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From person-centered to humanistic-phenomenological psychotherapy: The contribution of Merleau-Ponty to Carl Rogers’s thought

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This article describes a clinical practice, humanistic-phenomenological psychotherapy, that can be understood as a continuation of Carl Rogers’s experiential phase (1957–1970), in which he drew closer to phenomenology. Although arising from Carl Rogers’s theory, humanistic phenomenological psychotherapy, in line with developments in other experiential psychotherapies, is based on Merleau-Ponty’s definition of humanism: a philosophy that focuses on the human being in his or her relationships with other human beings and the mutual constitution of a common history.

Keywords: person-centered psychotherapy; humanistic-phenomenological psychotherapy; Carl Rogers; Maurice Merleau-Ponty

Von der personzentrierten zur humanistisch-phänomenologischen Psychotherapie: der Beitrag von Merleau-Ponty zu Carl Rogers’ Gedanken


Desde centrada en la persona a psicoterapia humanista fenomenológica: La contribución de Merleau-Ponty al pensamiento de Carl Rogers

Este artículo describe una práctica clínica, psicoterapia humanista fenomenológica, que puede ser entendida como una continuación de la etapa experiencial de Carl Rogers (1957–1970), en la que se acercó más a la fenomenología. Aunque derivadas de la teoría de Carl Rogers, la psicoterapia humanista fenomenológica, en consonancia con la evolución en otras psicoterapias experienciales, se basa en la definición de Merleau-Ponty de humanismo: una filosofía que se centra en el ser humano en sus relaciones con otros seres humanos y la constitución mutua de una historia común.

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De la psychothérapie centrée sur la personne vers la psychothérapie humaniste-phénoménologique: La contribution de Merleau-Ponty dans la pensée de Carl Rogers

Cet article décrit une pratique, la psychothérapie humaniste-phénoménologique, qui peut être comprise comme une prolongation de la phase expérientielle (1957–1970) de Carl Rogers, quand il s’approchait plus de la phénoménologie. La psychothérapie humaniste-phénoménologique émerge de la théorie de Carl Rogers, mais elle est basée sur la définition de l’humanisme de Merleau-Ponty : une philosophie fondée sur l’être humain dans ses relations avec d’autres être humains et sur la constitution mutuelle d’une histoire commune.

Carl Rogers’s approach assumed various titles: *nondirective counseling, client-centered therapy, student-centered teaching, the person-centered approach* – the last of these, according to Rogers (1983), being the broadest and that which best describes his theory. The evolution of the title demonstrates the changes within Rogerian theory. Although starting from a clinical theory of psychotherapy, his work expanded into other areas such as education, groups, etc.

Thus we find different phases of Rogerian thought, which have been described by commentators on Carl Rogers’s work as (1) *nondirective psychotherapy* (1940–1950); (2) *client-focused therapy* (1950–1957); (3) *experiential therapy* (1957–1970); (4) the *collective or inter-human phase* (1970–1987) (Cury, 1987; Hart & Tomlinson, 1970; Holanda, 1998; Moreira, 2001, 2007, 2010a; Wood, 1983). The first three
phases are from the period in which he dedicated himself to psychotherapy; while the fourth phase refers to the final period of his life, when Rogers had left clinical practice and started his work with groups and was concerned with wider human affairs.

Over the past 24 years, from Carl Rogers’s death in 1987 to the present, the person-centered approach has been developing in different parts of the world through a great variety of schools, branches, or “tribes” (Cain, 2010; Sanders, 2007; Segrera, 2002) into a fifth phase, which I have named the Post-Rogerian or Neo-Rogerian phase (Moreira, 2009b, 2010a).

This paper summarizes, in a general outline, a proposal for a humanistic-phenomenological psychotherapy as one of the several branches of contemporary Rogerian thought and practice: one that aims to develop his ideas in a phenomenological direction. The paper:

(1) Presents a historical and epistemological perspective of humanistic-phenomenological psychotherapy;
(2) Describes the experiential phase of Carl Rogers, presenting humanistic-phenomenological psychotherapy as a present-day development that stems from that time;
(3) Discusses similarities and differences between the person-centered psychotherapy of Carl Rogers and humanistic-phenomenological psychotherapy, developed on the basis of Merleau-Ponty’s work.

