



9-27-2017

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### Recommended Citation

Jackson, Aaron P. (2017) "No Safety in Solipsism," *Issues in Religion and Psychotherapy*: Vol. 38 : No. 1 , Article 8.  
Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/irp/vol38/iss1/8>

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# No Safety in Solipsism

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At the outset let's acknowledge that the *need* for safe spaces for our LGBTQ siblings comes from Latter-day Saints' failing to be good Christians in the first place. At least, we have failed to be good enough Christians. If Latter-day Saints were ideal Christians, being with them would already be a safe space—regardless of Rogers's (1961) co-opting or corrupting the constructs that comprise it. I will return to this issue at the end of my comments.

A key question for Gantt and Thayne (pp. 3–21) is whether Rogers's theory somehow corrupts our attempts to create genuinely safe spaces. I appreciate and generally agree with their concerns about notions like unconditional positive regard and their critique of how Rogers's ideas have even distorted what we mean by love and hate. In addition to those issues, I would like to address the question of what we mean by *safe*. To me, a primary problem with Rogers's approach is that he imagines a value-free human interaction and establishes this view as a primary criterion for safety. He supposes that counselors and other empathic helpers can engage their clients and others without bringing any notions of what is good or bad to the experience. This proposal is both impossible and contradicted by the fact that Rogers proposes that value-

free interactions are better than other interactions—a clear moral value.

Despite Tjeltveit's (1999) comprehensive critique of value-free therapy and nearly two decades of supporting philosophical and empirical research, professional psychology continues to cling to the notion that psychotherapy can and should be a value-free or value-neutral enterprise. Clinging to this notion keeps us from attending to the more important question, which is, "Given that all human interactions are to some degree clashes of values and moralities, how do we engage each other in love across those differences in a way that provides community and safety?" Psychology has been so consumed with the notion that it should not make moral judgments that it has been unwilling and unable to acknowledge the unavoidability of its own values and moralities. Rogers provides a striking example of this. He clearly believes it is better (i.e., morally superior and more valuable) to act on one's independent individualistic intuition than to follow the prescriptions of other individuals, societies, or gods. He believes it is better to be "self-responsible" (1961, p. 55) than to be responsible to others and that being self-responsible and responsible to others are mutually exclusive. Ironically, this is Rogers's moral imperative,

the basis on which he, albeit kindly, is judging and influencing his clients—despite his claims to the contrary. Again, the question for all of us is not whether to judge and influence one another but rather how to do so in an honest and loving way.

I see two problems within Rogers's ideas. First, he proposes that we provide unconditional positive regard for people even though we clearly do not have positive regard for their inauthentic way of being. However, this is not radically different from the Christian's dilemma. The mandate to love all people regardless of background, beliefs, and identities is clear. The means by which we do so is much less clear. I agree that Rogers muddies the waters by supplanting love with positive regard. However, the fundamental dilemma, regardless of terminology, is how to love (or regard) across our inherently different values and moralities. The challenge of Christianity is learning to love "strangers," to "[take] them in" (Matthew 25:31–46). This certainly seems synonymous with a safe space. Rogers assumes a safe space can be created simply by adopting a non-judgmental stance. However, such a stance (if possible) precludes any genuine love. One cannot love from such a privileged and distant position. In LDS parlance, we might call this "love feigned" (cf. D&C 121:41). I cannot love you unless I know you, and I cannot know you except in terms of how we might agree and differ. Interestingly, in describing those who achieve a celestial glory, Joseph Smith said, "they see as they are seen, and know as they are known, having received of his fulness and of his grace" (D&C 76:94). It may be that our capacity to know and love across our differences comes by "grace."

Second, Rogers seems to place the sole authority for one's authenticity within oneself. He does this without much discussion of how one becomes the ultimate authority on oneself. He says,

The client finds that it is his [*sic*] own organism which supplies the evidence upon which value judgments may be made. He [*sic*] discovers that his own senses, his own physiological equipment, can provide the data for making value judgments and for continually revising them (Rogers, 1951, p. 501).

To me, it is this radical individualism that creates the greatest philosophical and moral issues for Rogers's theory. His model is essentially solipsistic and seems to raise the question of why someone would

come to psychotherapy in the first place. From Rogers's perspective, the purpose of psychotherapy seems to be to help the client see that they cannot, and should not, depend on or be influenced by anyone else in their quest to be authentic. I suppose the ultimate goal is for the client to disallow the therapist's values as they paradoxically adopt them. Rogers's ideal seems to end in a solipsistic nightmare of isolation. Ironically, Rogers, whom so many have seen as the father of empathic listening and understanding, has a philosophy that undermines even the possibility of real empathy—let alone the gospel notions of "mourning with those that mourn" and "bearing one another's burdens" (Mosiah 18:8–9). He says,

Every individual exists in a continually changing world of experience of which he [*sic*] is the center. . . . An important truth in regard to this private world of the individual is that it can only be known, in any genuine or complete sense, to the individual himself [*sic*]. . . . I can never know with vividness or completeness how a pinprick or a failure on an examination is experienced by you (Rogers, 1951, pp. 483–484).

Again, in what seems a profound irony, Rogers's philosophy puts severe limits on one's ability to relate to and empathize with another. This inherent distance only allows for people to *tolerate* one another, not really understand and connect with one another (cf. Williams & Jackson, 2015). The implications of the individualistic philosophy espoused by Rogers and most mainstream theorists have recently been explicated by both philosophers (e.g., Oliver, 2001) and psychologists (e.g., Gergen, 2009). Latter-day Saints, with their understanding of a literal atonement and the understanding that Christ became better able to "succor his people" (Alma 7:12) by vicariously suffering with and for us, might be able to extend our understanding of the true nature of empathy and our capacity to suffer with each other.

I have one caution regarding Gantt and Thayne's analysis. The casual reader might interpret their description of God's expectations, contingencies, and chastenings as an excuse for humans to do the same. I think this is the crux of what has kept Latter-day Saints from being the safe havens that our LGBTQ siblings might have expected us to be. We have followed the world's example in discriminating against them and persecuting them. The scriptures teach us

that such “persecution of the saints” (D&C 121:38) comes as a result of our own tendency to “cover our sins, or to gratify our pride, our vain ambition, or to exercise control or dominion” (D&C 121:37). I think it has been easy for Latter-day Saints and other Christians to imagine that they are the ones who have the responsibility to “humble, chasten, and rebuke” (Gantt & Thayne, p. 13) others. To me, it seems that such acts are almost exclusively God’s purview. For us to go beyond Rogerian tolerance and quasi-empathy, we will need to take Moroni’s advice to become more charitable and, “pray unto the Father with all the energy of heart, that [we] may be filled with this love” (Moroni 7:48).

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