

John Rowan

The New Image of the Person

Peter Koestenbaum. *The new image of the person: The theory and practice of clinical philosophy*, Greenwood Press 1978. pp.570.

This is a large and ambitious book. It attempts to put therapy on a proper philosophical basis, so that it can go all the way. And it adopts an existential-phenomenological standpoint to do so.

It is in three Books. Book one is entitled *A model of being*, and introduces the basic thinking of phenomenology. At least that is what he says he is doing, but there are only a couple of references to Husserl, and most of the references are to other books by himself. What he is in fact putting forward is a theory peculiar to himself. I'll come back to that point later.

Book Two is called *Revelations of anxiety* and makes the basic distinction between existential anxiety (good) and neurotic anxiety (bad). He then applies this thought, together with the other material from Book One, to problems such as birth, evil, nihilism, freedom, death and guilt.

In Book Three, entitled *Pathology*, he goes on to apply all the ideas he has developed to specific clinical problems such as schizophrenia. And he spends some time discussing the basic notion of healing.

There are eight appendices, a select bibliography and an index.

The basic question which arises is - has he done what he set out to do? Does it work?

A key concept in what he is trying to do, and one which recurs very often in a number of different contexts, is the transcendental ego. We reach this ego, he says, by means of the *epoche*. This *epoche* is one of the most distinctive, and one the most controversial, concepts in phenomenology. It is defined by Koestenbaum as "the 'cognitive yield' of applying the (1) *Presuppositionless* (2) *description of* (3) *first-person experience* to the activity of knowledge itself." So to reach the transcendental ego we have to give up our presuppositions. Now this is a hard, and some would say impossible, task. Koestenbaum himself acknowledges this by saying - "Strictly speaking, we do not eliminate assumptions but we become aware of them; we identify the assumptions that are made in every cognitive endeavour." Of course this means that we become aware of certain assumptions by making other assumptions; we become aware of these other assumptions by making new assumptions; we become aware of these other assumptions by making new assumptions - in other words, we

are in an infinite regress. Koestenbaum admits this, and holds that - "Transcendental consciousness *is* the phenomenon of self-reference. Self-referentiality is an infinite regress." This all begins to sound a bit giddy or dizzy, and indeed Koestenbaum says - "This regress explains psychopathology, for it is the experience of nihilism, nothingness, foundationlessness and the death of God. . . Anxiety neurotics and many schizophrenics are condemned to the permanent perception of these transcendental truths. The so-called healthy person has either learned to tolerate this anxiety or has developed successful defences against it."

It seems, then, that to enter the transcendental ego state is a hard task indeed. It would seem to be something we might achieve at moments, rather than something we could experience for long periods. Yet it is crucial for Koestenbaum to say that the good therapist is able to enter into this state throughout the therapy session.

Let us step back a moment to see what the transcendental ego is contrasted with. Koestenbaum makes this set of contrasts:

TRANSCENDENTAL REALM

EMPIRICAL REALM

Pour-soi
Subjectivity
Noetic

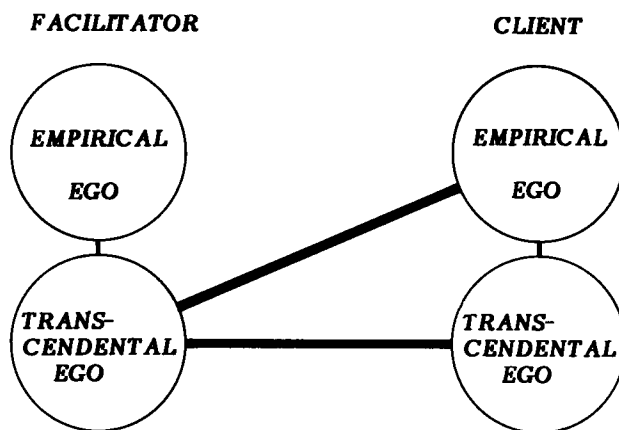
En-soi
Objectivity
*Noematic (meaning is imposed
 by consciousness)*

Cogito
Reflexive thought
Intentionality (aspiration)

Cogitatum
Referential thought
Intentionality (result)

Over against the transcendental ego, therefore, is the empirical ego. "The empirical ego consists, minimally, of the body, feelings, needs, attitudes, behaviour and the unconscious." So each person has both a transcendental ego (of which s/he may or may not be aware) and an empirical ego. The connection between the two is crucial. Koestenbaum says: "The creative erotic energy core, the individual and unique identity which is called an *Existenz*, is neither the transcendental nor the empirical ego. It is instead the cathexis by the transcendental ego of the empirical ego. This is the ultimate experience of existing."