Fundamentals of humanistic-phenomenological psychotherapy

Humanistic-phenomenological psychotherapy is a contemporary development of person-centered therapy, originating from the intersection of two main schools of thought: humanistic psychology, which appeared in the United States at the end of the first half of the 20th century with thinkers such as Carl Rogers, Rollo May, Fritz Perls, Abraham Maslow, and others; and the phenomenological psychopathology tradition, represented by thinkers such as LudwigBinswanger, Eugene Minkowski and Arthur Tatossian, amongst others. From a philosophical point of view, humanistic-phenomenological psychotherapy has its basis within Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology (Moreira, 1993a, 1993b, 2001, 2007, 2008, 2009a, 2009b, 2009c, 2010a, 2010b).

Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908–1961) was a French philosopher belonging to the generation of Sartre and existentialism, although there are important differences between the two men’s philosophies (Stewart, 1998). Merleau-Ponty’s thought is contemporary to 21st century ideas in the sense of its critique of Cartesian dualistic thinking and the search for a pre-reflexive comprehension of the Lebenswelt (lived world), which he drew from Husserl’s last writings: Krisis (1936/1970) and Experience and Judgment (1938/1973), and which represent Husserl’s thought after the publication of Being and Time by Heidegger (1927/1989). Although Husserl, the founder of phenomenology, remained committed to his research of the pure transcendental époché (the search for the essence behind our acceptance of the world as we perceive it) as a method for philosophy, he also inculcated the notion of Lebenswelt as the world of existence, and inaugurated psychological phenomenology as a psychology of subjectivity, which aimed to understand this Lebenswelt (Goto, 2007; Moreira, 2010b). This, in turn, led to all the many different branches of
experiential, dialogical, and relational approaches within existential psychotherapies (Bugental, 1976; Cooper, 2003; Cox & Ford, 2009; Frankel & Sommerbeck, 2007; Friedman, 1985; Goto, 2007; Holanda, 1998; Knox & Cooper, 2010; McMillan & McLeod, 2006; Mearns & Cooper, 2010; Mearns & Schmid, 2006; Mearns & Thorne, 2010; O’Hara, 1992; O’Leary, 2006; Schmid, 2003, 2006; Schmid & Mearns, 2006; Spinelli, 2010a, 2010b; Yalom, 1980).

Merleau-Ponty’s (1942, 1945, 1960, 1964a, 1964b, 1966a, 1966b, 1969) phenomenology, discussed below, is radically existentialist in terms of thinking of human beings within their inherent lived existence: as existing in mutual constitution with the world. Some authors consider him to be an anthropological phenomenologist (Bidney, 1989; Muñoz, 1975), in the sense that an individual cannot be considered in isolation from the lived world. Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology was predicated on the objective of overcoming the dualism and ambiguity of the object–subject relation. This idea is well illustrated by his famous example of two hands which come into touch with each other. Is the right hand touching the left hand? Or is the left hand touching the right hand? To Merleau-Ponty (1945), unlike Husserl (1936/1970), the *époche* never resolves; we can never be totally free of the world that constitutes us, we are always in the world, made by it and producing this world that surrounds us. Subject–object dualism is nonexistent; the human being and the world are at the same time subject and object.

Within clinical psychology and psychotherapy, which encompass the human condition, the aim of using a pure Husserlian phenomenology does not make any sense; we are always dealing, relating and interacting with other human beings in their lived existence. That may be why Spinelli (2010a) took “to be the foundational assumption running through all branches of phenomenology – the inter-relational basis of human reflections upon our existence” (p. 105). Thus, when I refer to phenomenology in this paper, I am always talking about an existential phenomenology, which enables phenomenology to be used in psychotherapy.

