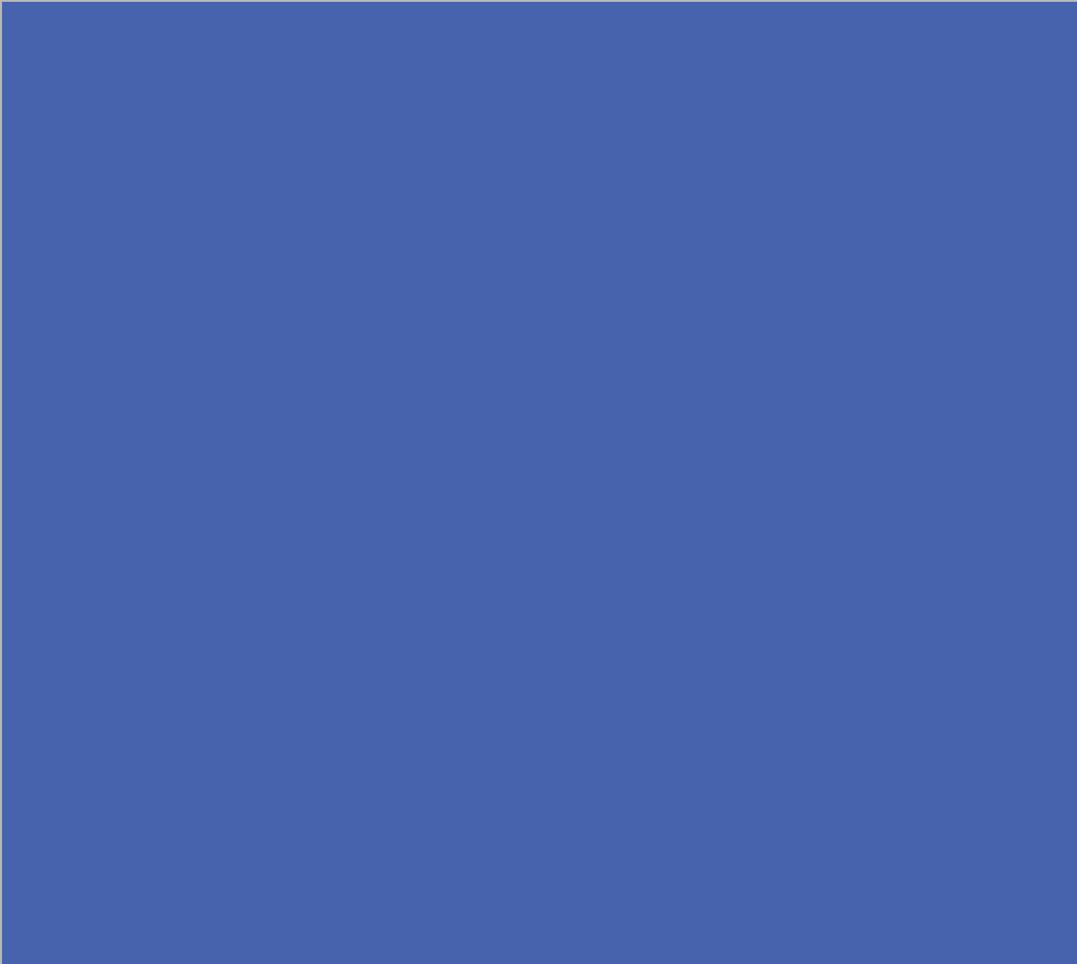


# Existential Analysis

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Journal of The Society for Existential Analysis



# Existential Analysis

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Edited by:

Simon du Plock

Martin Adams

January 2017



**The Society for Existential Analysis**

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# EDITORIAL

This, the first edition of the twenty-eighth volume of *Existential Analysis*, contains fourteen papers. It opens with no fewer than six papers originally given at last year's Society for Existential Analysis Annual Conference. Each reflects in different ways what was evoked by the conference title 'Insider/Outsider': Michael Montgomery, Richard Pearce, Marty Radlett and Manu Bazzano, in particular, offer radical and inspiring perspectives which argue that existential therapists can make an impact on wider political, social and economic conditions. Simon du Plock's paper from the ninth Conference of the East European Association for Existential Therapy makes a further contribution to this theme.

In addition to these rousing conference papers, the Journal also includes accounts of innovative research – an existentially-informed hermeneutic phenomenological analysis of decision-making among senior mental health practitioners, and an IPA study of therapist's experience of death anxiety, contributed by Simon Wharne, and Mark Vehrmeyer and Simon Cassar (respectively). Edgar Correia's paper on existential therapy's relationship with empirical research provides a valuable addition to our understanding of the ways in which our resistance to developing empirical research methodologies contributes to keeping us 'on the fringes of mainstream practice' – and in the process links again to notions of 'Insider/Outsider', and just where we want to position ourselves.

This edition welcomes Martin Adams (previously Book Review Editor since 2006) as a co-editor, in place of Dr Greg Madison, who made an enormous contribution to *Existential Analysis* in this role from July 2007 until earlier this year. Other recent changes have been Sarah Ferguson taking over distribution and Richard Swann becoming the Peer Review Coordinator. We are therefore looking for a new Book Review Editor and people who are interested in this are requested to contact the editors.

**Simon du Plock**  
**Martin Adams**

# Radical Existentialism – The Outsider

Talk given at the Society for Existential Analysis Annual Conference, London, 30 September 2016

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**Michael R. Montgomery**

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## Abstract

A train of thought prompted by the key conference question is followed down a rabbit hole, finding Colin Wilson, author of *The Outsider* and a New Existentialism, and eventually emerging as a potential book outline on the state of existentialism in the current European context.

## Introduction

It is a great honour and a privilege to be speaking at the conference once again. I hope to keep within the aims of the SEA today, and simply express some views, and exchange a few ideas. Perhaps we might even have some collective effervescence in terms of how we connect (Durkheim, 1995).

Our Society speaks of promoting existential thinking. When referring to existential thinkers and practitioners today, Erik Craig (2015, p.81) suggests they ‘constitute a vibrant global community of individuals and groups who gather the meanings of lived experience wherever they find the human breath and heartbeat’. Perhaps there will also be something of that here.

The organising committee posed the question, ‘What does insider/outsider evoke – especially when considering some of the current challenges facing Europe today?’ This article represents a train of thought – where my mind went in response to that question.

The first thing that occurred was a short satirical story by Steven Millhauser (2006), ‘The Dome’. In it he describes how we start to put domes over our lives and our property and our things, and how this process expands and extends until everything is under the dome. I began to think about the UK in terms of a similarly allegorical dome, and how for many years we’ve been looking out but now have people desperately trying to get in.

## The Outsider and *The Outsider*

My mind then turned to Camus and his novel *The Outsider*. At around the same time as the announcement regarding the conference theme, I had finished reading Sarah Bakewell’s popular book, *At the Existentialist Café*, in which she dedicated four pages to Colin Wilson (1931-2013). I had not heard of Wilson at the time, but 60 years ago he wrote an important book, also called *The Outsider* (Wilson, 1956/2016). It was published to resplendent reviews in the weekend press, and sold out in hardback on the following Monday. It

has never been out of print since and is published in over 30 languages. It is difficult to describe the level of buzz around *The Outsider* when it appeared. Kenneth Walker, of the BBC's *The Listener* magazine pronounced it 'the most remarkable book upon which the reviewer ever had to pass judgement'. Its success was not restricted to the UK: *The Outsider* was also an instant international bestseller. *The New York Times* praised 'the newest prodigy on the English literary scene... where young Wilson got his knowledge baffled the critics... that he had, there could be no mistake'.

In its fusing of literature and existential thought, *The Outsider* was an unlikely success. The breadth of sources that it covered was remarkable, bringing attention for the first time to many unknown or untranslated classics. This range and the speed at which Wilson discussed them led some to question his depth and accuracy (Dossor, 1991). The focus of his work was principally alienation, creativity and the modern mind. Wilson's Outsider was a person with a pressing hunger for meaning and spiritual purpose in a world seemingly bent on denying him these very things. He drew from thinkers and artists alike: Nietzsche, Nijinsky, Van Gogh, T. E. Lawrence, Sartre and Hölderlin.

Wilson was perplexed by the idea that someone like Van Gogh could paint *The Starry Night*, yet a short time later kill himself, asking 'will the misery never end?' So, which was real – the misery or these life-affirming and intense experiences? This is a dichotomy that Wilson also observed with the Romantics. He went on to say (Wilson, 1956: p 273), 'heaven after death is irrelevant... the way forward is into more life, life itself is an exile, the way home is not the way back'. What he was pointing to is the necessity for self-actualisation, and he had a very particular understanding of that, as opposed to going back to the comfort and security of the mundane. He believed that man should and could strive to be more than just a happy, well-fed animal.

## **The Outsider's Outsider**

Very quickly, if not from its inception, the focus shifted from the writing to the man. Wilson became the story; and what a story he was. He was only 23 when he wrote this extraordinary book, 24 when it was published. (At 23 I probably couldn't have got past the first three pages.) He had left school at 16, and had no further formal education. He was from a working-class background in Leicester and lived a desultory, hand-to-mouth existence, doing an assortment of unrelated jobs. The media salivated at the fact that, to save money while writing some of the book, he was living rough on Hampstead Heath. During the day he would stow his sleeping bag and cycle to the British Library Reading Room, where he would write *The Outsider* (and also try to finish his first novel). On publication, he was catapulted almost overnight headlong into a whirl of

international celebrity, rubbing shoulders with T.S. Eliot, Marilyn Monroe, Camus himself, Aldous Huxley and Henry Miller.

Wilson's meteoric rise was followed by an equally swift downfall: he went from lionised literary darling to pariah within the space of about 18 months. There was a defining incident when his future in-laws arrived at his bedsit where he was having dinner with his future wife, Joy. Joy's parents had read and mistaken Wilson's notes for his first novel – which was about a sadistic sexual murderer – as his diary. A horsewhip was produced. An umbrella was swung. A kerfuffle ensued, and tabloids were informed. In an effort to rectify the misunderstanding, Wilson naively gave the in-laws his actual diary. It was, as might be expected, very personal. In certain sections he referred to himself as a genius and to others who weren't as 'half-livers'. *The Daily Mail* published extracts highlighting his immodesty. Evidently it is one thing to have talent, quite another to be self-aggrandising about it.

But it fascinates me to think that the tabloids have never been more existential. (Can you imagine Kim Kardashian being knocked off the celebrity page in favour of Ernesto Spinelli?)

The literary world felt that Wilson had squandered his promise, that he was an upstart member of The Angry Young Men – the celebrated 1960s anti-establishment coterie of playwrights and authors (Wilson, 2005). R.D. Laing (1980) makes the point that what we commonly think of as the 60s actually occurred in the 50s, so a lot of really interesting and original anti-establishment writing had its genesis there. Arguably, in a bitter act of revenge, and in an effort to slam shut the once-open door, the critics savaged Wilson's (1957) next book, *Religion and the Rebel*. One of the more sinister aspects of their reaction was his dismissal as an autodidact. The implication here is that Wilson was appropriating wisdom that properly belonged within the purview of the establishment, and that only those with the proper credentials could challenge this prevailing order. In short, he was a vulgar *arriviste*.

One senior academic I contacted expressed some regret about this, as he had originally been very negative about Wilson's philosophy. It should be noted that few critics at the time addressed the substance of his work but rather seemed to be defending their own reputation. The tabloids hounded him around London, then to Ireland, to Devon and eventually to Cornwall, where he remained for 50 years, until his death in 2013 (Lachman, 2016).

### *The New Existentialism*

What fascinates me as someone interested in existential thinking and living, is that despite his harsh treatment, Wilson didn't stop. Indeed, he went on to write six books within this Outsider cycle, and then a summary he called *Introduction to the New Existentialism* (Wilson, 1966). (He had

wanted to call it ‘phenomenological existentialism’ but decided the word wasn’t very accessible.)

Wilson decried existentialism for its atmosphere of gloom, or at least its stoical kind of optimism, and he felt that a limit or dead end had been reached in terms of its development. He criticised ideas like *contingency* in favour of peak experience. The American psychologist Abraham Maslow contacted him and initiated a dialogue about whether peak experience can be experienced at will. Wilson proposed that the New Existentialism needed to reconsider the work of Edmund Husserl and the structure of consciousness, whilst remaining free from Cartesian dualism.

Wilson shared a platform with R.D. Laing, who challenged him on his optimism, deeming it shallow. In return, Wilson questioned Laing’s pessimism. He thought Laing and Merleau-Ponty represented something of the flavour of the New Existentialism, and he was very hopeful of the existential psychology of Boss and Binswanger.

Wilson’s work is in no need of an apologist. One of his biographers said ‘his work has the profound effect of assessing us, by providing a yardstick with which we might measure our intelligence and legitimacy of our philosophical vision. In a world where almost every feature of living has been transmuted into a commercial commodity and in which values have become marred in materialism, Wilson challenges us to think in higher terms’ (Dossor, 2014).

Colin Wilson went on to write and publish some 130 books in all, over 300 book reviews plus more than a hundred introductions to other people’s books: an astonishing tally by any estimation. He was something of a workaholic and said ‘the average man is a conformist, accepting miseries and disasters with the stoicism of a cow standing in a field’.

He had the idea of a robotic consciousness in opposition to one that is much more aware of possibilities and potentialities. The robot is a labour-saving device that supports us and takes care of the little or mundane tasks so we don’t have to. For example, if you are doing simple data entry on a computer and then consciousness moves into this sort of automated robotic typing, which can serve you very well, you can think about other things while typing. But Wilson’s point is that at times the robot seems to have gone beyond its usefulness, and we lose something of our intuitive experience. He called for a more sensitive and a fairer society as a result of a more aware consciousness.

I believe that Wilson was in many ways a forgotten existentialist – although this year did see the first conference in his honour, at The University of Nottingham. This month a new, comprehensive biography is published, *Beyond the Robot* (Lachman, 2016), plus a revised and colossal bibliography (Stanley, 2015). My contention is that Wilson should be remembered for provoking some significant existential thinking. Bakewell (2016) was both

unkind and inaccurate when she said he became an angry old man. That was a reference to one incident involving a reviewer who came to meet Wilson having, it transpired, already written his piece. Wilson was annoyed by this, and rightly so. In person, he was described as warm, charming, cheerful, generous and upbeat (Lachman, 2016). He liked to think of himself as the optimistic existentialist, but he was a realist too. He said ‘being alive is grimly hard work... including kings and millionaires’ (Wilson, 2005, p.384). If he were here I think what he would say is, ‘Who among you will write the next great existential novel or the great existential book? If not one of you, then who?’ That would be Colin Wilson’s attitude towards our potential.

### *Relevancy & Frequency*

That little rabbit hole that led to Colin Wilson evokes something very interesting in terms of who decides or contributes to what is relevant. I do recalling reading Wilson in terms of some of his forensic commentary: it stayed with me, but I remained unaware of his body of work. In *The Outsider*, he cited, discussed and brought to public awareness many names that hadn’t been much heard-of at the time. Herman Hesse is a good example. The popularity of Hesse’s work in the Sixties can be in some measure directly attributed to Wilson’s discussion of it. (When Wilson wrote *The Outsider*, only one of Hesse’s books was available in English.) I thought about Simone de Beauvoir and how it seems increasingly more difficult to find her work in print, and how much media and academia really influences what remains relevant.

I enjoy playing around with the Books Ngram viewer – the Google application that allows you to see how the frequency of words in books has fluctuated over the years. Put in Aleister Crowley, who Wilson wrote about, and you can see that frequency flatlines in interest until 1947 when he died, and then spikes. This posthumous level was sustained for about ten years, also fuelled by publication of a biography, then starts to taper off. In 1967 it dramatically spikes again. This coincided with the release of the Beatles’ album, *Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band*, which included Crowley in the photomontage of the Beatles’ friends on the cover. 2.5 million copies of the album were sold in 3 months, providing Crowley with a new audience for his published works.

The greatest relevancy can become irrelevant in the space of a heartbeat. This fascinated me when it came to philosophy and the state of existentialism. I thought that if a book was to be written on existentialism today, what would need to be in it to make it really relevant?

### *The Most Powerful Object*

Then I thought, now we’ve got eBooks, is a book still relevant? In fact, in 2015, digital book sales fell for the first time (Tivnan, 2016). Part of that can

be attributed to the growth (£58–175m) in self-published eBooks, but I think what's also happened is there is more of a balancing-out as people discover the advantages and disadvantages of eBooks. They've evolved to co-exist – just like the war between papyrus and codex some 2,000 years ago.

For me, a book still retains a lot of power. Houston (2016) describes it as the most powerful object of our time. I tend to agree. This assemblage of wood pulp and glue really is an extraordinary technological artefact: it doesn't need electricity, and there is no capacity for central censorship. (With eBooks, you could remove a word or a paragraph by the click of a switch or keystroke; and in years to come, how would you know?) You can read more than one book at a time, which is something I tend to do. You can write in the margin. You can smell them (they smell great). They're cheap, lendable, portable, theft-proof (no one's going to break into a car to steal a book) and replaceable (in case someone actually does).

In May, this year I went to Auschwitz-Birkenau. In an exhibition there I was reminded that books are also weapons in the war of ideas: they can challenge a regime, shake an ideology to its foundations. I was struck by the fact that some of the books that the Nazis destroyed were on passivism, and not just works by Jewish intellectuals like Freud. Literature itself was also a threat: Hermann Hesse was on the list. I was also reminded of the quotation, 'the opposite of love is not hate; it is indifference'. This is often attributed to Elie Wiesel but actually Heinz Kohut (1913-1981) was on to the idea many years before in his neutrality of empathy. I thought back again to the refugees and migrants. I don't believe it is hatred of these desperate people that poses the greatest threat to them: it's indifference. When I imagine the stories that will inevitably come over the next few months – of more drownings, of more stowaways half-suffocated in lorries, more people freezing in camps – again I return to this idea of the dome, of us looking out and them trying to get in.

### *Radical Existentialism*

I digress because my mind then went back to the question of what is an existentialist today – referring to someone who still connects to the heart and spirit of existentialism. The reason I reference Bakewell's book is because I think it has recently done more to popularise – or re-popularise – the idea of existentialism. Again, back to relevancy, and maybe a window has opened here. Bakewell offers quite a nostalgic and historical view of existentialism, helping to differentiate the trend. The turtlenecks are nearly all gone now and perhaps some of the pessimism with them, but she did say this: 'existentialism has never seemed as raw and as dangerous as it did back then' (Bakewell, 2016: p 317). I think she got that fundamentally wrong.

So, how can I say something that will make it a bit rawer, a bit more dangerous? I concluded the title of the book would have to be *Radical*

*Existentialism.* Aboard ‘The Enterprise’, Mr Spock insists, ‘specifics, doctor – a label is not an argument’ (*Star Trek*, 1967), and I hope to give some specifics as to why it is radical. But I thought isn’t this a fantastic existential statement when working with people who tend to over-label, particularly some psychiatrists (‘specifics, doctor...’)? When Wilson (1966, p 161) said ‘existentialism has more in common with science fiction than with academic philosophy’, he intended something very specific indeed. He meant as ‘a response to the fundamental alienation of being from power, meaning and purpose’ – arguably relevant and radical.

Cooper (1999) posits this idea of the average or ideal existentialist. An ideal existentialist embodies the rational reconstruction of existential thought. Colin Wilson’s view might embody the intuitive reconstruction of existential thought aided by the intellect, but I think the radical existentialist is in this area. Existentialism has always been radical, both in its spirit and heart and in its philosophical outlook and accessibility. Think only of the radical phenomenology of Heidegger, the radical freedom of Sartre, the radical rediscovery of perception and embodiment by Merleau-Ponty, and the radical passivity of Levinas: all radical in their expression.

Some of Heidegger’s most interesting concepts don’t even have a hyphen in them – ideas like *care*, *moods*, and his increasingly relevant writings on our relationship to *technology*. When considering the radical freedom of Sartre, and working clinically, I see people who, when they really come into the awareness of their choice, tend to make better ethical selections for themselves rather than excuse or pass over their decisions. For all the criticism that Sartre’s political choices drew, it should be remembered that he had huge social impact, on people such as Martin Luther King Jr., helping shape the latter’s thinking on segregation; on Frantz Fanon (1952) and his work on the impact of colonialism; and of course on the structuralists and post-structuralists. I think yes, there are some question marks over these figures too, but when we strip away the hero-worship and get back to the original heart and spirit of existentialism and how it relates to how to live it, I think some of these issues are resolved (even, dare I say it, Heidegger’s terrible relationship with national socialism).

### *Spirit of Existentialism*

I include Levinas because he seems to be becoming a symbol for people, a symbol of Otherness and, again, a counter to some of the other philosophers. But I think these ideas have the capacity to comfort the disturbed and to disturb the comfortable. When you get back to the essence, to what can be lived, Sartre (1946/2007, p 53) said, ‘Existentialism is merely an attempt to draw all the conclusions inferred by a consistently atheistic point of view.’ And of course, Sartre didn’t mean traditional atheism. Although if you’ve ever had to think your way out of a religion, a dogmatic religion, to stand

alone against your family and society, then I think you approach something akin to what he is talking about. I believe he's also referring to a starting point, that if there were conclusive proof of a God, it wouldn't change the existential position. I like to think in terms of the aliens test: if there were conclusive proof of them, would that change the existential view? And I think that's a very important test for some of these ideas. As Sartre said (1946/2007, p 54), 'in this sense, existentialism is optimistic, it is a doctrine of action'.

### *Have You Felt It?*

There's been an awakening. Things are going on – for example, the 'radical openness' Sullivan and Goldenberg (2016) referred to in their article in *Hermeneutic Circular*. This strikes me as a fundamentally good thing. Let's be honest, not all existentialists are radically open: they can be radically closed – to other ways of being, to other ways of doing therapy. Then there's Dead White Philosophers (Mitchell and Radlett, 2016). I think what they actually said was dead white *male* philosophers. This touches something for me called the 'burn and the turn'. When you hear something like this, particularly if you happen to be male, white and revere some dead philosophers, you might experience a bit of a burn – a sensitivity or a reactive, a defensive impulse. And I think you have an opportunity. Either you turn away, perhaps lob an insult, or you turn back and face what is being said and you ask, is something being disclosed here, is something being touched upon?

Another example for me is Black Lives Matter (MacDonald, 2016). There is a burn: shall I choose to turn away, saying 'do not all lives matter?' Or am I going to turn back and try and hear some very difficult things that are being said, things that might challenge my own sense of white privilege or however people want to conceptualise it?

### *Radical Action*

I think there is some Radical Action happening and it's great to follow up on the previous year's conference. Greg Madison utilised an Open Dialogue approach, garnered enthusiasm and connections to help facilitate the Living Psychology Course at the Free University Brighton (Gander, 2013). He's got a group of us to go down and do a six-week course, four hours for each session on a Saturday, and that was just out of his engagement in the conference. Some of what Greg says results in a personal burn, but the more I can turn towards, the more I can hold that sensitivity, the more I can actually expand because it's challenging to me.

### *The post-existentialism of Del Loewenthal*

Loewenthal calls out existentialism for its narcissism, its egotism, for its brush with fascism. He brings in ideas like Foucault's critique of phenomenology

and Deleuze and Guattari and other core ideas from structuralism and post-structuralism. He talks from a practical point of view in a clinical way that ideas can arise rather than be framed up. So he even talks about psychoanalysis and how ideas from that can actually present themselves.

### *The Radical Turn in Existential Therapy*

Ernesto Spinelli presented three grand theories in his keynote last year, and in the Journal. It's an incredible piece of work that is worth taking the time to try and digest. He spoke of the I-you-being, and he's in the realm of relatedness, embeddedness, wholeness, non-duality; but he also said something I found really significant in that article: 'each of us is responsible for everything and to every being' (Spinelli, 2016: p325). In the click of a keyboard or the flick of a pen he brought in the environment and also nodded to the non-human turn (Grusin, 2015). But my mind started going, and again I started thinking that really resonates with me very deeply, something in the realm of truth perhaps. But is it truth, is it an ideology or is it theory?

### *Radical Ideology – Radical Thinking*

I reflected that within contemporary existentialism I believe there has been such a focus on ontology that something has been lost – a little clarity about what is true and what is not true, what we can know and what we cannot.

Donald Trump said 'it is not truth that matters, it is victory'. Actually I don't know whether he said that; Hitler is on record as having stated it. But that is my point: today's defenders of truth seem to me to be the traffickers in ideology. So I think there's a chapter in this potential book to do with radical ideology, or to be thinking about ideology radically. I don't mean the obvious ones of religious and political ideology: I'm thinking in terms of the subtler ones, of people who immediately try to turn method into truth. (We've all seen that therapist who believes they have found the truth of what they're doing.)

Radical existentialists have a task of challenging some of these things, but it's nothing new. Emmy van Deurzen reminds us that existentialism is grounded in this. 'Kierkegaard and Nietzsche. Both were in conflict with the predominant ideologies of their time and committed to the exploration of reality as it can be experienced in a passionate and personal manner' (van Deurzen, 2006). The dogma and objectivity of Christianity of its time and freedom from conventional morality: these were the ideologies she was referring to.

Let's look at a few examples of subtle ideology and how and why it needs to be radically challenged.

*'I cannot be racist because I voted for Obama'.*

I would propose that a lot of the racial tensions in America at the minute can come back to the fact that people voted for President Obama (Gorlick, 2009). This behaviour links to the phenomenon of moral credentials or licensing (Merritt *et al.*, 2010). The idea that if I do something that is perceived as morally positive, it can strengthen one's self-image; but as a result makes one less worried about the consequences of immoral behaviour.

*'I have always really been nice to Jewish people for years and years so now it's ok for me to be anti-Semitic'.*

A great visual example of this is Tony Soprano, from the TV drama *The Sopranos*. He'll dutifully go on his exercise bike and then wolf down a big bowl of ice-cream. It's that same concept: 'I've voted for Obama so I can now be loose in how I am behaving towards others.'

Another case that I think is very current is the idea of resurrective ideology, which is steeped in the work of Robert Stolorow (Stolorow, 2009). It posits the idea that in response to trauma and vulnerability, people can form collective beliefs about one's being-in-the-world that seek to bring back to life the absolutisms that have been nullified. So let's take another instance. After 9/11 happened, America could have moved towards a real state of vulnerability, existential kinship-in-the-same-darkness, but instead moved into a resurrective ideology: the war on terror, a war that promised to resurrect the pseudo-security experience on American soil prior to the terrible events of that day.

You could pick virtually any early speech by Hitler and see this in play – when he talks about the Germany of old, the Germany of our forefathers.

*We can make Germany great again → We can make America great again. → Trump.*

So it's a dynamic that is very current. From a radical existential point of view, these are the things that should be challenged, people should be going deeper, not just saying they are racist or nationalist in a derogatory way, but actually trying to make sense of what may be going on, what is served by repugnant beliefs.

One last example. I was asked to speak at a school about young people's concerns around sex and sexual consent – a real worry, certainly among 14- and 15-year-olds. There was something influencing and impacting some of these concerns: a 'you know you want it' ideology. This is an ideology propagated by the pornography industry that states women like and want violence and degradation. 88% of the top titles in pornography when surveyed had physical aggression, including gagging, asphyxiation, slapping and verbal degradation (Paul, 2006). But what's happening with

some young people today is that they are starting to absorb this ideology into their sexual identity, particularly young men whose first exposure to pornography is this very hardcore material. The violent objectification of women's bodies and minds is the norm for young people who have prolonged exposure to these images.

Recent research released in Australia highlighting the unprecedented sexual pressure that young people are under gives voices to 15-year-old girls who have had sex before kissing (Hontiveros, 2016). That is, sexual contact before intimacy. Rather than reveal a shift in social norms, it reveals harassment, bullying and exposure to extreme images that the girls go on record saying they don't want – 'but you know you want it', right? The other issue, which is not being discussed, is children having unbridled access to this type of pornography 24 hours a day, every day. 90% of 16 to 24-year-olds have access to a smartphone (Ofcom, 2015; Busch, 2016). In the group of people that I was talking to, that figure was 100%. Some 80% of pornography is accessed in this way. This was not being discussed at home or in school; nor the fact that searches for 'porno', 'porn', and 'xxx' remain the top- three most searched-for terms on Google across society.

In Germany, another issue that some young girls had was fear of the big Other – of rape in the dark by the hooded stranger or the migrant. Perhaps there was some projection of the fears around the girls' emerging sexuality.

However, one of the issues for some people not from the West is that their first exposure to a western woman is online through pornography that portrays women as wanting the experience to be violent and degrading. In other words, they potentially come to imbue the ideology of 'you know you want it'. So it may go a little way to explaining some of the concerns around events such as sexual assaults at festivals or the mass assaults on women on New Year's Eve 2015 in cities across Germany.

### *Radical Constructivism*

My mind then returned to the question of what is truth? When I was conducting the McDonaldization research (Montgomery, 2015), it was very hard to get senior practitioners to pin down and verbalise what their idea of reality and truth was, what they knew, how they knew it was. So I think it necessary to dedicate some time in the book to pin that down. The title of that chapter would be Radical Constructivism (von Glaserfeld, 1984; 1991).

Constructivism is the idea that knowledge is actively constructed by the learner, not passively received from the environment (Dougiamas, 1998: p 1). In a conversation about learning outcomes, Dida Mitchell said 'an outsider can't put a foreign object in you'. This becomes an essential idea when one considers the whole area of one person trying to label another. This, in turn, also opens up the world of social constructionism: the idea

that history, media, power, language, privilege all influence how people construct what they know. But radical constructivism goes further. It says that ‘coming to know is a process of dynamic adaptation towards viable interpretations of experience. The knower does not necessarily construct knowledge of a real world’ (Dougiamas, 1998: p 1). But very importantly, nor do they deny that one exists; they just question that it is knowable in the conventional sense.

Simone de Beauvoir, who I think was very much a radical existentialist really, touches on this. She was with Sartre in a restaurant near Euston Station, and they were having an argument about their experience of London and his attempt to reduce it to a theory. In one of the few times she really concretely disagreed with his philosophy, she said ‘I maintain that reality extends beyond anything that can be said about it, that instead of reducing it to symbols capable of verbal expression, we should face it as it is, full of ambiguities, baffling and impenetrable’ (de Beauvoir, 1986: p 144). To summarise it in the words of W. B. Yeats (1939), ‘man can embody the truth but he cannot know it’. As von Glasersfeld (1991, p3) states, ‘the ultimate level of experiential reality can only be achieved through interaction with cognitive entities... therefore in the radical constructivist view, the need to consider others is not an ethical assumption but an epistemological requirement’.

The crux of why I think this clarification is really important is it replaces truth with viabilities. So it’s a way of working and cutting through concepts that might cause pain. ‘People matter more than concepts and must come first. The worst of all despotisms is the heartless tyranny of ideas’ (Johnson, 1988: p 342). von Glasersfeld (1991), urges us to give up the requirement that knowledge represents an independent world and admit instead that knowledge represents something that is far more important to us, namely what we can do in our experiential world.

### *Radical Conditions*

So I think the last chapter in the book would need to touch on this idea of experiential worlds, which I believe are changing rapidly, driven by technology. In Alvin Toffler’s classic *Future Shock* (1970), he said that ‘the illiterate of the future will not be those who cannot read but those who cannot learn, unlearn and relearn’. Since Toffler published those words, the speed and reach of technological change have been staggering.

Technologies help connect us faster, gather news, map the planet, and compile knowledge. We are becoming more dependent on an instantaneous network where time and space appear compressed. Rushkoff (2014) argues the dissonance between our digital selves and our analogue bodies has thrown us into a new state of anxiety – present shock, the ever-present now, the ever-growing capacity to feel like we are everywhere at once. An

incident happens in Iraq or in Paris, and we can access media images from every angle. What is that doing to our experience? The Pokémon Go app has been downloaded 500 million times. Is this the moment in history that augmented reality has really started to happen?

The concept of singularity (Lanier, 2010), where human consciousness would be somehow uploaded online, seems a little redundant. The internet is coming down to us. Soon you'll pick up a book and it will tell you the latest promotional price and it will have the reviews because you'll be using some sort of goggles to augment reality. If you think that's far-fetched, it is predicted that 80% of the world will have a smartphone by 2020 (*The Economist*, 2015). 80% of the planet will be connected to a manmade system for the first time. Technology is showing no signs of slowing down. Have we even begun to consider the impact and ethics of advanced robotic technologies?

Things simply move too fast: 'before one can accustom oneself to an invention, it is already supplanted by a new one, so that one more and more lacks the most elementary "cognitive mapping" needed to grasp these developments' (Žižek, 2014: p 65). This really shows in the work previously cited on pornography and smartphones. You're in a school where parents actually haven't comprehended that children hold unfettered access to the most violent and obscene material within their hands. It also seems to be the generation that has had the most free access to information in history, and the one that is the least interested. From a radical existentialist point of view, it brings us back to this idea of alienation: how do we remain engaged in a technologically driven world without drowning in it? What I see in my own practice and in my immediate world is alienation that's been responded to by varying forms of numbing. I see it everywhere: in people's increased checking of their smartphones (Andrews *et al.*, 2015); in consumption of pornography, substances and food. I think the radical existentialist has something very important to say about these issues.

