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THE PROBLEM OF EVIL:  
An Open Letter to Carl Rogers

ROLLO MAY

Dear Carl:

Your letter published in the special issue of Perspectives (Rogers, 1981) discussed my contribution to humanistic psychology, and I very much appreciate what you wrote. You do me honor in many ways.

You also went on to point out your major differences with me concerning the problem of evil.

As you rightly say, “The presence of terrorism, hostility, and aggression are urgent in our day.” I would add that the importance of our confronting these issues is crucial. Central among these destructive forces is the possibility—or probability, as many people believe—of nuclear war and the related threat of nuclear radiation. A recent Gallup poll shows that seven out of ten people in this country believe a nuclear war will actually occur, or that there is a good chance that it will occur, within the next ten years (Newsweek, October 5, 1981, p. 35). It seems obvious that if we cannot deal constructively with the threat in atomic power and the terrorism that goes with it, our civilization will die like those of the ancient Romans, Assyrians, Egyptians, and Greeks.

You wrote, Rollo “sees the demonic as a basic element in the human makeup and dwells upon this in his writing.” You contrasted this with your own view, “that it is cultural influences which are the major factor in our evil behaviors. . . . So I see members of the human species . . . as essentially constructive in their fundamental nature, but damaged by their experience” (Rogers, 1981, p. 16).

It is difficult to write this letter because of my affection for you and our long friendship. But the problem of evil is so crucial that it is imperative that we see it clearly. I shall therefore try to clarify my own position not only for our personal purposes but to help readers confront these problems themselves, for the sake not only of ourselves but our
children and our future world. I agree with the statement of Edmund Burke: "The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing."

1

In the first place, I never use the word demonic, except to say that this is not what I mean. My term is daimonic, which is critically different. I quote from Love and Will, the book in which I write most on this topic:

The daimonic is the urge in every being to affirm itself, assert itself, perpetuate and increase itself... [the reverse side] of the same affirmation is what empowers our creativity [May, 1969, p. 123].

Thus I am stating that I see the human being as an organized bundle of potentialities. These potentialities, driven by the daimonic urge, are the source both of our constructive and our destructive impulses. If the daimonic urge is integrated into the personality (which is, to my mind, the purpose of psychotherapy) it results in creativity, that is, it is constructive. If the daimonic is not integrated, it can take over the total personality, as it does in violent rage or collective paranoia in time of war or compulsive sex or oppressive behavior. Destructive activity is then the result.

You and I have seen many cases in therapy with adolescents who are accused by their parents of being destructive when they are really only trying to establish their own independence, their own self-assertion, and indeed their own right. If we undercut the daimonic, as many therapists do, we do a disservice to our clients. I believe Rilke was right when he wrote, "If my devils are to leave me, I am afraid my angels will take flight as well."

It is true that the concept of the daimonic gives a rationale for demonic activity just as it gives a rationale for creativity. This may be why you describe me (I think wrongly) as writing about the demonic.

2

In your letter you acknowledge the evil surrounding us. You say, "I am very well aware of the incredible amount of destructive, cruel, malevolent behavior in today's world—from the threats of war to the senseless
violence in the streets." But you say that you "believe that it is cultural influences which are the major factor in our evil behaviors."

This makes culture the enemy. But who makes up the culture except persons like you and me? You write about "the destructive influence of our educational system, the injustice of our distribution of wealth." But who is responsible for this destructive influence and injustice, except you and me and people like us? The culture is not something made by fate and foisted upon us.

Obviously the culture is a great boon as well as a source of evil. We could say, as well, that the fact that we have an educational system at all and the fact that we have an economic system at all are themselves results of our culture. It takes culture to create self and self to create culture; they are the yin and yang of being human. There is no self except in interaction with a culture, and no culture that is not made up of selves.

True, any group does exert a conformist tendency toward those within it by virtue of the mutual expectations it establishes that make it a group. But this is only one element and it cannot account for the fact that human beings individually and en masse are able to turn into warmongers and individual or collective assassins. I propose that the evil in our culture is also the reflection of evil in ourselves, and vice versa.