**Carl Rogers’s humanistic psychology and phenomenology: A critique of his anthropocentric humanism**

Even though there are affinities between Carl Rogers’s humanistic psychology and phenomenology, not all of Rogers’s thinking was based on phenomenology (Cooper, 2007a; Cury, 1987; Mearns & Cooper, 2010; Moreira, 2001, 2007, 2008; Spiegelberg, 1972; Spinelli, 2010a, 2010b). Research that analyzed Rogers’s clinical interventions in the 1940s, 1960s, and 1980s showed that, even though Rogers adopted a phenomenological approach in the 1960s during his experiential phase (1957–1970, see below), he began to move away from a clinical phenomenological approach in the 1980s, in his inter-human phase (1970–1987) when he stopped working as an individual psychotherapist (Moreira, 2001, 2007). The idea of the “inner” person as a focus of the therapeutic process, which is explicit in his interventions during the interviews analyzed within that research (Bryan’s, in 1942, in the nondirective phase; and Jan’s, in 1984, during the inter-human phase, Moreira, 2007), is not so explicit in the interview with Gloria in 1964, in his experiential phase. At that time, one could not observe a subject–object relation in which the psychotherapist had only the client as the focus of his or her attention. The phenomenological analyses of the interview with Gloria show that Rogers
included himself in the psychotherapeutic relationship (Moreira, 2001, 2007), getting closer to the idea of the psychotherapeutic process as an intersubjective, or relational process (Cooper, 2003, 2007a; Mearns, 2010; Schmid, 2007; Spinelli, 2010a, 2010b; Wachtel, 2008). He seemed to be concerned with the experience of being with Gloria, which could be understood as a *common field* of the client–therapist relationship (Moreira, 2001, 2007). In other words, he gives more attention to the interaction, to the experience of the relationship itself.

Coelho (1988, pp. 101–105) developed a notion of “*common field*” as a search for establishing a less troubled and condensed conceptualization in order to translate the context and, at the same time, the condition in which the production of knowledge in the psychotherapeutic situation somehow occurs. We think of “*common*” in the sense of a pre-reflexive shared situation of a lived space, of a shared lived time. There is union and lack of union, convergence and divergence. It is an ambiguous field, but not necessarily ambivalent. We slide constantly from the common world to the private. There is porosity in the pre-reflexive plan, and no irreconcilable polarities. We consider a notion of common field as something which characterizes an experience which takes place on a level prior to that which is categorically established by the distinction between subject and object, between what would be interior and what would be exterior.

What we can observe is that the more Rogers approached the experience of relating to the patient, immersing himself in it, the closer he was to a phenomenological attitude of *common field* in the psychotherapeutic situation, departing from the *person-centered* attitude, where the inner portion of the client was the object of his attention (Moreira, 2001, 2007).

The elaboration of a pertinent conception of the human being – *to beyond the person* – is an essential step towards going beyond the dualistic thought which divides man into interior and exterior, transcending the idea of working with a defined center, which keeps person-centered psychotherapy “stuck” and stops it from working with the emergent phenomenon. By keeping the person in the center, it can be argued that the psychotherapeutic process stagnates. Evolving towards a conception of understanding the person as a phenomenon in mutual constitution with the world is a possible path for developing a theoretical model of psychotherapy that includes society and culture as an inherent part of humanity.

The main task for humanistic psychotherapy can be seen as liberating the field from the notion of centeredness which, in existential phenomenology, was achieved through the thinking of Merleau-Ponty (1942, 1945, 1960, 1964a, 1964b, 1964c, 1966a, 1966b). Merleau-Ponty transcended the theoretical centering of phenomenology in consciousness and in the subject towards the mutual constitution between man/woman and world (Moreira, 2001, 2007, 2008 and 2009a). Therefore, in the field of philosophy, Merleau-Ponty brought an important contribution to phenomenological methodology, which I propose to use in psychotherapy.

*Philosophical foundation: The anthropological contribution of Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology*

Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy is eminently critical thinking: his conception of our knowledge of ourselves as ambiguous, knowing ourselves only insofar as we are inherent in time and in the world, surpasses Western dualistic Cartesian thinking,
being always on the move through a cyclical dialectic, with multiple outlines, in a process of mutual constitution with the world. As Lefeuvre (1976) pointed out “it is not about an ambiguity which would be dissipated with the progress of knowledge; it is about an invincible ambiguity, based on the being’s structure” (p. 306). Influenced by Lévi-Strauss, Merleau-Ponty (1960, 1964a) overcame the dichotomy between the natural and the cultural world by taking as priority the meaning of the lived world. In this way, his thinking remains pertinent, bringing crucial matters into discussion: themes such as culture, which permeate the discussion of the nature of human beings in the world. From this perspective, the world is not a synonym of culture; culture is understood as one of the dimensions of Lebenswelt, because for Merleau-Ponty (1945), just like nature, it penetrates the core of our personal lives and commingles with it. Continuing from this perspective, it could be very useful for us, as psychotherapists, to remember Kleinman and Good’s (1985) definition of culture, as the intersection of experience and meaning.