Karl Marx said that philosophers have only interpreted the world; the point is to change it. Love him or loathe him, Slavoj Žižek (2015, p 1), a self-proclaimed communist, critiqued Marx and said remarkably 'today we maybe try to change it too quickly, the time is to interpret again, the time is to start thinking'. I think for the radical existentialist, one of the most important questions that could be asked today is how do we truly remain free? We, referring to the 'we' of Spinelli – of all beings.

So I have shared with you my train of thought that started with *The Outsider*, that led into Colin Wilson, the forgotten existentialist, and ended up with this idea of radical existentialism: a response to the fundamental alienation of being from power, meaning and purpose. Colin Wilson said 'the mind has exactly the same power as the hands, not merely to grasp the world but to change it'. Radical existentialism, existentialism radical.

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Dedicated to the life and work of:

*Colin Henry Wilson (26 June 1931–5 December 2013).*

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# Towards a Radical Psychotherapy

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## Abstract

This paper<sup>i</sup> considers the way in which perceptions of the ‘other’ change with the socio-cultural and physical environments that encompass our experiences. Using concepts from the Sartrean tradition, I argue that when we facilitate change in the way that another person experiences the world, we are acting both politically and from a radical perspective.

## Key Words

Anxiety, consciousness, self, other, authenticity, political, radical, psychotherapy.

## Introduction

We live in a world that is characterised by discord and violence. Increasingly an air of pessimism pervades thoughts of the future, and the anger and hatred expressed in relations with what is considered ‘other’ seems to grow. Following the near collapse of finance capitalism, and internationally engendered civil wars, societies (within and across borders) appear more and more fractured, and although this has given rise to a variety of social movements, increasingly we see the rise of polemics similar to those of the 1930s, those dominated by a worldview that emphasises *hierarchy*, *difference* and *discipline*. It is these three words, I argue, that encapsulate the outlook that pervades the aftermath of social trauma, that engender and respond to a *zeitgeist* that is pervaded by a deepening of existential anxiety.

In arguing for a ‘radical’ psychotherapy<sup>ii</sup>, I am not necessarily suggesting that many of us do not approach or work in this way already, but rather making the case that if we are to carry out our role with authenticity, an awareness of the radical foundations of our work is pertinent. A starting point here is that our work is always social. This is axiomatic once one accepts the pervasiveness of social trauma. This arises, I argue, because social trauma is personal in its implications, and personal trauma always has social consequences.

All of us live *in* the world, in society, we are not absent from it at any time. Personal trauma, a consequence of experience, is the manifestation of anxiety that always has social consequences. We cannot detach from these consequences. Here I attempt to explore some of the implications

for both counsellors and psychotherapists in the current context of social and cultural change. In so doing, I first consider the bedrock of trauma that is anxiety, before going on to outline what I consider to be the ethical basis of our work with reference to the philosophical roots of existentialism provided by Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir. Finally, I argue the case for regarding our work as essentially political and, following Bazzano (2016) supporting a view that is both progressive and radical.

### **A note on anxiety**

We are anxious beings, it is a part of who we are, and is one of the elements that defines us as human. Our anxiety is borne from our sense of uncertainty. Nothing is certain in our world; whether concerned with the outcomes of events or actions that are past, or those that have yet to take place, our world is coloured by uncertainty of varying degree. In part this uncertainty arises from the responses of ourselves or others to contexts that we engender or which directly concern us; and in part to events outside of our immediate sphere of influence, but which describe the context in which we exist. By saying that something is uncertain, we are saying it is, in some degree, unpredictable; that the outcomes of events are not, and cannot be fully known. The anxiety borne of this fundamental uncertainty, I describe as *existential* anxiety. An anxiety that pervades and defines our existence, and also underpins all states that are misleadingly described as examples of psychological dysfunction.

In response to this pervading sense of anxiety we attempt to build structures, ways of seeing ourselves in the world that coalesce around a notion of ‘who’ we are. I have argued (Pearce, 2016), following Sartre, that we approach an awareness of self pre-reflectively, but that this sense is dynamic in the way that it interacts with our reflected knowledge of the world. But this perception of identity, however fleeting or even misconceived, is a structure through which we attempt to ameliorate anxiety, to make our ‘self’ safe in an uncertain world. It allows us to find value in an otherwise meaningless world. The more comfortable we are with this identity; the more we are able to feel included, accepted or connected, the less the threat of uncertainty pervades our consciousness.

The anxiety we live is a part of us, but our ability to manage this is contextual. The word ‘trauma’ is generally taken to refer to a ‘deeply distressing or disturbing experience’; we can interpret this as meaning an experience that threatens our ability to coherently manage our contextual anxiety, that threatens the structure that is our sense of ‘self’. As psychotherapists we are very aware of the way in which personal traumas may threaten such structures, leaving individuals open to the invasion and consolidation of fears: shells permeated by the toxicity of uncertainty. But there is also social trauma, the anguish of social change that may lead to the falling away of the expected,

the recognisable, of everything that marks our world as 'safe'. And when we encounter trauma we may seek to reinforce these structures, to pursue certainties in our attempts to counter our growing anxiety. I believe, however, that there is always a personal face to social trauma, just as there is a social face to personal trauma: one reinforces the other.

### **Hierarchy, discipline and difference<sup>iii</sup>**

Social trauma may take many forms, have many depths, and even though our times are coloured by a plethora of events that might be considered 'traumatic', it is seldom absent in an uncertain world. What concerns us as psychotherapists, however, is our understanding of trauma as it engenders responses in those who come to us with their pain. The shock of change can be destabilising and threatening and, I argue, precipitate responses that are often 'inauthentic' in ways that reinforce the very conditions that threaten.

The vision that the words hierarchy, discipline and difference convey is one pervaded by a desire for order, for certainty and for acceptance: the archetypal 'safe place'. A perception of structure (order) is necessary to obviate the enervating impact of uncertainty and to feel a sense of belonging and acceptance by others. Without the metaphorical scaffolding that is perceived as order, the edifice through which the ability to envision a 'safe' or estimable future begins to crumble. It is the container through which hope and aspiration can emerge. This sense of structure can appear spontaneously from the social fabric when it engenders a feeling of containment, of grounding, such that the individual has a sense of ease in their environment or relationships, and feeling at ease implies an absence of threat, a perception of integration and belonging. Such an emanation of order is then an internal manifestation rather than an imposition. But when that structure appears threatened, or in some way made impermanent, then we seek to create ways of retaining or regaining the certainties that are leaving, to establish or reinforce the scaffolding that holds our fleeting sense of self together. These are configurations of defense; of walls rather than of openness. Structures to protect us from the chaos of uncertainty.

### **At the edge of uncertainty**

To say that our world appears in chaos is to say that it is beyond our knowledge, unfathomable, unreachable and separate from us even though we are a part of it. Chaos is always there; it resides at the edge of uncertainty. It is when the world becomes unknowable. But when the breakdown of familiar structures appears to escalate, the world becomes threatening and 'unsafe'. What is safe is what is known, what can be predicted. So we seek to make the world safe, even if that means accepting a place of subordination in that world, as long as we have a place, a home that is predictable and more certain. We seek 'order in the midst of chaos'. In

such a context the external imposition of order becomes acceptable or even desirable, and the price of that is acquiescence to hierarchy, to having a place in the social context that is imposed. In so doing, as I argue below, we abjure our freedom in order to avoid the responsibility that freedom brings. But the imposition of hierarchy requires discipline, and what better tool with which to impose discipline than a sense of difference<sup>iv</sup>, a way of differentiating ourselves from others, others who (we might believe) have a lesser or undeserved place in that hierarchy, so that we may justify to ourselves our certainties in a world that is attained at the expense of (instead of) that which is different to ourselves, of that which is ‘other’.

Often our engagement with the ‘other’ is contradictory, or at least paradoxical. On the one hand, we seek inclusion with and by the ‘other’ to enhance our sense of certainty, to reduce the anxiety that comes with a lack of predictability about our future. Inclusion gives us a sense of belonging, being a part of something greater than ourselves. In this we are like species of bird that fly in flocks to reduce the chance of being ‘picked off’ by a predator. We do not stand out; we are less vulnerable. We seek to shore up our sense of vulnerability, above all our vulnerability to the predator, to a threatening ‘other’. At the same time, inclusion provides a sense of safety against that which excludes. And exclusion, creating a sense of difference, allows us to identify (make common feeling) with others who appear in some way more like ourselves, more separate from that which can be excluded.

I suggest that this dichotomy of inclusion/exclusion closely mirrors another binary, that of intimacy/individuation. Just as our responses to social contexts can hinge on our desire to be both separate and secure (a part of), our responses to the unfolding circumstances of our more personal lives can pivot around the paradoxical and conjoined searches for merger and separateness (Pearce, 2014). In this context, the often overwhelming, and frequently pervasive fear of ‘not being good enough’, can distort our equilibrium between these two foundational ways in which we seek to combat uncertainty, to ameliorate anxiety. ‘Not being good enough’ implies not being accepted, and not therefore feeling included by others. In more severe circumstances this struggle may lead us to crave acceptance by the ‘other’ or, alternatively, to immerse ourselves in exclusion, from where we may comfort ourselves in the ‘safety’ of self-loathing, or the defiance of the ‘outsider’.

Often both these impulses may run in contradiction as we seek to respond to the threat of what Laing described as ontological insecurity, a state characterised by fear of engulfment or depersonalization, often both at the same time (Laing, 1960). Laing described an ontologically secure person as one having a sense of identity and autonomy. We can interpret this state as one where there is an awareness of oneself as an entity; a cohesive sense

of existing that is capable of continuity. This need not be fixed, it does not preclude change, but neither is it threatened by change. At the same time, this entity feels a measure of control over her choices, a freedom to interpret her experiences.

## **Freedom and Authenticity**

A cornerstone of the existential or Sartrean tradition emphasizes the notion of freedom, that is the existence of agency in the context of choice, and that we can exercise that choice in either an active or a passive way. But choice is unavoidable. We are, according to that tradition, contingent beings shaped by experience, but making choices in how we respond to that experience (Sartre, 2008). Often that choice is made impulsively, without reflection, a response to habit or embedded ways of responding. By saying that such choices are embedded within us, I am suggesting that they are products of what Sartre described as non-reflective consciousness, the source of our innate sense of self. That awareness of ourselves, or self-consciousness, that meets the world.

Reflective consciousness, on the other hand, (the presence of which is perhaps what defines us as human beings), reflects on past or future experiences, it tries to make sense of the world and, sometimes through deliberation, makes what might be called ‘informed’ choices. Even allowing for reflection, however, such choices are influenced, to a varying degree, by past responses to experience, our habitual ways of ‘thinking’ about a particular entity or conjuncture (Webber, 2017)<sup>v</sup>. To the extent this is the case, there is no agency and our choices are not free. They are not manifestations of our freedom, rather they represent our conditioning, our embedded ways of seeing and being in the world. On one level we may believe we are responding to an ‘event’ by making a choice in ‘good faith’, i.e. one that is ‘genuine’ or ‘authentic’, a choice that resonates with our sense of self, but more often than not such responses are inauthentic, or in bad faith.

The conception of freedom is a controversial one, and one about which Sartre moderated his views through his life (Sartre, 1977). When we say we are free in an existential sense we mean we are free to choose who we are, and therefore how we respond to events and experiences. That some sense of agency exists seems an imperative to the approach to psychotherapy adopted not only by existential psychotherapists, but to many humanistic, cognitive and psychodynamic traditions. But the extent that we feel able to exercise freedom, in Sartrean terms to change our original project, may be limited by the growth of habitual responses to choices, by embedded attitudes that have arisen in previous attempts to find a semblance of certainty in an uncertain world.

According to Sartre, a characteristic of bad faith is to deny our freedom; to act as if we have no choice, or to represent ourselves as an object, rather

than a subject, as an entity rather than a process (Detmar, 2013). When we fail to recognise the choices we face, or be aware of the motivations that underlie that process of response, we are acting inauthentically. To act authentically, therefore, entails an awareness, or self-consciousness that enables us to ‘know’ in depth what causes us to make the choices or responses we make, and to act in a way that reflects that knowledge.

As a point of clarification, it is appropriate to refer back to the difference between the manifestation of ‘self’ that is ‘aware’, that is the sense we have of ourselves when we act; and the objectified self, or ego that we attempt to construct through reflection, through ‘knowledge’ (Williford, 2011). I would argue that neither of these two conceptions of ‘who we are’ are necessarily authentic or inauthentic, there is no ‘true’ self, just a process. And that process involves a constant dynamic between these two aspects of consciousness, a dialectical relationship that is the constantly changing bundle that is a human being (Pearce, 2016). The way we experience the world non-reflectively, our sense of awareness, is constantly interacting, dialectically, with our reflections on our experiences; and the tenor of those reflections move with the dynamic of how we experience the world. This is the fulcrum of our work as psychotherapists. But often this dialectic may be static or enclosed, repeating patterns of behaviour in order to reduce, or prevent the growth of uncertainty in our lives.

### **Freedom and the ‘other’**

It is also a foundational tenet of existentialism that our senses and reflections are defined in relation to the ‘other’. What exactly constitutes the ‘other’ in this respect may be a matter of debate, but here I will make the assumption that we are speaking of another human being, or collective of human beings, of whose presence we have come to be aware. For Sartre, this issue crystallizes around his discussion of the ‘Look’, and the impact of being rendered an object through the awareness of another (Catalano, 2010). We are ‘known’ by the other, in a way that objectifies us and denies our subjectivity, and therefore our freedom. We may in turn objectify the other, and reciprocate this exchange of hostilities.

In reality our interactions are likely to be far more nuanced than the polarized exchange that Sartre describes in *Being and Nothingness* (Sartre, 1956), and there has been considerable debate concerning the potential for reciprocal recognition of the other as subject: the potential of seeing not just an object, to dominate or fear, but a subject that is full of possibility (e.g. Martinot, 2005). But what does it mean to say that we are aware of the other as a subject? In one sense we do this when we perceive of ourselves as an object for the other, of the other’s attention. And indeed this might often be the first reflex in a round of defensive endeavours, a marking of territory, as we attempt to position this intruder into our subjective space in a manageable

place, to categorise and objectify, to make them more known and predictable, therefore bringing less uncertainty into our lives. Even if we allow their subjectivity, their freedom of expression, we may objectify it through making objects of ourselves: we feel comfortable when we know our place. So in this response to the otherness of the other we either deny our own freedom, our contextual agency, or we deny the freedom of the other.

The degree of familiarity may be important here. The other may already be conceived as relatively known, but also alienating. This alienation may be due to appearance, or past experience. Someone who through past actions de-stabilises our sense of self, our identity or capacity for subjective expression, or through appearance or observed behaviour may be associated in our perceptions with the likelihood of such de-stabilisation. The more the other is either a stranger who brings a high degree of uncertainty, or someone familiar who already carries a level of alienation, the more likely we are to respond in an inauthentic or bad faith manner, denying freedom through objectification. The more our responses are embedded, the more our disposition will be to act in this way.

It is through the manner of our confrontation with the stranger that our responses to the 'other' can be most clearly illustrated. In this respect, we don't meet the stranger in a vacuum. The stranger carries with them a wide range of information that imprints itself onto our senses. This will include appearance, mood, gesture and context. Through this we already attempt to make them less 'strange'. We react to these according to past experiences, whether real or imagined. And we make assumptions accordingly with respect to how 'best' we might meet this stranger. We rarely meet the stranger with an openness that allows us to perceive their freedom, the possibility that they can be other than what they appear to us in our past-laden perception. To the extent that we meet them from this closed place, we deny them their freedom to choose who they are; we meet them as predetermined, as an object, and we deny them their freedom.

In terms of the previous discussion concerning existential anxiety, how 'best' to meet the stranger in this context may mean how can we most easily make ourselves safe; our becoming less uncertain? How can we minimise the uncertainty that this encounter engenders? How can we reduce the potential threat? It is axiomatic that the greater is our ease with ourselves in any given situation; the less we fear the possibility of non-acceptance, the more open we can be to the other. The lack of openness in our disposition is therefore a reflection of our underlying existential anxiety.

A central tenet of Sartre's philosophy is that we are free to choose who we are within our context. That we have agency and intentionality, and make choices given the world we face at any moment. To express choice is to reveal our subjectivity, and we do so in our interactions with the world we find ourselves in. But, he also argues, we should not lose sight of the

equal potential of the ‘other’ to express their freedom. To deny our own freedom, is the ultimate deception in his view; it is the concept of bad faith or inauthenticity. It can be argued that such a precept provides the basis of an ethical framework and a political agenda.

### **An ethical framework**

The ethical basis of an existential approach is probably first outlined by de Beauvoir (de Beauvoir, 1948; Bergoffen, 2012), although it is already implicit in Sartre’s writings of the immediate post-war period, in particular his *Anti-Semite and Jew* (Sartre, 1948). The reasoning highlights the ethical or moral choices we face. To be authentic, according to this tradition is to make choices based on the knowledge that our primary purpose as humans is to ‘unveil being’, to seek the truth of our existence through our actions, and that that truth is predicated on the idea that it can only be revealed through our being; through our existential choices. We choose our actions, and therefore are responsible for them.

At the same time, to experience our subjectivity, to unveil our being, our transcendence, our becoming, is only a part of this story. To seek the truth of ourselves, is to seek a paradoxical truth that can never be known or held, but only glimpsed as an awareness of becoming. We are nevertheless bound to pursue this vision, to seek the unattainable in order to give meaning to our existence. But in this pursuit we are dependent on the subjectivity of the ‘other’, to be ‘seen’ or ‘held in awareness’ by the other. In our unveiling of our being, we need the ‘other’ to verify our existence. Without that verification we do not exist (Sartre, 2008).

Freedom of the other is essential to our own freedom, since without the other being free we cannot ourselves be affirmed as free; and if our own authenticity is dependent on our recognition of our freedom to transcend ourselves in pursuit of our original project, that is that we are free to make choices and accept the responsibility of those choices, it is also dependent on the other’s freedom to recognise us as a free being, since without that recognition we cannot be aware of ourselves: it is through the ‘other’s’ recognition that we ‘unveil’ ourselves as intentional beings. To be authentic, therefore is to meet the ‘other’ in a mutual recognition of each other’s subjectivity. I will now explore what this might mean in terms of psychotherapeutic practice.

### **What do we do in psychotherapy?**

I described a conception of existential anxiety that stems from the inescapable uncertainty that afflicts us as free human beings as we project ourselves into the future. It is when this uncertainty grows to proportions that are, or threaten to become, unmanageable, that we may seek therapy. Such uncertainty, and the anxiety it generates, has its roots in an ‘other’ of some description, an ‘other’ that is not known sufficiently to engender

an adequate security of outcome. As Sartre described, the ‘irrational’ responses so engendered can lead to projections of fear, anger, or blame onto the source of uncertainty, onto the ‘stranger’ (or the ‘strange’ phenomenon). It is a projection that is designed to generate a movement towards a defense, a safeguarding, of a fragile sense of identity. The more fragile this identity construct, the greater the projection can become. Not to do so might allow this ephemeral sense of self to be undermined, to be left defenseless. Such responses, therefore, are often inadequately reflected but genuine responses to experiences of a palpable suffering.

Alternatively, and commonly, those projections are also interiorised, turned inwards, onto the ‘self’. This may provide a more easily recognisable manifestation of alienation or non-acceptance, a process that more obviously (to us as therapists) describes the undermining of the scaffold that supports our transient sense of ourselves. But there is, I argue, a dialectical process, described by the *inevitable* and reciprocal action between our external and internal worlds. This process may, all too often, compound both forms of alienation and reinforce collective manifestations of non-acceptance, or hostility, towards the ‘stranger’, or that which is ‘other’.

Drawing on this perspective, and while recognising that there are many things that we do in psychotherapy, I would suggest they have a common theme, and that this concerns facilitating awareness of self and other on the part of the person concerned. This statement itself may be contentious, and the subject of another paper, but briefly I would argue that this is the primary intention of all approaches. We may do many things, employ diverse techniques, but ultimately this growth in self-conscious awareness is what we are trying to achieve. This, of course, raises the question of what we mean by ‘self-conscious awareness’?

In one sense we might think of self-awareness as one where we are familiar with ‘what is really happening’. No illusions, no self-deception, we arrive at this point through stripping away, or seeing through, the masks and illusions through which we might interpret our actions and motivations, and through which we experience the world. This is not to say that there is a true reality that we are failing to see, it is not about platonic ideas of essentialism, but about understanding the conditioning behind our own sense of being in the world, and of being in the world in context, that is the fleeting and intuitive sense of awareness that we call a self. This might be described as an understanding of what it is we value. And if it is our values that define our sense of self, therefore, then it is an awareness of both what it is we value, and how we arrive at those values that constitutes, at least in part, our self-awareness.

But to enhance or elaborate an understanding of our ‘selves’ is only a part of the story. As psychotherapists we also seek to facilitate an awareness of the ‘other’, of the potential reasoning and conditioning that produce

the actions and motivations of the other or others with whom we interact. An understanding of the other facilitates a placing into context of our own responses and intuitive awareness. But to be aware of the other in this way, means being aware of the other as subject, not as object, since if we objectify the ‘other’ we experience them as part of our objective world, not as subjects of their own worlds.

The awareness we are concerned to facilitate, therefore, is one that I have described above as authenticity. It is one that allows the mutual and reciprocal recognition of subjects; an authentic awareness that encompasses both the subjective presence of the self alongside that of those we come into contact with, through whom we construct our lives. It is, as Sartre suggested, an almost impossible target, something we can glimpse from time to time. As Catalano (2010) has suggested, this place of good faith or authenticity exists somewhere between non-reflective consciousness and pure reflection, between subjectivity and non-objectifying thought. Pure (as opposed to impure) reflection implies a standing back from the perception of the subjective, a reflection that allows for the subjectivity of the other, similar perhaps to Buber’s notion of ‘I-thou’.

But if this ‘authentic place’ we seek as psychotherapists to facilitate is merely a fleeting presence how, we might argue, does this change lives, or enable people to live more comfortably with themselves? I believe the answer stems from the idea of the self as a process: if we identify the ‘self’ as a sense or awareness of being that is non-reflective consciousness, then that self is in continual and dialectical interaction with our reason, our reflection, and in that interaction both are constantly changing. In psychotherapy, we facilitate the person a glimpse of alternative possibilities of the world, and these glimpses in turn impact back on the way we meet the world, on our subjective responses to experience. Putting it another way, the subjective presence that is the self is in constant dialogue with reason, and both move as a result of that dialogue.

From the Sartrean tradition we take the ethical imperative of authenticity, of the mutual recognition of our own and other’s freedom, as being of value and something to be sought if we are to live lives that have meaning. In psychotherapy, we seek to know and ameliorate the existential anxiety that lies at the root of the concerns that people bring to us. This leads us to work with people to facilitate that awareness. The techniques we use in that process are of secondary concern and will be unique to each individual and each individual practitioner.

## **The political and psychotherapy**

I contend that the essence of our work as psychotherapists is political, and that it is authentic and therefore ethical (in the sense described above)

that we recognise the work as such. I further contend that it is likely that most psychotherapists, irrespective of training, work in a way that reflects the philosophical approach outlined above. Techniques may vary, but the underlying premise remains. A political act can be interpreted as any deliberate intervention that impacts, even in an imperceptible way, on the social context that is itself the sum of human relationships. Furthermore, I follow the Sartrean tradition, particularly as described in the 'Search for a Method', in maintaining that there is a dialectical relationship not only between the non-reflective awareness of our 'sense of self' and the reflective search for knowing, but also between that dynamic and our experiences in the world. Our motivations and actions, therefore, impact on the world as part of that dialectic, even if that impact is sometimes infinitesimal.

I understand that within the therapeutic context individuals bring a sense of themselves that is based on those continual and dynamic dialectical relationships. From within that process emerge the manifestations of anxiety that are the individual's responses to their world. I suggest that in the context of psychological trauma, of whatever degree, there can be a response that is a denial of freedom in some form, a loss of authenticity in relations with the world, either through negation of one's own freedom or that of the 'other'. The role of psychotherapy is to enable the individual to achieve a heightened awareness of their transient self; and to know and accept their own subjectivity as well as the subjectivity of others. It is through this process that we facilitate an understanding and awareness of the pain that emanates from anxiety.

## **Conclusion: towards a radical psychotherapy**

In this paper, I have attempted to outline a challenge that we face as psychotherapists, in a world that appears increasingly witness to social trauma and dislocation. That challenge is to recognise the political responsibility we face as psychotherapists, a responsibility grounded in the social nature of trauma and its consequences. The interweaving of personal and social trauma is ever present, and emergent from the bedrock of existential anxiety, an anxiety borne of the essentially uncertain nature of 'being towards', the uncertainty of our fragile self-construction as we project into the future.

It is this fleeting entity that is our self-projection that we seek to capture through the provision of a containing scaffold, a structure that is rendered vulnerable and which we seek to reinforce in response to trauma. This defensive process may lead to perceptions cloaked in inauthenticity or bad faith. Our role as psychotherapists in this context is not to collude with inauthenticity, but to facilitate an awareness of the freedom of self and

other in a social context; to render the authentic response possible. Authenticity entails recognising and acting upon our own freedom in conjunction with that of others; it involves holding the 'other' in an awareness that allows both our own subjectivity and that of the other. And once we allow the other as a subject, rather than reducing her to an 'object' we no longer interact with the world as though we are the centre of that world, but experience the world in a more open way. From this state of openness, each 'other' becomes an entity of the world that is integral and equal. She becomes a free being, subject to the same 'situatedness' as all other beings within our perception. To objectify creates hierarchy, in the absence of objectification it has no foundation. Without hierarchy, discipline has no *raison d'être*, and difference a changed connotation. As long as we cease to objectify self and other, then difference can be accepted rather than become a source of anxiety.

Referring back to the earlier statements regarding our potential response to uncertainty and the tendency to seek structure and surety: our desire to minimise vulnerability and fall back into the pursuit of 'hierarchy, discipline and difference'. We could find the antonyms of these in the French motto: liberty, equality and fraternity. In reflection of this, it can be noted that Article 1 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states:

*All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood.*

(United Nations, 1948)

Perhaps this short statement can provide the ethical bedrock of our work as psychotherapists, and describe the political nature of our work as we strive to be authentic in our practice.

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## Notes

<sup>i</sup> This paper is based on a short presentation at the Annual Conference of the Society of Existential Analysis, 2016

<sup>ii</sup> I was inspired to use this expression by two luminous keynote speeches at the Conference of the Society of Existential Analysis, 2016: those by Manu Bazzano and Michael Montgomery.

<sup>iii</sup> After the tragic death of the British Member of Parliament Jo Cox, I researched websites sympathetic to the views of the person who killed her. These three words, I believe, are a synthesis of the ideological motivation of those who

perpetrate current tendencies towards such intolerance and hate.

<sup>iv</sup> I use the term ‘difference’ here to imply a means of differentiating and separating. In expressing individuality or a minority interest ‘difference’ *can* be something we celebrate. But the term can also be used, as I have, to denigrate that which is ‘other’, to separate ourselves from that which we seek to dominate, or use to shore up our sense of our self-worthiness.

<sup>v</sup> This new book by Jon Webber, entitled *Rethinking Existentialism* is a very valuable addition to the existential literature, but particularly here in drawing out the contribution of de Beauvoir’s writing on embeddedness to the broader Sartrean tradition.

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# Therapy Beyond Its Remit

Talk given at the Society for Existential Analysis Annual Conference, London, 30 September 2016

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## Marty Radlett

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*Remit n. Item remitted for consideration; terms of reference of committee, etc.*

*The Concise Oxford Dictionary (1976), Sixth edition.*

## Introduction

This paper is an expanded version of a workshop I gave at the 2016 SEA Conference. My presentation was fuelled by fury: [1] at the dire economic/political state of the UK, and its brutal impact on so-called ‘ordinary’ people and their families, who lack the protection and resources members of, and agents for, the ruling elite take for granted; and [2] at the spectacle of government-employed psychologists and therapists offering counselling, primarily cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT), to those whose lives have been devastated by decisions made in boardrooms on Wall Street, the City of London and Parliament. Why, I wondered, hadn’t the training and accrediting bodies of our profession challenged the spurious notion that therapy uniquely provides the explanation for – and solution to – everything? In the run-up to the Conference – and after revisiting my 1989 MA thesis – I realized that I have been preoccupied with the origins of this grandiose – and arrogant – assumption for nearly thirty years. It was stimulating to reengage with the investigations of critics and historians such as Paul Roazen, Phillip Reiff, Russell Jacoby and David Smail, among others; and this paper will reference many of their cogent – and in the case of Smail, angry – explanations. While I endorse their trenchant comments, the political and professional conclusions I make – I hasten to add – are mine alone.

My presentation was divided into four sections, which I’ll expand in this paper.

## 1. The state we’re in: Britain 2017

Soaring unemployment; Zero Hour contracts/low pay/job insecurity; savage cuts to housing, sickness and disability benefits; profit-gauging landlords demanding extortionate rents; evictions; homelessness; foodbanks. Jargon terminology such as ‘the free market’ and ‘de-industrialization’ obscures, objectifies, distances and sanitizes the destruction of communities

dependent on industry and manufacturing. There has been no shortage of journalistic, academic and charitable investigations into the extent and consequences of the boom/bust cycle of international capitalism, AKA the ‘global financial crisis’. Among dozens of research papers published in 2015 and reported in the press, I’ve chosen two examples: Shelter: ‘One in three working families in England are a monthly pay packet from losing their homes.’; and the Joseph Rowntree Foundation: ‘More than one million [British] were so poor they couldn’t afford to eat properly, keep clean or stay warm’.

The result? Tens of thousands are experiencing panic, anxiety, shame, isolation, fear and despair; and many seek help from the National Health Service (NHS), which can only offer anti-depressants; and/or CBT.

I will argue that these citizens are casualties of economic/political forces and the subsequent decisions made in boardrooms on Wall Street, the City of London and in Parliament, all of which operate in what I call the *Impersonal World*. The plight of these victims has nothing to do with the state of their psyche, their unique personal past, insecure/inadequate parenting, poor career choices, etc. And no therapeutic approach – including our own – can change or influence that world. Why do I say this? I believe that history itself – both past and present – demonstrates that influencing/reversing/overturning decisions made in the *Impersonal World* requires collective – not individual – action. It is my contention that the therapeutic endeavour – its proper remit – focus on the client’s *Personal World*, where individuals do have the capacity – the agency – to make choices and changes, albeit often difficult ones.

Before I continue, I want to clarify that this paper does not in any way constitute a criticism of the NHS or even CBT (as a useful/appropriate intervention for those with phobias, fixed ideas, etc.). We are fortunate to retain the remnants of a social welfare safety net. Only weeks before I gave my workshop, I’d returned from a month in the United States – where the socio/economic situation is as dire as it is in Britain. A significant difference, however, is that over 33 million Americans have no health care: either because they are unemployed/never employed; or if in work, that benefit has been withdrawn by employers; and premiums (even for ‘Obamacare’) are too expensive. This horrific situation is the stark reality behind the meaningless, histrionic sloganeering Americans are regularly bombarded with, such as: Thomas Jefferson’s ‘Life, Liberty and The Pursuit of Happiness’; Barak Obama’s ‘Yes We Can!'; Donald Trump’s rallying cry ‘Make America Great Again’; and my personal favourite for outright irrationality, the state of New Hampshire’s official motto ‘Live Free or Die’. For the vast majority of my fellow countrymen and women, life is truly a Darwinian existence. On the eve of the 2016 presidential election, Illinois trade unionist Mike Griffin told a British reporter that even those

in work ‘... understand that they got shit jobs, shit wages and no benefits and no health insurance’ (‘The Republicans and Democrats failed blue-collar America. The left-behind are now having their say’, *The Observer*, 6 November 2016).

However, CBT – an intervention purporting to alleviate the anguish of those shattered by decisions made in the Impersonal World by supposedly changing clients’ faulty cognitions – is, to my mind, particularly useless. I’ll let two psychologists involved in NHS/CBT provision make my case. According to Dr Elizabeth Cotton, former NHS psychologist and critic:

*IAPT services were the clinical equivalent of speed dating. You’re given 30 minutes to get to grips with complex and often hopeless situations, **lie** (Cotton’s emphasis) about what you can do and walk away from human tragedy*

(quoted in ‘Call Centre Therapy’. *The Guardian*, 26 January, 2016).

And psychologist Stephen Weatherhead noted that CBT

*... feels a bit crass trying to work with someone on their depression...when (it) is well-founded, because they’re at risk of losing their homes or not being able to feed their kids*

(quoted in ‘The psychologists walking to fight austerity’s impact on mental health’. *The Guardian*, 19 August ,2015).

