



Carl Rogers' Famous Potato Observation

Background

When US psychologist Carl Rogers – who founded the humanistic approach to counselling and psychotherapy – was 12, his family moved from Chicago to a farm. There, he became interested in how plants grow. In particular, he noticed that even potatoes kept in unfavourable conditions demonstrated a tendency to try their best to grow.

Observations

Rogers wrote about his potato observations in his final book, *A Way of Being*, in 1980, seven years before his death (1980, p. 118):

I remember that in my boyhood, the bin in which we stored our winter's supply of potatoes was in the basement, several feet below a small window. The conditions were unfavorable, but the potatoes would begin to sprout – pale, white sprouts, so unlike the healthy green shoots they sent up when planted in the soil in the spring. But these sad, spindly sprouts would grow 2 or 3 feet in length as they reached toward the distant light of the window.

The Directional Tendency

Based on his observations, Rogers (1980, p. 118) wrote about the 'directional tendency' that leads all living things (humans, animals, plants etc.) to keep trying.

He related the phenomenon he had observed in the potatoes to ‘clients whose lives have been terribly warped, in working with men and women on the back wards of state hospitals’ (ibid.).

He wrote (ibid.): ‘So unfavourable have been the conditions in which these people have developed that their lives often seem abnormal, twisted, scarcely human. Yet, the directional tendency in them can be trusted.’

The Actualising Tendency

This directional tendency is today commonly known as the ‘actualising tendency’. While the term is commonly associated with Maslow and Rogers, it was in fact first introduced by Kurt Goldstein, a German neurologist and psychiatrist, in 1934 (in German, translated into English in 1939).

However, the idea did not gain traction until 1943, when Maslow’s paper ‘A Theory of Human Motivation’ was published in *Psychological Review*. This formed the basis of the model that would later become known as ‘Maslow’s hierarchy of needs’.

Different Takes on the Actualising Tendency

Many people assume that all humanistic psychologists think the same, but in fact there were differences between Goldstein’s, Maslow’s and Rogers’ views of the actualising tendency. Goldstein first put forward the concept as a theory of motivation, whereas Maslow related it to the human desire to be the best that each person can be.

In 1959, Rogers outlined his own ideas on the actualising tendency in a book chapter, ‘A Theory of Therapy, Personality and Interpersonal Relationships’. While he shared Maslow’s values relating to the intrinsic goodness of human nature, and the innate capacity of individuals for personal growth, he disagreed that the actualising tendency was self-driven and automatic. Instead, Rogers argued that people need the right emotional environment in order to grow emotionally; in particular, we must receive empathy, genuineness and acceptance.

References

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