You also write, in another context but on the same theme: "The persons of tomorrow . . . will be the ones capable of living in this new world, the outlines of which are still only dimly visible. But unless we blow ourselves up, that new world is inevitably coming, transforming our culture" (Rogers, 1980). But this very culture which you see as being "transformed" is what you also say may blow us up. The 7 out of 10 people who believe in the likelihood of a nuclear war are also the "persons of tomorrow," but they have a quite different point of view. They obviously do not believe in a new world "inevitably" coming, "transforming our culture." They see other facts: Some of them are aware that a single nuclear bomb dropped on Chicago would result in the deaths of 200,000 people. The United States at the end of this year will have approximately 2,400 more nuclear explosives than it did at the beginning of the year, at a cost of billions of dollars. Norman Cousins (1981), reviewing these facts, states: "A mammoth and deadly illiteracy has seized us." I would call it a collective psychosis, which has got us all in its lethal grip, and we find it attractive enough to participate in it. There is no preordained reason our society should "inevitably" survive or disintegrate as did
Rome and Greece and Egypt. What about the “good” in their members? Whether we survive or not depends upon whether you and I and millions like us can and will act to change our destructive directions.

The culture is evil as well as good because we, the human beings who constitute it, are evil as well as good. Our culture is partially destructive because we, as human beings who live in it, are partially destructive, whether we be Russians or Japanese or Germans or Americans.

You have also written on the new world toward which you believe we are moving:

This new world will be more human and humane. It will explore and develop the richness and capacities of the human mind and spirit. It will produce individuals who are more integrated and whole. . . . It will be a more natural world, with a renewed love and respect for nature. . . . Its technology will be aimed at the enhancing, rather than the exploitation, of persons and nature. It will release creativity, as individuals sense their power, their capacities, their freedom.

The winds of scientific, social and cultural change are blowing strongly. They will envelop us in this new world. . . . We may choose it, but whether we choose it or not, it appears that to some degree it is inexorably moving to change our culture [Rogers, 1980, p. 356].

You paint a seductive and enticing picture, and anyone would like to believe it. But I recall the words of Warren Bennis in the film of you and him, when he characterized your viewpoint as “devilishly innocent.”

How do you square this “human and humane” world you predict with the fact (Yankelovich, 1981, p. 184) that the suicide rate in this country has gone up 171% in the last 30 years? Most of this great increase is among young people in their teens and early 20s; how can one tell them that their world explores “the richness and capacities of the human mind and spirit”? What about the fact (Yankelovich, 1981, p. 182) that major opinion polls, which showed in the early 1970s that only 1 in 5 Americans believed that “next year will be worse than this year,” reveal now that a 55% majority has been forced into this pessimistic position? How can one talk to those people about releasing “creativity as individuals sense their power, their capacities, their freedom”?

In the 1950s and up to the late 1960s, most Americans believed that the present was superior to the past and that the future would improve on the present. By 1978 this pattern had wholly reversed itself, a “truly historic shift away from optimism to bleakness” (Yankelovich, 1981, p. 183). These “people of tomorrow” do not find the world “enhancing” their “persons and nature.”
I wonder also how you square your statements with the famous Milgram (1969) experiments at Yale? You recall that Milgram took subjects from every walk of life (they answered an ad and were paid $4.00 an hour). The purpose of the experiment, as stated to each subject, was to teach the “learner” behind a glass partition by means of giving him electric shocks when he gave the wrong response. But the experiment was actually designed to see how far human beings would go in increasing the voltage to punish the learner for his mistakes. Subjects were told by Milgram to increase the voltage as they went through the experiment.

The results, which shocked Milgram as well as the rest of us who read about them, were that over 60% of the people willingly turned the electric current up to a voltage that they knew would kill the person on the other side of the glass partition. Milgram (1969, p. 178) writes that his studies “are principally concerned with ordinary and routine destruction carried out by everyday people following orders.” Milgram points out that his results are similar to the phenomena uncovered in the trial of Lt. Calley for his actions at My Lai in the Vietnam war, when women, children, and old men were slaughtered in cold blood by American soldiers when commanded to do so by Lt. Calley.