## **2. What are the origins of the persistent belief in our profession that therapy uniquely provides the explanation for – and solution to – everything?**

In my preface I indicated that in attempting to answer my query above, I’ll be drawing on the works of scholars such as Jacoby, Roazen and Reiff, as expert witnesses, if you like, in helping me make my case. In fact, it was fifty years ago that Reiff named this conflation of the personal and the political ‘The Triumph of the Therapeutic’. Since these historians were pre-occupied with the ubiquity and authority of psychoanalysis, it is only fitting and proper that I begin my investigation at the beginning: with Freud and his followers. I am most definitely **not** an expert on the Freudian canon; however, I suspect that, like the bible, one can find a multitude of theoretical conclusions/speculations in his voluminous publications and correspondence. So, it is with some trepidation that I elucidate what I believe are Freud’s core beliefs.

[1] That he discovered a universal psycho-sexual template of infant/child development within the interior world of the family, expressed unconsciously,

which he confirmed in his analyses and treatment of what Freud himself called ‘... the problems and anxieties of the cultivated middle classes’ (quoted in Reiff, 1959: p 308).

[2] His deep pessimism about human nature – its ancient and innate aggressiveness – which translated into a distrust and dismissal of political solutions. According to Reiff, Freud’s body of work ‘... inculcates scepticism about all ideologies except those of private life’. Therefore, ‘Freedom is no more than a metaphor for Freud, when applied to any form of society; it can be properly said to exist only within a person, when there is the right balance among parts of the psyche’ (Reiff, 1959: p 255). Another scholar, Jeffrey Abramson, defines politics as closing the distance between persons; and because of that threat to human individuation, ‘... Freud mistrusted politics only slightly less than religion’ (Abramson, 1984: p 49). Whatever the explanation for it, the logic of Freud’s assumptions is that any quest for a societal solution to injustice, war, tyranny, poverty is unnecessary and futile. If freedom is a mental construct (achievable perhaps, by changing one’s cognitions?), available to anyone, barrista or banker, provided they can pay for or access psychological treatment, governments are exempt from blame and responsibility.

According to Roazen, Freud was especially hostile to Marxism; and explicitly rejected Marxian hopes that man’s murderous impulses would be meliorated by an alteration in property rights. Instead, Freud declared: ‘Aggressiveness was not created by property’ (quoted in Roazen, 1968: p 271). Of course, Freud’s private, fee-paying clients, including those training to become psychoanalysts, were solidly middle and upper class; some were members of the European aristocracy. A proper Viennese, petit-bourgeois professional, Freud harboured distrust in, and dismissal of, economic classes beneath his, writing in *The Future of an Illusion* that because human nature is ultimately destructive: ‘It is only through the influence of individuals who can set an example, and whom the masses recognize as their leaders, that they can be induced to perform the work and undergo the **renunciations** (my emphasis) on which the existence of civilization depends’ (Freud, 1927: p 7).

However, the bible also says ‘Seek And Ye Shall Find’. Thus, Roazen cites passages where Freud strikes a more humane and modest note: ‘Psychoanalysis has never claimed to provide a complete theory of human mentality in general, but only expected that what it offered should be applied to supplement and correct the knowledge acquired by other means’ (quoted in Roazen, 1968: p 18). And his famous remark to a patient that ‘...much will be gained if we succeed in turning your hysterical misery into common unhappiness’ (Freud, 1895) suggests Freud didn’t believe that his treatment guaranteed permanent tranquillity (psychic freedom), either.

Although Freud may have dismissed political solutions, and grandiose claims for his treatment, many of his acolytes, as well as future theoretical challengers, believed otherwise: that beneficial and peaceful social (political) transformation **is** achievable; however, it depends on the utopian notion that most everyone has therapy **first**, in order to rebalance the disordered psyche (supposedly responsible for everything). Thus psychological treatment *ipso facto* is essential for future personal and societal well-being. As Roazen explained: ‘One of the misleading appeals of personality theory for the liberal mind is the illusory notion that the psyche is the only source of limitation and failure, and that potentially the outside world can be made tractable if only one’s inner self was under control’ (Roazen, 1968: p 18). And that control supposedly depends on therapeutic intervention.

Below are some examples of that ‘illusory notion’ that therapy uniquely provides the explanation for – and solution to – everything.

#### **a. Wilhelm Reich**

If Freud rejected political solutions, his younger German psychoanalytical colleagues were very political. Many were soldiers during the first world war and witnessed its shocking carnage. Both sexes were electrified by the 1917 Russian Revolution; and according to Jacoby, a significant number identified with Marxism and joined the German Communist Party (Jacoby, 1986). Yet Freud’s theoretical influence was so powerful that in the first, overtly political text written by a psychoanalyst – *The Mass Psychology of Fascism* – Wilhelm Reich concluded that the reason German workers voted for Hitler in the 1933 general election was because they had been subjected to harsh parental punishment of childhood sexual expression. The result, Reich believed ‘...produced acquiescent subjects who...are adjusted to the authoritarian order. Thus the family is the authoritarian state in miniature, to which the child must learn to adapt himself as a preparation for the general social adjustment required of him later’ (quoted in Sharaf, 1994: p 183). Decades later Abramson endorsed Reich’s explanation, noting that ‘Freud’s shrewdness about politics and submission rests comfortably on the historical cycle of rebellion and remorse embedded in family life’ (Abramson, 1984: p, 53).

Reich’s explanation however, is factually untrue. The German working class was well organized, politically sophisticated and historically militant, despite whatever psycho-sexual traumas workers *might* have suffered in childhood. Although the Nazis resorted to extra-legal terror in the run-up to the election, including the suspension of the press representing the two mass workers’ parties, arrests of activists, and murder of several left-wing candidates, the communists and social-democrats won a combined total of 201 seats in the Reichstag; Hitler’s Nazi Party won 288 seats, which did not give him an elected majority. However, those who did vote for

National Socialism had suffered from more than a decade of economic crises in post-war Germany, including mass unemployment, hyper-inflation (the one million denomination Deutschmark) and impoverishment. Hitler offered desperate Germans solutions: he promised jobs; he gave them external enemies to blame (the Allies who drafted and enforced the Versailles Treaty; the Bolsheviks), as well as internal enemies: workers' political parties and, especially, the Jews, denounced by Goebbels in 1930 as '... the real cause of our losing the Great War' (quoted in Rose, 2014: p 6).

There are ominous economic parallels with 1933 Germany and 2016 United States and its presidential race; however a significant difference is that in the US there are no ostensible workers' political parties to vote for. Instead, the choice is between the two wings of what critic Gore Vidal called 'The Property Party'. This is why a significant majority of Donald Trump's core supporters are the disenfranchised, desperate, angry long-term unemployed (and mostly white) working class, susceptible to his fantastical claims – Trump will bring their jobs back. And he gives them scapegoats to blame: Muslims; Mexicans; immigrants and Washington, DC 'insiders', especially his Democratic Party opponent, Hillary Clinton. Trump's demagogic ranting is dangerously close to neo-fascist provocations. Not only did he lead the chorus of 'Lock her up'; but at an August rally in North Carolina, Trump hinted that that gun rights supporters could violently intervene should Clinton win the election and appoint Supreme Court judges who favour stricter gun control measures. 'If she gets to pick her judges, nothing you can do, folks,' Mr. Trump said, as the crowd began to boo. He quickly added: 'Although the Second Amendment' (right to bear arms) 'people – maybe there is, I don't know.' ('Donald Trump Suggests Second Amendment People Could Act Against Hilary Clinton'. *New York Times*, 9 August 2016). And let's not forget that president-elect Trump has yet to 'distance' – I believe that's the euphemism – himself from the Ku Klux Klan's political endorsement.

Only days before the election, however, supposed experts in human behaviour continued trotting out psychological explanations for Trump's popularity. According to professor of psychiatry, Jonathan Shedler, Trump's appeal should be understood as 'transference', which occurs when people experience stress. 'Trump is benefiting from a childlike fantasy of being rescued by an all-powerful father-figure [who expresses] their not-quite-conscious yearnings' ('The Shadow He Casts'. *The Guardian*, 5 November 2016). And in the immediate aftermath of Trump's victory, newspaper editorials and columnists continue to proffer psychological explanations for Trump's success. According to Deborah Orr: '...this election was nothing to do with politics, economics, the left-behind. It was about the power and horror of narcissism. The final irony is that it came in the long wake of the financial crisis, caused by bankers, among whom there is a high

concentration of narcissists and other personality-disordered individuals ...Politics in its current state isn't going to help this world. Massive, high-quality psychological intervention might' ('The magnetic pull of King Narcissist'. *The Guardian*, 12 November, 2016).

### **b. Anna Freud**

Like father, like daughter, she believed that in therapy with adults: 'We assume the patient suffers from a conflict not with the environment, but within the structures of his own personality...Depth psychology...focuses on the individual's perception of his environment and the way we each distort the external world' (quoted in Roazen, 1968: p 259).

### **c. Melanie Klein**

Klein believed that 'The repeated attempts to improve humanity...have failed because nobody has understood the full depths and vigour of the instincts of aggression in each individual'. Until Klein, that is, who modestly argued for universal Kleinian child analysis which will resolve infantile anxiety and modify the child's aggressive impulses, resulting in a permanent state of '...desire to love and be loved, and be at peace with the world'. Was this a utopian fantasy?, she asked herself. No, she wrote, it '...may well come true in those distant days when, as I hope, child analysis will become as much a part of every person's upbringing as school education now is' (quoted in Brown, 1991: p76).

### **d. Erik Erikson**

Erikson stated that in order to vanquish '...exploitation and inequality in the world, we must realize the first inequality in life is that of child and adult' (quoted in Roazen, 1968: p 250).

### **e. Jung**

In 1946 Jung concluded that 'When Hitler seized power it became evident to me that a mass psychosis was boiling up in Germany', noting that 'The driving forces of a psychological mass movement are essentially archetypal...'. Jungian scholar Aniela Jaffe concurred, writing that Nazism '... represented an outburst of the collective unconscious' (both quotes in Jaffe, 1971: p 90).

### **f. Humanists**

I've singled out Carl Rogers, as his position on human behaviour – that one is benign towards oneself and others if unconditional positive regard is provided – led him to conflate the personal and the political, writing that when individuals are affirmed, they will value what is good for themselves and for others. Rogers believed his theories had universal application. In his final decade, he founded what he called a 'transformational'

political organization: The New World Alliance, whereby facilitators using Rogerian person-centred techniques would resolve antagonisms between labour and management; warring countries; religious and ethnic groups.

The feel-good appeal of Humanism's utopian promises remains robust. In 2013 US family therapist J.B. Doherty argued that during economic and social crises the stakes are too high for therapists to 'take refuge in our private practice'. What is needed, he argued, is a new professional role for practitioners, which he christened 'Citizen Therapists for the 21st Century', noting that: 'The reason we therapists are so well situated to be change agents is that we hear real stories of personal pain in a troubled world'. (Well, it seems to me that bartenders hear shedloads of 'stories of personal pain in a troubled world'; and there's a lot of bartenders out there. Why not make bartenders 'change agents', too?)

Doherty, to his credit, entered the profession hoping to 'make the world a better place...I believed in a kind of "trickle-up" psychological dynamic, whereby therapy would make enough people healthier to **tilt** (my emphasis) the social order toward justice and harmony... I even entertained the idea that national transformation would begin when everyone in Congress and the White House got into therapy – or a good personal growth group' (Doherty, 2013: pp 15-17). But why go to all the effort of psychologically transforming politicians, when the hippies of the 1970s counter-culture had a much speedier solution: If Richard Nixon smoked marijuana – or better yet – dropped a tab of pure LSD, he'd become one with all humanity – PEACE AND LOVE, MAN! – and the next day he'd pull US troops out of Vietnam.

Roazen, whose book *Freud: Political and Social Thought* was published at the height of the late 1960s counterculture/anti-war, anti-racist activism was politely scornful of such utopianism, which '...can lead to discounting the relevance of social forces, to believing, for example, that the limits of the presidency are simply set by his personality' (Roazen, 1968: p 30). I would, however, substitute Roazen's phrase 'social forces' with the more precise 'economic forces', as the limitations of any titular leader are determined by the economic system h/she represents. I also agree with Jacoby, who insisted 'There is no such activity as radical therapy – there is only therapy and radical politics' (Jacoby, 1997: p 139).

### **g. Attachment-based psychotherapy**

If you think my US examples are simply evidence of American naivety, I call your attention to a London conference, featured in the summer 2015 Confer brochure, titled: '*The establishment on the couch: a psychological exploration of class wounding in the consulting room and in society*'. I was riveted; but not enough to shell out an extortionate amount of money to attend. I did, however, pore over the conference precis, which plaintively asked: 'Why is our privileged establishment so uncaring and un-empathetic?'

What are the deep psychological structures of those who govern and control us with so little apparent concern for those who have less – less money, opportunity, safety, education and cultural capital?'. Its conclusion: we in the UK have wounded leaders: victims of broken attachments; fobbed off on nannies; exiled to boarding school at a tender age; incarcerated in public schools (Eton, Harrow, etc.), notorious for emotional, physical and sexual bullying. This is why our ruling elite perpetuates an unfair class system and fails '...to establish a proper social democracy like our European neighbours'. What to do? 'Psychology needs to boldly address the political both in and beyond the consulting room'.

Wisely, the precis didn't explain how this prodigious feat will be accomplished; but I believe I have the answer: Attachment therapists should be on tap 24/7 in the public schools. This will ensure that when our future leaders roll up to Oxford there will be no more Bullingdon Dining Club criminality: renting a posh restaurant; getting completely smashed; trashing the place; throwing wads of money at management. Instead they will drink responsibly, behave impeccably and tip lavishly. And when our newly therapized, now compassionate, rulers take their seats in government, they will pass good, social democratic legislation. 'Done and dusted' as the English used to say. For North American readers, that quaint expression is the equivalent of 'it's a slam-dunk'.

#### **h. Existential psychotherapy – less deluded/more modest?**

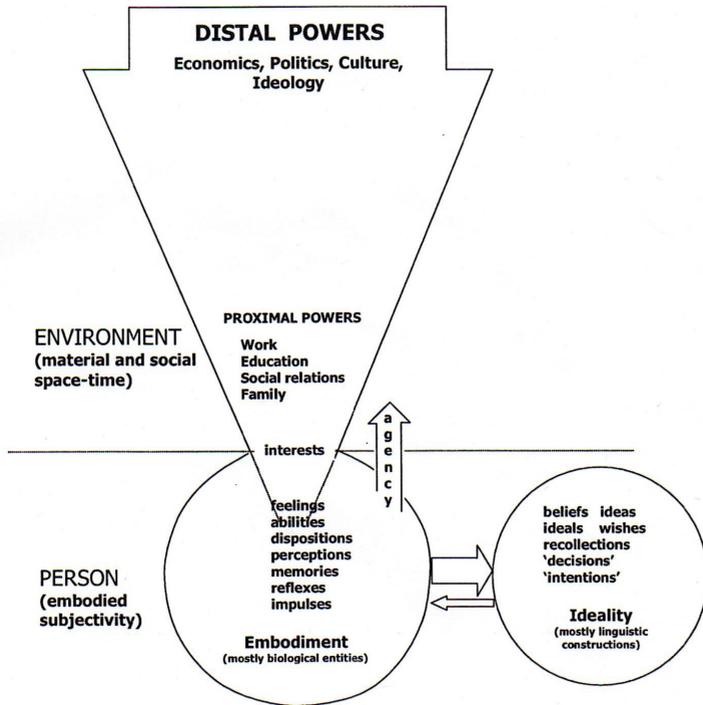
I was drawn to existential therapy because I thought it modest (not grandiose). I aged with Yalom, who wrote that psychological paradigms are: '...wafer-thin barriers against the pain of uncertainty'; that his existential therapy has no exclusive hegemony and '...is not capable of explaining all behaviour' (Yalom, 1980: p 26). Therefore, it hadn't occurred to me to scrutinize my own methodology. So I was startled when Martin Adams, colleague, friend and co-editor of *Existential Analysis*, read this paper in draft form and asked me why I hadn't explicitly declared existential therapy either guilty or innocent of conflating the personal and the political. It was an astute question. I'd like to believe that existential therapists – particularly the ones who write books on how to practice it – share my stance; however, finding out would mean doing a huge amount of research, rounding up the usual suspects (as the chief of police so memorably said in the film *Casablanca*); and my get-out-of-jail card was a looming deadline and an imposed wordcount.

Nonetheless, Martin drew my attention to recent assertions made by several authors, including himself and Emmy van Deurzen (*Skills in Existential Counselling and Psychotherapy*); and Darren Langdrige (*Existential Counselling & Psychotherapy*). Both texts emphasise that living has a political dimension, which is certainly true. However, after reading some pages from

*Skills* I believe its authors have reduced this dimension to civic obligations, such as voting. Not voting, they charge, is irresponsible, as it ‘...is one of the practical meanings of... living existentially’ (am I in trouble!). Worse, refusal is a moral failing, setting the abstainer ‘apart from society’. And I have no idea what this rather doomy sentence means: ‘Without reciprocity and cooperation, the fabric of society will collapse and we will lose our individual and collective humanity and identity’ (Deurzen & Adams, 2016: p 40). Langdridge notes that most existential therapists fail to recognize issues of power and politics, preferring to keep the therapeutic space ‘neutral or apolitical’, an unfortunate misapplication of the phenomenological method. A practitioner whom he admires is the Jungian Andrew Samuels, who uses his ‘therapeutic knowledge to engage in political discourse and allow space for the political to influence their practice’. Existential therapists should do the same, Langdridge argues; they ‘...cannot escape the political... A refusal to acknowledge this leads only one way, toward the conservative as we abdicate our responsibility and deny **our power to effect change** [my emphasis]’ (Langdridge, 2013: p 132). This sounds like a more sophisticated version of the American Doherty’s touching belief that therapists can be society’s ‘change agents’. Perhaps I’ve misunderstood these authors. If so, I expect they’ll let me know.

### 3. David Smail

When I gave my workshop, I asked how many in attendance knew of him or had read his books. Only a few hands went up, which didn’t surprise me, as it’s my opinion (unproven by research) that most existential therapists only read texts devoted to existential philosophy and practice. I discovered Smail – along with Charles Rycroft, Antony Storr and Peter Lomas – in Regent’s College library in the mid-1980s, attracted to the provocative titles of his publications. Smail’s analysis of the limitations of therapy reinforced my then tentative conclusions. Smail uses different terminology than I do. Where I speak of two worlds – impersonal and personal – which affect us, Smail identifies two types of power: distal (distant) power and proximal (proximate) power – but we are talking about the same phenomena. As he notes, ‘...our lives are most powerfully controlled by forces that are completely out of sight’ (Smail, 1993: p 37). His books, rather delightfully, are littered with diagrams – many of them positively baroque – which illustrate his central concept; an example of which, entitled ‘The Impress of Power’ (Smail, 2005: 27) is below.



Smail’s conclusion that therapy cannot alter decisions made by distal powers was based on his long career working as a NHS psychologist in Nottingham – a city in the Midlands experiencing decades of destruction of its traditional industrial and manufacturing base. His clients were ‘ordinary people’, the majority working class, without social or economic resources when calamity struck: a layoff; plant closure; rent hike. He was especially scathing about the profession’s insistence that [1] all psychological pain is the result of personal trauma; and [2] its historic tendency to make extravagant claims: ‘Everything about the therapeutic effort, from the construction of technique-specifying theories to the painstaking effort to demonstrate their effectiveness through objective research testifies to the fundamental assumptions involved’ (Smail, 1984: p 137). Even more damning, Smail believed, is how useful it is for distal powers if a view is established that psychological pain is ‘... a problem caused and cured within the immediate ambit of peoples’ personal lives’ (Smail, 1993: p 19). He called it ‘Orwellian’ that: ‘Those thrown on the scrapheap in the interests of profit’ must endure officialdom preaching that they assume responsibility for their situation

and ‘accept whatever scraps are thrown to them and sort themselves out... without disturbing the peace’ (Smail, 2005: p 77).

Smail made one assertion, however, which I disagree with. Explaining that the world is structured by powers at varying degrees of distance from us, he claimed that proximal powers (parents, siblings, partners, etc.) ‘... are the ones which preoccupy us most, the ones focussed on by psychology, the most **amenable** to intervention and the **weakest**. Those further from us – the distal powers – are the least salient, the ones we spend least time thinking about, the ones focused on by sociology and politics, almost entirely impervious to mere personal influence and **the strongest**’ [my emphases] (Smail, 1993, p 37). I agree completely with his last sentence. However, as therapists we know that much of the pain and damage experienced in the Personal World isn’t weak, and not always amenable to therapy. Indeed, Smail confirms this in a later book, writing: ‘A decision made in a boardroom in New York is likely to have a greater impact on a larger number of lives than anything a mere parent can dream up, and yet... a father’s drunken rage may be perceived as an event of cataclysmic proportion’ (Smail, 2001: p 38). What makes a client ‘amenable’ to therapy, I believe, is [1] their need to make sense of their own history; and [2] willingness to make new choices about how to live in their Personal World.

I chose to study and practice existential therapy for two reasons: [1] its insistence on individual agency; and [2] that we’re not determined by our personal past: the victim of child sex abuse isn’t fated to become a paedophile in adulthood, as an extreme example (the so-called cycle of abuse); a child who witnesses their parents’ unhappy, even violent, relationship, isn’t doomed to repeat it. (I believe the new therapeutic buzzword for agency is *resiliency*.) According to Thomas Szasz, when someone increases, even partially, their knowledge of themselves with others, it enlarges ‘... his freedom of choice in the conduct of his life’ (quoted in Storr, 1979: p 153).

However, for clients who are the casualties of distal powers, Smail believes therapists can only offer clarification (not your fault), consolation, and solidarity. Interestingly, Smail notes that some clients insist that it is their fault. They should have: stayed in school longer; studied harder/gone to university; not had children so early/married the wrong person; trained in a different skill; seen ‘the writing on the wall’ and moved to the south of England where there were more employment opportunities, but didn’t want to uproot the family from relatives and friends. Why do they insist on assuming personal blame? Because it’s a terrifying concept: that our lives are hostage to impersonal forces. Perhaps the self-inflicted indictment of poor personal judgement is comforting, with its suggestion that if only they had made different decisions, they could have avoided their fate. The reality is, they were simply in the wrong place at the wrong time.

#### **4: Are clarification, consolation and solidarity enough? What might existential therapy offer to the casualties of the Impersonal World?**

I have never worked as a therapist in the public sector; therefore, what follows is a fantasy of what I call Existential Guerrilla Therapy (EGT). I mean guerrilla as in Che Guevara, not gorilla as in King Kong (guerrilla and gorilla are often confused). The setting for EGT: I'm in a room in a NHS surgery, supposedly providing CBT. I check for hidden microphones and cover up the CCTV camera. A new client comes in. First, I clarify that s/he is not to blame, and explain what is. Next I tell him/her that as an individual, h/she had no power to prevent or change what's happened. However, despite serious limitations s/he can make choices about how to live in their greatly altered Personal World. I ask the client questions and explore/challenge their responses: are they numbing the pain with alcohol or drugs?; self-harming?; considering suicide?; taking out their fear and frustration on partner or children?; blaming other vulnerable groups – migrants; racial/ethnic populations?

This investigation may seem much too little, but it is what I believe is ethical for therapy to offer. At the end of six or 12 sessions I have to say good-bye. I wish them courage, fortitude and compassion toward themselves and others. And because I'm a very political person, I'd be tempted to give my client a copy of Lenin's pamphlet, *Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capitalism*. I suspect Smail would have endorsed my impulse, as he believed that 'What we need is not an unlimited supply of therapy so much as a rehabilitation of politics: the realization that power can be used for good or ill' (Smail, 2001: p 55).

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# Exile on Main Street – Towards A Counter-Existential Therapy

Talk given at the Society for Existential Analysis Annual Conference, London, 30 September 2016

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**Manu Bazzano**

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*In memory of Jo Cox (1974-2016)*

## **Abstract**

Brexit saw the rise of nationalism, an idea founded on tribal violence against the other. But for Nietzsche the ‘good European’ transcends parochialism, whilst Said saw modern western culture as the work of exiles. Existentialism embraced the modern ontological condition of exile, endeavouring to describe existence in the absence of a subject whose nature is groundless. It promised to confront the philosophical tradition and its false hopes in order to account for displacement, absence, otherness, openness to radical ethics and socio-political transformation. Does the philosophy of existence (and existential psychotherapy) still answer for the above? Or do we need to formulate a counter-existential perspective?

## **Key Words**

Exile, otherness, existential psychotherapy, logocentrism, differentialism.

## ***‘Where are you from?’***

Towards the end of therapy, my client Ahmed made plans to leave the UK. Brexit had been the last straw. A bright thirty-something from Algeria, he had built a career in the creative area of banking, one that allows him to employ his natural talent for mathematics. To a degree, our weekly meetings helped him, I think, steer a difficult balance that brought him some respite and the clarity needed to act. The turning point came after the EU referendum, the culmination of a long process: he’d been aware for a while of uncomfortable feelings and emotions that had come up since the move to London, brought about by his affluent neighbours’ gracious indifference after years of him living there, by the courteous interrogations he felt subjected to at the school parents’ meetings, by the probing question: ‘Where are you from?’ – reserved for anyone whose accent or complexion is different. Add, twice a day, the swarming assault at train carriages, the aggressiveness of commuters shoving their way in, fighting for that corner where they can enter their monadic being in the

cultural delights of the *Evening Standard*, and it was no surprise that Ahmed had had enough. ‘Let’s move to France’: His wife agrees. The kids are excited. Not that he harbours illusions about France’s *fraternité*, with all the brouhaha about *burkini* and the mounting secularist intolerance. For another thing that annoys Ahmed is being routinely asked to come up with assertions about Islam, the religion of his upbringing he feels connected to, but not as badge of tribal identity.

This last point became central. His reluctance to view identity in these terms raised two questions: a) Why do we view identity solely in terms of *membership*? b) What happened to identity as radical uniqueness, something one finds (‘finding one’s voice’) – something that demands temporary exile from one’s tribe of origin?

## Good Europeans

Other clients too voiced their dismay after Brexit. Europeans among them felt the ugly xenophobic undertones. My British clients were discomfited by what they saw as the narrowing of the horizon, the claustrophobic nausea they felt of being aboard a ship of little islanders captained by Livid Nigels in Mr Kipling blazers and Dyed-blond Chancers waving the Union Jack on a City bike. Before it gained currency, the term ‘Brexit’ sounded jarring to me. There is no exit in Brexit but closure, vainglorious enclosure, self-confinement within a brittle notion of identity that believes itself encircled by swarming migrants at its borders, and contaminated by multi-culturalism in its midst. These sentiments belong to a brutal legacy that sees ‘a homogenous country [as] more peaceful and stable’; (Robinson, 2012: p 25), a legacy that plays on a misguided metaphor borrowed from geology: a homogenous stone is more solid than a heterogeneous one.

I am no fan of the EU, especially after what they did to Greece. The ‘good European’ of today supports austerity and casts a suspicious glance on outsiders. But there is another meaning to the phrase ‘good European’, if one thinks of Europe as the font of modern western culture – understood, with Said (2001), to be ‘the work of exiles, émigré, refugees’ (p 173). This is a vision of Europe built on Hellenism, in turn influenced by Asia – a Europe whose *borders are porous*. In modern times, this is a vision of Europe as cradle of inspired scepticism, deconstructive force and critical thought; of writers who fled wars and holocausts, or left voluntarily: Joyce, Beckett, the latter preferring France at war to Ireland at peace; a Europe that gave us existentialism and phenomenology.

## The lunacy of nationality

The writer who best articulated this notion was Nietzsche, whose hopes were inextricably linked to his despair about the German Reich of Bismarck and the subsequent Wilhelmine period, presciently seen by him as a danger

for the rest of Europe. Nietzsche considered attachments to any so-called fatherland, with their ‘lapse and regression into old loves and narrow views’ (Nietzsche, 1978: p 152) as a form of ‘lunacy’ (*ibid*, p 169).

His initial pan-Europeanism eventually morphed into trans-Europeanism: a good European, it turns out, is one who gazes at Europe from the viewpoint of exile and statelessness, one who, like himself, has *no homeland*. Believing that Europe found itself at a time of difficult transition, in the mid-1880s he wrote words that are resonant today:

*How can those of us who are children of the future be at home in this house of today? We are averse to all the ideals in which anyone today, in this brittle and broken time of transition, might feel at home; but as far as the ‘realities’ of our times are concerned, we do not believe that they will last. The ice that barely continues to bear our weight has become very thin: thawing winds are blowing, and we ourselves, we who have no homeland, are something that breaks up ice and all those ‘realities’ that have become too thin*

(cited in Krell & Bates, 1997: p 2, translation modified, last emphasis added).

### *Exile, Existence, Existential*

Those among us who have no homeland can make a significant contribution: we can help rupture ‘realities’ that have become superfluous and open a route to the future. Those among us who recognized the death of God, i.e. our condition of *groundlessness* – ‘the destruction of the centuries-old horizon of meaning and ontological stability’ (Viriasova, 2016: p 225) – are up to the task of clearing the view for new horizons. For that reason, ‘a good European must...leave home’ (Bazzano, 2006: p 195). Home leaving can be factual: Nietzsche was a nomad without a state, a home, and a citizenship. Exile can be tragically factual, as in the current plight of thousands upon thousands of refugees fleeing war zones. It can denote, as in the *tokudo* or ‘homeless vows’ of one receiving Zen ordination, a rethinking of values, an aspiration to leave the false security of home and received identity. Greg Madison (2009) has written positively on *existential migration*:

*Unlike economic migration, simple wanderlust, exile, or variations of forced migration, ‘existential migration’ is conceived as a chosen attempt to express something fundamental about personal existence by leaving one’s homeland and becoming a foreigner*

(Madison, 2009).

Madison stresses the clear preference in voluntary migrants for ‘the unfamiliar and the foreign over the familiar conventional routines of the homeworld’ (*ibid*).

The ‘philosophy of existence’ seemingly embraced our ontological condition of exile announced by Nietzsche. The very word existentialism, beginning with the prefix *ex* (‘out’ or ‘out of’) aligns it with *existence exile, exodus, exit, exteriority*; these words ‘bear a meaning that is not negative’ (Blanchot, 1993: p 127), a meaning that challenges the sedentary predilection of the philosophical tradition for home, identity, and self-sameness. It questions the centrality of the established *polis* in favour of a cosmopolitan community; it challenges a paradigm of homesickness that places the refugee and the exile in the ‘inferior position of the supplicant’ (Viriasova, 2016: p 222).

Existentialism resisted the Platonism of the philosophical tradition and confronted its false hopes – self-identity, centrality of *logos*, denial of the body, enclosure within the borders of the city and the state – in order to account for difference, displacement, nomadism and social and political solidarity. Does the philosophy of existence (and existential psychotherapy) still stand for any of the above? To investigate, I will examine the question in the three key areas: 1) self; 2) self and other(s); 3) self, other(s) and the world.

## 1) Self

### *Incarinate subjectivity*

As a rule, subjectivity is either unduly substantiated or summarily circumvented. We either get bogged down in it, or we shun it in favour of loftier concepts. Among phenomenologists, Merleau-Ponty’s position is unusual; he walks an ambiguous middle path. He does not accept the Cartesian paradigm nor can he fully agree with Husserl’s rationalism. At the same time, he remains loyal to Husserl by never entirely abandoning subjectivity. Referring to Heidegger, he writes:

*The thought of subjectivity is one of these solids that philosophy will have to digest. Or let us say that once ‘infected’ by certain ways of thinking, philosophy can no longer annul them but must cure itself of them by inventing better ones. The same philosopher who now regrets Parmenides and would like to give us back our relationship with Being such as they were prior to self-consciousness owes his idea of and taste for primordial ontology to just this self-consciousness. There are some ideas which make it impossible for us to return to a time prior to their existence, even and especially if we have moved beyond them, and subjectivity is one of them*

(Merleau-Ponty, 1964: p 154, emphasis added)

It is not possible to dream up a mode of thought *before* the birth of modern subjectivity, to think and act as if the encrusted layers of two millennia of post-Socratic philosophy have little bearing on how we live. The task is to work *with* subjectivity and find a way forward – in Merleau-Ponty’s case, through the fertile notion of the *body-subject*. This also provides us with a doorway to an emancipatory way of conceiving our being in the world, of constructing an ‘irregular cosmology...of our finitude and imperfection’ (Nussbaum, 2003: p 661). In this sense, incarnate subjectivity is none other than ‘the finite mortal individual, democratic citizen, equal to and among others, who contains the world within himself by virtue of his resourceful imagination and his sympathetic love’ (*ibid*, pp 656-67).