Going back now to the therapy session, what Koestenbaum is saying is that the object with which both therapist and client are concerned is the empirical ego of the client. Neither of them is interested in the empirical ego of the therapist. But the transcendental ego of the therapist and that of the client should be in intimate communion. We thus get "the therapeutic triangle", as follows:



The therapist's empirical ego is "put into brackets" by means of the *epoche* and the *reduction*. It is perhaps worth quoting Koestenbaum at length here since it is so central to his case:

A transcendental relationship exists when the conscious centre of the patient or client and the conscious centre of the therapist or facilitator form one intimate and intersubjective field (and this statement is meant to be literally true and not just an apt metaphor). In addition, that transcendental relationship is part of a therapeutic triangle when the common object to this expanded common subject is a specific problem, situation, fear or emotion (that is, an empirical phenomenon) of the patient or client. The relationship is called transcendental because it exists on the level of transcendental consciousness alone. The therapist's empirical ego is left out.

Now the question arises - can this really happen, or is it just a wish? Is it just a nice idea which represents nothing more than an illusion? Is it even just a neurotic fantasy?

Well, I don't know Koestenbaum, so I can't comment on the last possibility, but it does seem that there must be a considerable degree of illusion about this. There is no way of switching off the empirical ego in the way suggested. But more important than this, there is no way that we can have a transcendental ego in the way suggested.

Now this is an assertion which cuts at the very root of what Koestenbaum is trying to say, so it needs some arguments in justification. Here are three:

1. *All our experience of other people is mediated* We cannot experience another person except through our own perceptions - the way we see the

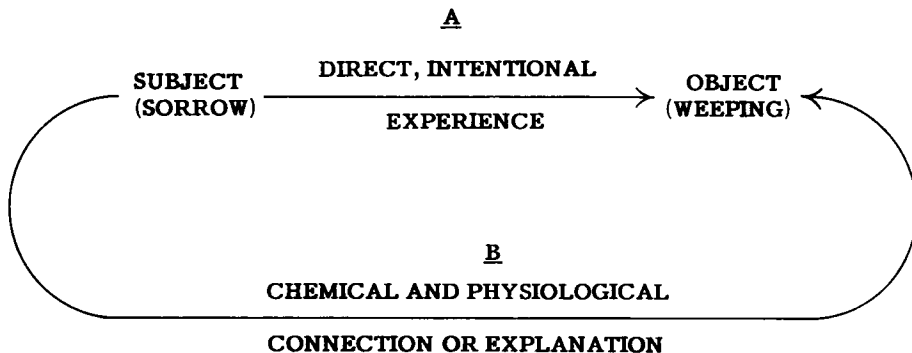
world. And these perceptions are influenced by our previous experience, by our expectations, by social pressures and many many other things, including our own intentions. There is no way of putting them "in brackets" in the way that phenomenology suggests. And this is very clear when we look at the actual work done by phenomenologists (in the Duquesne studies, for example) - their cultural blinkers show through very clearly when they are most trying to do without them.

2. *We can't act while in an infinite regress* Even if we agree that the kind of experience which Koestenbaum talks about (as we become aware of our awareness, etc.) does sometimes happen, as soon as we start to act we start to lose it. I think this is common experience in group work or therapy. Someone sees through their own games, ceases to be identified with them, stands outside them (ecstasy literally means "standing outside"), has an ecstatic realization that they can be real, catches a short or long glimpse of the infinite regress, and for a short period talks and acts from the new centre thus revealed. But there is no way of hanging on to this and deliberately using it as a therapist in the therapy session - or anywhere else - because it *has no content*. It is a glimpse of what underlies all specific content. It can be very useful, and extremely important, and amazingly stimulating - it can change one's life - but it can't be used *as an instrument* in the way that Koestenbaum suggests.

3. *The notion of the transcendental ego is incoherent* Koestenbaum presents himself as an existentialist, and it is well known that existentialists are very critical of the idea that human beings have an essence. As far as Sartre is concerned, for example, a pure or transcendental consciousness is "nothingness" -as Koestenbaum himself notes (p.37). Yet it seems clear that Koestenbaum also see the transcendental ego as some kind of essence of the person. Husserl says, in one of the basic statements of phenomenology, quoted by this author with approval (p.32), that "Consciousness is always consciousness of something." And yet the transcendental ego is either "nothingness" (as Sartre would have it) or "an infinite regress" (as Koestenbaum himself puts it) - in either case a very peculiar and ungraspable "something". Koestenbaum tries to get out of this by saying that transcendental consciousness is consciousness without an object (p.67) but immediately withdraws this nine page later. He makes a rigorous distinction between existentialism and essentialism (p.191) and then says, 16 pages later) that "we are entitled to call clinical philosophy a *higher level*. . . essentialism." I think he's thoroughly confused in his statements in this whole area, and this is what I meant when I said earlier that it was his own philosophy, rather than any very strict derivation from existentialism or phenomenology.