How also do you deal with Philip Zimbardo’s (1971) “prison” experiment at Stanford? You will remember that Zimbardo and his associates divided his psychology class of students into “guards” and “inmates” and had them go through a prison period, planned to last two weeks, in the basement of a building. He found that the “prisoners” began to taunt the “guards” and that the guards would taunt back, and soon the guards were striking the prisoners with clubs. The real violence became so destructive that Zimbardo, to his surprise and chagrin, had to stop the experiments after one week.

These students had no particular enmity toward each other to begin with. They were middle-class persons like you and me and our colleagues, and they certainly would have fit your category of “people of tomorrow.” But they had a capacity for destructiveness that became, without much provocation, an evil acted out in reality. The evil possibilities were just beneath the surface. Philip Zimbardo, like Stanley Milgram, is a psychologist of stature who was simply trying to find out the possibilities in human beings for destructiveness and self-control.
Yes, the culture admittedly has powerful effects upon us. But it could not have these effects were these tendencies not already present in us, for, I repeat, we constitute the culture. When we project our tendencies toward evil on the culture—as we do when we repress the daimonic—the evil becomes the culture’s fault, not ours. Then we don’t experience the blow to our narcissism that owning our own evil would entail.

If you conclude that the trouble lies in the fact that human beings are so susceptible to influence by their culture, so obedient to orders they are given, so pliable to their environment, then you are making the most devastating of all judgments on evil in human beings. In such a case we are all sheep, dependent upon whoever is the shepherd; and Fred Skinner is right. But I do not think you believe that and neither do I.

True, I could cite as many incidents of heroic and altruistic behavior, as after the recent plane crash in Washington, D.C. I am not arguing that we human beings are only evil. I am arguing that we are bundles of both evil and good potentialities.

4

Let us turn to the question of evil as we experience it in our own field, that of psychotherapy. You will recall your own important experiment, continuing over three years, on client-centered therapy with schizophrenics at the Veterans Administration Hospital in Madison, Wisconsin, some twenty years ago (Rogers, Gendlin, Kiesler, & Truax, 1967). You will also recall that I was chosen as one of the twelve judges, who were experienced and practicing therapists, to assess that therapy.

After listening to the tapes you sent me, I reported that, while I felt the therapy was good on the whole, there was one glaring omission. This was that the client-centered therapists did not (or could not) deal with the angry, hostile, negative—that is, evil—feelings of the clients. It turned out that the other judges, by and large, pointed out the same thing. I quote from the summary written by you and your colleagues of this whole experiment:

Particularly striking was the observation by all the theorists that the client-centered process of therapy somehow avoids the expected and usual patient expressions of negative, hostile, or aggressive feelings. The clear implication is that the client-centered therapist for some reason seems less open to receiving negative, hostile, or aggressive feelings. Is it that the therapists have little respect for, or understanding of their own negative,
hostile, or aggressive feelings, and are thus unable to receive these feelings from the patient? Do they simply 'not believe in' the importance of negative feelings [Rogers et al., 1967, p. 503]?

One of your students, Nathaniel Raskin (1978, p. 367), quotes my report as it was discussed in that book:

Rollo May, as one of the outside experts in the Wisconsin study, "sometimes got the feeling there were not two people in the room. . . . A consequence of a misuse of the reflecting techniques . . . [is] that we get only an amorphous kind of identity rather than two subjects interacting in a world in which both participate, and in which love and hate, trust and doubt, conflicts and dependence, come out and can be understood and assimilated." May was concerned that the therapist's over-identification with the patient could "take away the patient's opportunity to experience himself as a subject in his own right, to take a stand against the therapist, to experience being in an interpersonal world."

In spite of the fact that "client-centered therapists, both individually and collectively, have advocated openness and freedom in the therapeutic relationship," the outside judges focused "upon what they perceive as the therapist's rigid and controlling nature which closes him off to many of his own as well as to the patients experiences" (Rogers et al., 1967, p. 503).

This same student, who has since become a therapist in his own right, adds some notes about his own experience. I realize that our students develop in their own way, and you and I cannot be responsible for them. But Raskin's (1978, p. 366) comments on his own experience are so relevant to the issues here that I ask your permission to quote it:

I used the early concept of the client-centered therapist to bolster the inhibition of my anger, my aggression etc. I got some feedback at that time that it was difficult for people, because I was so nice, to tell me things that were not nice, and that it was hard for people to get angry at me.

