Evolutionary idealism: a philosophical foundation for holistic nursing theory

The philosophical tradition of evolutionary idealism is explored as an appropriate metaphysical foundation for holistic nursing science. Some implications of this tradition for theory development, testing, and practice are identified. It is suggested that evolutionary idealism can form an appropriate philosophical foundation for nursing theory development.

Barbara Sarter, RN, PhD, CS
Assistant Professor
Department of Nursing
University of Southern California
Los Angeles, California

NURSING HAS traditionally emphasized its holistic approach in theory and practice. The word "holism" is interpreted on a continuum of meanings, ranging from the analysis of all parts of a system, to a synthesis, into an irreducible whole that is greater than and different from the sum of the parts. Philosophically, the difference between these two ends of the continuum is significant. A breakdown and analysis of parts does not require the strict ontological monism of an irreducible whole. The recent critiques in the nursing literature of Cartesian dualism[1-3] seem to require a holistic view of humans that is synthetic and monistic in its ontology. Modern materialist philosophers, in rejecting Cartesian dualism, have established a monism that reduces all reality to matter or physical energy.[4-6] However, a human science such as nursing finds materialistic reductionism of little value in explaining its phenomena of concern. Human consciousness is not satisfactorily accounted for in a materialistic monism.

Adv Nurs Sci, 1987, 9(2), 1-9

The concept of consciousness is critical to any attempt to view human beings holistically. Even though the word itself may be absent from a given theory's formulations, consciousness has been implicitly acknowledged to be of great importance in current nursing theories. For example, Rogers's[7-9] concepts of pattern and four-dimensionality directly relate to the subjective awareness of the human energy field (Nursing science: A science of unitary human beings, glossary, unpublished paper, 1982, and personal interview, January 1984). Travelbee's[10] emphasis on the personal meaning of illness, Paterson and Zderad's[11] view of human beings' innate struggle "to know," Watson's[12] phenomenology of humans as spiritual beings, and Parse's[13] principle of "structuring meaning multidimensionally" also similarly assume the central role of consciousness in the human experience. Newman[14] made this assumption explicit in her definition of health as the expansion of consciousness. As mentioned, nursing theorists have almost unanimously rejected a materialistic reduction of human consciousness to physical and chemical phenomena. But a satisfactory ontology that is monistic, yet nonreductionistic, has yet to be elaborated by nurse philosophers. This article explores the philosophical tradition of evolutionary idealism as a potentially fruitful metaphysical foundation for the human science of nursing.

IDEALIST VIEW OF CONSCIOUSNESS

Two major idealist traditions exist in the body of philosophical knowledge—subjective and objective idealism. Subjective idealism contends that all that exists are ideas in the mind of the knower, which vary from person to person and which have no existence apart from the subjective mind. Objective idealism asserts that reality is of the nature of mind, but assigns an independent existence, or objective reality, to the objects of knowledge. For example, the subjective idealist would maintain that a given tree exists only as an idea in the mind of a knower. The objective idealist would affirm the existence of a tree independently of anyone perceiving it, but would ascribe a consciousness of some sort to the tree. Subjective idealism has presented nearly insurmountable philosophical difficulties to those who find it necessary to deal with the pragmatic concerns of human life. Because of these difficulties, the viewpoint of objective idealism will be explored for its appropriateness to a practice discipline such as nursing.

The primary thesis of the modern objective idealist, simply stated, is that all energy is conscious. This is a contradiction of Cartesian dualism, in which matter or energy is characterized as completely inert and consciousness is held to exist only in the human mind. Consciousness is awareness. It has three aspects: cognition, volition, and feeling. Perception is the foundation of consciousness. The idealist argues that even the most basic subatomic particles react to and interact with other energy forms (for example, attraction and repulsion). Reaction cannot occur without perception. Thus, the interactions of energy fields provide evidence of perception, and hence of consciousness, in energy of all forms. Biophilosopher Rensch expresses the idealist view: "We now think

quite differently about the 'solidity' of the matter from which the living organism is made up. 'Solid substance' has now given place to fields of energy, and these can only be comprehended in terms of relationships. This conception makes it easier to incorporate the findings of physics in a panpsychistic, identistic picture."[15(p270)]

Physicist-philosopher Bohm, after an extensive analysis of the philosophical implications of quantum theory, concludes that consciousness and matter are ultimately one within a "higher-dimensional actuality."[16(pp 208,209)] Thus, the objective idealist does not attempt to separate consciousness from energy or mind from matter or to reduce consciousness to physicochemical processes. Consciousness is assigned a primary ontological status, serving as the fundamental "stuff" of the universe. The processes observed and described by the physicist and chemist are manifestations of a certain level of consciousness characterized by relatively mechanical and predictable properties.