One might say that Merleau-Ponty was ahead of his time, developing a mundane (rooted in the world) phenomenology that, more than being a method, is a critical tool. It surpasses totalitarian thinking which presupposes absolute truths. For psychotherapy particularly, Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology is a consistent path, as it doesn’t deal with a transcendent or idealistic phenomenology in search of an essence, but is a philosophy which searches for the meaning of the lived experience. When we are working as psychotherapists, our end purpose is the other. This is to say that there is a physical human being to be helped by the psychotherapist; psychotherapy is, ultimately, an applied science (Moreira, 2008, 2009a). Thus, Merleau-Ponty’s contribution, in the sense of expanding Husserl’s phenomenology in the world, makes his thought appropriate for supporting possible theoretical developments in psychotherapy, which integrate the human being who, besides having a psychological and a biological dimension, also has cultural, political, and social dimensions (Moreira & Sloan, 2002). All these dimensions constitute multiple outlines which are part of all human beings, as Merleau-Ponty described (1960), making an analogy of his philosophy with Cézanne’s paintings and their multiple outlines. It is not by chance that Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology has been called anthropological phenomenology (Muñoz, 1975). The concept of Lebenswelt is the connecting link that drives all Merleau-Pontyian thought. In Bidney’s words:

The concept of the Lebenswelt is the connecting link between modern anthropology and phenomenology. Contemporary anthropologists frequently describe cultures as “the designs for living,” historically constructed by man for life in society . . . Each cultural lived-world is a subjective world; it is the historical world created by human effort and thought which has meaning and value for the members of that society at a given time and place. (1989, p. 133)

It is this very anthropological phenomenology, with the Lebenswelt as an axis, which makes Merleau-Ponty’s definition of humanism differ from the anthropocentric tradition. He defines humanism as “a philosophy which confronts as a problem the relations of man with man and the constitution of a common situation and history between the two of them” (1960, p. 283). This definition by the French philosopher brings out the following theoretical questions: How to think of historical-cultural critical humanism in psychotherapy? How to develop a humanism which is
fundamentally concerned with man/woman, but that doesn’t have man/woman as the center and situates him/her as a mundane being, inhabiting the world and in turn inhabited by it? How to develop a clinical practice rooted in the world? Inasmuch as man/woman is simultaneously subject and object, he/she blends into the general mass which composes our world and history, while at the same time distinguishes him/herself through his/her actions, thoughts and speech (Moreira, 2001, 2007, 2008, 2009a).

From this perspective, in psychotherapy, the patient can be understood as a being intricately permeated by the world, which is his or her own history and his or her own possibility of transformation. We are talking about a cultural world, as Merleau-Ponty (1945) emphasized. Psychotherapist, patient and society share the same flesh. To elaborate on the concept of flesh, Merleau-Ponty (1964b, 1964c) started from the idea of interbodiness, in which flesh is that which my body is – active–passive, material and psychic. Flesh is not the synthesis of man/woman–world. It is a form of approaching the being, which escapes representation. It is neither matter nor spirit, but it is in between the two. It is the sense of the body regarding the objects because, for the philosopher, man/woman has no constituting conscience of things, as idealism presupposes, but:

visible and mobile, my body is in the number of things, is one of them, is detected in the contexture of the world and its cohesion is that of one thing. But, since it is visible and mobile, it keeps things in a circle surrounding it; they are an annexation, or a continuation of itself. They are stuck inside its flesh, they are a part of its definition, and the world is made of the very stuff of the body. (Merleau-Ponty, 1964b, p. 19)

Thus, we take from Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy, and particularly from his concept of flesh, a model of man/woman that cannot be fitted into Western dualistic thought. This mundane man/woman, who is always tied to the world, is not the center of the world. He/she constitutes the world as much as the world constitutes him/her, in such a way that a center does not exist. From the critique of anthropocentric humanism, such as is found in person-centered psychotherapy (Rogers, 1976, 1977, 1983), an urgent need was found for the (re)formulation of the conception of man/woman in the practice of a historical and cultural humanism in psychotherapy (Moreira, 2008, 2009a).