### *Dead Ringer*

It is my impression that the body-subject, a sensible way out of the philosophical impasse of subjectivity, is only a minor item within large sections of the ‘British school’ of existential therapy. I also believe that there is an inconsistency in the latter derived in turn from Heidegger’s own inconsistency on the matter. A case in point is Heidegger’s notion of ‘fore-structure’, already approximated by Husserl (Magliola, 1984: p 201n) in his *Cartesian Meditations* (Husserl, 2013), in the section titled ‘The Ego as substrate of habitualities’ (pp 66-67), where he puts forward the intriguing notion of *habitus*. After the moment when a particular decision I have taken has passed, Husserl says, and regardless as to whether I am of the same conviction, ‘I am abidingly the Ego who is thus and so decided’ (p 66). This is not simply because ‘I remember the act or can remember it later’. I can remember the act even if ‘I have “given up” my conviction’. Even if I have given up my conviction, my particular decision has helped construct ‘this abiding *habitus*, or state’ (p 67), by which ‘the persisting Ego is determined’ (*ibid*). It is not possible to uncouple *habitus* from Aristotle’s thought and from the thirteenth century’s theology of Thomas Aquinas and Dante. This is not surprising – there are evident if overlooked affinities between Husserl and Descartes, and Descartes and Christian theology. This notion was useful to Husserl in his attempt to disentangle phenomenology from the clutches of a ‘philosophy of consciousness’ that has it in its tight grip to this day. It will prove useful to Bourdieu (1990) who re-appropriated *habitus* to great effect ‘as a way of escaping from the choice between structuralism without subject and the philosophy of the subject’ (p 10). And it was useful to Hegel in moving philosophical enquiry past Kantian dualism.

What we have in Heidegger’s case is something else entirely. His own version of *habitus*, the fore-structure (*Vor-struktur*), mentioned briefly in *Being and Time* (Heidegger, 1962) is crucial as it will provide an opening for Gadamer’s own version of hermeneutics (Gadamer, 2004). Heidegger

(1962) sees fore-structure as comprised of three aspects: a) fore-having; b) fore-sight and fore-conception: '[w]henver something is interpreted as something – he writes – the interpretation will be founded essentially upon fore-having, foresight and fore-conception' (p 191). This state of affairs he calls the "hermeneutical Situation" (*ibid*, p 275), something which 'needs to be clarified and made secure *beforehand*, both in a basic experience of the "object" to be disclosed, and in terms of such an experience' (*ibid*, emphasis added). This 'imprint' ends up *substantiating* subjectivity at the same time as it lures us into believing that it has been surpassed. This is even more in evidence in relation to interpretation: for Heidegger, interpretation is making explicit something we have *in advance*, something *already* understood. This formulation not only fails to add anything new to Husserl's 'habitus'. It also falls back to Kant, who in the *Critique of Pure Reason* wrote:

*Experience is itself a species of knowledge which involves understanding; and understanding has rules which I must presuppose as being in me prior to objects being given to me, and therefore as being a priori.*

(Kant, 1933: p 22)

Heidegger's 'existential analytic' retains 'the formal traits of every transcendental analytic' (Derrida & Nancy, 1991: p 98). *Dasein* itself is but 'a dead ringer for the Cartesian cogito' (Rapaport, 2003: p 104), coming to occupy "the place of the subject, the cogito" (Derrida & Nancy, 1991: p 98). In psychotherapy too, despite our enthusiasm of organismic, socio-constructionist, and transpersonal detours, we unfailingly go back to the Ithaca of the cogito (Bazzano, 2016d).

It is not so easy to do away with the subject, but admitting defeat or owning doubt may be preferable to the fantasy of believing the riddle is solved once and for all. At the very least the first stance is recognition of the strangeness and ultimate unknowability of what we are.

### *Singularity and Uniqueness*

In *Democratic Vistas*, Walt Whitman wrote:

*There is, in sanest hours, a consciousness, a thought that rises, independent, lifted from all else, calm, like the stars, shining eternal. This is the thought of identity – yours for you, whoever you are, as mine of me. Miracle of miracles, beyond statement, most spiritual and vaguest of earth's dreams, yet hardest basic fact, and only entrance to all facts*

(Robinson, 2012: p xii-xiii)

Despite its eternalist leanings, Whitman's evocation of identity implies

vital distinctiveness, a locus of singularity as well as of essential solitude. In existential language, this could be read as the place of *irreplaceability* within the configuration of *Dasein*. It is also the necessary locus of personal ethical response to the presence of the other. At the same time, this singularity *cannot be made universal*. This is the fundamental mistake of *subjectivism* found in wide sections of humanistic and existential therapy. To universalize subjective experience has often meant intoning a self-congratulatory paean to our ‘beautiful soul’, a concept already tackled by Hegel (1977):

*The ‘beautiful soul’, lacking an actual existence, entangled in the contradiction between its pure self and the necessity of that self to externalize itself and change itself into actual existence, and dwelling in the immediacy of this firmly held antithesis ... this ‘beautiful soul’ then, being conscious of this contradiction in its unreconciled immediacy, is dissolved to the point of madness, wastes itself in yearning, and pines away in consumption*

(p 406)

### *Intentionality and Expression*

Did existential therapy exhume the beautiful soul via its own notion of the ‘authentic self’? Despite avowed protestations in favour of fluidity and relationality, the notion of a self-existing entity called ‘I’ who, with the valiant help of the existential therapist, will tackle the challenges inherent in his being-towards-death, is still going strong.

Both the beautiful soul and the authentic self are gripped by a *static* notion of subjectivity that regards itself in greater light than the fluid world they inhabit. The first is mesmerised by purity, the second is gripped by conscience, albeit ‘existential’ conscience (Van Deurzen, 2007). At closer scrutiny, both stances are *pre-phenomenological*, harking back to Kant and even Descartes. The antidote here comes from the first phenomenologist, Hegel. In the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, he holds this difficult balance admirably:

*An individual cannot know what he is until he has made himself a reality through action. However, this seems to imply that he cannot determine the end of his action until he has carried it out; but at the same time, since he is a conscious individual, he must have the action in front of him beforehand as entirely his own, i.e. as an end*

(Hegel, 1977: p 240)

The individual has consciously prefigured a particular action, yet it is only *after* the deed that both the nature of her deed and her own self imprinted in it are more fully clarified. The deed is social and historical.

Here the emphasis is no longer on *intentionality* but on *expression*. The emphasis is no longer on the soul or the self (however beautiful, however authentic) but on their concrete actions in the world which alone will convey who this person is. One of the tragedies of the philosophy of existence has been its inability to consider the parallel developments of the Frankfurt School of Critical Theory, a mode of thought which in its best manifestations (Adorno, Benjamin) took to heart and transformed the Hegelian legacy without falling into the trappings of a ‘philosophy of consciousness’. A recalcitrant heir to the existentialist legacy, Foucault (1983) acknowledged that many theoretical blunders could have been avoided by paying closer attention to the *ontology of actuality* that run through the ‘Frankfurt School’ (Dews, 1986). Interestingly, contemporary expressions of social change and direct action such as the *Occupy Wall Street* movement did not turn to existentialism for inspiration, but to Critical Theory (Jeffries, 2016).

### *Of Thanatologists*

One way in which strands of existential therapy buttress Cartesian subjectivity is through attitudes towards death. Loosely inspired by Epicurus, one of Yalom’s books is boldly titled *Staring at the Sun* (Yalom, 2008). The title reverses La Rochefoucauld’s celebrated maxim according to which we *cannot* stare directly into the face of the sun or death. By overturning the aphorism and inviting us to confront our own eventual demise squarely by taking ‘a full unwavering look at death’ (p 275), Yalom misses the subtlety of the aphorism. His stance is common among thanatologists (death specialists, from *Thanatos*, death), but when our zeal to ‘confront death’ is prominent, we overlook two essential things: a) staring at death is an act of *arrogance*; b) like the sun, death is also *benevolent*, ‘a counterpart to the great source of life, the sun’ (Ricks, 1993: p 20): we will benefit from both *as long as* we don’t eyeball them with our hyper-rationalist stare.

Thanatologists are well-intentioned: they long to inject a little depth in the ailing body of humanistic psychology, an orientation all too keen to be out with the transpersonal fairies. They redirect the focus from the obvious narcissism of ‘self-actualization’ to the nuanced narcissism of contemplating being-towards-death. In the process, the self is crowned; his grave, worthy exercises in ‘confronting death’ are applauded, despite being thoroughly self-absorbed. Having indelicately scrutinized death, the therapist will now subject her own existence to the self-punishing enterprise of ‘living authentically’. Emboldened by the new-found ‘truth’, she will then go out ‘guiding’ her clients. We could do worse here than being reminded of Levinas’ powerful critique of ‘being-towards-death’ (Levinas 2001). In his view,

*[it]converts the irremissibility of an unappeasable and implacable death, the existence of the corpse, into something that can be mediated, comprehended, and hence taken over by human subjectivity in ontological terms*

(Rapaport, 2003: p 110)

*Speaking, a.k.a. Chanting my own Dirge*

Contemplating being-towards-death gives us the comforting illusion that death can be understood and assimilated in our experience: a rationalist act of hubris if there ever was one.

Focus on death-as-finality distracts us from the fact that death, or more accurately *lifedeath/deathlife* (Bazzano, 2016b) is vividly present in our everyday, in the language we speak. Speaking itself is linked to our *absence* from being:

*My language does not kill anyone. But if this woman were not really capable of dying, if she were not threatened by death at every moment of her life, bound and joined by death by an essential bond, I would not be able to carry out that ideal negation, that deferred assassination which is what my language is*

(Blanchot, 1995: p 323)

*I say my name, and it is as though I were chanting my own dirge: I separate myself from myself, I am no longer either my presence or my reality, but an objective, impersonal presence, the presence of my name, which goes beyond me and whose stone-like immobility performs exactly the same function for me as a tombstone weighing on the void*

(Blanchot, 1995: p 324)

Our language estranges us. It reaffirms exile as our ontological condition. Affirmation of exile announces the beginning of the end of anthropocentrism (Lacoue-Labarthe & Nancy, 2005): the end of the assumption that the human individual constitutes the basis for a notion of political community. It is the beginning of the end of a political anthropocentrism founded on national and ethnic identification (Rapaport, 2003).

## **2) Self and Others**

*Concrete Relations*

A milestone of relationality is chapter 3, part III of *Being and Nothingness*, where Sartre (2003) initiates an important discussion on ‘concrete relations with others’ (pp 383-452), a text which has been rewritten by Levinas,

Derrida, and Lacan. Echoing Hegel's *Phenomenology*, Sartre emphasizes conflict in human interactions, something we ignore at our peril: doing away with conflict is doing away with *agon*, the Greek word for struggle and contest and a fundamental human instinct towards amelioration. He writes of the crucial role *Anerkennung* (recognition/acknowledgement) plays in human interactions. I want what only the other can give me, her recognition: the recognition of a mirror. The other can give me what I want only inasmuch as she is free but her freedom is a threat to me. I want her to be free and at the same time I want to control her freedom. In this contradictory, seemingly impossible task we spend our 'useless passion' (Sartre, 2003: p 636). Despite his austere vision, Sartre was extraordinarily generous in his political commitment in favour of the wretched of the earth and unflinching in his condemnation of injustice and discrimination, a stance that makes current 'intersubjective therapy' stances look feeble in comparison. As one astute Sartrean commentator writes:

*[Sartre's] analysis of the roots of prejudice and his understanding of how the process of persecution arises make a valuable and insightful contribution to understanding a contemporary Western world that is currently living in the wake of the near collapse of finance capitalism. A world characterized by constant subjection to the fear of the stranger, epitomized by rising anti-immigrant fervour; by an increasing persecution internationally of minorities such as gays and bisexuals; and by the rolling back of female emancipation*

(Pearce, 2016: p 84)

Yet only a faint echo of Sartrean concrete relations remains in contemporary notions of relational existential therapy which are instead largely derivative of relational psychoanalysis (Stolorow *et al*, 1987; Orange *et al.*, 1997). One will certainly not find in them even a trace of the notion of 'psychotherapy as a political act' (Pearce, 2016: p 87).

What I find appealing in Sartre's perspective is its lack of sentimentality and a contemplation of human inter-relational struggle that is free of 'familialism', of the 'framework of the most traditional psychiatry' (Deleuze, 2004: p 235). There *is* mutuality here, but it's the gritty mutuality of entanglement, power struggle as well as love, a struggle forever tinged by ontological disparity. None of the lyrical flights of reciprocity are to be found that characterize the 'philosophy of the meeting' on which much therapeutic orthodoxy relies. The symmetry found here is the springboard for Levinas's work, who reframes concrete relations in terms of *separation* and of an ethical relation that is essentially *non-reciprocal* as well as *non-transactional* (Bazzano, 2016c). My own interpretations of Levinas, applied

to philosophy (Bazzano, 2012) and psychotherapy (Bazzano, 2016c) reframe concrete relations to the political domain of *host* and *guest*, of citizen and migrant. In receiving the guest, the host is herself received by her own dwelling. Only a host who knows her existential condition of guest on Earth can become a good host. By remembering ‘our essential condition as guests on this earth’, we may become ‘good hosts and true citizens’” (*ibid*, p 129).

### *Togetherness*

It is to Levinas that Maurice Blanchot (1993) turns to weave his own account of the relational dimension, one that I have adapted to the psychotherapy domain with my formulation of *togetherness* (Bazzano, 2013). The term, of Germanic origin, means *to gather*, indicating the gathering into proximity, companionship, and sharing of individual components, without relegating aloneness and uniqueness to the background. This is because there is no discrepancy between ‘individual’ and relatedness. The dichotomy arises only if one adopts the view of the *inherent existence* of the self – one of the dominant views in western philosophy and theology. Togetherness comprises of aloneness and autonomy *alongside* relatedness. More importantly, the lesson I draw from Blanchot (1993; 1997) is that *meeting* takes place not in the ‘I-Thou’ dialogical domain but in the non-dialectical, *impersonal* dimension of *il y a* (‘there is’), the phrase used by Rimbaud in part 3 of his poem *Childhood* (Rimbaud, 1986: pp 237-38). The meeting between self and other, therapist and client is an unexpected opening into the domain of poetry.

There are dialectical and non-dialectical modes of encounter. The dialectical mode is in turn divided into three: (1a) objective; (1b) inter-subjective; (1c) immediate.

(1a) In the *objective* mode, the self (therapist) perceives the client (other) as the object of study and observation (whether as a bundle of drives, carrier of symptoms to be alleviated or problems to be solved, or as a ‘case’ to be cognitively and behaviorally re-programmed). This is a normative approach, a Procrustean perspective forcing a human being to fit into a frame – an approach invariably in tune with the dictates of the market, the dominant ideology and fundamentally indifferent to the needs of the real person.

(1b) In the *inter-subjective* perspective, championed by large sections of existential therapy, the client is perceived as another self, perhaps very different, but linked to the self through a form of primary identity. By universalizing Gadamer’s stance in the transition from hermeneutics to psychotherapy, the inter-subjective perspective omits the *inherent disparity* present in any relationship and the fundamental otherness of the other.

(1c) The *immediate* view attempts to bridge the separation between self and other. Intensity and a heightened sense of presence are key notions

here, often highlighting a quasi-numinous incidence of peak experiences. Alterity may be lost in this bridging, and the solitude/autonomy of the other sacrificed at various altars: spirituality, the transpersonal, quasi-magical readings of the notion of ‘therapeutic presence’. What is implicit in this view is Platonist nostalgia for lost union.

Dissimilar on the surface, all three dialectical approaches share a propensity towards bridging the unbridgeable. The objective analyst, the inter-subjective existentialist and the empathic spiritualist all unwittingly reduce the uneasiness inherent in the unknowability of the other; in the process, they risk neglecting her very real otherness.

The *non-dialectical* mode is definable by what is *not*. It is not something the therapist does nor does it rely on the conditions he allegedly ‘offers’. All one does here is making the room ready for a guest who may or may not appear. Genuine encounter is an occurrence rather than direct result of the therapist’s doing.

Blanchot’s own emphasis is on *authorship*, on the work of the artist/writer. This can legitimately be extended to the notion of authorship of one’s life. There would then be a fundamental difference between a psychotherapeutic practice which emphasizes hermeneutics and one that focuses on authorship. The first is based on description/interpretation; the second on ethical respect for the autonomy of the client and the decentering of the therapist’s role. The question then is no longer how to describe/interpret but how to create space for authorship to emerge.

### 3) Self, Others, World

#### *Horses for Courses*

One of the assumptions implicitly disputed so far is the foundational relatedness of human experience. I want to state my claim more explicitly, by linking ‘foundational relatedness’ to its philosophical roots. I will then put forward a different view, one with its own history. In doing so, I do not claim access to a *truer* perspective, but simply to one that better appeals to me.

#### *The Rhetoric of Boundaries*

In a section on ‘Heideggerian resonances’ within a recent article, Spinelli (2016) writes of ‘being-in-the-world [as] a *unitary phenomenon*’ in which ‘there is no divide between subject and object, nor between internal and external’ (p 316, emphasis added). For Heidegger, the author says, the ‘I’ itself ‘expresses the *wholeness of being*’ (p 317 emphasis added) and must be read ‘as a general term rather than...that which designates a specific and singular entity or agent’ (*ibid*). The ‘Heideggerian resonances’

in question are one of a series of parallel examples presented by Spinelli (alongside spiritual traditions, physics, social sciences, consciousness studies and ‘Husserlian resonances’) that would demonstrate the validity of what the author calls ‘the Third Grand Theory’ (universal relatedness) upon which ‘the “radical turn” proposed by existential phenomenology is...dependent upon’ (p 310). The first two ‘Grand Theories’ described by Spinelli, are: a) ‘individual subjectivities’ (p 305) and b) ‘subjectivity/ intersubjectivity (or bi-subjectivity)’ (p 306), both seen as exerting a diverting influence on existential phenomenology. These two roughly correspond to ‘Cartesian subjectivity’ and ‘inter-subjectivity’ in the way I’ve discussed them here. At a crucial point, the author writes:

*The third ‘Grand Theory’ deviates significantly from the previous two by proposing a foundational grounding of universal relatedness from which all individual subjectivities emerge. Each distinct subjectivity is therefore viewed as an outcome expression or manifestation arising from an a priori ‘ground’ of relatedness* (Spinelli, 2016: p 308, first emphasis added).

In my view, *universal relatedness is wholly in accord with Cartesian subjectivity and with inter-subjectivity*. Self-identity first encounters inter-subjectivity then discovers universal relatedness. These are stages in a trajectory that widens the ground. However, there is no ground to begin with. It is not true that the theory of universal relatedness ‘challenges dominant Western assumptions regarding a distinct and internalised self’ (Spinelli, 2016: p 308); it merely tickles them. Furthermore, universal relatedness (a.k.a. *holism*) has always been present in both western and eastern philosophical/spiritual traditions *alongside* differentialist, counter-traditional views.

### *Logocentrism*

Spinelli is right in seeing universal relatedness as more consistent with existential therapy than either crude subjectivity or dialogical inter-subjectivity. This is also where the problem lies, for then existential phenomenology *ceases to account for difference, fragmentation, and the modern ontological condition of exile* and becomes instead another variation on the metaphysics promulgated within the Citadel of Logos – a metaphysics whose name is *logocentrism*. The logocentric view assumes *unity* between language and reality. It compresses difference into an all-encompassing whole sometimes built on reason, other times on mystical union: logocentrism can be *rational* as well as *mystical*. For Derrida, one of Heidegger’s most gifted interpreters, Heidegger’s notion of *Sein* belongs to a particular kind of mysticism that recognizes the unity of opposites (Brooks, 2015; Magliola,

1984), to an onto-theology inscribed within ‘metaphysical determinations of truth’ (Derrida, 1998: p 10). In *The Question of Being* (Heidegger, 1958), we read:

*Only because the question ‘What is metaphysics?’ thinks from the beginning of the climbing above, the transcendence, the Being of being, can it think of the negative of being, of that nothingness which just as originally is identical with Being*

(p 101)

Identity of ‘being’ with *Being* replicates a theme found in the tradition, the *self-identity principle*. Finely attuned to Heidegger’s critical practice and drawing on Heidegger’s late work *Identity and Difference* (Heidegger, 2002), Derrida deconstructs – *Dekonstruktion* was after all Heidegger’s term — the mystical notion of unity of opposites, opening phenomenological inquiry to a multiplicity of interpretations (Derrida, 1998).

### *Differentialism*

Logocentrism is almost inescapable because linked to what we see as undisputable: the principle of self-identity. But there is an alternative, namely the *differentialist* thought of the kind espoused by Nāgārjuna (150-250 AD), the Buddhist sage-philosopher, and, in the modern era, by Derrida and the work of what came to be known as ‘post-structuralism’. All of these are concerted assaults on what we hold most dear: the notion that ‘I am I’; the notion that whatever is, is. If invited to forego for a moment categories such as *identity, unity, being*, and entertain a line of enquiry unburdened by these metaphysical crutches, many may come to experience unease. This is because our way of thinking is steeped in the above concepts. With globalization exporting ‘our way of life’ all over the world, this increasingly applies to other cultures as well. Within some traditions we nevertheless find threads of differentialism. Zen Buddhism is a case in point: alongside logocentric views and the tendency to refer back to unity and the ‘ground of being’, one finds in Zen the invitation to consider that a being is not a unitary entity but a product of *co-arising*, of ‘simultaneous happening of different elements that together construct what we call a self’ (Park, 2006: p xii). A being is at all times *already* ‘in the web of movement without...possibility of creating a “presence” of “entity”’ (Park, *ibid*: p xiii). This is an example of what Nāgārjuna called *śūnyatā*, often translated as ‘emptiness’. To a conventional way of thinking, the above description sounds like annihilation. Similarly, the notion of *identity of non-identity (anattā)* – namely that *all things in the world are devoid of self* – will be understood as a ‘violation of the Aristotelian logic’ (Park, *ibid*: p xiv). When faced with the differentialist perspective,

the customary response is twofold: a) rejection of this philosophical and religious practice because it is deemed to be ‘nihilistic’; b) assimilation of its otherness within customary metaphysical categories. Yet the differentialist perspective plays an important role in our era, the *era of difference*. Difference is crucial when applied to metaphysics, religion and transformative practices such as psychotherapy. This is because a thought that recognizes difference is not reducible to onto-theology; *it does not reduce phenomena to ‘Being’*.

### *Indra’s Net and the Panopticon*

Echoing de Beauvoir and Dostoyevsky, Spinelli (2016) draws a powerful ethical inference at the heart of universal relatedness: ‘*Each of us is responsible for everything and to every being*’ (p 325, italics in the original). This phrase reminded me of the Vedic image of Indra’s net found in the *Avatamsaka Sutra*. The god Indra hung a wondrous vast net, a spider’s web stretching to infinity. At each crossing point there is a glittering jewel. Each jewel reflects all others – a haunting metaphor for the inter-dependence of all things. Everything affects everything else. But there is a twist: we are all interconnected *within* Indra’s net. There is a powerful rhetoric of *inside/outside* and *of boundaries* at work here. Poetic beauty notwithstanding, this vision of universal relatedness is thoroughly logocentric: it points at closure; it marks space; it creates borders. In short, it has all the ‘hallmarks of holism’ (Magliola, 2006: p 247).

What’s more, the universal responsibility implied by universal relatedness engenders *universal guilt*: a weak point in Levinasian thought, echoed unintentionally by Spinelli. Luckily, there is a way out. The first ethical vow taken up by a Zen practitioner states: ‘Sentient beings are numberless. I vow to save them’. One reading of the vow is: ‘I vow to save them *from me*’. To be ‘responsible’ for others has to mean, on one level, *to let others be*, to refrain from bothering them with my greed and aggression and equally from flooding them with my moral effulgence.

Another image of universal relatedness is Jeremy Bentham’s *Panopticon*, an institutional building where everyone can be observed by a single watchman – enclosure, imprisonment, and the entanglement of our globalized world where relatedness means *entrapment*. At this juncture, exile is a legitimate act of resistance reinstating a primary, non-subjectival freedom. Affirmation of exile then becomes affirmation of existence: the right to *exit*, to escape the prison of logos, where otherness is kept out of our violent borders.

Were we able to affirm our modern ontological condition of exile, we’d see the myriad manifestations of existence as stemming from *emptiness* rather than reduce them to ‘*oneness*’. We’d be free to move about leisurely. We’d become a person who, as Huineng (638-713 AD) says, ‘does not

abide either inside or outside ... [and] is free to come and go' (Yampolsky, 1967: p 150).

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# Existential Experimentation: From being and doing to an approach that addresses the theme of ‘Insider and Outsider’

Talk given at the Society for Existential Analysis Annual Conference, London, 30 September 2016

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**Mark Rayner, Chekkie Kauntze & Lauren Sayers**

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## Abstract

This paper articulates how an existential-phenomenologically informed intervention fits within a primary care setting in the United Kingdom National Health Service (NHS). It focuses on how a measurable notion of change in the form of client-determined goals and Repertory Grid Technique (RGT) can be integrated in a way that does not compromise existential-phenomenological values and principles. A case study is cited to help demonstrate this way of working.

## Key Words

NHS, existential experimentation, existential phenomenological psychotherapy, outcome measures, change, goals, Repertory Grid Technique.

## Introduction

Existential Experimentation (EE) as an existential-phenomenological short-term approach in the public sector, is at the centre of the tension between being considered an ‘insider’ and ‘outsider’. It was developed at the same time as the IAPT (Improving Access to Psychological Therapy) by the team at EASE Wellbeing. This paper aims to demonstrate a manner of integrating existential-phenomenological psychological therapy with NHS practices and consequently how it achieves a ‘both/and’ stance as discussed by Spinelli (2016) at the recent SEA conference.

The thinking behind this approach commenced a decade ago and was first published in this journal several years later entitled ‘CORE Blimey! Existential Therapy Scores Goals’ (Rayner & Vitali 2013). Since then, we have published several papers that embrace the integration of existential attitudes, phenomenological methods and humanistic principles, together with NHS standards of practice. These NHS standards of practice include: a rigorous risk assessment, risk management, as well as monitoring and measuring outcomes. Additionally, it adheres to a way of working that demonstrates a level of consistency in the intervention, allowing for the production of robust data required by the NHS.

Whilst it is very difficult to distinguish this as an existential approach, rather than simply a short-term one, it is underpinned by notions of openness and discovery of limitations, as well as potentials that are central to the ontological nature of the endeavour, thus rendering it existential in nature. Furthermore, the approach aligns itself with the existential notion of paradox, recognizing the tensions present in clients' difficulties, such as the cost of being 'depressed' as well as the possible 'gains' of adopting such a position. For example, it may be safer to stay indoors and depressed, rather than venture into the world when one has been traumatised by experiences within it.

EE additionally maintains its existential-phenomenological essence by challenging the medicalisation of distress. It does this by intervening early in the life cycle of distress and by applying a phenomenological methodology, in an attempt to explore and deconstruct the experience of the person in advance of them falling into the classificatory systems used to categorise psychological issues (Conrad, 2008; Rapley *et al.*, 2011; Rossler, 2013). Therefore, rather than homogenising distress, it is an individualised approach that explores how each individual relates to their world, helping them to re-evaluate their roles, beliefs, assumptions and attitudes. This in turn, empowers the individual to take responsibility for their life, which is not only based upon existential principles, but also on the government's recovery initiative, promoting individuals to live more fulfilling lives (Shepherd *et al.*, 2008).

## **On the periphery**

There are two key positions that relate to EE being involved in the theme of 'Insider Outsider'. First, existential-phenomenological psychotherapy and counselling psychology has sat on the periphery of services in the NHS. This is in part, a result of existential-phenomenological therapies failing to comply with statutory sector principles around risk assessment and management, rigorous maintenance of patient information, time limits to therapy contracts and aiming for 'recovery'. Having said that, EE's approach is appropriate to belong on the inside since it conforms to the required standards aforementioned.

Second and importantly, existential-phenomenological thinking occupies a position that enables EE to offer positive critical appraisal of that which is 'inside' such as the shortcomings of dominant models of current service delivery. For instance, primary care within the NHS is increasingly governed by NICE guidelines, which rely on evidence-based practice to inform therapeutic treatments, an aspect that existential psychotherapies tend not to adhere to. Randomized Control Trials (RCTs) are the main form of evidence relied upon, however they have numerous biases and flaws when applied to psychological research (House and Lowenthal, 2013). This is partly the consequence of attempting to generalise from something as diverse as human distress and because what clients deem to be effective

within therapy is subjective and differs across outcome measures (Margison *et al*, 2000). What is more, while some clients report positive outcomes from receiving an empirically validated treatment, one cannot infer from this that the effective aspect of the intervention was the specific technique, thus making RCTs less valuable in naturalistic settings than in laboratories (Assay and Lambert, 1999). Having said that, it is outside the scope of this paper to address RCT evidence in detail.

Empirically validated interventions dominate the NHS, despite a lack of evidence for their superiority, while existentially based interventions remain sparse (Mcelaveney *et al*, 2013). Partly, this is because they are not readily measured by RCTs and therefore not endorsed by NICE guidelines (Leng *et al*, 2010). Yet, it is additionally because the application of an existential-phenomenological therapy makes it challenging to operationalise and practitioners are often reluctant to adapt to certain restraints (Cooper, 2008). Existential-phenomenological practices have not met the guidelines that allow therapies to be included on the ‘inside’, thus the intervention discussed here holds the tension between offering a consistent and measurable encounter with the notion of individualism, creativity and flexibility. Henceforth, it is a valid question whether being on the periphery represents a better description than being either on the inside or outside.

## Therapy process

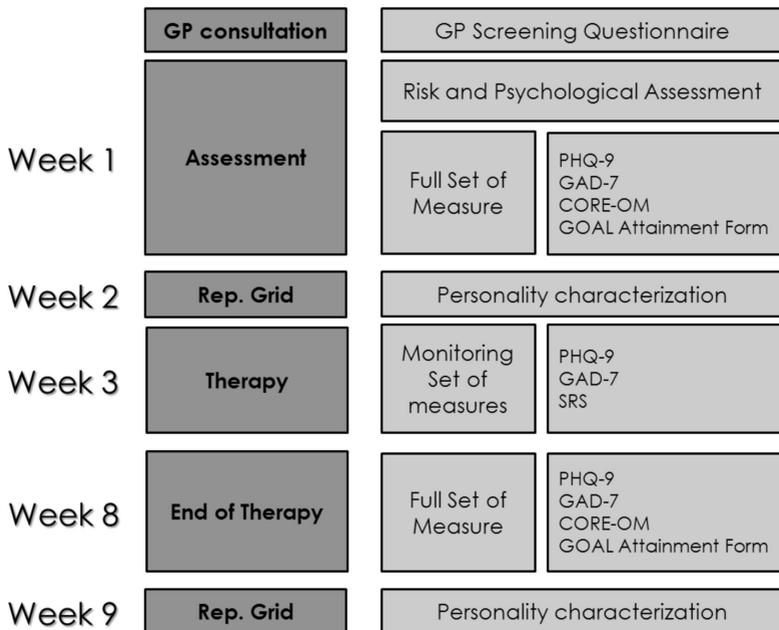
EE operates on a number of key principles:

1. Addressing psychological difficulty early in the life cycle of distress.
2. Challenging the medicalization of misery.
3. Providing a personalised yet measurable approach to psychological therapy.
4. Reducing waiting times by seeing clients at GP surgeries.
5. Challenging stigma by providing treatment in routine settings.
6. Reducing costs by avoiding psychiatric facilities and psychology offices.
7. Decreasing referral rates to secondary care by addressing concerns early.
8. Promoting recovery as defined by the ability to engage in life in a meaningful manner rather than one that is free of psychopathology or symptomatology.
9. The personalised approach is client directed through the elicitation of goals at the outset of therapy.

EE is currently being implemented within the NHS in Primary Care with the underpinnings of the principles above. The pathway is arranged chronologically from when clients complete a screening questionnaire

with their GP, to their follow up sessions. Referrals are made by GPs in Primary Care which is designed to get a sense of the client's difficulties, how they impact upon the client currently and to promote a tight sense of collaboration with the GP and EASE. Following this, an EASE clinician assesses each referral, to determine whether they meet the criteria for an approach that is short-term and sits within the NHS range for treatment of mild to moderate mental health concerns (see Rayner & Vitali, 2016). Following this, the semi-structured interview is carried out which forms the first part of the repertory grid, a form of measurement consistent with evaluation this form and other forms of therapy in terms of effectiveness at addressing notions of self-construct. Clients then receive six sessions of EE therapy, which is an operationalised approach in order to ensure that clinicians are adhering to the key principles and attitudes of the protocol, whilst also maintaining flexibility. For example, the protocol consists of de-objectifying distress, setting goals, attaining descriptions to promote reflection, improving clients' hermeneutic work, exploring their worldviews and attitudes around choice and responsibility and encouraging clients to

**Figure 1:** Visual representation of the EE therapeutic process



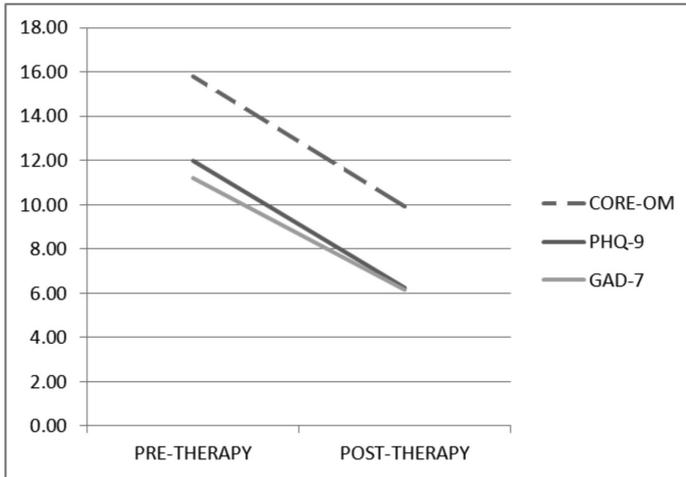
attempt open-ended experiments with new ways of being within both the therapeutic relationship and the world. The second part of the repertory grid interview is carried out after the six sessions of therapy and two follow-up sessions are conducted at three and six months.