IDEALIST VIEW OF EVOLUTION

The ontological stance, then, of evolutionary idealism is that the fundamental substance of the universe is consciousness. As opposed to the static idealism of Spinoza, Leibniz, and Hegel, post-Darwinian evolutionary idealists such as Bergson, Whitehead, and Teilhard see the conscious energy of the universe in a process of continual evolution, generating consciousness of many different levels or orders. The teleological nature of this process has been interpreted in various ways. Bergson[17] saw no particular direction, purpose, or goal in the "elan vital"—the vital flow of creative evolution. Whitehead[18] rejected the notion of substance altogether and identified the basic elements of reality as prehensions, which are characterized by emotion, purpose, valuation, and causation. He described the evolutionary process as a development of feeling into increasing intensity, creativity, novelty, and unity (the many becoming one). Teilhard[19,20] interpreted evolution as a process in which centers of psychic energy move into increasing complexity, centration, consciousness, and personalization.

The place of humankind in the evolutionary process is viewed quite differently by the evolutionary idealist than by the materialist. Briefly, the materialist view of humanity is that it is a fluke, the result of a random, mechanical process. Human beings, in their self-awareness and search for knowledge and meaning, are aliens in a universe that has no meaning.[4] The idealist view of human beings connects them with the larger universe, which is of the same fundamental nature, and sees humanity as consisting of a more fully evolved consciousness than other existents. Many evolutionary idealists do not presume that human beings are the final stage of evolution; they view humans as still evolving into higher forms of conscious energy.[19-21]

PHILOSOPHICAL STRENGTHS OF EVOLUTIONARY IDEALISM

Particularly when considering it as a philosophical foundation for a human science such as nursing, evolutionary idealism's attribution of major significance to the phenomenon of consciousness is attractive. Consciousness is, indeed, a powerful force in human affairs. The view that

consciousness is present at all levels of existence provides a continuity and coherence to the universe that is consistent with the deepest human intuitions. There are no sudden evolutionary leaps that require explanation. Humans are not in the untenable position of being separate from the rest of nature. Various levels of consciousness are explainable as qualitative shifts that occur in connection with certain critical thresholds of complexity or integration of structure.[20,22-24] In the words of biophilosopher Jonas:

> The continuity of descent now established between man and the animal world [by the theory of natural selection] made it impossible any longer to regard his mind, and mental phenomena as such, as the abrupt ingression of an ontologically foreign principle at just this point of the total flow. With the last citadel of dualism there also fell the isolation of man, and his own evidence became available again for the interpretation of that to which he belongs. For if it was no longer possible to regard his mind as discontinuous with prehuman biological history, then by the same token no excuse was left for denying mind, in proportionate degrees, to the closer or remoter ancestral forms, and hence to any level of animality. . . .[25(p58)]

For biophilosopher Huxley, the unique ability of the mind to transmute quantity into quality, or fact into sensation, requires an idealist explanation: "For a biologist, much the easiest way is to think of mind and matter as two aspects of a single underlying reality—shall we call it world-substance, the stuff out of which the world is made. At any rate, this fits more of the facts and leads to fewer contradictions than any other view."[26(p77)]

Like Huxley, the American objective idealist Peirce argued that a stimulus must be of the same nature as the sensation it evokes, this nature being one of feeling or consciousness. Otherwise, how could the stimulus evoke any response at all?[27]

The teleological view of evolution assumed by the evolutionary idealist need not involve the Aristotelian conception of final causation, which refers to a causal influence that is exerted by the end-product of a process. Teleological explanation in modern philosophical circles has moved toward the description of innate tendencies within organisms and groups that guide their development.[18-20,22-24,28] The latter teleological view can explain the directional movement of evolution toward greater complexity, integration, and consciousness more satisfactorily than neo-Darwinism. This is not to suggest that the neo-Darwinian mechanism of evolution (random mutation and selective reproduction) is incorrect. It simply does not go far enough. Neo-Darwinism describes the how of evolution; the teleological view of the evolutionary idealist describes the why of evolution.

