with adherence to religious dogma, his life-long interest in human psychology developed. After studies in psychology to doctoral level, he worked for over ten years as a psychologist with delinquent young people. Starting in 1940 with Ohio State University, he was appointed to a series of professorial positions at a number of American universities and was later involved in other institutes such as the Centre for Studies of the Person - which he helped found - at La Jolla, California. During these years (the 1930s and decades following), there evolved his unique approach to working with clients combined with ongoing research and the publishing of his many works, including on the theory and practice of the person-centred approach. Together with a happily-married

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family life, these activities continued to be amongst the main features of his life until his death in 1987. By the time of his dialogue with Buber in 1957, he – like Buber – had already become an established figure in his field.

### **Their views of relationship**

Buber's "I and Thou" (the English translation) is written in quite abstract and at times poetic language which is difficult to paraphrase briefly for the purpose of this article. In Part One of the book, humans are described as having only two primary ways of relating, I-Thou and I-It. We live mostly in the world of I-It relations in which we relate to the people and things in our environment as objects which we can use for our benefit and view in an systematised way. We can have moments of I-Thou relation which are characterised by mutual giving of ourselves to one another with no separation between us. We need to live in the world of I-It relations but without I-Thou relations we are not fully human. We can move between times of I-Thou and I-It relations with different people as well as with the same person over time, the I-Thou moments tending to be more short-lived than the times of I-It. (Buber 1937).

Neither is it easy to summarise Rogers's view of optimal relationships given how often, as his understanding evolved over many years, he expressed it in different ways and with varying emphases. For him, the relationship between

people, in particular between therapist and client, which offers therapeutic benefit seems to be one characterised by congruence in which the therapist relates, in all their realness, to the client so that the client's congruence evolves in response in the relationship between them both as persons. The therapist's realness involves their being open to all aspects of their own experiencing and willing to communicate this, as appropriate, to the client; their relating to the client includes a continual attempt to understand them empathically at the same time as valuing them in a positive and unconditional way. (Rogers 1961; Kirschenbaum & Henderson 1990)

### **The dialogue**

*Reading the text of the dialogue (compiled verbatim from a recording), I was struck by the humanity of the interaction between the two in conversation with one another. They related to each another with courtesy, restraint and humour during their hour-long conversation in front of an audience. I don't propose to cover all the issues raised during the dialogue but to concentrate on those germane to the question of relationship, particularly in the therapeutic context. In the following abbreviated account, I have highlighted the points which seem (to me) to be essential, with an occasional commentary. Those of you who read the full text of the dialogue – which I heartily*

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*recommend – will see that I have followed its wording quite closely with certain phrases quoted verbatim, and put between inverted commas, for purpose of emphasis.* (Kirschenbaum & Henderson 1990)

The single largest component of the dialogue deals with the nature of the therapist-client relationship. It begins with Rogers outlining his understanding of this relationship and wondering how it compares with the I-Thou relation as understood by Buber. Rogers describes his relationship with the client as effective when he, Rogers,

- enters the relationship as a subjective person;
- is relatively whole and transparent in the relationship;
- has a real willingness for the client to have the feelings and attitudes that he has and to be the person that he is;
- is able to sense with a good deal of clarity the way the client's experience seems to him (the client).

And, on the client's part,

- if he (the client) is able to sense some of these attitudes in the therapist,

Then, there is a real experiential meeting of persons in which each of them is changed.

In response, Buber identifies some aspects of the therapist-client relationship which he sees as lacking in mutuality and equality (and, therefore, by implication – though he doesn't say so explicitly- is not an I-Thou relation). In particular, Buber points out that:

- the client comes to the therapist for help, the therapist doesn't come to the client;
- the therapist can, more or less, help the client which the client cannot reciprocate;
- the therapist can see the client

to a greater extent and in a way in which the client cannot see the therapist;

- the client is not interested in the therapist as a person in anything like the same way in which the therapist is interested in him.

This is Buber's initial response which he sums up as the therapist being a "detached presence"... which Rogers clarifies so that he understands accurately but to which he doesn't immediately respond.

Buber goes on to make, as a second response, that:

- in the therapist-client situation, the therapist sees and experiences the situation from both his own side and from that of the client; the client, however, remains as his own side only of the situation. They each have a necessarily different stance to the situation. "You are not equals and cannot be", Buber says to Rogers.
- while the therapist may wish themselves, in relation to the client, to be "alike to one another, on the same plane" as in "I and my partner", they cannot be; there is an objective situation involving difference, perhaps of tragedy on the client's side, which the therapist cannot change.

With Rogers's response to Buber's analysis, their conversation moves to the kernel of the difference between their two approaches. For Rogers, when another person is really expressing himself and his experience, he (Rogers) doesn't feel different from him in the way Buber describes; in that moment, Rogers can look on the other person's experience as having equal authority and validity with the way Rogers sees life and experience. For Rogers, there

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Buber doesn't doubt Rogers's feeling in the situation but, rather than focussing on Rogers's feeling, rejoins that in the given situation involving the two persons: "Neither you nor he look on your experience. The subject is exclusively he [the client] and his experience". And there is something, Buber says, about the given situation that is "objectively real that confronts you [the therapist]". Rogers's response goes, I feel, to the heart of the difference between the two men. He agrees that there is an objective situation, that is real and measurable but that, in his experience, "that is reality when it is viewed from the outside and... that has nothing to do with the relationship that produces therapy". For Rogers, that therapy-producing relationship is "something immediate, equal, a meeting of two persons on an equal basis – even though, in the world of I-It, it could be seen as a very unequal relationship". At this point, the two men agree to disagree...