### **Integrating a measurable notion of chance/ becoming an insider**

To measure and monitor outcomes, EE uses a range of measurements, some that are commonly used within the statutory services and others that are not. EE has incorporated the current IAPT scales such as PHQ-9 (Kroenke *et al*, 2001) and GAD-7 (Spitzer *et al*, 2006), which are delivered on a session-by-session basis, and CORE-OM (Evans *et al*, 2000), which is administered pre and post therapy and at the follow-up sessions. These outcome measures are used to enable EE to be compared to psychological approaches of similar time lengths in primary care, in order to establish whether an existential-phenomenological approach was effective for treating distress in primary/secondary care. EE additionally measures and monitors outcomes not commonly used within the NHS such as the Session Rating Scale (Duncan *et al*, 2003) on a session-by-session basis and the RGT (Fransella, Bell & Bannister, 2004), which is administered pre- and post-therapy (discussed in further detail below).

A feasibility study for EE looking at symptomatology and perceived psychological distress outcomes for adults referred for depression and/or anxiety was conducted (Rayner and Vitali, 2015). On average EE reduces depression (measured with PHQ-9), anxiety (measured with GAD-7) and psychological distress (measured with CORE-OM) of individuals within a primary care setting. Similarly, data from an ongoing pilot study was recently analysed and found consistent results; a reduction in anxiety, depression, and psychological distress post therapy.

**Figure 2:** Data from an ongoing pilot study showing a reduction in all scales measuring symptomatology



N. Valid CORE forms	22
N. Valid PHQ-9 forms	20
N. Valid GAD-7 Forms	18
Total N. of clients	24

Thus, EE seems to produce promising psychotherapeutic outcomes in terms of reducing the symptomatology of depression and anxiety. That said, we appreciate that these scales that are predominantly used within the NHS, do not adequately capture a client's experience, and the focus on symptomatology is not representative of the aims and values of an existential-phenomenological approach (Cooper, 2008). Rather, we take up the position that clients express their concerns using the language of illness, but when this is deconstructed we find that their difficulties more often are relational. In other words, we understand words like 'depression' or 'anxiety' as representing a person's relationship to themselves, others and the world. Therefore, EE takes the stance that rather than change referring to the eradication of symptomatology, change can be understood in terms of a change in understanding of oneself, others and the world, which we believe can be expressed and measured through goals.

## Goals

Hopes are expressed by therapists nowadays as goals and by clients as wished-for positions in their life. In other words, what they would like

to achieve in therapy. Furthermore, our work is underpinned by the notion of intentionality, the idea that problems that clients express nowadays as symptoms, when deconstructed, are understood as expressions of their relationships to themselves, others and the world. Thus, we argue that symptoms are aspects of world experience and, as such are inevitably meaningful, purposeful and functional. While this approach does not directly address meaning, existential-phenomenological thinking and work considers all experience in the above terms.

Thus, it is incumbent upon us to deconstruct these meanings, functions and purposes. This is not to say that these are desirable positions as the intention of coming to therapy is to address that which hinders us, but principally a phenomenological enquiry attempts to move the language of illness to one of human experience. In doing this, the endeavour between client and therapist becomes one where blame, shame, dysfunction and stigma can be addressed and also promotes a sense of agency. In other words, the client can quickly recognise the experience as ‘mine’. This we believe contributes greatly to clients being engaged, interested and motivated (which is hard to measure) in how they can understand the positions they have taken up in relation to their experience, rather than try to simply get rid of unwanted thoughts, feelings and/or behaviours. These are some of the key principles of this approach, but further research is needed to explore what creates, reinforces and maintains notions such as engagement and motivation.

Clients rate, in their final session, the degree to which they feel that they attained their goals, thus allowing for an individualised and creative method for measuring change across therapy. Furthermore, client-determined goals seem to provide a valid outcome measurement that additionally compliments an existential-phenomenological approach (Rayner and Vitali, 2014). Below are results from an ongoing pilot study.

	<b>1<sup>st</sup> Goal</b> n=22	<b>2<sup>nd</sup> Goal</b> n=21	<b>3<sup>rd</sup> Goal</b> n=17	<b>4<sup>th</sup> Goal</b> n=11
<b>Not at all</b>	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%
<b>A little bit</b>	4.55%	9.52%	0.00%	18.18%
<b>Moderately</b>	27.27%	4.76%	52.49%	45.45%
<b>Quite a bit</b>	40.91%	71.43%	25.29%	18.18%
<b>Extremely</b>	27.27%	14.29%	11.76%	18.18%

**Table 1:** Clients rated achievement of goals post therapy\*

• This data is to be viewed as anecdotal at present as the sample size is small due to some clients not rating their goal achievements and some

only construing two or three goals out of four.

Additionally, in the on going pilot study, thematic analysis was utilised to assess the client's goals (Rayner and Sayer, 2015). The following were key themes found from analysing the goals; developing and understanding self, understanding relationships with self and others, understanding emotions, understanding the need for more or less control, dealing with givens and holding onto something versus letting go. As mentioned, EE challenges the way in which we understand change, so that rather than change referring to behaviour or symptoms, it can also include a change in understanding of oneself, others and the world. Therefore, the content of the goals seems to be in line with the type of change that EE works on achieving and encompasses existential-phenomenological themes.

### **Repertory Grid Technique**

As part of the process of validating the ongoing pilot study, a tool to measure change of clients beliefs, assumptions and values of themselves, others and their world has been introduced as part of the therapeutic process. RGT is an idiographic and personalised quantitative outcome measure that allows an individual's beliefs and values to be explored phenomenologically, whilst enabling patterns to emerge and be represented in a quantitative way. We believe that the flexible nature of RGT bridges the gap between qualitative and quantitative research and could be a more beneficial way to create evidence for psychotherapy research and EE in particular (Winter, 1994).

RGT was designed in harmony with personal construct theory and it assesses how an individual construes and gives meaning to themselves, others and their world (Kelly, 1955). EE helps the client to explore and challenge their assumptions, rigid beliefs, contradictions and paradoxes in relation to themselves, others and their world and thus RGT seems to also be in line with an existential-phenomenological approach such as EE (Winter, 1994). Furthermore, in EE the client is encouraged to explore new ways of being, whilst acknowledging the benefits and costs that such changes may bring (Spinelli, 2015). RGT captures an individual's paradoxes in the form of implicative dilemmas, where a wished for change in one aspect may lead to an undesired change elsewhere. For instance, a client may wish to be able to say 'no' more easily to others, but this would risk others perceiving the client differently. Therefore, it can highlight what dilemmas are present which may be contributing to a client's feeling of 'stuckness' in their current way of being and as RGT is conducted pre and post therapy, it reveals whether the number and content of dilemmas change over therapy for each client. Consequently, the aims of EE seem similar to what RGT captures and therefore we believe that RGT is an outcome measure that detects the complexity of change that occurs across EE more

adequately than just using the standard psychological scales, common in the NHS (Fransella, Bell & Bannister, 2004).

In order to facilitate the understanding of how RGT can aid the understanding of what and how clients may have changed across therapy, in addition to how clients goals are worked on within therapy and what this approach looks like in practice, a case study will be cited:

## Case Study

**Client Goals: 1. To be more confident, 2. Learn to accept myself, 3. Coming to terms with my face, 4. Being assertive**

### Why now?

*The client is a 48-year-old female who on first appearances seemed very outgoing, confident and friendly. However, she immediately became tearful and reported feeling very depressed, overwhelmed by the world and consequently desiring to be alone, struggling to leave her house and feeling like a burden to those around her. When she was fifteen years old she had a severe car crash which she has no recollection of. Yet, she can recall the horrific moments upon awakening and not recognising herself in the mirror and times of wearing what she described as 'scaffolding' around her head, with people pointing and talking about her. She has been subject to thirty years of facial reconstruction surgery and her face is still disfigured and she wears a patch to hide her false eye. She described how everything is filtered through her appearance and eye and accordingly throughout therapy she was very conscious about what angle I was viewing her from, what I might be perceiving and thinking, and she described how she has never felt more self-conscious and lacking in confidence about her face in her whole life as she has done in the past few months.*

*For the past twenty years the client was happy working in the Ministry of Defence. However she felt she wanted to 'give back' for all of the surgery she received on the NHS and therefore retrained to become a nurse working in Accident and Emergencies. However, this turned out to be a huge challenge; the constantly changing setting meant that she would bump into machinery, due to her reduced vision and she would find herself apologising to it, thinking that it was a person, which she found immensely humiliating. Moreover, the high turnover of patients meant that they frequently asked about her patch in what she felt to be insensitive ways. Therefore, it became clear that this new environment had re-traumatised her and consequently she felt unable to return to work.*

### Exploring attitudes and opening up the narrative

*It became apparent from opening up and exploring her narrative that*

*certain attitudes, assumptions and ways of being that once were adaptive, enabling her to stoically continue facing the endless surgeries, get a job, and make so many friendships, were no longer working for her. For example, she described how she felt the need to overcompensate for her facial disfigurement in order to feel equal to others. This was in the form of trying to please others, overworking, never saying no or putting her needs first, and caring for others while struggling to accept care in return. Also, she would take responsibility for everything and came across as extremely positive, friendly and outgoing, which exhausted her and she would have preferred to be alone. The client realised that her stoic attitude of getting on with anything without complaining, had contributed to her becoming overwhelmed with too much to do and not being able to do everything to her best ability. This constant pretence had become hard to uphold and meant that others took advantage of her generosity, knowing that she would step up to any challenge. Therapy worked on highlighting and empathetically challenging these assumptions and beliefs and introduced new perspectives into her narrative, by reflecting on these aspects when they occurred within the therapeutic relationship.*

*Challenging assumptions/experimenting with new ways of being.*

*A strong therapeutic relationship was developed immediately, which the client reported was influenced by genuineness and enabled her to develop confidence and experiment with new ways of being in and out of therapy. She was able to experiment with accepting care and not trying to please or care for me, being assertive in relation to telling her boss the conditions upon which she would return to work and perceiving herself and others in new ways. For example, at night she would hide her false eye from her boyfriend and she never left the house without her patch on. However, the client chose to spend the sessions speaking to me without her patch on. As her confidence grew in our sessions, this spread outside of therapy, with her arriving to the surgery without her patch on and going on a walk and speaking to two people without her patch on. She had never done this before and was astounded that others did not comment on her face or treat her differently. She decided not to wear her patch again and instead bought glasses. She could never have imagined the possibility of having the confidence to do this and hopefully therapy helped to empower her and allowed a safe space to explore others reactions and her own fears. However, amongst all this positivity, she also accepted that there would always be a spectrum of perceptions and responses; some people may not notice her face at all and may be concerned with their own inner worlds, while others will notice it, and some will be inquisitive for caring reasons and others may just be rude. She learnt that what mattered was maintaining her confidence, acceptance of herself and the ability to*

*withstand responses. She also became aware that no matter how much she tried to overcompensate, care for others or put on a pretence, she would not be able to predict others responses and would only exhaust herself attempting to do so. She started to accept what she had lost, but also came to an understanding that she would not be the ambitious, determined, loved and relatable person that she is, without all that she has been through.*

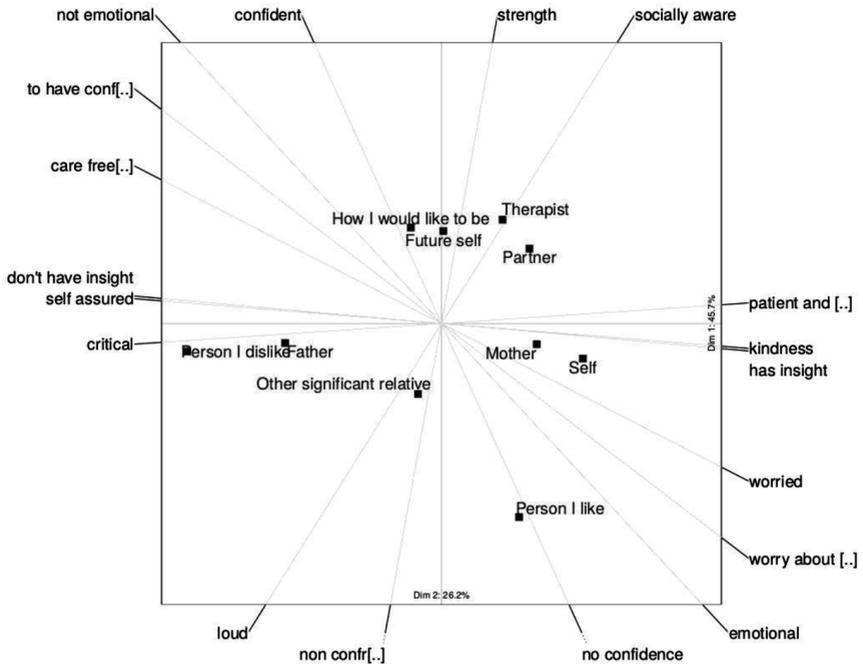
### Feedback

*The client said that at the end of therapy her ‘depression’ had entirely gone, and the world seemed to have colour again. She could never have imagined being the person that she had become over therapy. She said that if she had a moment of feeling very self-conscious when she saw people without her patch on she would think of all the possible perspectives of how others might view her and would not immediately assume that people were thinking negatively (for example they may have been staring at her, but they could also have been focusing on driving or not had good enough eyesight to see her false eye, or looked at her for other reasons), which allowed her to face the world and others. Understanding that her stoic attitude meant that people at work had no idea about the strain she was under, helped her to put her needs first and be more open about her vulnerabilities. Consequently, she was able to return to work and in her three month follow-up she reported that as a result of being assertive, not overcompensating and allowing herself to be vulnerable, she was now able to cope with work, has more energy and her colleagues do not resent her for not doing more than her fair share. While she stated that accepting her face would be a lifelong goal, she felt that the possibility is now more attainable and she feels that she has agency in her situation.*

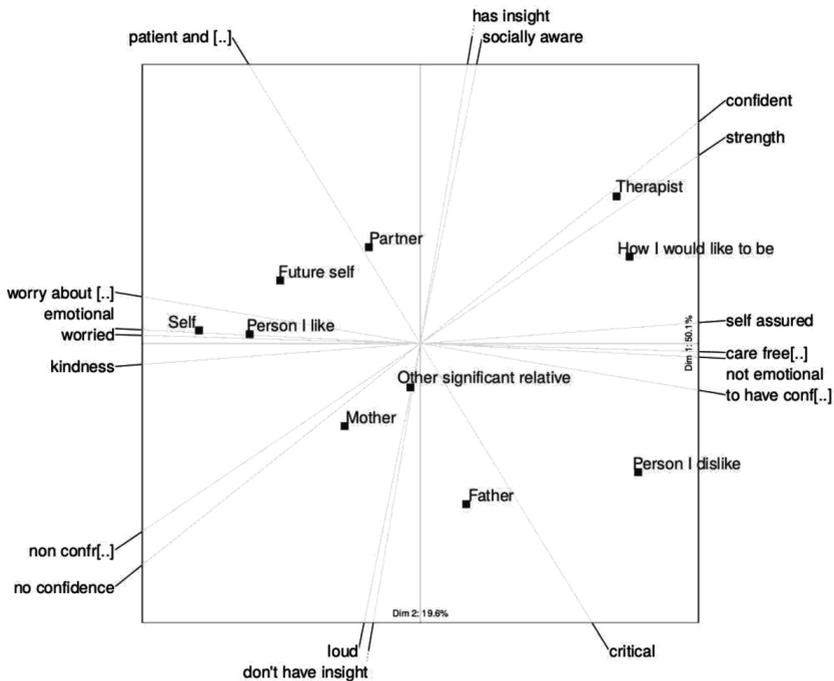
The above case study hopes to reveal what EE therapy looks like in practise and how the client’s goals are worked upon. In terms of the client’s repertory grid, viewing it in an exploratory manner rather than merely combining it with other RGTs to generalise from it, highlighted that before EE therapy this client perceived herself as very far from how she would like to be. In the graphic representation of the statistical analysis (principal component analysis) it can be noticed that the distance between her ‘ideal self’ and ‘self’ appears closer from Figure 3 (pre-therapy grid) to Figure 4 (post-therapy grid). Furthermore, her ‘future self’ (realistic view of where she might be in five years) seems closer to both her ‘ideal self’ and to the ‘therapist’ post therapy. These nuances of the data represented graphically in the after therapy plot perhaps may be interpreted as an increased sense of hope that she may achieve these wished-for new ways of being. Following the methodology for analysis explained by Winter (1994), it appears from

the plot that the structure in which the personal constructs are related to each other is different: constructs that appeared as very tightly grouped together before therapy, now seem more differentiated (Winter, 1994). These wider inter-construct distances on the map can be interpreted as greater differences between the meaning attribution functions of each construct dyad. This perhaps suggests that the client has somehow reconstructed the way in which these constructs relate to each other and we like to speculate that these differences represent a shift in her worldview and so in her view of herself, others and the world. This potential change in worldview was reflected in her feedback about therapy, her goal scores and the therapists' observations across therapy.

**Figure 3:** Visual representation of the client's pre therapy assumptions about herself, others and her world.



**Figure 4:** Visual representation of the client’s post therapy assumptions about herself, others and her world.



We would like to thank Francesca Venturi for collecting the Repertory Grid data for the client discussed above.

## Discussion

There are limitations to this study and the results presented above are just preliminary. The aim of the study was not to bring evidence about outcomes or produce evidence at this stage, rather to demonstrate a way of integrating different methodologies. The aim of the paper was to express the ways in which EE, as an existential-phenomenologically informed psychotherapy service, positions itself in the realm of Mental Health services. In order to be a flexible and adaptive service EE needs, and hopefully has, a sense of flexibility in its position and principles, although it recognises that the ambiguity of its position makes it a difficult place to be as criticism comes more easily from both ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders’. Nonetheless, EE tries to maintain a

stance of embodied choice, rather than responding to and acting upon the requirements of others' conditions. Essentially, EE is on the periphery of being an 'insider' and an 'outsider', which allows it to maintain the required responsibility of keeping up to date with insiders' concerns and fears and also of outsiders' concerns, motivations and fears of insiders' development and critique. We aim to be committed to both sides, without joining either.

## Current research projects

A pilot study is being conducted in order to establish whether RGT is an appropriate assessment tool for identifying if and how clients change across EE therapy and the initial results allow for cautious optimism. We hope that RGT may be a more adequate measure to provide quantitative evidence for an existentially based therapy and thus potentially increase the evidence base, as well as enabling the comparison of what changes occur across modalities.

Moreover, while EE has shown positive outcomes at reducing symptomatology, psychological distress and helping clients achieve their goals, the clients' experience of EE therapy has not been explored systematically. Therefore, an assessment of EE therapy from the clients' perspective using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis and RGT is about to be embarked upon as part of a Doctoral Thesis. The combination of IPA and RGT hopes to shine a light on the various facets of the client's experience. Additionally, using the RGT data will enable comparisons to be made with the qualitative data in an exploratory format, to see if this quantitative method for detecting change compliments the qualitative data, where it converges and diverges and it may help to highlight what happened during therapy.

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# Existentialism and the Dialogical Self

Talk given at the Society for Existential Analysis Annual Conference, London, 30 September 2016

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**John Rowan**

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## Abstract

The connection between existentialism and multiplicity of the self seems impossible at first, but on closer examination it turns out to be not only possible but actually important, as witness such names as Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Cooper and Spinelli. The latest theory of such an approach is Dialogical Self Theory (Hubert Hermans).

## Key Words

Bakhtin, Hubert Hermans, dialogical self, I-positions, existentialism, Lysaker, Stiles.

At first sight there is no connection between existentialist theory and the concept of multiplicity within the person. Existentialism is famous for emphasising the real self, the true self, the authentic self – and of course there can be only one of those per person. The general image of existentialism is probably still dominated by Jean-Paul Sartre, who is famous for saying things like – ‘Free and alone – without assistance and without excuse’. He was of course not the only one who said things like that– Jaspers, Friedenberg, Laing and many others have made similar pronouncements.

However, we can look at this quite differently, as Mick Cooper has pointed out in more recent times (Cooper, 2015). He writes of clients experiencing their worlds in different modes of being.

*‘To help clients develop a greater awareness of these different modes, it can sometimes be useful to disentangle them through personification: symbolically representing and enacting each mode through a person-like form or voice.’*

(p 83)

He has written quite fully about multiplicity within the person, and in fact contributed to a book which I co-edited with him, entitled *The Plural Self* (1999). He went on five years later to write an insightful chapter in a book on the dialogical self (2004).

But it is not just Mick Cooper. Søren Kierkegaard not only believed in

multiplicity within the person, he acted on it. As we all know, he did not always write in his usual voice, but adopted the identities and outlooks of

- Victor Eremita, editor of *Either/Or*
- A, writer of many articles in *Either/Or*
- Judge William, author of rebuttals to A in *Either/Or*
- Johannes de silentio, author of *Fear and Trembling*
- Constantine Constantius, author of the first half of *Repetition*
- Young Man, author of the second half of *Repetition*
- Vigilius Haufniensis, author of *The Concept of Anxiety*
- Nicolaus Notabene, author of *Prefaces*
- Hilarius Bookbinder, editor of *Stages on Life's Way*
- Johannes Climacus, author of *Philosophical Fragments* and *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*
- Inter et Inter, author of *The Crisis and a Crisis in the Life of an Actress*
- H.H., author of *Two Minor Ethical-Religious Essays*
- Anti-Climacus, author of *The Sickness Unto Death* and *Practice in Christianity*

This is not only writing about multiplicity within the person, but acting on it in a very public and overt way. Those of us who have read his writings cannot but be impressed by the way in which he really enters into these different voices and expresses them in quite different ways.

And then there is Nietzsche, who of course was a prodigious talent, breaking the bounds over and over again in different ways, particularly in 'Good and Evil', in the 'Will to Power' and in 'Gay Science', with serious academic commentaries by Nehamas (1985), Whitmire (2009), Booth (1985) and Guay (2006). Nehamas tells us that 'The idea of "the subject as multiplicity" constantly emerges in *The Will to Power*' (p 177). Here is a quote from that book: 'The assumption of one single subject is perhaps unnecessary: perhaps it is just as permissible to assume a multiplicity of subjects, whose interaction and struggle is the basis of our thought and our consciousness in general... My hypothesis: The subject as multiplicity' (par.490).

Spinelli (2001) writes at some length (Chapter 3: 'I am not a noun: The vagaries of the self?') about the multiplicity of the self, with examples. He says: 'At each moment of reflection a self-structure emerges which may be simple or complex, coherent or contradictory' (p 54). He also has some good things to say in his (1989) book, for example: 'From this phenomenological perspective, we are *all* multiple personalities. We continually construct and deconstruct our selves' (p 95). The mention of phenomenology reminds us that we have to pay careful attention to what we actually find in action, rather than seeing through the eyes of theory. If people really are multiple, then we have to do justice to that, and accommodate it somehow.

## The Dialogical Self

In my opinion all this is well systematised in the discipline of Dialogical Self Theory.

One of the very first influences on this theory was the work of Mikhail Bakhtin (1984), who has also been of interest to many recent existential writers, as for example Monica Lawson in the SEA journal this year (2016). His work was taken up and used to good effect in the creation of Dialogical Self Theory by Hubert Hermans from the early nineties onwards. He is a Professor at Nijmegen University, and has been responsible for organising nine international conferences over the past eighteen years.

Dialogical Self Theory is grounded in narrative theory (Angus & McLeod, 2004; Bruner, 1990) and constructivism, the idea of which is that the stories we tell ourselves give meaning to and anticipate events, provide for action planning, consolidate our self-understanding, establish our characteristic range of emotions and goals, and guide our performance on the stage of the social world (Nimeyer, 2000). Stories contain various characters, each equivalent to a facet of self. Some of these characters are the authors of the stories, the self-as-subject (I) in James' terms, others are talked about, and correspond to the self-as-object (Me), others may comment on the stories told in this way, and so may occupy a meta-position which is self-reflexive (Dimaggio *et al*, 2004; Greenberg, 2002; Hermans, 2003; Hermans & Dimaggio, 2004a; Stiles, Osatuke, Glick & Mackay, 2004).

Identity is not, therefore, based on the decisions of a central and omniscient ego but surfaces from the constant dialogue between aspects of the self given agent-like-qualities, which may be called voices (Stiles, 1999), characters (Bruner, 1990) subpersonalities (Rowan, 1990), I-positions (Hermans, 2004), possible selves (Dunkel & Kerpelman, 2006) or roles (Horowitz, 1987; Ryle & Kerr, 2002). Each one of them represents a point of view in relation to the others, for example, the loving voice of the father of a little girl may get replaced by a subservient voice typical of an application to a bank manager for a loan.

The different parts of a multiple self are involved in communicative interchange, which takes the form of a dialogue (Angus & McLeod, 2004b; Hermans, 1996; Lysaker & Lysaker, 2004) in which each voice may be in accord or discord with the other. For example, a man may be divided, one I-position wishing to spend the weekend with his family and another wishing to get on to an urgent piece of work. The dialogical self is based on the assumption that we can profitably speak of processes that are taking place between the different parts of the self, or in the relationship between the individual and him- or herself. The internal dialogue may take the form of a critical parent (Berne, 1961) as against a nurturing parent, in trying to make a decision, such as for example to take the family to Disneyland. The voice may come across as some aspect of myself (myself as a mediocre father, an

enthusiastic bowls player, etc), or perhaps someone else who has the required characteristics. Or it may take the form of a persecutor, or a victim, or a rescuer (Karpman, 1968) – or even a bystander (Clarkson, 1992) – whatever character it may take to play the role, or, as we could also say, take over the I-position (Greenberg, 2002; Hermans, 1996; Hermans & Dimaggio, 2004). The meaning of events emerges from the form that the dialogue takes. Finally, some of the voices may be consistently submerged or surface only rarely (Bakhtin, 1927/1973; Leiman & Stiles, 2001; Hermans, 1996; Hermans & Dimaggio, 2004). For example, a strong character may be the dominant one in narratives and the weak and needy part surfaces with difficulty, which makes it impossible for the subject to ask for help and obtain it.

The characters often assume positions that are different and contradictory. To give an impression of unity and integration an individual needs to develop self-reflexive points of view that take account of these differences and create self-narratives that explain them ('I'm a lazy employee, but I'd never do anything dishonest and I work for the Union'). There are various names for this self-observing point of view: reflexive function (Fonagy & Target, 1996), metacognitive or metarepresentative skills (Sperber, 2000; Semerari, Carcione, Dimaggio, Falcone, Nicolò, Procacci & Alleva, 2003), meta-position (a character, that is, which observes other characters' actions, Hermans, 2003) and observing-I (Leiman & Stiles, 2001).

What is consistent in all this is a refusal to reify the I-positions, as is done in the theories of ego-states, subpersonalities, subselves and so forth. We do not look upon them as homunculi inside the person, but as responses to a situation, and only valid within that situation. We do not worry whether the same response may arise over and over again: we just deal with it in the moment. This makes it much easier to let it transform and move on when that is indicated. We do not envisage it as a fixed entity that may resist change, but as a momentary position that comes and goes.

Unfortunately, the dialogical self has often been conceptualized as on just one level, the same for everyone. And this is quite justifiable in the everyday work of psychology, where the same assumption is generally made. But if we are to do justice to the world of the transpersonal (the spiritual, the numinous, the sacred, the holy, the divine) we cannot rest content with this limitation (Rowan, 2005).

## **Psychotherapy**

This is particularly true when we come to the world of psychotherapy, where it is quite common to use ideas like I-positions (ego states, subpersonalities, subselves, alters, parts and so forth) in order to use methods like the empty chair. It has been shown that empty-chair and two-chair work is very efficacious in working with unfinished business, both with other persons from the past or present, and also with subsystems

within the person (Elliott *et al.*, 1998 on posttraumatic stress' Kellogg, 2004 on variation of the system; Wolfe & Sigl, 1998 on anxiety disorders). This seems to me a particularly existential approach, because it brings the current concern into the here-and-now, where it can be faced directly, instead of merely being talked about.

It may be remembered that the theory says that people are basically multiple, and the name given to the internal persons is 'I-positions'. Hubert Hermans, who is the prime source on this, says quite succinctly that he conceptualises the self 'in terms of a dynamic multiplicity of relatively autonomous I-positions in the landscape of the mind' (Hermans *et al.*, 1992). This now takes the place of older concepts such as subpersonalities, ego states, internal objects and the like, simply because it is much better researched (Rowan, 2010).

Recently there has been a great deal of research in this area, as for example by William Stiles of Ohio University, who has been doing some years of research on what he calls assimilation theory, as witness Stiles (1999). He has found that measurable changes in the voice can arise in therapy and that these can be very revealing as to the process going on.

The Lysakers have been doing extensive research with the theory in the field of schizophrenia, and have been carefully distinguishing between normal multiplicity and the pathological forms of multiplicity which can be found in schizophrenia (Lysaker *et al.*, 2010).

And in Portugal, the team led by Miguel Goncalves has been doing extensive research on the actual process of psychotherapy and the changes which take place as insight is gained (Santos & Goncalves, 2009). We could also look at the work of DiMaggio in Italy, and others in New Zealand.

In practice, this leads to the extensive use of chairwork. The difference is that the theory behind it is different. Instead of being completely careless about what is happening, or adopting some ad hoc solution, we have a theory which says that I-positions are normal, that I-positions are temporarily real, and perhaps most surprisingly, that each I-position is a real self. In other words, we are now saying that authenticity as a concept does not require the real self to be separate and unique – there are plenty of them and to spare.

It has often been pointed out by existentialists – such as Hans Cohn (1997) – that the person changes in each interaction: the person I meet is not the same person that another therapist, or a friend, or an assessor, may meet. And now we can put this more formally, and say that the I-position I am in when I meet you may be very different from the I-position I am in when I meet my child, or my Bank manager. But none of these is necessarily fake or made up – although of course they may be: we always have the choice of putting on a false face if we want to.

In my own work I have found that the combination of existentialism

with the Dialogical Self Theory works well. For example, I was working some while ago with a man who hated his job, but felt he had to continue for the sake of his wife and baby. I fully acknowledged the reality of his situation, but encouraged him to get in touch with another I-position who could see some way out of this dilemma. It turned out that one of his I-positions was as a stand-up comic, but that one did not hold out much hope for a short-term solution, and in fact made things more difficult by demanding more airtime and more opportunities. Another I-position had seen an offer for a course in psychology which appealed to its imagination. This one made the point that his wife had a well paid job, and an efficient carer for the baby, and could hold the fort, so to speak, for the length of such a course. After an exchange of views between all these I-positions, he felt much encouraged, and in the end did go for the psychology course that interested him.

I am not saying that every problem has a neat solution, but I am saying that the use of I-positions is a valuable resource in many situations. Here is a deeper and more emotional example. This was a sixty-year-old woman who had been married for forty years. At the age of twenty-two she had given birth to a baby with birth defects. A medical decision was made to let the baby die after a few days. The baby was named and given a religious burial. The woman had never visited the grave, and felt guilty as a murderess. This crime weighed on her conscience so that she came into therapy.

All this took some time to emerge, by which time we had built up a trusting therapeutic relationship. It now seemed that we were ready to tackle this major issue. I put out a cushion on the floor in front of her, and suggested to the client that her baby was sitting on the cushion, and by some miracle could talk back if she addressed it. It took some time before she had the temerity to ask it to forgive her.

I asked her then to sit on the other cushion and be the baby and answer back. After a lot of tears and hesitation the baby answered that forgiveness was not on. The mother was guilty and should suffer. 'How could you do that to me?' The baby was adamant. The client cried a great deal.

It took some time before we dared to approach the matter again. In the meantime the client had investigated further and talked it over with me, and it did seem clear that she had actually had no part in the decision apart from assenting to the doctors' suggestions.

We returned to the cushion and the baby, and tried again to negotiate. But the baby was still not convinced, and accused my client of collusion and evasion of responsibility. She was still guilty. More tears ensued.