The ability of evolutionary idealism to encompass the vast range of human experience, mystical and moral as well as scientific, must also be considered one of its strengths. This provides it with a holism of perspective that is lacking in the materialist, positivist world view. The separation of

The ability of evolutionary idealism to encompass the vast range of human experience, mystical and moral as well as scientific, must be considered one of its strengths.

fact from value has become a focus of deep concern to many modern philosophers. It is a logical outcome of Cartesian dualism, again denying the fundamental human experience of unity of self.[23,29]

IMPLICATIONS FOR NURSING THEORY DEVELOPMENT

Current nursing theory encompasses a wide range of concepts and underlying assumptions. Nearly all nursing theorists maintain that their models are holistic, in the sense of attempting to encompass all aspects of the person, not only the physical. However, the monistic ontology of philosophically rigorous holism is suggested by only a few nursing theories. Preeminent among these is Rogers's[7,8] model of unitary human beings, which maintains that the human energy field is an irreducible whole that cannot be described in terms of its parts.

The exploration of evolutionary idealism reveals an ontological foundation that can support and refine holistic nursing theory such as Rogerian science. Two major sources of confusion in Rogers's model are the nature of the energy field and the concept of four-dimensionality. The idealist view of consciousness can help clarify both of these areas and make them more useful and relevant to other nursing theories. Although Rogers has clearly stated that the energy of the human field is not electrical, she does not elaborate on its nature (personal interview, January 1984). A closer look at the unique patterning and four-dimensionality of the human field invites the characterization of it as a field of conscious energy.[9] This avoids the "particulate" view of consciousness that Rogers rejects. The model's characterization of reality as four-dimensional, ie, nonlinear, nonspatial, and nontemporal, appears to be an attempt to capture the fundamental subjective awareness of every energy field. "All reality is four-dimensional" may be restated as "all energy is conscious" with no significant change in meaning.

The teleological view of the evolutionary idealist can also provide a clarification and refinement of Rogers's view of the "life process." To summarize, the evolutionary idealist interprets the purpose of evolution to be the unfolding of consciousness: specifically, the refinement and development of cognition, volition, and emotion (knowledge, power, and feeling). Rogers's correlates of human patterning and principle of helicy reflect her attempt to describe the direction of human evolution. Nearly all of the correlates of human patterning relate to manifestations of consciousness—time experience, sleep-waking-beyond waking, imaginative-visionary qualities, even human field motion (personal interview, January 1984).[8]

The principle of helicy describes the increasing diversity and more rapid rhythms of human field repatterning. Additionally, energy fields are negentropic open systems, which by definition evolve into increasing complexity and integration.[9] Combining these trends of helicy with the evolution of consciousness described by the correlates of human patterning results in a teleology of evolution quite similar to that of many evolutionary idealists. In particular, Teilhard's law of centro-complexity-consciousness[20] and Whitehead's law of the evolution of feeling into greater novelty and intensity[18] provide

a teleological foundation for Rogerian science that is coherent and clear.

Other nursing theories may also draw philosophical support and clarification from some of the key ideas of evolutionary idealism. Newman's theory of expanding consciousness[14] is highly compatible, as is Watson's recent attempt to describe humans as spiritual beings in a dynamically evolving universe.[12] Both Watson and Newman openly acknowledge their intellectual debt to Rogers's pioneering work. Watson also directly pulls one of her key concepts from Whitehead's ontology.[12] Indeed, Rogers herself was apparently influenced by the work of both Whitehead and Teilhard in her early phases of theory development. Thus, the philosophy of evolutionary idealism is not only an appropriate potential metaphysical foundation for nursing theory; it has already exerted a significant, albeit nonsystematic, influence.

An example of a specific, testable nursing theory that could be derived from a philosophy of evolutionary idealism is that experiences of health and illness can promote the development of greater knowledge, feeling, or volition in the individual. The purpose of nursing, then, would be to facilitate this evolutionary development of consciousness in the client. Testing of such a theory may involve such methodologies as phenomenology, which has been widely supported as an appropriate research method for a holistic human science such as nursing.[1,30-33] Phenomenological research, although it does not allow the researcher to bring any preconceived theory to the phenomenon under investigation, may nevertheless uncover trends toward a certain kind of growth, expansion, or deepening of consciousness among certain patient populations. For example, a phenomenological study of the cancer experience currently being conducted by this author is revealing positive changes in patients' attitudes, values, and outlook on life as they progress through the illness. Other nursing studies have also pointed toward this conclusion.[34,35]