The experiential phase (1957–1970) of the person-centered approach when Carl Rogers’s thought was closer to phenomenology

Rogers’s experiential phase from 1957 to 1970 included the book On Becoming a Person, from 1961, as his key work. Some of the articles published in this book were written after 1957, when, as analyzed by Frankel & Sommerbeck (2007), Rogers changed from client-centered to “we-centered” therapy due to his concern about being more congruent and authentic in the relationship with the client. It was the phase in which he had the interview with Gloria, in 1964. This third phase was called experiential due to Rogers’s change of conduct, which from Cury’s (1987, 1988) point of view was influenced by Eugene Gendlin’s concept of experiencing, who in turn was himself influenced by Merleau-Ponty. Under Gendlin’s influence, which prioritized the experiential in the therapeutic process, the intervention of the therapist was seen as part of the intersubjective space in the therapist–patient relationship (Moreira, 2001, 2007).
In this phase, the objective of psychotherapy was to make it easier for the client to use his or her experience fully, in the sense of promoting a greater congruence between the self and the organismic experience. In other words, the emphasis fell on the inter- and intrapersonal life and the therapeutic relationship began to acquire significance as an alliance, or an existential encounter (Cooper, 2003, 2005, 2007a, 2007b, 2009; Cury, 1987; Gobbi & Missel, 1998; Holanda, 1998; Mearns, 2010; Mearns & Cooper, 2010; Mearns & Schmid, 2006; Schmid, 2003, 2006, 2007; Schmid & Mearns, 2006; Spinelli, 2010a, 2010b). Here the therapist’s authenticity or congruence is emphasized as a facilitating attitude. The psychotherapist must trust his or her own feelings, being congruent with his or her own experience. Therefore, the therapist’s experiences started to be understood as a part of the therapist–client relationship. And, in that sense, it ceased to be understood as client-centered, to be understood, according to Cury (1988) as “bi-centered”: It consisted of an effort to exploit two phenomenal worlds, making them interact in benefit of the client through the creation of new meanings from the space inhabited by both. The psychotherapist used his or her feelings as movements directed towards the client, making room for intimate and intersubjective dialogue between the therapist and the client; or, as asserted by Frankel and Sommerbeck (2007), doing “we-centered therapy.”

In her analysis of the evolution of the formulations on the relationship between client and therapist in person-centered psychotherapy, Cury (1987) pointed out Gendlin’s special contribution, amongst others of Rogers’s colleagues, for the description of this phase. Although his focusing approach developed in a technical direction, Gendlin’s (1961, 1990) work had important ramifications for the person-centered approach: a psychotherapeutic proposal grounded in experiential theory that focused on living the therapist–client relationship, being more oriented towards the experience of this relationship than towards the verbal content itself. This experience, which is an intersubjective client–therapist lived experience in psychotherapy, is considered responsible for the process of change in the client (Moreira, 2001, 2007).

However, Rogers, himself, didn’t arrive at the theorization of the psychotherapeutic process understood as an experiential flow. The experiential phase of his thought was characterized by the emphasis on the concept of authenticity or congruence (Cury, 1987), and it is worth remembering here the definition of the concept of authenticity as being present in the experience of the therapeutic relationship. This concept is frequently confused, leading to an idea which states that being authentic means talking about oneself. In Rogers’s words:

It was discovered that the personal transformation was facilitated when the psychotherapist is who he is, when his relations with the patient are authentic, with no masks, expressing openly feelings and attitudes that occur to him. We choose the term “congruence” to try to describe this condition. With this term we try to signify that the feelings experienced by the therapist are available to him, available to his conscience, and that he is capable of living them, of being these feelings and attitudes, that he is capable of communicating them if the opportunity arises. (1961/1976, pp. 63–64)

This is, therefore, the phase in which Rogerian clinical practice was closest to the approaches of the phenomenological tradition, with a departure from focusing on the client’s person in order to focus on the intersubjective experience (Moreira, 2001, 2007).

In order for the psychotherapy model left to us by Carl Rogers to assume all of its phenomenological potential, present in his experiential phase, it must cease the
search for an internal man/woman – the person as center – moving towards a therapy of the emergent phenomenon which potentially exists in his theory (Moreira, 2001, 2007, 2009a). This is the project of humanistic-phenomenological psychotherapy. In other words, starting from the experiential phase of Rogers’s thought, this proposal develops a clinical praxis which intensifies the phenomenological direction present in an embryonic form in this phase.