After a few more weeks we came back to the baby again, and this time there appeared to have been a shift. The baby was still uneasy about being too ready to make allowances and did not understand the concept of compassion. But there was a grudging assent to the idea that it was not all

the mother's fault.

After another gap, we tried again, and this time the baby was much easier about the matter, showing much more understanding and placing the blame in a much more diffused way on the whole surrounding cast of characters. My client felt forgiven and absolved from blame. I was very moved by this process.

Soon after that she visited the little grave and cleared away the debris that had collected on it and decorated it with flowers. She reported crying a great deal, but said that those were healing tears.

With later clients too, I found that it was possible to put an aborted foetus on a cushion and find out its attitude, often coming to a positive resolution with the woman involved.

Here we have a good example of the case put forward by the dialogical self school:

*As we argued earlier, the self is characterized by oppositions, ambivalences, and ambiguities, in which a broad variety of positions play their part, not only those that are foregrounded as presentations to the outside world but also those that are backgrounded as 'shadow positions' (Hermans, 2001), 'exiles' (Schwartz 1995) or 'disowned selves' (Stone and Winkelman, 1989) in the darker spaces of the self.*

(Hermans and Hermans-Konopka, 2010: p 178)

I give this example to illustrate the point that dialogical work can lead us into some very deep areas, and may suggest ways of working which are theoretically quite unusual. It can also be used in group work, as has been well described by Sewell *et al.* (1998).

## Research

As I have said already, there has been a great deal of serious research done in Dialogical Self Theory, as witness for example Giancarlo Dimaggio's (2012) impressive chapter in the 2012 *Handbook*. In the same source we find a very good account of the work of the Lysakers on 'Schizophrenia and alterations in first-person experience: Advances offered from the vantage point of dialogical self theory'. More data comes from the interesting work of Eugenie Georgaca (2001) on psychotherapy generally. In America, William Stiles has led a whole team of researchers in what he calls assimilation theory, which is highly relevant to our present concerns, as witness for example the striking chapter by him and his team in the 2004 book edited by Hermans and Dimaggio. A very helpful summing-up is offered by Robert Niemeyer (2006), who writes particularly clearly and with great humanity about these matters.

## Conclusion

The most recent work in the theory of the Dialogical Self speaks of the ‘carnivalisation’ of psychotherapy – a concept taken from Mikhail Bakhtin. This is not the place to go into this at length, but it is an exciting idea which I think will lead to some very interesting work.

In conclusion, it seems fair to say that Dialogical Self Theory and existentialism are not as far apart as might be expected, and that there is now a body of research which means that existentialists can explore Dialogical Self Theory without compromise and without hesitation as something sympathetic and meaningful.

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# Everyday Therapy: Putting the Wonderment Back into Our Daily Lives

Invited Paper, given on 5th September 2016 at the 9th Conference of the East European Association for Existential Therapy, in Birstonas, Lithuania. The Conference was held in celebration of the 20th anniversary of the existential training programme of the Institute of Humanistic and Existential Psychology

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**Simon du Plock**

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I have been thinking a great deal in recent months, and have started to write about what I want to call ‘Everyday Therapy’. I have been prompted by a number of things, including the increasing democratization of psychological health care in the UK, the growth of phenomena such as ‘mindfulness’, Dr Kirk Schneider’s concept of ‘awe-based therapy’, and especially my own interactions with therapy clients and with clinical supervisees. All these have prompted me to reflect on less grandiose, more mundane ways to talk about and practice therapy. We long ago, most of us at least, gave up talking about ‘psychotherapy’, when what we really intended to discuss was how to attend to the being of the person as a whole – this is reflected in the title of your own organisation: the East European Association for Existential *Therapy* – and increasingly I feel we need to take on board more fully what it might actually mean to attend to the whole person, both psyche and soma in indissoluble union, in a fellow-traveller rather than a top-down, expert-to-patient way. ‘Therapy’, not ‘*psychotherapy*’, is surely the accurate descriptor for this.

I have started to think about the value of ‘wonderment’, as against ‘awe’, and I have even begun to question the notion of ‘therapy’ and to think about whether something more akin to ‘self-care’ might have a place. After all, we readily talk about self-care in supervision with qualified therapists – so perhaps it is not so great a stretch to apply this kind of thinking to clients too. It may be objected that clients, by definition, will have more limited resources for self-care, and I don’t want to make light of that. There are times, particularly in the midst of crisis and trauma, or when weighed down by deep depression, when common sense suggests that clients will have little if any ability to take care of themselves. But even at these times, in fact maybe especially at these times, I notice in my encounters with clients that they can often have a strong sense of what they most need. Earlier this year I gave a paper on trauma at a conference to mark the twentieth anniversary of the founding of Emmy van Deurzen’s New School

of Psychotherapy and Counselling, and in the course of researching for this I was fascinated to come across Mearns and Cooper's assertion, in their 2005 text *Working at Relational Depth*, that client's experience trauma as meaningful, and often simultaneously as both hugely negative and as the point in their life when they felt most *alive* (p 67). A fellow-traveller, I suspect, can help the client to surface their subjective meaning in such situations, in ways that an 'expert' carer cannot. It's that familiar Heideggerian distinction, isn't it, between 'leaping-in' (*Einspringen*) and 'leaping-ahead-of' (*Vorspringen*).

You might ask, what is the connection here between all this 'leaping', and 'wonderment'. Between heavy Germanic philosophising and English Romanticism. My response, perhaps not remarkably original, is 'Sorge', or 'care'. In 'leaping-ahead-of' the client we model the act of curiosity – and the client, on noticing our genuine curiosity about their 'self', may in turn begin to take their self seriously. In doing so they may find themselves, I want to suggest, in the same place as Samuel Taylor Coleridge when he writes:

*Hast thou ever raised thy mind to the consideration of existence, in and by itself, as the mere act of existing? Hast thou ever said to thyself thoughtfully It is! Heedless in that moment whether it were a man before thee or a flower or a grain of sand...without reference in short to this or that mode or form of existence?*

(1969, p 514)

There is, I think, a direct link through from Coleridge's 'wonder of all wonders' to taking existence seriously and Rollo May's 'Here-is-a-new-person' and 'I-Am' experiences – the twin phenomena which have guided my own clinical practice over the years. I want to propose the promotion of 'wonderment' as a goal for therapists and clients alike, and I want to be clear that this is not the same as 'awe'. Many of you will I am sure, remember Kirk Schneider's discussion of what he termed 'awe-based therapy' and 'awe-based psychology' when he was here in Birstonas in 2010. Schneider uses the word 'awe', as he says, to stress 'the poignancy of life, the profundity and vivacity of life' (2012, p 196).

I am not sure 'awe' captures what I have in mind. I am wary of its religious connotation and its specifically Judeo-Christian theological point of reference. (Not to mention its imperialistic use in the 2003 American invasion of Iraq as part of what was called Operation Shock and Awe). Kirk and I co-authored a chapter in a book in 2012 – *Existential Therapy: Legacy, Vibrancy and Dialogue*. True to the title, we engaged in a discussion of awe versus wonderment, and I was interested to see how all-encompassing awe became as Kirk talked about plans for awe-based education, awe-based work, awe-based democracy, even awe-based society. It occurred to me

pretty quickly that all these awe-based institutions would likely need a group of expert therapists to steer them. Perhaps something like the ‘priest class’ Kierkegaard railed against in his critique of organised religion, or even a band of ‘Philosopher-Kings’ of the type Plato thought were required to bring about his utopian city-state of Kallipolis (or beautiful city). As Plato wrote in *The Republic*: ‘philosophers must become kings’. This seems to me to be a very ambitious project indeed. We might even say ‘awesome’.

Now my position is certainly not that our role as therapists is limited to the one-to-one encounter in the consulting room. Far from it. In 1996 I was a founding member of an influential campaigning organisation called *Counsellors and Psychotherapists for Social Responsibility*, and I’ve written frequently about the role of social inequality in constructing and perpetuating psychological distress. One of my earliest contributions to this debate was a chapter on ‘Social Responsibility’ published in a book called *The Needs of Counsellors and Psychotherapists*, which saw the light of day back in 1997. In the course of these activities I have become increasingly sensitized to the subtle ways in which power can be exercised to control all of us. So when Kirk defines *his* awe as ‘commingling senses of wonder, dread and reverence’ I start to worry. It’s good to know wonder is in the mix. I’m not so sure about ‘dread’ and ‘reverence’ – it seems to me that I spend quite a lot of my time as a therapist in supporting people in their struggles to free themselves of a sense of dread, and really question what if anything they want to revere. I have no concerns about reverence or dread freely-chosen, but I am concerned about how easily they can be insinuated by the powerful into the lives of the vulnerable.

Curiously, to go from the sublime to the ridiculous for a moment, the American adoption of the term ‘awesome’ in mundane conversation instead of ‘excellent’ or just ‘very good’ may have diluted its stock even further. I was always amused to be told in shops and restaurants in the US that my choice of goods or foodstuffs was ‘awesome’! I may have good taste, but I doubt that I have taste that inspires awe.

I think ‘wonderment’ – the secular equivalent of ‘awe’ might be a more helpful, less fearful, dare I say, less imperialistic, term. I do not want to be in awe, and I do not want my clients to be in awe – I want us instead to recapture our innate ability to wonder. The ability to wonder comes from within us. It is not something frightening, a Higher Power which descends upon us from above.

I suspect the erosion of wonderment begins with childhood. ‘Childhood’ is, of course, a social construct, but in the last half-century we have all but abandoned the Romantic celebration of the child’s view of the world as expressed, for example, in Wordsworth’s *Intimations of Immortality Based on Recollections of Early Childhood*. Children are increasingly required to be ‘busy’ as adults are – constantly engaged in some activity

or other. Perhaps we should stop processing children as the recipients of each new technology, as, as it were, ‘marketing opportunities’, and reflect on what childhood might be. A child raised on ready-made, often violent, computer imagery must necessarily lose out in terms of a cultivation of their own imaginative resources.

The American author Kurt Vonnegut, prisoner of war and survivor of the Dresden bombing, wrote some of the most singular and humane fiction of the last century. Towards the end of his life, some schoolchildren wrote to invite him to speak to their class and reflect on what he had learned. He wrote back with all the wisdom anyone probably needs:

*Dear Xavier high school, you really know how to cheer up a really old geezer (84) in his sunset years. I don't make many appearances any more because I look like an iguana. What I have to say to you, moreover, would not take long, to wit: practice any art, music, singing, dancing, acting, drawing, painting, sculpting, poetry, fiction, essays, no matter how well or badly, not to get money or fame but to experience becoming, to find out what's inside you, to make your soul grow...Do it for the rest of your lives!*

It was Vonnegut who, tongue in cheek, advanced the notion that the stories we begin to learn in childhood have recognisable emotional curves that could be fed into a computer (a notion that has, in fact, lately been employed in research projects to attempt to teach artificial intelligences the subtleties of human feeling). Those curves shape young minds, perhaps literally. A YouGov opinion poll commissioned by Amnesty International earlier this year showed that more than half (53%) of UK parents still think reading a book is the best way to develop a child's ability ‘to put themselves in other people's shoes’ – to develop the capacity to empathize. Only 3% went for ‘playing a computer game’ and 5% for ‘watching a film’. What accounts for this striking difference? Perhaps it's as simple as the fact that reading a book encourages the child to use their imagination, while a parade of ready-made images does not. In fact I would suggest that being bombarded with ‘finished’ imagery leaves no room for the viewer to develop their own imagery and may even inhibit the development of imagination and empathy. Reading provides a kind of active ‘work out’ for the mind; viewing, on the other hand, is essentially an act of passive consumerism. The key concept, I think is ‘practice’, as when Vonnegut exhorts us to ‘*practice* any art’ – it is in losing ourselves in creative activity that we find ourselves! We are not asked to become expert, only to engage.

The rediscovery of wonderment, for both children and adults, is not just the task of therapy and therapists. Wonderment does not preclude the spiritual, but holistically encompasses mind, body and spirit. If indeed we

increasingly lack the ability to experience wonderment, I would like to suggest ways of promoting it, of reminding ourselves how we can be more fully human and more aware of our existential being. These owe more to the roots of existential therapy in philosophy than to a narrowly defined psychology. In their apparent simplicity and ready availability, they may help us to revision therapy in increasingly democratic ways. They may help people in identifying the effects of the worst excesses of consumerism and materialism, and support them in their efforts to find affordable ways to help themselves counter some of the more toxic aspects of contemporary life – thereby gaining a sense of mastery and agency, where there was previously a sense of helplessness or passivity.

The English clinical psychologist Professor David Smail (2015) has written persuasively on the erosion of communal living and the glorification of selfishness and competition which characterises the contemporary west. He argues that deciding what sort of world we want to live in is an ethical choice. I agree with him that we existentialists have a responsibility to critique technical individualistic treatment of distress and to show how mechanisms of power and interest impact upon the subjective experience of each one of us.

I want to introduce some ideas of an eccentric nature. By ‘eccentric’ I am referring to the etymological sense of being ‘outside the centre’, being marginal or liminal. I find, as a practitioner, that this eccentric perspective – the stance which asks not ‘why’, but ‘why not?’ – often assists clients in their pursuit of clarity about their own way of being in the world. A *liminal* position enables us to throw light onto different parts of the client’s world, while a *central* position, I would argue, tends to reinforce the normative, the status quo, sedimenting the client’s sense of being in some way marginal or mistaken in their worldview, rather than allowing it to simply come into focus as fully as possible.

I believe we can learn a great deal from the philosophers (at least when they do not aspire to kingship), and not always in the most obvious ways. Kierkegaard, for instance, made several references to the therapeutic value (both physical and metaphysical) of physical **exercise** in his diary and letters. Writing to his young niece he urges:

*Above all, do not lose your desire to walk: every day I walk myself into a state of well-being and walk away from every illness; I have walked myself into my best thoughts, and I know of no thought so burdensome that one cannot walk away from it...in walking one constantly gets as close to well-being as possible, even if one does not quite reach it...Health and salvation can only be found in motion”*

(Poole and Stangerup, 1989: p 69)

Walking kept him socially involved and was, for him, a symbol of movement itself. For Kierkegaard, physical exercise was an integral part of community life, poles apart from the modern day gym culture – let alone hours of solitary sitting in front of a computer screen.

Nietzsche, too, was a great walker, though you might not expect this given his history of physical illnesses. Like many writers he needed to walk to create. As he expressed it ‘All truly great thoughts are conceived by walking.’ Between 1883 and 1888 he wintered every year in Nice on the Cote d’Azur and most days he walked what is now called *le sentier de Nietzsche* (or Nietzsche’s path), the rocky mountain trail on which he composed part of *Thus Spake Zarathustra*. It is still possible to walk in Nietzsche’s footsteps – I make the climb every summer when I am in the South of France. Some of you may have seen the photograph of *le sentier de Nietzsche* which I took for the cover of a 2005 edition of *Existential Analysis*.

Henry David Thoreau chimes with these sentiments in 19th century North America. Writing in *Walking and the Wild* (1851) he says:

*I think that I cannot preserve my health and spirits, unless I spend four hours a day at least...sauntering over the hills and fields, absolutely free from all worldly engagements.*

(In Miller, 2006: p 211)

Richard Mabey, the author of a remarkable autobiographical book *Nature Cure*, reminds us that a respect:

*for the curative properties of **nature** goes back as far as written history. I want [he writes] to suggest a greater sense of the natural world provides an ideal way of increasing our ability to experience **wonderment**...The Romans had a saying, ‘solvitur ambulando’, which means, roughly, ‘you can work it out by walking’, including your own emotional tangles.*

(2005, p 223)

How often have all of us, caught up in some downcast mood, ‘gone for a walk to’, as the English say, ‘blow the cobwebs away’, and come back with a renewed sense of direction or purpose? And what is good for us is surely good for our clients too – I increasingly find myself facilitating clients to reflect on their relationship to the physical world, the *Umwelt*, and I am struck by the frequency with which a reflection on this dimension leads clients to re-evaluate how they engage with the givens of the natural world. The American folklorist John Jacob Niles collected fragments of an Appalachian carol which he published in 1933 with the title ‘I wonder as I wander’, and the first line, ‘I wonder as I wander, out under the sky’.

It seems that wondering and wandering go hand-in-hand, at least when they occur in nature!

Mass pilgrimages were regular occurrences in the medieval world and if we know our Chaucer at all, we know the journey (purposeful wandering, if you like), was far more important than the destination. *The Canterbury Tales* may be read as the description of a liminal experience, since its subject matter is a transitional journey between the known world and an imagined, possibly more holy, identity. Mabey stresses the strong connection between nature, language and identity when he writes:

*We constantly refer back to the natural world to try to discover who we are. Nature is the most potent source of metaphors to describe and explain our behaviour and feelings. It is the root and branch of our language. We sing like birds, blossom like flowers, stand like oaks...in using the facility of language, the thing we believe most separates us from nature, we are constantly pulled back to its, and our, origins. In that sense all natural metaphors are miniature creation myths, allusions to how things came to be, and a confirmation of the unity of life.*

(2005, pp 19-20)

Mabey is only the most recent of a long line of writers who have recognized these profound connections between language and the nature of the world. The English lyric poet Percy Bysshe-Shelley, writing early in the nineteenth century, states:

*Poetry lifts the veil from the hidden beauty of the world, and makes familiar objects to be as if they were not familiar.*

This reminds me in many ways of the ability of therapy to offer a different perspective on being in the world – one which can make the familiar, tired and dreary vital and meaningful again.

William Henry Davies, a much acclaimed Welsh Edwardian poet, owes his continuing fame in the west to a short poem entitled ‘Leisure’, published in 1911. He raises the question in the opening stanza:

*What is this life, if full of care,  
We have no time to stand and stare?*

And supplies his own answer in the last stanza:

*A poor life this, if full of care,  
We have no time to stand and stare*

For those of us who can read English, here is the whole poem:

*What is this life, if full of care,  
We have no time to stand and stare?*

*No time to see, when woods we pass,  
Where squirrels hide their nuts in grass.*

*No time to turn at Beauty's glance,  
And watch her feet, how they can dance.*

*No time to wait till her mouth can  
Enrich that smile her eyes began.*

*A poor life this, if full of care,  
We have no time to stand and stare*

If you can't read English, don't despair, you're not missing a great work of art. Nevertheless, it hit a nerve and became enormously popular as a result. It addresses the plight of the Edwardians – and particularly the rural working class – who in great numbers left the land to become for the most part semi-skilled appendages to the burgeoning machine world, and who also in great numbers were to be mown down by machines in the Great War which broke out just three years later.

Now Davies is not, of course, an existentialist *per se*. I'm not even sure we could put him in the category of 'non-philosophical existentialists' that the philosopher Mary Warnock proposes, to distinguish between those – the 'true' existentialists – who make use of phenomenology and those who do not. But his naïve imagery reminds me of the lyrics of pop songs which resonate simply because they are immediate and truthful. And his warning that 'the hectic pace of modern life has a detrimental effect on the human spirit' seems more pertinent today than ever.

Since movement, **observation** of nature and the world around us, and freedom of expression seem intimately related, we can see **exercise** and **nature** as our first routes to an enhanced sense of being.

We can't always, of course, be walking in nature. Even leaving aside the difficulty of this for urban populations, each of these writers is concerned with the attainment of a certain balance in life: they see having a relationship

with the physical world as an element of good living – what the Greeks termed *eudaimonia*. It is *also* important that we experience ourselves in relation with our fellow human beings. And we can do this in a number of ways, including by direct communication in the form of conversation – or **dialogue** – with our contemporaries, or indirectly by reading the thoughts of our predecessors.

Awareness of the significance of dialogue is not a recent phenomenon. Michel de Montaigne, the 16th century French essayist, recommends conversation over solitary reading when he says ‘studying books has a languid feeble motion, whereas conversation provides teaching and exercise all at once.’ Montaigne thinks of conversation as an intellectual sporting event that will improve the mind. He writes:

*Our mind is strengthened by contact with vigorous and well-ordered minds.*

(Miller, 2006: p 1)

Throughout the 18th century writers argued that conversation promoted psychological health and intellectual development. Adam Smith states:

*Society and conversation...are the most powerful remedies for restoring the mind to its tranquillity, if, at any time, it has unfortunately lost it.*

(*Ibid*, p 21)

In 18th century Britain conversation signified both what it means now: ‘the informal interchange of information, ideas, etc., by spoken words’, and *also* social interaction in general: ‘the action of consorting or having dealings with others.’ Most contemporary observers see talk and communication as identical. Conversation Analysis, an academic sub-discipline in the field of sociology, focuses on basic social interaction – on all types of talk. Writers in this field use talk and conversation interchangeably. American theorist Diane McWhorter conflates the two in an essay entitled ‘Talk’. She says ‘talking is what binds us into people’, and

*I am speaking of conversation, the ‘world of sound’ ...the I-thou world where, through the mysterious interior resonance which sound best of all provides, persons commune with persons, reaching one another’s interiors.*

(2004, p 47)

Though there is no clear distinction between talk and conversation, most writers on conversation argue (and I think this sits well with Heidegger) that it is not instrumental – we do not use the other as a means to an end.

We enjoy good conversationalists, Hume says, because of the pleasure they give, not the information they provide.

In *The De-Voicing of Society: Why We Don't Talk to Each Other Anymore* (1998), John I. Lock argues that modern technology has had a negative effect on sociability. A number of studies, he says, make it clear that many people use email to avoid face-to-face interaction. This trend is disturbing because we learn many things from a person's voice and gestures:

*With no access to our species' social feedback and control mechanisms, there will be nothing to keep misunderstanding, incivility, and dishonesty from creeping into our daily life at unprecedented levels.*

(1998, p 176)

Locke also argues, as did 18th century writers on conversation, that the very fact of being with other people improves our sociability – or, as they express it, increases our stock of benevolent passions.

It seems to me that there is, actually, something very existential going on in the way we communicate now. Whenever I venture beyond my own front door I am struck by the ubiquity of mobile 'phones, tablets, iplayers and other mobile devices. In my daily journey to the university I notice at least half the people in my bus or train are tapping away on such devices. They don't look at each other or out of the window. People *seem* to be communicating more than ever in history, but *what* are they communicating? And to whom are they communicating? Many of these communications carried out in public places seem intrusive and trivial – 'I'm on the bus', or 'I'm on the train' seems to have the function of identifying where people are on a public transport system...often at just the point where they lose the signal! This obsessive communication seems to me to be mostly a form of self-soothing...a way of reminding ourselves that we exist! Not only do we exist, but our existence has meaning...we are 'on our way', 'about to arrive', 'in the building'! *We matter!*

Such ways of telling ourselves that we are communicating with others can become ends in themselves – the person who has a thousand 'friends' on Facebook may have no time to cultivate one-to-one relationships. And all this activity can become compulsive. What happens when it becomes a way of life in itself? A 2013 study undertaken by the University of Winchester found that regular Twitter and Facebook users experienced withdrawal symptoms when they were required to desist for even a short period of time, and there have been proposals recently to introduce a specific 'Social Media Withdrawal Syndrome' into the *DSM*. All well and good, if we take these presenting problems as an opportunity to enquire into the meaning which clients give to social media, but maybe not so

positive if this becomes another opportunity for the big pharmaceutical companies to prescribe us out of our anxieties.

Perhaps one of the implications of the radical subjectivism of postmodernism is the way it can subvert real dialogue: if all ideas are personal truths, there can be no solid conversation – no interchange of ideas. Each speaker (or writer) can only recite *their* truths. And the audience (or reader) can say only: ‘Thank you for sharing your personal truths with me.’ This might sound fanciful – we might object that people do not in reality speak in this way. I might have agreed until recently when, in a meeting of senior academics I witnessed exactly this exchange when two colleagues in profound disagreement about how a decision had been made could only agree that they each held ‘their truth’ about the matter. In the absence of an email trail it was, apparently, impossible to say more. Electronic media now, it seems, provides the only objective truth.

In similar vein, in *Socrates Café: A Fresh Taste of Philosophy* (2001) Christopher Phillips, writing about contemporary American society, says:

*...the way people go about conversing is every bit as critical as their ability to converse freely. If, for instance, they all speak freely and fully in a series of non sequiturs, if they don't react to and critically examine and build upon one another's perspectives, it seems they may be left with a rather empty and stagnant type of democracy.*

(2001, p 49)

Finally, I want to come to reading as an aid to wonderment. Some of you may recall that I spoke about my research on therapeutic functions of reading at the 2010 East European Association Conference. I won't go into this in any depth now, except to remind us that the therapeutic potential of literature has most likely been known since the beginning of written communication – there is a reason why the inscription over the entrance of the Ancient Greek library at Thebes proclaimed it ‘The healing place of the soul’. And the oral tradition of storytelling predates even reading.

I said earlier that Montaigne regarded solitary reading as inferior to conversation. But I suspect every one of us here today can name a novel, short story or poem which has inspired us with a sense of wonderment and which has helped us to an enhanced sense of what it is to be human. It may be that we make the mistake of regarding the reader as a passive audience, but is this necessarily so? Spinelli tells us that Heidegger, writing about artistic creation in general, views it as

*...an act of revelation or unconcealedness regarding the truth of our existence; it is the means of ‘unveiling’ that which is present*

*but is also ordinarily hidden from everyday awareness.  
Expressions of art are able to bring us the truth of being.*

(2001, p 136)

We have only to think of Heidegger's use of Holderlin's poetry to see what he means by this. And, Spinelli writes

*...those who make up the audience for an act of creation share some degree of this plunge into a transcendent unknown. Their relationship with the work also permits their 'truths' to emerge, and confront and transform.*

(*ibid*, p 142)

I have only mentioned a few aids to wonderment: there are many more including tending a garden, painting, dancing, singing and playing music... The astute listener will I am sure have noticed by now that the foundational aids to wonderment which I have identified in the course of this presentation spell a special word:

**W**riting  
**O**bserving  
**N**ature  
**D**ialogue  
**E**xercise  
**R**eadings

But I would stress that the specific activity is less important than the attitude of openness and attentiveness it nurtures in our way of being in the world, and the extent to which it can act as an aid to wonderment and self-care, and, in turn, promote *Everyday Therapy* as part of the quotidian world. As an everyday, inexpensive, democratic, self-nurturing aid to self-care.

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# Leaping-In And Leaping-Ahead: An Exploration Of Heidegger's Notion Of Solitude

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**Barbara Karban**

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## **Abstract**

This paper looks at Heidegger's distinction between leaping-in-solitude (*einspringende Fuersorge*) and leaping-ahead-solitude (*vorspringende Fuersorge*) and its importance for the therapeutic relationship. In Part Two, two examples of leaping-in-solitude are given from the setting of Forensic Psychiatry. In Part Three, an example is given from the same setting but in the author's role as an Art Psychotherapist. Conclusions are then made for therapeutic practice.

## **Key Words**

Being and being, caring, remembering and forgetting, solitude, concern, leaping-in, leaping-ahead, forensic psychiatry, art psychotherapy.

## **Introduction**

In this paper I will explore Heidegger's distinction between leaping-in-solitude (*einspringende Fuersorge*) and leaping-ahead-solitude (*vorspringende Fuersorge*) and its importance for the therapeutic relationship.

Medard Boss was one of the first psychotherapists to apply existential thought to therapeutic practice. In his enthusiasm for exploring the application of philosophy to clinical practice, he invited Martin Heidegger to give lectures to medical students in Boss's home. These lectures became known as the 'Zollikon Seminars'.

In an article called 'Martin Heidegger's Zollikon Seminars' (1977), Boss describes how he came to know Heidegger. Boss indicates that Heidegger received hundreds of letters yearly from different parts of the world, yet answered scarcely any of them. However, according to Boss, Heidegger responded to his first letter immediately. Many years later, and after an intense teacher-pupil relationship and a life-long friendship had developed between the two men, Boss finally learned what had motivated Heidegger to reply to his letter. Heidegger confided that he had hoped that through Boss, a physician and psychotherapist, his thinking would escape the confines of the philosopher's study and become of benefit to wider circles, in particular to a large number of suffering human beings. It had made a considerable impression on Heidegger that in Boss's letter, Boss had expressly singled

out page 122 of his book *Sein und Zeit (Being and Time, 1962)*. Boss had drawn Heidegger's attention to the fact that under the title of leaping-ahead-solitude, he not only had described the ideal relationship between the psychotherapist and his patient but also made the distinction between the two modes of leaping-in-solitude and leaping-ahead-solitude explicit.

Heidegger's distinguishing this caring – '*vorspringende Fuersorge*' – which alone respects and preserves the dignity of the human being, from the other form of caring – '*einspringende Fuersorge*' – which constantly and necessarily dominates the other, enables the therapist to distinguish explicitly his particular therapeutic procedure in its originality and uniqueness from all the other, almost exclusively, medical procedures.

In writing this paper, I share my thoughts about Heidegger's concept of solitude and how it applies to human relating in general as well as to the therapeutic relationship in particular. In order to do this I present the paper in three parts.

In part one, I explore Heidegger's concept of 'care' (*Sorge*) as the fundamental mode of being-in-the-world. The two ontic/experiential modes of care (the relating to things and the relating to people), are clarified. The two distinctive modes of care which relate to people (*Fuorsorge*), the leaping-in-solitude and the leaping-ahead-solitude are the main focus of this study,

In part two, I relate Heidegger's concept of care to the therapeutic relationship and to my experience of working as an art psychotherapist in a Forensic Psychiatric Hospital, with examples of the leaping-in-solitude.

In part three, I give examples of a more authentic kind of care based on Heidegger's concept of leaping-ahead-solitude.

## **Part One**

### **'Caring' as the Fundamental Mode of Being**

In order to grasp the meaning of Heidegger's ideas, it is helpful to think in dualistic terms. That is, one must appreciate that in his writing Heidegger often presents complementary concepts, parallel thoughts and theories recognising two independent principles which, at the same time, have a bearing on each other. This is evident in such terms as Being and beings, ontological and ontic, Being and existence. I now explore the meaning of these terms as the basis for Heidegger's idea of 'caring' as the fundamental mode of being.

Steiner (1992, p 35) points out that for Heidegger the one question which permeates his whole work is: 'What is the Being (*das Sein*) which renders possible all being (*das Seiende*)'? Why IS there anything or something or everything, when there could be NOTHING? (My capitals). To ask why there is Being instead of nothingness is to question the foundations (*Ursprung*) of all things. Heidegger retraces the roots of these fundamental terms by

going back to Greek etymology. Similarly, his fundamental ontology attempts to go back to the roots of Being. The Greek word for 'Being' is '*parousia*' or '*ousia*', which is generally translated as 'substance'. The accurate translation according to Heidegger, however, would be a set of significations comprising 'home stead', at-homeness, a standing in and by itself, a self enclosedness, an integral presentness or thereness (German; *Anwesen*). Steiner (1992, p 46) suggests that Heidegger interprets the Greek understanding of 'being' as 'primal ground of being'. It is just this ground we must strive to come home to because 'home-coming' is both the process and the goal of authentic being.

A further important distinction for understanding Heidegger is between '*ousia*', 'being' in its stable, enduring aspect, and 'ex-existence'. Ex-existence derives from the Greek source which means 'to stand outside of', to be in a posture external to 'being', which would signify 'non-being'. Our thoughtless habit of using the words 'existence' and 'exist' as designations for being, Heidegger says, is one more indication of our estrangement from 'Being'. (Steiner, 1992: p 47).

Corresponding to the distinction between *Sein* 'Being' and *Seiendes* 'being' or 'entity' in Heidegger's thought is that between *ontologisch* 'ontological' and *ontisch* 'ontic'. Looking at reality from the standpoint of 'Being' (*Sein*) which underlies all things, is the ontological perspective, while looking at reality from the standpoint of the entities (*Seiendes*) we experience all around us is the ontic perspective. (McCall, 1983: p 92).

The distinction between 'authenticity of being', which is seen by Heidegger as both the process and the goal we must strive for, and the 'facticity of existence' which makes us forget this striving, is the basis for understanding 'care' as a fundamental mode of being. A crucial point that Heidegger makes is that facticity, authenticity and existence are interrelated. Facticity refers to the human condition such that we are constrained by certain givens e.g. we cannot choose our parents, background, culture and physical make-up. We are thrown into the world without our personal choice or previous knowledge. Authenticity is the remembering of Being. It is our ability to think and know and care about Being which link us to our origin and primal nature. This and our relating to other beings, make us different from things. Existence is to stand out of the ground of Being. An analogy is that Being is the 'ground' while the human being is the plant which stands out (ex-ists) of the ground in which it is rooted.

Having outlined Heidegger's thoughts and distinctions on Being and being, ontological and ontic and Being and existence, I now consider his view of care.