IMPLICATIONS FOR NURSING PRACTICE

Holistic nursing theory based on a philosophy of evolutionary idealism validates a wide range of therapeutic nursing interventions. Therapeutic touch has been explained by Krieger[36] as the interaction between the pranic energy of the nurse and the client. Prana is a Sanskrit term meaning "breath" or "life." Its current meaning in ayurvedic medicine is organic energy, referring to the vital organizing energy that regulates and maintains organismic life processes. Prana is a holistic concept, describing an energy that permeates and integrates the living organism. Pranic consciousness knows what it needs to maintain life processes, feels pleasure and pain in relation to this goal of preserving life, and has the will to obtain what is necessary for this goal.[37,38] Within a philosophy of evolutionary idealism, prana can be viewed as a specific level of consciousness that emerges at the beginning of life and remains operative in all living organisms, even when higher levels of consciousness emerge at the human stage of evolution. Pranic energy has not found a satisfactory explanation in current nursing theory, even though therapeutic touch is based on its existence.

Other nursing and self-care therapeutics can be described and classified according to what level of consciousness they influence, and it may be hypothesized that those operating at the later or "higher" levels of consciousness will be of greater influence and will affect all the lower levels of consciousness that are operative in the client. For example, massage may be found to operate primarily at the physical and pranic levels of consciousness. Visualization, or imagery, appears to intervene primarily at the level of mental consciousness. Meditation or prayer influences the client at the level of spiritual consciousness, and its effects will permeate all levels below it. A vast number of traditional and recently developed therapeutic measures can be explained within this framework of a hierarchical organization of conscious energy, and their interactions and effects comprehended.

The ethical implications of a philosophy of evolutionary idealism also have the potential of enhancing nursing practice. The preservation and development of consciousness to its fullest evolutionary potential is the primary value of this philosophy. The client's capacity to find personal meaning in the experience of health or illness will be held as an important goal. The concept of "quality of life" is used by many ethical theorists to provide guidance in decision making. Quality of life can be clarified within the context of a philosophy of evolutionary idealism. Illness, pain, and suffering may be seen as opportunities for the refinement of mental, emotional, or spiritual awareness. Gadow's[39] discussion of the nurse as an existential advocate reflects this view of quality of life. The client is encouraged and assisted to clarify personal values and the personal meaning of the health-illness experience. In essence, the client is the final authority on what a life of quality means to him or her personally. The process of existential advocacy promotes the maximum development of knowledge, feeling, and will of the client. These are the functional modes of consciousness that become the focus of nursing care.

• • •

Nursing theory has yet to fully develop a coherent and comprehensive metaphysical foundation for the generation of theories that can present a holistic view of human beings in their relation with the universe. The ontology and teleology of evolutionary idealism can provide valuable insights as nurse scholars develop their own philosophical foundation. It is not adequate to limit the focus of a philosophy of nursing to human beings as individual units. The human species forms one part of a complex, vast universe, and evolves according to the same laws. Health and illness can also be seen within this larger evolutionary context. Rather than the materialistic, neo-Darwinian view of evolution and health put forth by Dixon and Dixon,[40] it has been proposed that a more appropriate evolutionary philosophy for nursing science will be teleological and holistic rather than mechanistic and reductionistic. Kass makes the choice very clear:

> For man is, at least in origin, akin to nature. This discovery can, of course, lead one in opposite directions. Either man, too,—his felt sense of inwardness, freedom, mind, consciousness, and purposiveness notwithstanding—is to be assimilated to the blind and dumb world of mechanism, or nature must again be seen more in the light of what

common sense has always taken to be naturally human.[28(p251)]

Nursing is at the forefront of the developing human sciences in its effort to put forth a holistic view of human beings in their world. It must ensure that its philosophical foundations are able to fully support its theories in this exciting era of nursing science.