From Carl Rogers to Merleau-Ponty in psychotherapy

The mundane lens

In general terms, humanistic-phenomenological psychotherapy takes as a lens a mundane conception of man/woman, that is, rooted in the world (Coelho, 1988). It is to be developed in the field of mutual constitution of psychotherapist, client, and world, understanding, according to Merleau-Ponty (1964c, p. 29), that, “a phenomenology is the double will for choosing all the concrete experiences of man, such as they present themselves in history and not only in the experiences of knowledge, but also his experiences of life, of civilization.”

A mundane actualizing tendency

Together with Merleau-Ponty’s vision of mundane man/woman, the central axis of person-centered psychotherapy is maintained from Carl Rogers’s theory, that is, the concept of the actualizing tendency. However, in humanistic-phenomenological psychotherapy, this concept is amplified, emphasizing the intersection between the singular and the universal, leaving behind its metaphysical features which appeared in previous studies of Rogers’s psychotherapy (Moreira, 2001, 2007, 2009a). This idea could be understood in line with the concern of Mearns and Thorne (2010) with overcoming the individual emphasis towards a social and interpersonal actualizing tendency; or Schmid’s (2007, p. 37) definition of the actualizing tendency “as the force of the individual embedded in the interconnectedness, the social nature, the person.” Here it is explicitly understood that human beings have a positive capacity, a potential to be developed, but this potential isn’t purely inherent to the individual, neither does it depend only on environment; it is intrinsically ambiguous, or mundane. This means that the human being will develop in the intersection with the world and for this to be possible in a positive direction it is necessary to take into account many aspects of this development, including, amongst others, cultural, historical, and biological aspects. These many aspects constitute the multiple outlines of an ambiguous human development, constantly in movement, less or more positive. In line with Rollo May and Fritz Perls, I have argued that the human being’s life force can be expressed as a destructive tendency, as well as a constructive tendency, in its ambiguity (Moreira, 2009a).

The contingent responsibility

This proposal rescues the concept of the actualizing tendency in an eminently existentialist fashion, as responsible human being, defined as one that makes a project out of him- or herself. In Sartre and Ferraira’s (1970) words, “existentialism’s first effort is that of putting all of man under the dominion of what he is, and attributing to him full responsibility for his existence” (p. 219).
This responsibility is always mundane, in the Merleau-Pontyian sense. The freedom of choice is contingent, which is to say that it takes place within a certain historical and cultural context. There is no freedom that occurs independently of the lived world. As Merleau-Ponty (1945) reminds us: “By being in the world, we are condemned to the senses, and we cannot say nor do anything that doesn’t have a name in history” (pp. xiv–xv).

Like the client, the psychotherapist is considered flesh, rooted in the world, capable of developing his or her own capabilities, responsible and with free choice – at the same time limited by the circumstantial cultural and existential perspectives, or the contingent reality. To Merleau-Ponty (1966b): “contingency of all that exists and of all that is worth something is not a small truth . . . it is the condition for a metaphysical vision of the world” (p. 168). In other words, a cultural vision coming from the mundane man/woman in a phenomenological perspective will depend on both personal experience and collective experience, simultaneously lived as flesh.

The comprehension of the Lebenswelt through empathic understanding

When we are making use of the phenomenological method in psychotherapy, based on Merleau-Ponty’s ideas, we are dealing, first of all, with finding the meaning of the lived experience or, in other words, aiming to understand the Lebenswelt, the lived world. For Merleau-Ponty (1945):

understanding is retaining total intention – not only what we call the “properties” of the perceived thing, the dust of the historical facts, the “ideas” introduced by the doctrine – but the unique way of existing which expresses itself in the properties of stone, crystal, or the piece of wax, in all the facts of an evolution, in all the thoughts of a philosopher. (pp. 17–18)

In other words, this is about understanding the meanings of the lived experience in its plenitude, which is not purely objective or subjective. The concept of Lebenswelt includes precisely the intertwining of objective and subjective experiences. Having the Lebenswelt as focus in psychotherapy means to focus on the primary reality of our immediate experience, the world of meanings such as it manifests itself. The Lebenswelt is the segment of mundane existence lived by the individual in its uniqueness. The contents may vary from one society to another, but the form of Lebenswelt is unique. There is always a common sense, whatever the cultural content is: “it’s because my world is always, in this way, our world, an intersubjective and common world” (Tatossian, 2006, p. 88). As a psychotherapist, when I try to understand the meaning of the Lebenswelt, I try to understand this mixture of the lived, which is simultaneously subjective and objective, conscious and unconscious, individual and social (Moreira, 2009a, 2009c).