He then goes on to say that he needed to find some new ways within the client-centered approach to take in other phenomena, which I have called the "negative, hostile and aggressive feelings."

I find it important in therapy that the patient be able to take a stand against me, the therapist. This is in accord with what Raskin said, that he realized he was taking something away from the patient when he was "too nice, too much identifying with the other person." What he was taking away was the patient's possibility of becoming independent. Patients' anger is an essential part of their motivation in their assertion of individual steps toward psychological health. The anger of the thera-
pist can also be a powerful aid in helping patients experience what effect their behavior has on their relationships in general.

This means that aspects of evil—anger, hostility against the therapist, destructiveness—need to be brought out in therapy. Personal autonomy occurs not by avoiding evil, but by directly confronting it. Therapists need to be able to perceive and admit their own evil—hostility, aggression, anger—if they are to be able to see and accept these experiences in clients.

I am quite ready to believe that it would be impossible for anybody to sit down in a therapeutic hour with you and not be affected for good by it. But every patient does have the possibility to destroy himself or herself, and some patients will destroy themselves no matter how much or how well you and I work with them. You illustrate this when you speak of the trouble you had with a schizophrenic woman in Chicago.

5

I want to return to the question of inevitable cultural transformation. You write that this “new world” that you describe is “inevitably coming,” and later you remark that the new world is “inexorably moving to change our culture.” How can you be so certain? There are countless scenarios that can be written as predictions of our future. The persons who committed suicide, mentioned above, lived and died in entirely different scenarios from yours, and the polls indicate that the majority of citizens in our country would also write very different predictions. The scenarios I take seriously are those that see the evil in humankind’s development as well as the good.

You also write that “we may choose [this cultural change], but whether we choose it or not, it will still happen.” Do you mean it will take place regardless of whether we do anything about it? This sounds like Fred Skinner again: The environment will force us into this brave new world whether we want it or not!

As with Skinner’s viewpoint, your statement that it will come regardless of what we humans do about it cuts the nerve of social action. A danger of which I am very aware is that people, hypnotically seduced by rosy predictions of the future, will conclude that it requires no effort
from them and will sit back and do nothing. This, as Edmund Burke said so well, is the quickest way for evil to triumph.

There are innumerable issues that cry out for our awareness and our energies, quite in addition to the imminence of nuclear war. There is, for one, the food crunch and the problem of hunger. The President's Commission on World Hunger, 1980, stated that there are more ill-fed people on our planet than ever before, amounting to 800,000,000 (not counting the communist countries). The number is growing and, as the available food lessens, will approach panic proportions by the year 2000. This includes hundreds of thousands of children who are starving and millions more who go to bed every night hungry. This includes fathers who walk the streets, their self-esteem eroded because they are unable to find work. It also includes despairing mothers who can do nothing but watch their children starve.

If we do get to a new world, it will only be by solving these problems first. If we don't, we will not have the new world you see coming: The price in human suffering will be too high.

6

In Love and Will I also wrote:

It [the daimonic] constitutes a profound blow to our narcissism. We are the “nice” people and, like the cultivated citizens of Athens in Socrates’ time, we don’t like to be publicly reminded, whether we secretly admit it to ourselves or not, that we are motivated even in our love by lust for power, anger, and revenge. While the daimonic cannot be said to be evil in itself, it confronts us with the troublesome dilemma of whether it is to be used with awareness, a sense of responsibility and the significance of life, or blindly and rashly, . . . When the daimonic is repressed, it tends to erupt in some form—its extreme forms being assassination, the psychopathological tortures of the murders on the moors and other horrors we know only too well in this century.

“Although we may recoil in horror,” writes the British psychiatrist Anthony Storr, “when we read in newspapers or history books of the atrocities committed by man upon man, we know in our hearts that each one of us harbors within himself those same savage impulses which lead to murder, to torture and to war” [May, 1969, p. 129].