### **Care (*Sorge*)**

We have to first ask who cares and who cares for what? Man is the entity

Heidegger denotes by the term 'Dasein' (Being there):

*Dasein is an entity which does not just occur among other entities. Rather it is ontically distinguished by the fact that, in its very 'Being' that Being is an issue for it. This implies that Dasein, in its very Being, has a relationship towards that Being. This means further that there is some way in which Dasein understands itself in its Being. Understanding of Being is itself a definite characteristic of Dasein's Being. Dasein is ontically distinctive in that it is ontological.*

(Heidegger, 1962: p 32)

In other words, if Being is an issue for this entity and it has a relationship towards that Being and some way of understanding itself in its Being, it implies that it cares about its Being. In this caring about its Being, the entity aspires to selfhood, an openness to the world around, whose role and function is to disclose that world by communicating it to others. Yet in its everyday affairs of being-in-the-world Dasein forgets about the meaning of Being, in that it forgets to consider it. It forgets that Being is an issue about which it has to decide. It forgets to 'care'.

Care, as an ontological structural concept for Heidegger, is the 'primordial state of being' of Dasein as it strives, out of inauthenticity, towards authenticity of being. The three primary modes of being can be seen as ways of 'forgetting Being', they are:

1. Facticity (*Faktizitaet*). Facticity describes the imperative 'thereness' of the world into which we find ourselves thrown, as we encounter it and as we live it. In other words our being-in-the-world consists of having to do something, produce something, attend to and look after something, make use of something, give up something, undertake, accomplish, consider, discuss and know something. Our Dasein is inseparably involved and committed.

2. Existence. Dasein stands outside itself (*ek-sistere*), in order to be in vital contact with the world and aware of itself and its possibilities to be fulfilled. In a posture external to 'Being', however, it signifies 'non-being' or forgetting Being (McCall, 1983).

3. Fallenness (*Verfallensein*). The world into which our Dasein is thrown has others in it. To understand the presentness of others is to exist. Being in the world, is a being-with. But being-with also has its negative aspects. As an everyday being-with-one-another we come to exist not in and on our own terms, but in reference to, in respect of others. 'We are not

ourselves', which is to say that our being is made factitious. That is to say, our ability to think Being, remember Being becomes eroded by a process of averageness and alienation. We fall victim to the 'They' (*das Man*) and become absorbed by being-with-one-another which makes us forget 'Being' (*Seinsvergessenheit*). Inauthentic Dasein lives as 'they' live. The positive aspect of 'fallenness' is that via the inauthenticity of its being-in-the-world, Dasein is compelled to search out the authentic. (Steiner, 1992). By recognising how I fall in with others and forget my Being, I then become aware of Being and start to think/remember Being. For example in order to survive, I go to work and am useful to others. If I do this without questioning its meaning, I am falling, which is my 'habitual' state of being. However, there are moments when I do raise questions as to the meaning of my being, which brings me closer to authenticity of being.

## **Two Experiential or Ontic Modes of Care**

The two experiential or 'ontic' modes of care are concern (*Besorgen*) and solicitude (*Fuersorge*). Our most primordial relation with the things we encounter in the world, according to Heidegger, is from the perspective of their utility. We first see things not as merely present-at-hand (*vorhanden*) but as ready to use, ready-to-hand (*zuhanden*) This represents a relationship to 'things' which involves concern. The difference between relating to things and relating to people is that with the latter, we share our ability to remember Being. This relating of being with being is solicitude. I now examine concern and solicitude in more depth.

### **Concern (*Besorgen*)**

Relating to things or equipment which are in our environment (*Umwelt*) and which are humanly useful (*zuhanden*) is *Besorgen*, also translated as carefulness (carelessness is a deficient mode of carefulness) or taking care of things. We use the writing pen or the hammer before we wonder how it works, that is, before we become distinctly aware of it as something in itself, something that is just there (*vorhanden*). A particular type of perception or vision is part of this relating. 'Circumspection or looking around or looking over the situation', are translations for *Umsicht*.

Heidegger's own words from *Being and Time* (1962, p 157) further clarify this important distinction between concern and solicitude:

*'Concern is a character-of-Being which Being-with cannot have on its own, even though Being-with, like concern, is a Being towards entities encountered within-the-world. But those entities towards which Dasein as Being-with comports itself do not have the kind of Being which belongs to equipment ready-to-hand;*

*they are themselves Dasein. These entities are not objects of concern, but rather of solicitude'.*

Here Heidegger is saying that being which involves concern is one towards things which are with us in the world but which do not share the characteristic of being-with. That is, others and things are in the world with us but the relationships between being-with-others and being-with-things are different. Things have 'being' but no ability to know and remember 'Being'.

### **Solicitude (*Fuersorge*)**

In contrast, being-with-others involves being with entities who share the characteristic of being-with which is their ability to know and remember 'Being'. This type of relating Heidegger calls Solitude (*Fuersorge*).

In contrast to concern, solicitude always relates to persons, to that particular kind of entity which, or rather who, is never merely present (*vorhanden*) or useful (*zuhanden*), but who is someone to be with (*Mitsein*) and to care for. Heidegger identifies the characteristic type of perception for *Fuersorge* as considerateness (*Ruecksicht*).

Heidegger proposes two distinctive modes of solicitude.

The first, '*Einspringende Fuersorge*', leaps-in for the Other. Heidegger (1962, p 158) writes:

*With regard to its positive modes, solicitude has two extreme possibilities. It can, as it were, take away 'care' from the Other and put itself in his position: it can 'leap in' for him. This kind of solicitude takes over for the Other that with which he is to concern himself. The Other is thus thrown out of his own position; he steps back so that afterwards, when the matter has been attended to, he can either take it over as something finished and at his disposal, or disburden himself of it completely. In such solicitude the Other can become one who is dominated and dependent, even if this domination is a tacit one and remains hidden from him. This kind of solicitude, which leaps in and takes away 'care', is to a large extent determinative for Being with one another, and pertains for the most part to our concern with the ready to hand.*

In this passage Heidegger suggests that leaping-in solicitude is a type of relating which treats the other like an object or a thing. The other is thus relieved of responsibility or the ability to respond to his/her own Being in his/her own way. This is, the other is made redundant in terms of his/her ability to remember Being, The other's ability to care for being-in-the-world is taken away and he/she is left with nothing of value. Even when done out of a sense of caring, this type of solicitude still impinges

on the other's sense of being-in-the-world. This way of relating is largely how we relate to each other most of the time.

The second mode of solicitude, 'Vorspringende Fuersorge', leaps ahead of the Other. In Heidegger's (1962, p 158) words;

*... there is also the possibility of a kind of solicitude which does not so much leap in for the Other as 'leap ahead' of him (ihm vorausspringt) in his existentiell potentiality-for-Being, not in order to take away his 'care' but rather to give it back to him authentically as such for the first time. This kind of solicitude pertains essentially to authentic care – that is, to the existence of the Other, not to a 'what' with which he is concerned; it helps the Other to become transparent to himself 'in' his care and to become 'free for' it.*

*Everyday Being-with-one-another maintains itself between the two extremes of positive solicitude – that which leaps in and dominates, and that which leaps forth and liberates (vorspringend-befreienden).*

In this second passage, Heidegger proposes a different kind of relating which he calls leaping-ahead-solicitude. Instead of disallowing responsibility it is a relating which facilitates the responsibility of the other and his/her ability to respond to Being. This is authentic rather than inauthentic care as it relates to the other as a person rather than an object or a thing. In so doing, it opens future possibilities and potential of which the other is unaware. The other becomes free to relate to his/her own being-in-the-world. Although Heidegger says, in the former passage, that leaping-in solicitude is a more common mode of solicitude, here he suggests that solicitude is a continuum and that in relating to others, we leap-in and leap-ahead to varying degrees.

## **Part Two**

### **'Care' and the Therapeutic Relationship**

I will now consider how these concepts relate to the therapeutic relationship.

Heidegger's two extremes of solicitude, (that which leaps in and dominates and that which leaps ahead and liberates) and his suggestion that this everyday being-with-one-another maintains itself between the two extremes of leaping-in and leaping-ahead, not only reflects but also corresponds to my experience of working in a Forensic Psychiatric Hospital. Due to the need for confidentiality as well as legal considerations which have to be taken into account when talking about my work in Forensic Psychiatry, I will limit myself to just a few observations which, in my view, are typical for the leap-in-and-dominate extreme of solicitude. Examples of leaping-

ahead solicitude will be given in section three.

As a member of the multidisciplinary team (which includes psychiatrists, nurses, social workers, occupational therapists and psychologists), I attend weekly wardrounds which have the function of reviewing and discussing every patient on a regular basis. In order to protect the public, our main purpose is the assessment of a patient's dangerousness and the likelihood of his/her re-offending. Therapeutic intervention depends on the patient's mental state. The patient is normally first treated and stabilised with medication. Attention is then focused on enabling the patient to look at him/herself in the context of his/her past offending, the present situation and future possibilities. This means that the patient is continuously watched, observed, assessed, treated and cared for in an extremely objectifying and controlling way which closely corresponds to Heidegger's extreme of solicitude – that which leaps-in and dominates.

Forensic patients, because of 'having been found out' already in numerous psychiatric assessments and in court, have become almost impenetrable to further questioning regarding their offence. In order to break down their defences and stubbornness the patients are treated like cases, specimens, diagnoses, but not any longer like human beings. They are looked at from a distance, objectified and dehumanised which, curiously enough, according to their statements is also how they view their victims.

A typical example of a normal wardround interview is given by this excerpt:

*Consultant Psychiatrist: 'How are things? You look a bit glum. You know what that means?'*

*Patient: 'Yes, I just got up.'*

*C.P.: 'That late?'*

*P: 'I always get up at this time.'*

*C.P.: 'The sun is shining and you have missed out on most of the morning. I hear you have been breaking cups!'*

*P: 'Yes.'*

*C.P.: 'Why?'*

*P: 'I don't know. I have been feeling fed up.'*

*C.P.: 'Cups haven't done anything to you? Why do the cups have to suffer? Who would you like to smash? Who is the person you would like to smash up? Is it your father you want to smash up? The way you behave here is how your parents treated you. Your father is an extremely difficult man.'*

P: 'Yes.'

C.P.: 'Let me push you a bit. What would happen if he died?'

P: 'I don't want him to die, I'd miss him.'

C.P.: 'He wouldn't stop your Mum from seeing you then. Have you had the picture of throwing the baby?'

P: 'No.'

C.P.: 'These are things difficult to talk about. It is easier to break cups.'

This leaping-in proved to be a self-defeating exercise. The patient, a young man in his early twenties, became increasingly agitated and visibly distressed when pushed to think of his father's dying. He left the interview room with a red face and spent the next few days totally withdrawn and unapproachable in his bedroom.

According to Heidegger, we can never escape having to disclose the world and ourselves to each other. We are essentially *disclosedness* and therefore only true when we disclose the world as openly and revealingly as possible. Instead of helping the young man disclose more of his particular being-in-the-world which includes his hearing voices and feeling persecuted by recurring violent mental pictures, the Consultant Psychiatrist made him close off in fear and feelings of guilt even further and found out nothing about him in truth.

Heidegger says, 'disclosedness is that basic character of Dasein according to which it IS its "there". Only with Dasein's disclosedness is the most primordial phenomenon of truth attained' (Heidegger, 1962: p 263).

Another example of leaping-in for the other, so the other becomes dominated and dependent, even if this domination is tacit and hidden, is the case of a female patient who cannot come to terms with the death of her second child who died as a baby. She continuously attacks fellow patients as well as the nursing staff and the doctors, she regularly smashes up not only her own room but the television set and the windows in the living area. It is as if her own despair and helplessness is taking over everybody around her. With the help of the nursing staff she unearthed the ashes of her dead child, buried them and unearthed them again. She now keeps them in her bedroom. She has had more therapeutic input than any other patient I know of, for instance individual psychotherapy with psychologists, regular individual sessions with doctors, nursing staff, social workers and occupational therapists. However, nothing has changed in her behaviour. This leaping-in kind of care by these professionals did not help her free herself from her grief nor open her to future possibilities.

## Part Three

### **An example of authentic care**

The Being of Dasein according to Heidegger, is different from the Being of all other beings in that Dasein has to decide about its own Being. It can be the author of what Dasein is or can hand that authorship over to others. The decision to take responsibility for Being is essentially caring about Being. In my work as an art psychotherapist, I strive to relate to my patients with leaping-ahead solicitude. That is, I try to help my patients become mindful of their Being and recognise their choices.

Before there was any acceptance of my professional status as an art psychotherapist, my colleagues had to acknowledge the fact that the patients I worked with (especially the ones I worked with individually) not only liked me but expressed that liking verbally. Additionally, my colleagues needed to recognize that my patients changed and started to take responsibility for themselves and their progress through the system, which eventually led some to their discharge into the community.

In trying to overcome patients' initial fear and resistance to express themselves when they came to the art room for the first time, I discovered that by doing a drawing with them, I not only helped them to challenge their preconceived ideas about themselves, their dislike for art and their lack of skill, but more importantly to remember their innate ability to move through the space of an empty sheet of paper, and even enjoy it. The drawing we do together has the character of a conversation but with lines, dots, shapes and colours which spontaneously express and represent thoughts and feelings. It asks for an intense yet pleasurable kind of concentration and involves waiting for the other to respond rather than leap-in, always having in mind the whole picture being created with the other person. This helps patients learn to tolerate being confronted with their own self-expression while being with another person. By seeing me take the same risks in expressing myself visually that I expect them to take, they find the courage to become visible in the marks they make. It also demonstrates that being in the process of doing a drawing without expecting a particular outcome feels very different from doing a drawing by following a mental picture of the end result, which in most cases is disappointing.

One of these conversations on paper with a new patient who had just been transferred from prison, may serve as an example and help clarify the above. The patient was a middle-aged man who had spent most of his life in prison due to a violent assault and aggressive behaviour. I invited him to draw with me, although he had not done any drawings since his childhood. As soon as he realized that he was not expected to perform but rather to share equally in contributing to a drawing we did together, he visibly relaxed. Because of the information given to me about him, I was prepared to see signs of aggression

in the way he used the space by, for instance, cutting across it with sharp directed lines or impatiently filling up the available space with meaningless scribbles. Surprisingly, I found him gently following the marks I made to begin with but, encouraged by our shared enterprise, he eventually ventured out into the empty space with his own spontaneous designs. The way he related to the empty sheet of paper (which sometimes triggers a feeling of nothingness in people which they cannot tolerate), the relationship to the pen he used to draw with, and the way he related to me and to the art room described his ‘being-in-the-world’ and his basic willingness to care and communicate. This ability and willingness to communicate and care about what they do, to whatever limited degree, is what I am looking for in the patients before I start working with them. After I had worked individually and in a group setting with this particular patient for quite some time, he told me that while we were engaged in doing our conversational drawing I had told him that I had noticed that he was gentle in the way he drew. The experience of this, he said, left a lasting impression on him because until then he was expected, and only seen to be, aggressive and violent. It helped him to remember that he could be different and, as it turned out, helped him to become different.

This is a very simple but lived example of what Heidegger calls ‘to leap ahead’ of the individual in his/her potentiality-for-Being, not in order to take away his ‘care’ but rather to give it back to him/her authentically possibly for the first time. In other words, this conversation on paper momentarily helped the patient open himself to his own experience. Until then, opening himself to his own experience (and possibilities) was too threatening and forced him to deny and close himself off to the truth of what he was experiencing. He thus closed himself off to his disclosing nature, instead of letting it be expressed. This, in the therapeutic relationship with me over a period of time, helped him to be less afraid of himself and his own impulses. He gradually learned to trust his impulses enough to start acting on them in a more constructive manner.

It was only after I learned about Heidegger’s two distinctive modes of solicitude, that I realised that the conversational drawing I do with every new patient is a very simple example of leaping-ahead-solicitude.

## **Conclusion**

In this essay I have looked at Heidegger’s concept of care as the basic structure of Dasein with its various existential modes of being. I have focused on the two distinctive modes of solicitude, leaping-in-solicitude and leaping-ahead-solicitude, and have given examples of both from my therapeutic experience and practice.

Since being-in-the-world essentially is caring-for-being-in-the-world,

which we either do deliberately or by default but cannot evade doing, I suggest that we might as well find a way of caring for 'Being' that enriches life with meaning rather than allowing it to become more alienated and meaningless. Drawing on Heidegger's concept of leaping-ahead-solicitude and my own experiences of working in an institution, I suggest ways of being-with in the therapeutic relationship which moves closer to authentic relating and therapeutic care.

Heidegger's question about Being which renders possible all being and why there is Being instead of nothingness, however, still has to be seen as the central issue. As long as the question about what Being is is not considered to be the central issue of our inquiry and is forgotten in the everyday affairs of the world, none of Heidegger's clear distinctions between different modes of being-in-the-world will help us to overcome the growing feeling of alienation from ourselves, from the world we live in and others we live with.

Only by accepting how continuously we forget to consider the meaning of being-in-the-world we begin to 'authentically' care in leaping-ahead of ourselves and others in our potentiality for Being.

If therapeutic space is seen as providing an opportunity for becoming more aware of this forgetfulness of Being, it also provides an opportunity to retrieve the memory of the 'primal ground of Being' which Heidegger suggests we must strive 'to come home to', and which is both the process and goal of authentic being.

Although I have in this paper applied Heidegger's concept of care to a very specific role and setting of an art psychotherapist working in a Forensic Psychiatric Hospital, the relevance as Boss recognised is far reaching. Its scope extends not just to Forensic Psychiatry or even to all formal therapeutic settings, but the very way we treat each other in everyday life.

By remembering Being of others we not only enhance their lives, but our own. By forgetting Being we are both diminished.

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# Drawing from a Deeper Well: Contemplative Asian Sources of Radical Existential Thought

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Ken Bradford

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## Abstract

This paper discusses how Taoism and Buddhism are significant, if unrecognized, sources of what we think of as Existential thought. The radical philosophies of Buber and Heidegger are discussed as essential examples that have been inspired and informed by Asian non-dualistic traditions. This intellectual heritage expands the Euro-centrism of Existential thought into a necessarily, and potentially creative, East/West philosophy, and challenges Existential Therapy to recognize itself as a fundamentally contemplative discipline that must rethink its understanding of authenticity.

## Key Words

Existential Therapy; East/West Psychology; Heidegger; Buber; Buddhism; Taoism; nonduality; authenticity.

Introducing Existential thought to American psychologists in 1958, Rollo May explained, 'Existentialism, in short, is the endeavor to understand man by cutting below the cleavage between subject and object which has bedeviled Western thought and science since shortly after the Renaissance' (p 11). In these words, May alluded to a non-dualistic view which informs the radical epistemology of Existential-Phenomenology. Almost a quarter century later he was compelled to admit, 'In our crisis of thought and religion in the West, the wisdom of the East emerges as a corrective. This wisdom recalls us to truths in our own mystic tradition that we had forgotten, such as contemplation' (1981, p 164). It is one thing to have a theoretical view of human nature not based on an object/subject split, but another thing entirely to be able to put that undivided vision into practice. May came to appreciate that while the West may be able to intellectually understand (*theoria*) a holistic approach to being in the world, it lacks the meditative capability (*praxis*) for realizing non-dualistic knowing.

Prior to May's declaration of the value of Eastern wisdom for the West, Martin Buber and Martin Heidegger, among other akin philosophers at the time, shared a similar concern, immersing themselves in the study of Eastern 'mystic' traditions. This immersion, occurring at the beginning of the 20th century, is a largely unacknowledged source of some of the most radical

– in the sense of non-dualistic – insights which have come to be identified as ‘Existential’ thought.

As it stands, Existential Therapy (ET) is commonly understood to be, and understands itself to be, a decidedly Western form of thought and practice, sourcing itself exclusively from European philosophical and psychoanalytic traditions, with a minor influence coming from American psychology. But even the pragmatic American contributions, typically emphasizing humanistic priorities such as self-expression and self-determination, such as are reflected in individual development, person-centered psychology and experience-near therapeutic applications (For instance, Bugental, 1981; Gendlin, 1978; Maslow, 1968; Moustakas, 1969; Rogers, 1951), are well within the European intellectual tradition.

In the following pages, I will introduce the contemplative Asian sources that inform the thought of Heidegger and Buber. By so doing, I wish to 1) challenge the Euro-centrism of Existential thought as it is currently identified, and 2) empower the reach and range of ET by highlighting its radical, non-dualistic potentiality. That is, in conjunction with *broadening* the *range* of the field of ET by dialoguing with and incorporating the contemplative knowledge of Asian traditions proper to Existential thought, there is the challenge of *deepening* the therapeutic skillful means of its *reach* by recognizing that contemplative practice is essential to deeper self-inquiry, self-understanding and self-liberation. These concerns are nothing new, as they have been of interest to depth psychotherapists for sometime.

## **Western Psychology looks East**

Following Buber and Heidegger, but apparently unaware of their earlier studies, Medard Boss (1965) published a remarkable account of his encounters with Indian spiritual masters, entitled, *A Psychiatrist Discovers India*. This title is indicative both in the sense of *what* he discovered and *how* he approached what he discovered. What he discovered was the Indic wisdom traditions of Buddhism and Vedanta (Hinduism). How he approached these psycho-philos-spiritual traditions was through the lens of a Western psychotherapist. Strangely, his unique text is little referenced, even though it is both a serviceable introduction to radical Indic thought and an illuminating dialogue contrasting the dualistic presuppositions of Western science and philosophy with the non-dualistic sensibilities of Eastern traditions. In addition, it is written in the readable manner of a personal memoir, with the East/West contrast occurring in the conversational style of a Socratic dialogue.

A notable contingent of other psychologists, also disenchanted with the materialism of Western science, were likewise drawn to wisdom traditions of Indo-China in the middle of the 20th century. (For instance, Benoit, 1955/ 1951; Goleman, 1977; Naranjo & Ornstein, 1971; Fromm, Suzuki

& De Martino, 1960; Welwood, 1979.) These psychologists and psychiatrists understood that Western empiricism, predicated on a split privileging perceived objects and objectivity over the perceiving subject and subjectivity, is indelibly handicapped in inquiring into the phenomenology of subjective experience. Not only is human science research handicapped by Cartesian empiricism (Boss, 1982/1963 & 1965; Giorgi, 1970), this worldview fortifies the separation of self from world, mind from body, and me (I) from you (Thou), leading to anxieties of alienation, estrangement and exacerbation of a consciousness divided against itself (Poltzner, 1994/1928). Transfixed by this severe dualistic vision, Western Psychology inevitably developed views of a disjunct subject and its 'object relations,' proliferating and cataloging a vast array of 'disordered' insanities that are symptomatic of a divided mind. Remarkably, conventional Psychology has no understanding of the nature of an undivided mind, and no clear understanding of the nature of sanity itself (Bradford, 2013).

Rather than premising a fundamental split between subject and object, non-dualistic traditions premise a fundamental inter-relatedness. A key term for this in Buddhist phenomenology is *pratityasamutpada*: inter-dependent co-origination. In addition, Eastern traditions have a range of skillful means by which to access, nourish and embody our inherently undivided, 'true' nature. It is not surprising that Westerners with an interest in psychic wholeness and well-being, finding few and feeble sources in the West, would be drawn to the emancipatory disciplines of Asia. Eastern sciences of mind can claim more than 25 centuries of ontologically attuned, epistemologically robust, and in the case of Buddhism at least, psychologically sophisticated research into the nature of consciousness, dwarfing anything comparable in the West.

Significantly, psychologists in the late 20th century encountering Asia's contemplative traditions did so with a good deal of intellectual sophistication. Unlike hippies, spiritual tourists, cultural refugees or other ill-prepared Westerners seeking some kind of escape or release from the suffering, lostness and confusion of Euro-American materialism, professional psychologists approached Eastern thought with a high capacity for critical thinking. In general, they understood the superficiality of religious dogma, East or West, and armed with healthy skepticism combined with an inquiring mind, cut through the thick smoke of exotic Asian religious rigmarole, and zeroed-in on the essential teachings. Psychologists during this period overwhelmingly gravitated to the more advanced, non-dualistic streams of Asian thought, such as Mahayana Buddhism, Taoism and Advaita Vedanta (*advaita* means nondual). This is in contrast to Psychology's Eastward turn today, which focuses on more preliminary approaches, such as mindfulness and physical yoga. Since psychologists in most cases encountered the East with their Western philosophical views already fully formed, Asian studies tended to

became an ‘add on’ to their pre-existing reference system. While this intellectual foundation protected them from getting absorbed by the exotica of Asia, these constructs also tended to insulate them from more fully absorbing, putting into practice and realizing the radical teachings of the East.

This seems to have been the case for C.G. Jung, who opened the door for psychologists ‘discovering’ Indo-China. In the 1920s & 30s, he was conversant enough with Asian traditions to write both a Foreward to D.T. Suzuki’s groundbreaking text, *Introduction to Zen Buddhism* (1974/1925), as well as to contribute a major Commentary to Richard Wilhelm’s translation of the Taoist text, *The Secret of the Golden Flower* (1975/1931). It was Jung who set the tone of caution in regard to Eastern wisdom traditions, which, although eroding, continues to this today. He warned,

*original Buddhist writings themselves contain views and ideas which are more or less unassimilable by the average Western understanding. [Admitting,] I do not know... just what spiritual background or preparation is necessary before one can [understand Buddhist or Taoist thought].*

To his credit, Jung understood that psycho-spiritual preparation was indeed necessary, even if he was not sure what this might entail. Continuing,

*It should not be too difficult for the Western mind to grasp what a mystic understands by ‘enlightenment’, ...[the] strange perception called Satori...Satori, however, depicts an art and a way of enlightenment which is practically impossible for an European to appreciate*

(1974/1925, p 9)

However, Jung’s limitation apparently did not pertain to Existential philosophers, who were well able to absorb the wisdom of the East. Both Buber and Heidegger seriously studied Taoism and Buddhism early in the 20th century. Unlike the psychologists, these philosophers did not encounter the East after their views were fully formed, but in conjunction with the formation of their unique philosophical perspectives. Early in their careers, these Existential luminaries encountered nondual Asian thought in ways that had an undeniable formative influence on their maturing thought.

## **Buber and Taoism**

It seems not to be widely known that Martin Buber was so involved in the study of Taoism as to have published a German translation of and commentary on Chuang-Tzu’s Taoist classic, ‘Inner Chapters,’ in 1910 (Buber, 1991/1910). According to Walter Kaufmann, Buber’s translator, this serious study began prior to the rough outlining of his landmark work,

*I and Thou* (Buber, 1970/1937: pp 49&50). His immersion in Taoist parables, philosophy and poetry continued during these early years, including the draft of a commentary on Lao Tzu's, *Tao Te Ching* in 1924 (Cited in Herman, 1996: p xi). Buber was forthright and appreciative about the formative influence Taoism had on his thought and practice of dialogical exchange. For instance, in a Preface to the 1951 edition of his Chuang-Tzu translation, he referenced 'the Taoist teaching, to which I am indebted for a great deal' (p 15). His involvement with Taoism was no passing fancy, but a source he found himself drawing upon throughout his life.

I expect a proper Buber scholar, which I am not, could speak with greater authority about the influences Taoist thought, especially its literary style of story, parable, and pithy aphorisms, had on the development of his dialogical philosophy. Certainly, the inter-relational and non-self-centered priorities of Taoism can be seen prominently in the primacy of intersubjectivity running throughout his work. And while his prime focus was devoted to Hasidic knowledge in the service of a kind of a Judaic renaissance, especially after the holocaust, Buber remained a decidedly nondualistic mystic. He opened a door for Jewish, Christian, agnostic, atheist and non-theistic Westerners alike to a radical, unmediated encounter with nature, others, and through opening to otherness, with oneself. Like Taoism, he did not understand the self as an independent entity, but at all times as self-in-relation. His unique approach emphasizes non-conceptual presencing and a relational intimacy that upends the tendency to objectify other people, including oneself, as a disjunct other. His approach to human beings is essentially an approach based on the *inter-being* of human being (to borrow a translation of *pratityasamutpada* offered by Thich Nhat Hanh, 1967).

Unmediated, non-conceptual encounter is the essence of authentic, wholesome relationship for Buber. As he puts it in *I and Thou*,

*The relation to the You is unmediated. Nothing conceptual intervenes between I and You, no prior knowledge and no imagination; and memory itself is changed as it plunges from particularity into wholeness. No purpose intervenes between I and You, no greed and no anticipation; and longing itself is changed as it plunges from the dream into appearance. Every means is an obstacle. Only where all means have disintegrated encounters occur.*

(1970/1937, pp 62&63)

Conceptual constructs, including My ideas and opinions about You, based on my personal and socially-constructed biases, including my history, memories, imaginings and fantasies, impede a genuine exchange. For Buber, it is necessary to release all intentionality – including emotional and

intellectual pre-dispositions – in the process of opening oneself to the other’s otherness, in order to have an authentic exchange with the other as well as to be wholly present as oneself.

Buber’s non-conceptual openness is in perfect accord with the core Taoist principle of non-action (*wu wei*). Non-action is neither an intentional expression of action nor of passive inaction, but arises spontaneously from the intrinsic intelligence of the within-ness, between-ness or inter-ness, of undivided presence. Buber understood that unconstructed and unconstructing awareness is the cognizant mode through which to be in attunement with the other, and *ipso facto*, with the Tao. In other words, unconditional co-presence is the living experience of what it means to be authentically in the world.

Elsewhere, Buber declares, ‘Feelings one “has”’; love occurs. Feelings dwell in man, but man dwells in his love. This is no metaphor but actuality: love does not cling to an I, as if the You were merely its ‘content’ or object; it’s between I and You’ (1970/1937, p 66). In these words, Buber points out the difference between a divided mind which might deploy a possessive kind of love, and a more basic, unmediated and uncalculating love, undistorted by self-centered hopes and fears. In observing that love is ‘between’ us, that ‘it’ is no thing, belonging to no one, Buber is again in alignment with the Taoist ethic of non-fixation, or unknowing, that enables non-action. He understood that the existential intelligence intrinsic to the Tao is not an intellectual knowing, but a knowing of the heart, having the nature of love implicit within it.

‘Tao in itself is the unrecognizable, the unknowable. “The true Tao does not explain itself.” [Lao Tzu says,] It cannot be represented: it cannot be thought, it has no image, no word, no measure.... Tao appears in the becoming of the world as the original undivided state, as the primal existence from which all elements sprang, as “mother of all beings”.’ (Buber, 1992: p 181). Usually translated as ‘the Way,’ Tao refers to the possibility of alignment with the wholesome way things are prior to being distorted through emotionally-charged mental constructions. It points to the essential inter-being of beings as well as to the potentiality of swimming in a holistic flow within a stream of spontaneous well-being. Or not.

We are free to either resist and stand apart from *what is*, or, to go with the flow in the great stream of being, in the fully-engaged manner of practicing a martial art such as Tai Chi or Chi Gung, for instance. To be ‘in the Tao’ is to be in attunement with the way things are, in accord with the thrust of being in its manifold appearances and disappearances, without getting lost in those appearances. This requires resting in the nature of openness, between-ness and no-thingness, which is never separate from “the spirit of the valley” that bears everything. The spirit of the valley is deathless; it is called the deep feminine’ (Buber, 1992: p 181). These phrases are pure Taoism. Tucking into this a bit deeper, the spirit of the

valley is deathless because it is unborn, and being unborn, it cannot be found to exist as anything whatsoever. So, the practical question remains: will one recognize one's inseparability with the basic intelligence of existence – which is no thing –, or not?

The experiential challenge in Taoist and Buddhist practice is that of releasing one's projections, ideas and opinions about oneself and the world. This involves, in psychological language, the loosening of mental fabrications cohering the (imaginary) protective boundedness of one's limited and limiting self and worldviews. As a practice of non-doing, the essence of Taoist practice involves relaxing projections in order to be present with *what* is free of mediating constructs. This 'way' requires risking a non-conceptual, non-self-referential and so inevitably insecure, unknowing in the face of the immensity of existence. That is, it requires a decidedly *contemplative* engagement. Buber explains,

*what men call [objective] knowledge is no knowledge. In separation there is no knowledge. Only the undivided man knows; for only in him in whom there is no division is there no separation from the world, and only he who is not separated from the world can know it. Not in the dialectic of subject and object, but only in the unity with the all is knowledge possible.'*

(p 183)

Dualistic knowing that splits object from subject is the habit of forming projections and then taking them to be real, while remaining ignorant of the subject fabricating the projections. Only in uncontrived and uncontriving felt attunement with the Tao is unconfused perception and true knowledge possible. Without adopting a contemplative attitude, the most psychological science can do is 'measure its own measurements,' or, said in psychological terms, fulminate over its own projections.

It is essential to note that while Buber is widely recognized as the originator of 'dialogical' therapy, emphasizing dialectical exchange between partners, he clearly sees the limitations of dialectical inquiry for realizing full knowledge and genuine relational presence. He points to a way of *being-with* that, in being undivided, does not occur through a subject-object dichotomy. For Buber, such basic nonduality is the radical core of Existential thought and practice.