The psychotherapeutic process is produced in the intersection of the therapist’s and client’s Lebenswelten. As a psychotherapist I like to think that I walk hand in hand with my client in his or her Lebenswelt, always trying to understand it, without ever separating from my own Lebenswelt. It is useful for me to think of his or her lived world as a Cézanne painting, with obscure corners, opaque forms, density of colors that constitute the figures (Merleau-Ponty, 1966a; Moreira, 2009a, 2009c). This happens through empathic understanding, one of the basic attitudes postulated by Carl Rogers. Moreover it is interesting to point out that in between the repeated definitions of his ingenious concept of empathy as the basic facilitating attitude of
the psychotherapist, Rogers, in one of his later writings, stated that for the therapist to be empathic “means to penetrate the other’s perceptual world, while feeling totally relaxed in this world” (1977, p. 73). The concept of “perceptual world” is actually quite close to that of Lebenswelt. So, empathic understanding not only allows the psychotherapist to dive into the client’s world, but also to move in the client’s company, searching for comprehension of his lived experience (Moreira, 2009a, 2009c).

Outline of a humanistic-phenomenological psychotherapy

In conclusion I now present a summarized and initial outline that seeks to theoretically delineate humanistic-phenomenological psychotherapy, without forgetting that its proposal is in construction, in movement. The following points are essential in the development of this clinical proposal:

(I) Starting from a critical humanistic psychotherapy theory – to beyond the person – with its basis on Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s mundane phenomenology, psychotherapy does not have a center. It is developed in the intersection of the relation psychotherapist–client–world aiming to understand the Lebenswelt which is neither inside nor outside, conscious nor unconscious, individual nor environmental, but at their intersections, or, as Merleau-Ponty (1964b, 1964c) would say, in the chiasm.

(II) It keeps within the context of the psychotherapeutic process the central axis of Carl Rogers’s psychotherapy: the concept of the actualizing tendency, but as a mundane concept. It introduces, in a “circular, dialectic” way, the destructive human tendency in the comprehension of so many of the client’s processes in its mutual constitution with the positive tendency. The dynamics of this psychotherapy process will also be understood in an ambiguous way, in terms of a circular dialectic, such as defined by Merleau-Ponty (1964b), as dialectic without synthesis, which never settles on one thesis and that is in constant motion. The actualizing tendency is worked dialectically in the psychotherapeutic process, in the Merleau-Pontyian sense, in its circular and ambiguous relation with the human destructive tendency.

(III) It maintains the psychotherapist’s basic facilitating attitudes within the psychotherapeutic process – empathic understanding, unconditional positive regard, and congruence – as originally formulated by Carl Rogers. Clinical practice has shown that psychotherapeutic processes with people in profound structural emotional difficulties can be expanded by phenomenological interventions that favor a deepening of the contents which constitute the patient’s lived world. In humanistic-phenomenological psychotherapy these attitudes are adopted by the psychotherapist not only for “strolling” through the patient’s Lebenswelt, but as critical tools which allow for the comprehension of this lived world within the objective–intersubjective psychotherapist–client–world relationship. Using the example of Tatossian (2006), when I am working with a patient in whom lived world experiences of “depressivity” are taking place – Tatossian (2006) uses the French term depressivité to describe the lived experience which is not necessarily related to depression as pathology – I am with him or her and
with what is described to be this lived world, of “depressivity” in this case, always trying to reach its intersection (the intersection of the person of the client and his or her described lived experience).

(IV) Besides the facilitating attitudes formulated by Rogers, humanistic-phenomenological psychotherapy proposes the following phenomenological interventions as facilitating critical tools or attitudes for the deepening of the psychotherapeutic process (Moreira, 2001, 2009a):

(1) The description, which will work as the “motor” of the psychotherapeutic process, given that the search for meaning through the phenomenological method always takes place from the description as its starting point; the meaning will emerge from the description. In the case of psychotherapy, while description apparently repeats itself, it creates new meanings and for this reason the description must repeat itself exhaustively in psychotherapy.