So in this area, for these reasons, it seems to me that Koestenbaum has not lived up to his promise. The transcendental ego won't do the job he has laid out for it, and we can't refound psychotherapy on this basis.

But in other areas he has done a much better job. He uses a similar notion, but much more acceptably and believably, to develop a theory of healing. Here is his diagram (p.458):



Here he is saying that there are two levels at which our experience of our own internal states can take place. **A** describes an *experienced* relationship (what I would call an unmediated relation) whereas **B** represents an *inferred* relationship (a mediated relation). **A** is direct, while **B** is an image garnered from a belief system. Now awareness of my own inner states, and control of my body, *can* be direct and unmediated in a way which awareness of the outside world cannot. (This latter is my own statement, and of course I am partly disagreeing with Koestenbaum. It does seem to be true that my own feeling of pain, rage or fear is not something I have to infer or judge, and also true that my screaming or pounding or shivering is not something I have to construct or understand. Here I agree with Koestenbaum. But as already argued, other things and other people in the outside world cannot be experienced or known in this direct way. This is my disagreement with Koestenbaum.)

Now if, as we are now agreeing, direct contact can be made between my consciousness and my body, such that the relations is an unmediated one, this means that in principle I can control my body just as I can control my mental activities. And this can be a two-way thing, according to Koestenbaum. When contact is mind-to-body he calls that free will. When the contact is body-to-mind (he gives the examples of body work and massage) he calls that spontaneity. The analogy he gives to help to understand this is the analogy of the magnet, which has two poles but one magnetic field: similarly consciousness and the body are the two poles of a single field.

Hence he goes on to argue that the body is unique in the world. In my body, and only in my body, subject and object combine, meld and merge. (He credits this insight to Merleau-Ponty.) "That is why the body - the phenomenon of being incarnated, embodied, made flesh - is a philosophically extraordinary event. The body is the central symbol of all existence." (p.180).

This means that any therapy which does justice to this polarity is going to be particularly effective, and Koestenbaum mentions particularly primal work as being effective here. He also says, however, that other kinds of therapy can be useful.

Since we live in this unified field of being (what he calls elsewhere the "wavy zone") the one word which will help us understand the connection between the two poles is *action*. Action, understood in this way, is a key concept towards understanding our existence, because it is the interface between subject and object.

If we are intellectually aware of and emotionally in touch with that interface, then our life can be changed, for it is at this interface that thought and feeling become integrated into visible living. Life is then experienced as new because it is now philosophically realistic.

Obviously the implication of all this is that healing of the body can be done through the mind, just as healing of the mind can be done through the body. And he has a section - though to my mind rather a short and unsatisfying one - on healing, where he says that fantasy can be a useful adjunct to physical methods.

All in all this is a very interesting book for those who are interested in these kinds of problems. It is well written, with plenty of examples and case histories and diagrams and analogies - Koestenbaum is a good teacher. There are many remarks and observations in it which are extremely sound and penetrating as for example "Dreams are our basic protection against total dominance of commonsense metaphysics", or "All human beings are persons first and foremost; they are freedoms and choosers", or "birth can only be accomplished through anxiety" - and there is much in this book that is challenging and well worth thinking about. Otherwise I would not have spent so much time examining it in such detail. But ultimately it will not form the basis for therapy that its author wanted to set up.

In arriving at this conclusion I was led back to Hegel. I agree with Koestenbaum that therapy at the moment is based on a mish-mash of different theories - a bit of Freud, a bit of Zen, a bit of Reich, a bit of Klein, a dash of feminism, a smidgin of Horney, a drop of Moreno, a lump of Jung - and that we could do with something more soundly based and thought through. And I found unexpected riches in Hegel's *Philosophy of Mind*, which I would like to write about in a forthcoming issue. It seems to me that Hegel, read in a way which brings out his relevance, actually does get there, in a way that Koestenbaum does not. He has changed a lot of what I think goes on in the process of self-actualization, and I'm very excited about that.

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