Later in the dialogue, the two return to the question of reciprocity in

the therapist-client relationship with Rogers wondering, “if the moment where real change takes place... isn’t reciprocal in the sense that I am able to see the individual as he is in that moment and he really senses my understanding and acceptance of him”. Buber (again) acknowledges Rogers’s experience but needs to look at the whole situation including the client’s experience. He (Buber) understands Rogers, the therapist, as giving the client what he (the client) needs in order to be able to be on the same place as him – and this is a situation not of an hour but only of minutes. To this Rogers responds that what he (Rogers) gives the client is “permission to be... which is a little different from bestowing something on him”. To which Buber replies: “I think no human being can give more than this. Making life possible for the other, if only for a moment. I’m with you”. “Well, if we don’t look out, we’ll agree”, Rogers remarks, followed, the text says, by laughter which I assume is shared between them... Have they resolved their earlier disagreement?

### Other components

I have concentrated this article on the specific question of the therapist-client relationship as the largest component of the dialogue and as that of most interest to a readership of therapists. For the sake of completeness, I should mention that the other related components include:

- the question of a person’s relationship to themselves;
- whether a person’s basic nature, when its deepest levels are accessed, is to be trusted; and
- whether Rogers and Buber mean the same or different things by their respective terms “acceptance” and “confirmation”.

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### Summary

I’m aware that I have given a quite close textual account of the component of the therapist-client relationship with little or no attempt at interpretation or summation. I offer my understanding of the respective positions of the two men, as conveyed in the dialogue, in these terms:

- while accepting that, viewed from the outside as an objective situation, there may be many differences amounting to inequality between therapist and client, for Rogers the inter-subjective reality that can happen between them produces real therapeutic benefit for the client (and may also change the therapist);
- for Buber, notwithstanding what movement the therapist may facilitate in the client, the given situation in which they find themselves remains, in objective terms, a reality in which they are unequal and unreciprocal and which, on the client’s side, cannot be changed by the therapist.

I see these two perspectives on the therapist-client relationship as, each in their own way, valid. I can say “yes” to both of them. At the same time, I have to say that, of the two perspectives, I am drawn to that of Rogers in light of my own experience

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that person-centred therapy can lead to a discernible benefit to the client in their personal life as well as their life in society (and often, incidentally, to me as well).

### Another view

Implicit in my summary is to see the dialogue as an evenly balanced exchange between the

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two participants without either view prevailing or the dialogue leaving any dominant implication other than perhaps a desire to explore further the issues involved. Brian Thorne, on the other hand, feels that Buber, in the closing moments of the dialogue, “implies that the therapeutic relationship resulting from person-centred therapy may produce individuals rather than persons”, that is, people well-developed in their individual life and identities but less than human (by implication as social beings). Thorne attributes this view to Buber being unconvinced about the reciprocity of the therapist-client relationship as described by Rogers. (Thorne 1992). While recognising

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Thorne's overriding sympathy with Rogers and his approach, I can't entirely agree with his reading of the text of the dialogue. Personally, I didn't read Buber's closing remarks as an implied criticism of Rogers's approach on the basis of its deficient reciprocity. While Buber's statement can be read as a reflection on what Rogers has been saying, it can also, I feel, be read as standing in its own terms as a statement advocating persons being capable of full reciprocity with the world of people and all other points of contact – a statement with which Rogers would seem likely to agree. The text doesn't give any indication how Rogers understood these final remarks of Buber's as the dialogue ends at that point. To paraphrase Jane Austen (I wonder what she would have thought of the dialogue?): "I leave it to you, Gentle Reader, to decide".

### Implications for practice

I've been wondering, writing this article, what implications (if any) this dialogue might have for the practice of therapy. We will each, no doubt, (especially if we read the full text of the dialogue) draw our own implications from it in our own ways.

Personally, I found that Buber's comments challenged me to remember that each client lives in their own world of objective circumstances, that there are inequalities between us just as Buber describes, that we both have to face a reality, perhaps of tragedy on the client's side, which confronts us and that there are limits to what is humanly possible. At the same time, I know from experience, that

the inter-subjective reality of which Rogers speaks (without expressing it in exactly that way) can happen between therapist and client and that the therapeutic benefits which he describes can flow as a result. This encourages me to continue, in Brian Thorne's words, to be "concerned with inner worlds, with the validation of subjective reality and with the healing power of relationships". (Thorne 1991). ☺

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Ian Woods qualified from the Tivoli Institute in 1999 and has been involved in one-to-one client work since then, mainly in private practice, currently seeing clients at his home in Swords, Co. Dublin. He is accredited with the IACP.

Ian's orientation has evolved over time with post-qualification trainings in the Gestalt Process and Integrative Bodywork and a long-standing Jungian interest in dreams and imagery before settling into the person-centred approach. He is involved at Committee level in IAPCA.

His interest in the person-centred approach combined with an interest in the spiritual (including Jewish spirituality) drew him to study the dialogue which is the subject of this article.

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