I am pleading for a realistic approach to human evil. A colleague tells me that when you had the discussion with Martin Buber in Michigan you said, “Man is basically good,” and Buber answered, “Man is basically good—and evil.” I am arguing that we must include a view of the evil in
our world and in ourselves no matter how much that evil offends our narcissism.

When we can deal with this evil, then and only then what we say about goodness will have power and cogency. Then we can speak in ways that will genuinely affect our culture, in contrast to the miniscule number of people we see in our therapeutic offices.

You and I have often affirmed the capacities of human beings to be autonomous to some extent, to make decisions, to assert some freedom of choice in interrelationship with their destiny and their culture. These capacities put an added responsibility upon us to affirm realistically the anxiety involved, the precarious and limited nature of this freedom, and the fact that our belief in the human being can work for good only when the individual can face the world with all its inner and outer cruelty, its failure, and its tragedy.

The issue of evil—or rather, the issue of not confronting evil—has profound, and to my mind adverse, effects on humanistic psychology. I believe it is the most important error in the humanistic movement. Thus Yankelovich (1981) can say, in his book New Rules (which is concerned, as you and I are, with the persons of tomorrow), that humanistic psychology is the narcissism of our culture. I believe he is right. The narcissists are persons who are turned inward rather than outward, who are so lost in self-love that they cannot see and relate to the reality outside themselves, including other human beings. Some people who join and lead the humanistic movement do so in order to find a haven, a port in the storm, a community of like-minded persons who also are playing possum to the evils about us. I, for one, choose to be part of the minority that seeks to make the Association for Humanistic Psychology an organization that commits itself actively to confronting the issues of evil and good in our selves, our society, and our world.

In my experience, our human adventures from cradle to grave take on a zest, a challenge, an attractiveness when we see and affirm this human potentiality of both good and evil. The joy we experience will have, as its other pole, the self-assertion, the hostility, the negative possibilities that I have been talking about. In my experience it is this polarity, this dialectical interaction, this oscillation between positive and negative that gives the dynamic and the depth to human life. Life, to me, is not a requirement to live out a preordained pattern of goodness, but a chal-
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lenge coming down through the centuries out of the fact that each of us can throw the lever toward good or toward evil. This seems to me to require the age-old religious truths of mercy and forgiveness and (here I am sure you would agree with me) it leaves no place for moral superiority or self-righteousness.

I recall that in my younger days in the middle 1930s I had a position as counselor at a midwestern college. The vocal portion of the students at this college were pacifists. We believed in the League of Nations and we felt certain that we needed only to outlaw war for the world to have peace. I remember looking at a professor who said there would be another war as though he were a pariah. How wrong my colleagues and I were! We could not even believe what we read in the papers about the persecution of the Jews in Germany, just as people nowadays cannot believe what they read in the newspapers about nuclear bombs. The important point of this story is that Hitler capitalized on our noble but unrealistic ideals, and this, I believe, contributed to or at least hastened World War II. This is why I wrote in Love and Will:

Not to recognize the daimonic itself turns out to be daimonic; it makes us accomplices on the side of the destructive possession [May, 1969, p. 131].

I am not predicting doom. But I am stating that if we ignore evil, we will move closer to doom, and the growth and triumph of evil may well result.

I am not a pessimist. Yes, I believe in tragedy, as Shakespeare's dramas and Eugene O'Neill and others portray it, because I perceive tragedy as showing the nobility of human existence. Without it life would be pallid, uninteresting, and flat. I smile when I note, in conversations with some of my so-called optimistic friends, that when we get down to fundamental issues such as the possibilities of atomic war or the coming food crunch, or the fact that this planet itself will in all probability be wiped out in a finite number of years, their optimism turns out to be a reaction formation to their hopelessness; and I turn out to be more hopeful than they. This is because, it seems to me, one needs a philosophy for oneself that can stand regardless of failure in our actions or temporary despair.

All of this goes to demonstrate again that the terms "optimism" and "pessimism" refer to the state of one's digestion, and have nothing whatever to do with truth.
I write this letter, dear Carl, with profound respect for you and your contribution in the past to all of us. If I speak strongly, it is because I believe strongly.

Yours,

Rollo May

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