(2) The purpose of the psychotherapeutic process is that during this world–client–therapist conversation the primary talk arises, instead of the secondary talk, never forgetting that it is important that both kinds of talk happen during the process. To Merleau-Ponty (1945) the primary talk is produced for the first time; it is new. The secondary talk is thought. The primary talk is the authentic talk – the therapist’s and the client’s – the speech first-time formulated (Amatuzzi, 1989); hence, this intervention is an attitude to create in the common field of the world–patient–psychotherapist relationship the space for the arising of the new, and the creative, which could be a potential transforming issue for the client.

(3) To see and to listen in a phenomenological way, which means to see the invisible and really listen to the other (Amatuzzi, 1990), aiming to reach a more acute and refined comprehension of the experience that has been worked in the session. To Merleau-Ponty (1964b) the invisible is in the visible, just as the visible is in the invisible. This is why it is helpful to me, as a psychotherapist, to imagine my client’s lived world as a Cézanne painting, where the colors give texture to the forms and the perspectives take different forms allowing us to see and to hear the movements between the visible and the invisible.

(4) The phenomenological reduction (Merleau-Ponty, 1945), where, as a psychotherapist, I doubt my own experience, putting its contents in parentheses. As Merleau-Ponty (1945) reminds us, phenomenological reduction’s greatest characteristic is that it never completes itself. In the psychotherapeutic situation, the psychotherapist puts in parentheses all of his or her personal, clinical and psychopathological knowledge in order to try to understand the client in his or her singular alterity – from person to person, as Rogers said – which doesn’t mean that this knowledge is denied or of little importance in this understanding.

(5) The eidetic intuition, which aims to learn the meaning of experience (Merleau-Ponty, 1964a). For the psychotherapist, this is about looking for the meaning of the client’s experience in his or her Lebenswelt in the intersection with the psychotherapist’s own Lebenswelt.

(6) Humanistic-phenomenological psychotherapy depends on the knowledge described by the phenomenological-psychopathological tradition
about the Lebenswelt in different kinds of suffering, which is properly placed “in parentheses” so as to accompany the psychotherapist and his or her client better, through their intersected Lebenswelten.

Conclusion
In this paper I have been seeking to describe theoretically a clinical practice of humanistic-phenomenological psychotherapy which I have been developing over the last 20 years. Cooper (2007b, p. 83) said:

As we have seen, Rogers’ developmental model begins with an organism that is essentially separate from its world – a self-contained, self-regulating, discrete entity – that has the potential to achieve an independent and autonomous existence. For many contemporary “intersubjective” theorists, however, this idea is highly problematic.

I would include myself amongst these intersubjective psychotherapists who try to theorize humanistic psychotherapy nowadays, aiming to enrich Carl Rogers’ fecund thought.

Although the proposal of a humanistic-phenomenological psychotherapy is specifically based on Merleau-Ponty’s ambiguous phenomenology, there is a clear echo of this in the work of other intersubjective theorists and I am aware of different approaches for that work. For example, Lévinas’s ethical radical alterity is one other very fruitful way of theorizing phenomenological developments in humanistic psychotherapy. I believe that the pluralistic, dialogical, relational depth and existential psychotherapies that have been developing around the world over the last two decades, reassessing and reinterpreting Carl Rogers’s theories, can make an important contribution to this approach. I do hope that these Merleau-Pontyian phenomenological ideas can, somehow, be useful for reflection on our post-Rogerian clinical practice.

It has been possible for me to criticize and reinterpret Rogerian humanistic psychotherapy after hearing Rogers himself say, in Brasilia, Brazil, during a ten-day workshop in 1985, that he was not a Rogerian (Moreira, 2009a). I should also mention that I owe my theoretical involvement in the person-centered approach/humanistic psychotherapy to the privilege of having learned the approach from John Wood, Rachel Rosenberg, Maureen Miller O’Hara, and Maria Bowen. Their facilitating practice was and has always been deeply connected with intersubjective processes, long before these processes were theorized among humanistic psychotherapists.

Note
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