REFERENCES

1. Reeder F: Philosophical issues in the Rogerian science of unitary human beings. *Adv Nurs Sci* 1984;6(2):14-23.
2. Leininger M (ed): *Qualitative Research Methods in Nursing.* New York, Grune & Stratton, 1985.
3. Davis A: The phenomenological approach in nursing research, in Garrison E (ed): *Doctoral Preparation for Nurses with Emphasis on the Psychiatric Field.* San Francisco, University of California, 1973.
4. Monod J: *Chance and Necessity,* Wainhouse A (trans). New York, Knopf, 1971.
5. Delaney CF: *Mind and Nature: A Study of the Naturalistic Philosophy of Cohen, Woodbridge and Sellars.* Notre Dame, Ind, University of Notre Dame, 1969.
6. Sellars RW (ed): *Philosophy for the Future: The Quest of Modern Materialism.* New York, Macmillan, 1949.
7. Rogers ME: Nursing: A science of unitary man, in Riehl J, Roy C (eds): *Conceptual Models for Nursing Practice,* ed 2. New York, Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1980.
8. Rogers ME: Science of unitary human beings: A paradigm for nursing, in Clements IW, Roberts FB (eds): *Family Health: A Theoretical Approach to Nursing Care.* New York, Wiley, 1983.
9. Sarter B: *The Stream of Becoming: A Metaphysical Analysis of Rogers' Model of Unitary Man.* Ann Arbor, University Microfilms, 1984.
10. Travelbee J: *Interpersonal Aspects of Nursing,* ed 2. Philadelphia, FA Davis, 1971.
11. Paterson JG, Zderad LT: *Humanistic Nursing.* New York, Wiley, 1976.
12. Watson J: *Nursing: Human Science and Human Care.* East Norwalk, Conn, Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1985.
13. Parse RR: *Man-Living-Health: A Theory of Nursing.* New York, Wiley, 1981.
14. Newman MA: *Theory Development in Nursing.* Philadelphia, FA Davis, 1979.
15. Rensch B: *Biophilosophy,* Sym CAM (trans). New York, Columbia University, 1971
16. Bohm D: *Wholeness and the Implicate Order.* London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980.
17. Bergson H: *Creative Evolution* (1907), Mitchell A (trans). New York, Harper, 1960.
18. Whitehead AN: *Process and Reality* (1929). New York, Harper, 1965.
19. Teilhard de Chardin P: *The Phenomenon of Man,* Wall B (trans). New York, Harper, 1965.
20. Teilhard de Chardin P: *Activation of Energy,* Hague R (trans). London, Collins, 1970.
21. Aurobindo S: *The Life Divine,* ed 3. New York, India Library Society, 1965.
22. Harris EE: *Nature, Mind and Modern Science.* London, George Allen & Unwin, 1954.
23. Harris EE: *The Foundations of Metaphysics in Science.* London, George Allen & Unwin, 1983.
24. Jantsch E (ed): *The Evolutionary Vision,* American Associate for the Advancement of Science Selected Symposia Series. Boulder, Colo, Westview, 1981, vol 61.
25. Jonas H: *The Phenomenon of Life: Toward a Philosophical Biology.* Chicago, University of Chicago, 1983.
26. Huxley J: *Evolution in Action* (1953). New York, Harper, 1966.
27. Turley PT: *Peirce's Cosmology.* New York, Philosophical Library, 1977.
28. Kaas LR: *Toward a More Natural Science.* New York, Free Press, 1985.
29. Whitehead AN: *Modes of Thought* (1938). New York, Macmillan, 1958.
30. Omery A: Phenomenology: A method for nursing research. *Adv Nurs Sci* 1983;5(2):49-63.
31. Knaack P: Phenomenological research. *West J Nurs Res* 1984;6(1):107-114.
32. Ray MA: A philosophical method to study nursing phenomena, in Leininger M (ed): *Qualitative Research Methods in Nursing.* New York, Grune & Stratton, 1985.
33. Swanson-Kauffman KM: A combined qualitative methodology for nursing research. *Adv Nurs Sci* 1986;8(3):58-69.
34. Reed PG: Religiousness among terminally ill and healthy adults. *Res Nurs Health* 1986;9:35-41.
35. Kesselring A, Dodd MJ, Strauss AL: Attitudes of patients living in Switzerland about cancer and its treatment. *Cancer Nurs* 1986;9(2):77-85.

36. Krieger D: *The Therapeutic Touch: How to Use Your Hands to Help or to Heal.* Englewood Cliffs, NJ, Prentice-Hall, 1979.
37. Das Gupta SN: *A History of Indian Philosophy.* Cambridge, Cambridge University, 1932, vol 2.
38. Filiozat J: *The Classical Doctrine of Indian Medicine,* Chanana DR (trans). Delhi, India, Munshiram Manoharlal, 1964.
39. Gadow S: Existential advocacy: The nurse's role, in Spicker SF, Gadow S (eds): *Nursing, Images and Ideals: Opening Dialogue with the Humanities.* New York, Springer, 1980.
40. Dixon JK, Dixon JP: An evolutionary-based model of health and viability. *Adv Nurs Sci* 1984;6(3):1-18.