## **Heidegger, Tao and Zen**

While May focused on the subject/object split 'bedeviling' the West since Descartes, Martin Heidegger addressed the more fundamental dualism structuring Western thought since its Greek inception. Beginning with Parmenides, Plato and Aristotle, and supercharged by Judeo-Christian

theology, Heidegger (1959/1953 & 1969/1957) focused on the metaphysical split running throughout Western thought. Observing how Judeo-Christian moralism is overlaid on Platonic idealism, which itself serves as a foundation for Cartesian dualism, including the widespread malaise in our current disembodied 'age of anxiety.' David Levin writes,

*When we read Descartes, for example, it becomes quite evident that the epistemological and ontological dualism of 'body' and 'mind' is, in the final analysis, a reflective manifestation of the dualism in our religious experience of good and evil: we have tended to see a radical split in our moral nature, which reverberates...in every dimension of our being. The body is evil; it is a source of sin, moral weakness and limitation,...the 'mind' is essentially unpolluted and free of evil. Nothing so noble, so 'lofty' as thought could ever take place in the 'lower body'*

(1987, p 247)

Heidegger followed Nietzsche in attempting to bring 'an end to metaphysics,' of which Cartesian empiricism is but a particularly virulent strain. They both understood that metaphysics was not a mere aspect or add-on to Western thought, but was its very core. As Heidegger put it in 1935, 'In the seemingly unimportant distinction between being and thinking we must discern the fundamental position of the Western spirit, against which our central attack is directed' (quoted by Mehta, 1987: p 32). The 'fundamental position' needing to be 'attacked' is the dualistic habit of thinking that privileges reason (*logos*) over felt (*pathos*), embodied, holistic sensing.

Seeking inspiration and direction from fully acknowledged Western sources, including Phenomenology, the Pre-Socratics, poets and Christian mystics such as Meister Eckhart, as well as from the unacknowledged sources of Taoism and Zen Buddhism (May, 1996/1989), the nub of Heidegger's concern was to rediscover the lost sense of *being*. He saw 'forgetfulness of being' as core to Western estrangement, including the West's ever more self-destructive tendencies, both ecological and psychological.

Heidegger's philosophy was devoted to reorienting the 'calculative,' 'instrumental/technological' approach of Western, metaphysically-based thought, to a distinctly 'meditative' form of thinking (Heidegger, 1966/1959 & 1977/1944). He suggests there is a noble purpose for human being, which is to discover and heed what he refers to as 'the call of conscience,' so to be a 'shepherd of being' rather than a heedless instrument of a society fundamentally confused (*das Man*), bent on materialistic acquisition and the reckless deployment of technological power (Heidegger, 1962/1927 & 1977). It seems obvious that 'heeding the call of conscience' is remarkably akin to 'attuning to the Tao,' albeit with a Protestant moral imperative.

In promoting a non-calculating, 'authentic' relation of human beings with themselves, each other and the world, he explicitly seeks to reinvigorate a contemplative mode of cognizance (Heidegger, 1977/1944). This effort to rediscover a primary, inherently relational and non-conceptual rapport with existence is, it seems to me, a cornerstone of Existential Therapy. Ernesto Spinelli (2016), among others, advises that a holistic approach of 'inter-relatedness' is not merely a cornerstone, but the proper theoretical foundation for ET in its entirety. Certainly, *existential* psychology is above all grounded on what it means to be. As Spinelli puts it, "'being" (the being of Dasein) and "the world" are not separate entities but must be grasped together. In this sense, there is no divide between subject and object, nor between internal and external' (p 316). Nowhere are holistic sensibilities more robustly expressed than in the radical thought of Asia, and Heidegger was well aware of this.

There is now wide recognition of Heidegger's involvement with Eastern wisdom. Even a casual reader of his work is likely to notice a strong echo of Buddhist thought. More serious students of Heidegger recognize this similitude still more clearly. The question for Heidegger scholars is not *if* there is a correspondence between his work and Eastern thought, but the *degree* of correspondence, including the extent to which Asian thought has been an unacknowledged source of what we think of as 'Heideggerian' philosophy, and under his influence, more broadly as 'Existential thought.' This concern has been vital enough as to motivate the symposium, 'Heidegger and Eastern Thought' convened in 1969, on the occasion of his 80th birthday. Endorsing this symposium, Heidegger wrote, 'Again and again it has seemed urgent to me that a dialogue take place with the thinkers of what is to us the Eastern world' (quoted in Parkes, 1987: p 7).

In writing, 'again and again [a dialogue with Eastern thought] has seemed urgent to me,' Heidegger was not merely coming to this conclusion in old age, he was expressing a longstanding conviction, vital at least since the 1920's (see May, 1996/1989), and antedating all of his published work, including his opus, *Being and Time*. In 1987, a major anthology, *Heidegger and Asian Thought*, edited by Graham Parkes appeared, including essays by twelve internationally esteemed Heidegger scholars. A number of these authors reference both Heidegger's longstanding interest in East Asian thought and cite numerous correspondences between his writings and those of Taoism, Buddhism and Advaita Vedanta. However, Heidegger himself was ungracious to the point of secretive in acknowledging his intellectual debt to Asian wisdom. Erik Craig (2012) has noted that during the years of the legendary Zollikon Seminars, during which Boss invited Heidegger to teach and apply his philosophy to psychotherapists, he at times spoke to Heidegger about Asian wisdom, to which Heidegger listened, but admitted having no prior knowledge. This silence motivated Reinhard May (1996/1989) to publish an

investigation he entitled, *Heidegger's Hidden Sources*, revealing the unmistakable influences of Eastern thought on his presumably Western philosophy.

As it turns out, Heidegger's interest in East Asian thought was not unique, but a source shared by his principal mentor, Edmund Husserl, whose involvement with Eastern thought is also little known. At the very least, Parkes (1996/1989, p 89) reports that Husserl was interested enough in Buddhist philosophy in the 1920's to invite a prominent Japanese scholar from Kyoto to deliver a lecture series on Buddhism. Hosting these talks in his own home, the young Heidegger would certainly have been in attendance. Again, at the very least, the authority of Asian wisdom was sought after by the pre-eminent Phenomenologist of the 20th century. The extent of influence Eastern thought had on Husserl's own later thinking is an intriguing question inviting further research. But its influence on Heidegger's thought appears to be indisputable.

As Parkes summarizes in the *Hidden Sources* volume, 'By 1927, then, Heidegger had engaged in philosophical dialogue with three of the greatest thinkers of 20th century Japan....and had ample opportunity to learn about the Buddhist idea of nothingness, the affinity between Meister Eckhart and Zen, and the basic ideas of Taoist thought' (1996/1989, p 97). In 1930, he gave a lecture at a private home in Bremen on the question of intersubjectivity, which, as could be the case with a Heidegger lecture, was dense and difficult for the audience to follow. Realizing this, Heidegger asked the host for a copy of Buber's translation of Chuang-Tzu. Not only was Heidegger aware of this text, he was familiar enough with it to know exactly where to locate a specific aphorism with which to illustrate the point he was trying, apparently unsuccessfully, to make using only Western philosophy (Parkes, 1987: p 105).

In his effort to break the Western metaphysical fixation on the thingness of objects or people, including fixation on the static *content* of thought, in order to liberate the vitality of authentic presence and the dynamic *process* of thinking, he invoked Lao-Tzu.

*The key word in Lao Tzu's poetic thinking is Tao, which 'properly speaking' means way. But because we are prone to think of 'way' superficially, as a stretch connecting two places, our word 'way'...translated as reason, mind, meaning, logos, [is]...unfit to name what Tao says....Tao could be the way that gives all ways, the very source of our power to think what reason, mind, meaning, logos properly mean to say...Perhaps the mystery of mysteries of thoughtful Saying conceals itself in the word 'way,' Tao, if only we will let these names return to what they leave unspoken, if only we are capable of this*

(quoted in Stambaugh, 1987: p 84)

As with Jung, Heidegger notes the need to acquire ‘capability’ to comprehend mystic wisdom. There is an undeniable challenge involved in overcoming the divided consciousness that informs our constructed sense of self and world. Gaining access to undivided presence, and being able to open to the way of openness, to the ‘mystery of mysteries’ of our true nature, requires an ability for sustaining undistracted attention (*samadhi*). It involves meditative skill that, as Heidegger notes (1966/1959), must ‘be able to bide its time, to await as does a farmer, whether the seed will come up and ripen’ (p 47).

In his later writings, Heidegger often spoke of the importance of ‘craft,’ such as an artisan has, which has been a favorite analogy used by Zen masters for over a millennium. Conceptual thinking alone will not suffice for the mastery of any craft, and especially a spontaneous interpersonal craft, or art, such as psychotherapy. Once again, since Western thought is so thoroughly dominated by calculative thinking, it is clearly advisable for therapists to privilege contemplative forms of cognizance such as have matured in the East.

Reporting on a conversation he overheard Heidegger having with a monk, Heinrich Petzet writes, ‘that on hearing the Buddhist monk say that “nothingness is not ‘nothing’, but rather the completely other: fullness. No one can name it. But it – nothing and everything – is fulfillment”, Heidegger responded with the words, “That is what I have been saying, my whole life long” (quoted in May, 1996/1989: p 3). Indeed he had. Heidegger’s signature concept of *Dasein*, which he employed to refer to the nature of a human being, is as central to his philosophy, and as difficult to translate, as *tao* is to Taoism and *sunyata* is to Buddhism. *Sunyata* is the key Buddhist word for the true nature of self and world, commonly translated as ‘emptiness’ or ‘openness.’ The resonance between these three terms is unmistakable. As Lao Tzu famously put it, ‘the Tao that can be named is not the true Tao’ (my translation). Even as emptiness, the Sanskrit root *su* of *sunyata* paradoxically means to swell, referring to a fullness of being. ‘Nothing is not nothing,’ says the monk, ‘but...fullness. No one can name it.’ It is ‘fulfillment.’

In other words, we could say no-thingness is being in attunement with the *tao*.

In the still other words of Existential thought, *Dasein* is variously articulated as ‘there being,’ ‘being-in-the-world,’ no-thingness, ‘a clearing’ in the sense of an open space, a luminating realm, basic openness and the capacity of presence, or simply being. The potential fruit of ‘fulfillment’ in being simply and fully present in the moment, speaks to a fruition beyond therapeutic relief that seeks to transform ‘neurotic suffering into normal suffering,’ which Freud understood to be the goal of psychoanalysis. This worthwhile

psychological goal continues to be the overarching purpose of most psychotherapy, Existential included. But the fulfillment alluded to by the monk and philosopher does not refer to a psychological state, but to an ontological recognition that fulfillment is not some thing to be sought, as if it exists somewhere else, but is 'always already' intrinsic to the nature of being in the world *as it is*. Which raises a new question: Is one able to tune in and be in accord with this vital, paradoxical nature?

## Contemplatively-keyed Existential Therapy

In his doubt about a Westerner's ability to 'assimilate' Eastern teachings without sufficient 'spiritual' preparation, Jung apparently did not see that the nondual orientation of Asian traditions are also quite daunting for an 'average,' unprepared Easterner. He seems not to have seen that the preparation necessary for accessing nondual wisdom has little or nothing to do with culture and the conceptual husks surrounding the teachings, but has everything to do with a person's capacity for being open-to and opened-by non-referential presence. To discover the truth of the way things actually are, one does well to prepare by peeling away the outer husks of the way one thinks they are, be those constructs social, theoretical or personal, opening oneself to the vulnerability of un-knowing. Developing one's contemplative capacity, as William Blake put it, is to 'cleanse the doors of perception' and, through bearing the clarity and lightness of being, 'to see reality as it is: infinite.' Other words for 'infinite' are 'groundless', 'emptiness' and 'open-ended'.

## Self and world illusion

While May spoke to 200 years of the Cartesian split and Heidegger addressed 2,000 years of the metaphysical dualistic vision of Western civilization, wisdom traditions of the East address the dualistic thinking that characterizes the human condition since time immemorial. The subject/object split is not limited to the West and modern worldviews, but is endemic to the human species and the phenomenology of consciousness itself. Husserl understood that conscious intentionality involves both *noema* (object pole) and *noesis* (subject pole). And psychologically speaking, with consciousness, especially self-consciousness, comes unconsciousness. With selfhood comes otherness; with us comes them. As mystics of many stripes know, including Heidegger and Buber, conceptual thinking differentiates, separating this from that, analyzing wholes into constituent parts, and is vulnerable to making emotionally-charged, polarizing dichotomies, *all the while forgetting that these distinctions do not exist in reality, but only within one's construction of reality.*

Mistaking our mental constructs for reality itself, we become lost in our

own projections. Complicating matters, our ‘everyday’ lostness is confirmed and reinforced by the shared projections of the consensus reality in which we dwell, and we become convinced we are not lost. In Buddhist psychology, not recognizing this dilemma is referred to as the *fundamental ignorance* (*avidya*) underlying all confusion and anxiety. Daring to face and recognize the lostness of our situation (Buddha’s 1st noble truth) requires existential self-honesty, which is the courageous first step on a path of awakening.

While there are various steps and various paths in Buddhism, keyed to the varying capacities people have for facing the truth of existence, the foundation of all of them is self-reflection. The Zen master, Dogen (n.d.), notes this beginning purpose as, ‘studying Zen in order to study the self.’ On this level, Western psychotherapy has already made valuable contributions in the facilitation of self-examination. However, psychotherapy seems not to recognize that the depth of its inquiry only addresses relatively gross veils of self-deception and self-condemnation, and does not penetrate the more subtle veils of self-illusion, including the fundamental ignorance that shrouds one’s true nature.

Having developed the ability to self-reflect, the next step is to see into the illusory nature of the self, discovering that ‘I’ am not a separate, self-existing being, but a sentient process of inter-being; a no-thingness in on-going relationship with everything. The impression of continuity we experience through time, which we defensively, if innocently, solidify into an enduring, independent island of selfhood, creates a temporary safe harbour of security, but at the cost of interminable anxiety. In the back of our minds we somehow sense that our apparently secure sense of self and world is tenuous, and we find ourselves plagued by doubt, hope and fear, which accompanies us as a niggling, perhaps vague, apprehension. So, we compulsively engage in a constant stream of self-narration, which functions to reassure ourselves that we exist and are in some measure of control of our world/thoughts. This kind of compulsive thinking becomes obvious very quickly once we sit down to meditate. The skill of contemplative attention seems to be critical for slowing down the speed of 24/7 discursive thinking, in order to discover how we are, often unconsciously, construing our world and misconstruing ourselves.

## **Authenticity and radical Existential thought**

In Buddhist psychology, it is understood that along with the ‘fundamental ignorance’ of dualistic thought comes the potentiality of wholeness, basic sanity or ‘fundamental wakefulness’ (*bodhi*). Heidegger’s understanding of authenticity resonates strongly with this, which is likewise in accord with the existential harmony implicit to the Tao. These all point to a basic, unconditioned, undivided and lucid presence. However, it is very rare

that Existential therapists speak of authenticity in these terms; either in regard to or as a correlate of Buddhist enlightenment or attunement to the Tao. I suspect this is due to an unfamiliarity with the Buddhist sense of *bodhi* and Taoist sense of *tao*, as well as having only a vague sense of what Heidegger meant by authenticity.

Of course, the question of authenticity is central to ET, and has been considered by several Existentialists, from Kierkegaard to Nietzsche to Heidegger to Sartre to Fromm to Bugental. In general, these thinkers focus on authenticity as daring to source oneself from within rather in conformity to social norms and mores. But, as Heidegger was aware, there is a range of potential authenticity, just as there is a range in Buddhism from glimpsing to fully realizing enlightenment. There is maturational difference in Buddhist thought between having an experience of awakening (*satori*), which affords a glimpse into the true nature of mind, and more fully embodying non-defensive openness. Without having a more sophisticated understanding of the range of proximal versus full authenticity, ET remains hampered in understanding this core concern.

Appreciating only culturally-contingent ideas of what might constitute authenticity, ET is left with only a general humanistic idea of what this means. For instance, 'to be authentic' is often taken to mean, 'be yourself.' But the question of the *who* that one *is* as 'oneself' is often not deeply considered. So, what is typically taken to be one's 'authentic self' winds up being merely one's opinions, emotions, memory and psycho-physical characteristics. There remains, behind these self-centered aspects, a holistic awareness which can be aware of each one. Certainly, acknowledging and taking responsibility for what one feels and thinks is a moral and psychological victory for anyone who has been estranged from him or herself. Carl Rogers termed this 'emotional congruence.' But as regards the potential for a more complete self-realization, psychological self-knowledge remains a rudimentary kind of authenticity. Without doubt, self-understanding and self-acceptance can cut through irrational fears and self-deception, perhaps relieving a crippling inner dividedness. But this psychological kind of self-acceptance is not yet a realization of full authenticity which dissolves the fundamental ignorance and discontent that comes with the illusion of divided selfhood.

For ontologically-robust inquiry that is curious about seeking full authenticity, it is helpful to have a frame(s) of reference able to guide and support the inquiry.

## Conclusion

This essay makes two points. First, the field of Existential Therapy has underappreciated the extent to which some of its most fertile thought, particularly that of Buber and Heidegger, is inspired and informed by

Asian wisdom traditions. This being the case, the wisdom streams of the East *belong* to the field of ET and what we think of as the Existential corpus. This presents Existentialists with a challenge of intellectual integrity. Will we acknowledge these Eastern wisdom lineages as legitimate sources proper to ET? Many Existential therapists, including leading authorities in the field, have been unaware of, or have decided to ignore, this vital legacy. ET is already an East/West Psychology, if only in embryonic form. Given the sourcing of Existential values from Asian contemplative traditions, it falls to Existentialists more than other subfields of Psychology to honor this heritage and harness it in the service of self-understanding and, with more far-reaching import, self-liberation such as the Buddha discovered. Which brings us to the second point.

Existential Psychotherapy is primarily a contemplative art and science. Optimally deployed, ET privileges meditative, inter-relational and non-dualistic awareness over calculative thinking and utilitarian interventions. While this orientation is respected in ET (as well as in forms of psychoanalysis and transpersonal psychology), it has not been empowered as much as it could be.

The disruptive insight and reassuring verve of philosophical thinkers who do not shy away from existential actualities, paradox and the dizzying mystery of being are lights illuminating the existential way. I surmise that the Asian roots of Existential thought have been disregarded and under-regarded not only due to the cultural-intellectual difficulties involved, as Jung observed, but because opening more deeply to the nondual wisdom of the East puts us face to face with the inherently insecure nature of self-existence. The search for truth, meaning and authenticity sound enticing all the way up until we confront what actually *is*, beyond our mere ideas about it, and find ourselves teetering on the lips of an abyss. It is at this point of ‘being towards death,’ as Heidegger poignantly put it, that authentic presence reveals itself. Contemplative wisdom traditions are devoted to strengthening one’s capacity for unmediated attunement to existence as it is, and brilliant in pointing out that the terror and groundlessness of being is not other than the vitality of wonderment and well-being-as-such.

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# **‘A Process You May be Entering’ – Decision-Making and Burnout in Mental Healthcare: an Existentially Informed Hermeneutic Phenomenological Analysis**

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**Simon Wharne**

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## **Abstract**

A hermeneutic phenomenological analysis revealed that senior mental health practitioners experience their decisions as ‘terrifying,’ ‘weighty’ and ‘painful,’ feeling exposed, under scrutiny. When imposing unwanted choices on others they claim they only do that which their role requires. A move towards inclusive decision-making is unlikely while practitioners promote fragile certainties

## **Key Words**

Burnout, mental-health, decision-making, risk, hermeneutic, phenomenological.

## **Introduction**

Mental health practitioners can be conceptualised as replaceable parts in the systems of healthcare. Those who are prone to ‘burnout’ can be identified and potentially made more resilient (Gustafsson, *et al.*, 2010). However, difficulties might arise due to the way mental health services are set up and managed. Removing or treating the individuals who most often struggle will leave those problems unresolved. Perhaps these individuals are just trying to provide ethical, effective and professional interventions within a dysfunctional structure. A phenomenological investigation is described in this paper, exploring the complex interaction between the agency of individuals and the structures of professional culture.

Within the commonly held assumptions of mental health care, distress is understood as an unwanted and preventable outcome of biological or psychological dysfunction. Expressed in specific symptoms, it is thought to be caused by identifiable diseases or maladaptive psychological processes. This reductive and materialist paradigm divides populations into those who are ‘normal’ and those who suffer from certain ‘abnormal’ conditions. Concepts such as burnout are reified and measured using standardised tools. A sub-group of individuals are then understood as experiencing specific abnormal ‘symptoms’ and treatments are administered to make them more ‘normal.’

Phenomenological enquiry offers a more human-centred understanding than that which is generated through the objectifying processes of scientific measurement. For example, it has been observed that practitioners who become distressed are experiencing problems with their self-identity (Arman, *et al.*, 2011). Also, burnout is observed by co-workers to be a state in which someone over-reaches themselves in an effort to be in control, failing to delegate tasks, engaging in a kind of isolating self-sacrifice, while struggling to achieve unattainable goals (Ericson-Lidman & Strandberg, 2007). The concern remains, however, that distress as a form of human weakness might get in the way of delivering the most effective treatment in the most rational manner. Healthcare workers who feel empathy are more likely to show signs of burnout (Vaes & Muatore, 2013), for example. The abundance of regulations, recommendations and guidelines, in mental healthcare, clearly indicates the prevalence of this concern. In these documents, the role of the scientific practitioner is simplified in step-by-step descriptions of how to enact those treatment protocols that evidence has shown to be most effective.

It might be expected that evidence should lead everyone to the same conclusions, but professionals in healthcare settings often disagree as to what an ethical choice might be (McGrath & Holewa, 2006). This adds to the distress they experience when their choices are impinged upon by structural constraints, by the differing agendas of various institutions, by local team conflicts and particularly by the interdisciplinary disputes of their work setting (Austin, *et al.*, 2005). Also, distress will increase when referral rates go up and funding is reduced (Morant, 2006). The caring worker is a self-identity that is difficult to maintain when work tasks become unmanageable.

Paradox can be found in the way that workers must adopt a ‘professional attitude,’ in which emotions are managed, while at the same time they must be caring and empathic. Where is the safe ground between being too human and not human enough? Paradox is also expressed in the expectation that something can be done to manage conditions such as burnout, as if they are just more grist to the machinery of diagnostic categorisation and treatment. If the stress of identifying and treating mental illness without adequate resources makes someone ‘burnt-out,’ then to identify and attempt to treat their distress is telescoping the problem. The systems of knowledge by which practitioners objectify and manage the problems of others turn back on themselves in the distortion of a feedback loop.

Terms such as burnout could be understood as an attempt to contain the problem, to justify and maintain the system by locating the problem within an individual. However, senior practitioners are not just passively subjected to professional and managerial knowledge; they are functioning at a level in which they actively maintain or even construct structures and practices.

They are choosing to work in a setting where the depersonalising and self-isolating behaviour, which is thought to cause burnout, might sometimes be encouraged (Ericson-Lidman & Strandberg, 2007).

The action of isolating, objectifying and diagnosing individuals is not the only response available to practitioners when they encounter or experience human distress. If practitioners were not overwhelmed by their difficulties they might be able to build their resilience (Seery, 2011). They might adapt to uncertainty and to their inability to control the behaviour of others. There are frameworks, such as 'Open Dialogue' (Seikkula & Arnkil, 2014), in which the approaches of 'expert diagnosis' and 'classification,' with their associated control and management of behaviour, are often set aside. Uncertainty can be tolerated and practitioners do not need to rush into the expert position of imposing meaning.

Rather than speculating about what kind of model would account for paradoxical complexity, this article gives a descriptive account, based on a phenomenological study. This material explores the assumptions practitioners bring to their work and it is useful, therefore, for anyone considering the question of how mental health services should be set up, what outcomes they might deliver, or what kind of leadership will be effective?

## **Methodology**

This paper reports on an element of a larger study, which considered decision-making in mental healthcare at different levels, (Wharne, 2014). An existentially informed hermeneutic phenomenological approach was chosen (Willig & Billin, 2012), so as to explore the shared human experiences of participants. This approach has been used in education research for many years (van Manen, 1990) and is now often applied in healthcare (Lindseth & Norberg, 2004). It is useful for studying topics where there is conflict. Rather than choosing one theoretical model and taking up a position in academic disagreements, the researcher describes all that they encounter. Where there are complex disagreements the researcher will find more detail and finer distinctions enabling a richer understanding (Latour, 2005).

Ethical approval was gained from the university, NHS and Social Services committees and data was collected using semi-structured interviews. Sixteen participants were recruited by placing posters in community mental health team bases. The analysis brought the experiences of participants together under headings such as 'service user,' 'family carer' or 'mental health worker,' although most were found to act in at least two of these roles. The experiences of three participants are analysed here, where they spoke about their employment in senior roles in mental healthcare. Analyses of related material from the overall study are reported elsewhere (Wharne, 2012, 2014, 2015a, 2015b, 2015c).

As in other research methodologies, a rigorous approach was taken in analysing transcribed interviews. However, the place of the researcher is acknowledged through the use of reflexivity. The approach is heuristic, as the researcher must encounter the data as a person, rather than following a set of predetermined rules. The researcher has facilitated conversations and has drawn out accounts of experience. They must therefore be concerned about and engaged with the topic. They are not impartially reporting through a remote and disconnect voice, but are present, actively co-constructing and interpreting data. They become immersed in the data, moving continuously between part and whole in a hermeneutic circle, employing three methods of reading: holistic, selective and detailed (van Manen, 1990). Sententious phrases are noted where they capture the significance of the text as a whole and the connection between detail and overall meaning is verified through further readings. This disciplined exploration reveals aspects of the life-world in a cultural and historical context, expressed in the ‘fusion of horizons’ between participant and researcher (Langdrige, 2007).

Details of experience are important and participants are not taken as representative of a broader group, so results cannot be generalised as in empirical research approaches. Instead, this approach builds the reliability and significance of its results by getting as close to the experience of participants as possible. This requires that experience is understood through shared aspects of existence, such as; spatiality, embodiment, temporality, and relationality (Heidegger, 1962; Merleau-Ponty, 1962; van Manen, 1990).

## **Participants**

*Diana* is an Asian woman in her thirties. She is a Social Worker, approved to make assessments for detention under mental health law. She leads a community mental health service, where she manages staff and makes decisions about the allocation of resources.

*Harry* is employed as a Staff Grade Psychiatrist. He is responsible for prescribing and managing treatment in both inpatient and outpatient settings. He leads decision-making processes on behalf of the consultant psychiatrist. He is in his forties and is Asian.

*Kevin* is a Counselling Psychologist. He makes assessments, providing therapeutic interventions in a clinical leadership role, in a community mental health team. He is in his thirties and he is White British.

## **Thematic summaries**

### **Being real:**

Participants encounter the reality of limited resources, where there are risks and it is difficult to set priorities. ‘Being real’ requires that they

make unpopular decisions, using abstract rational calculations and assertiveness. Decisions are open to further examination so that they feel exposed and subject to scrutiny.

**Feeling protected when giving information:**

Participants face challenging encounters with people who are distressed and in need. They make decisions which might be experienced as intrusive or a form of abuse, but these actions are understood to be required by professional policies and legal frameworks. By giving information on these systems of knowledge, they can pass responsibility back to the people who are seeking help.

**An inability to control:**

Participants struggle with complex demands. They are unable to make commitments or build trust in on-going relationships. They are not negotiating so much as managing expectations, while following professional guidelines. The people they assess appear awkward or complex.

**Being real**

When making decisions practitioners report that they feel under pressure. They must forge an agreement between different agents who hold conflicting agendas, while managing limited resources, facing escalating risks. There are many problems which they cannot solve. Participants describe themselves as ‘being real’ in an intense feeling of being present. Rather than opening their thinking to the interpretations of others, they promote a narrow understanding. They are then managing expectations by speaking with conviction, being committed to following a particular course of action.

Diana manages a community team and the people who need help can be strong in their stance. Her efforts to remain in control of resources and risks can feel like a pointless and painful activity:

*It is about negotiation right, if you work with somebody, for example, who's got a very strong personality issues, they are going to want as much out of you as you can, and it sometimes is, you are banging your head against a brick wall and sometimes it is hard, because the risks, the risks increase and escalate*

(Diana)

*I work with a lady who's having ideas of taking her own life [...] it's actually just being real with her you know; 'I'm not, I'm not, I haven't got a magic wand to take your pain away from you'*

(Diana)

Diana talks about ‘being real.’ Although she mentions negotiation, the options she can offer are limited. Kevin has a similar experience when assessing people referred for psychotherapy. He faces the expectation that he should involve people, but says; ‘it more often kind of comes down to me deciding’ (Kevin). For example, he observes that people believe they will feel better if they talk about past traumas, while in contrast, he suggests that there is little evidence to support this:

*I think, so um is it, might it be empowering to say; ‘Well hang on can we, should we think about this, like what’s happened to you when you’ve tried talking about this before?’ Um, I suppose just flagging up more factors in order to make the decision*

(Kevin)

Like Diana, Kevin is managing expectations, informing people, and he experiences this as potentially empowering for them. However he is also drawing them into a discussion, so that he can use the information they give. People might assume that the more problems they mention then the more likely they are to be offered therapy. In Kevin’s view, however, treatment is not appropriate where there are severe difficulties. He sometimes feels that he is catching people out:

*I am interested to find out their view, and there’s that thing, [laughs] it almost feels like, a bit of a trick, so you find out what’s their view and say; ‘Well that’s not the sort of thing that we, [laughs] deal with’.*

(Kevin)

*It just feels a bit, tricky, or something, if someone says; ‘Oh yeah it’s awful I’m doing this, this and this.’ ‘Well, sounds like you’re not, you know, your problems are too severe at the moment to engage in therapy.’ And I think; ‘over shot,’ kind of thing [laughs]*

(Kevin)

People are providing him, unwittingly, with reasons for him to exclude them and his laughter is perhaps a sign of discomfort; maybe he feels that the business of psychological assessment should not be reduced to a game in which parties exaggerate or deceive each other.

Kevin also talks about an abstract rational means of making decisions, but making comparisons can be difficult:

*I suppose ideally, you’ll be able to look across all the people waiting, and and put some some sort of, use, apply criteria in*

*some sort of order of priority [...] doing everyone in parallel, and deciding, you know, in that way, you're seeing people in series, and you're seeing them, you don't know what the next person's got but you're saying yes or no to this person, and then somehow to the next person.*

(Kevin)

People give accounts of various difficulties which Kevin tries to grade by order of priority in an abstract system. Decisions would then be based on something that is real, or measurable, but the calculation is not easy. He describes how he is trying to categorise and to achieve this he must neglect information focusing on a narrow interpretation:

*In order to categorise you need to ignore a whole lot of features of somebody and just focus on the one by which you're categorising them*

(Kevin)

In Kevin's experience he must screen out a lot to place people in categories; 'suitable for treatment' or 'not suitable for treatment.' Meanwhile Harry is employed as a Staff Grade Psychiatrist and he encounters similar problems with limited resources and complex demands. He says decisions need to be taken quickly:

*Unfortunately we've got limited resources, we have got, um, facilities that are limited, the staff numbers, um, and the bed[s ...] so, so unfortunately we, we are, we have to, we are under pressure to decide so many things, in a quick manner*

(Harry)

*You need funding, there are so many barriers you know, you have identified that place there and stated that this is a place that can meet the needs of this particular patient, but you cannot because we have to go through funding panel*

(Harry)

There is an urgent need for Harry to find a bed in an inpatient unit, while freeing up these resources is delayed because of the barriers of aftercare funding arrangements. Time is therefore a factor which is experienced in a complex manner. Like Kevin, who tries to make comparative judgements Harry must decide who has a greater need to be in a hospital bed at a current point in time, when new information might arise at any point, which would change priorities. Harry talks about being sincere when he is negotiating or communicating:

*Negotiation is one of the important, part of our training programme as well, communications skills, how to negotiate, so if we are quite clear about what we want to talk about, and in a sincere and, way, the people do accept*

(Harry)

Like Diana, Harry is using the term ‘negotiation’ but talking about persuading people to accept his decisions about admission or discharge. He experiences a need to express assertiveness and conviction:

*We have to be, a bit assertive in there, because if you’re very convinced of the beneficial effects of whatever we are doing, it’s positive if you are convinced from a, all along that this is the right thing for this patient*

(Harry)

Harry emphasises a reality he experiences, that his recommendation will be beneficial. Like Diana and Kevin he is emotionally engaged in managing decision-making processes, where pressures feel real.

Kevin is aware that the decisions he makes are recorded and, if there are risks, it is possible that these decisions will be examined, or placed under scrutiny:

*There’s also this, thought at the back of my mind that it’s might be kind of being scrutinised somehow, or it might be up for scrutiny at some point you know if something goes wrong, and why did I make this decision which is all a bit, I suppose I can find it a bit sort of paralysing at times actually*

(Kevin)

Kevin is aware that his decisions might be scrutinised, causing him to feel paralysed and he feels the weight of a tangible pressure; ‘*The clinical decisions, feel more, generally feel more weighty*’ (Kevin). Diana also talks about feeling exposed in her senior role; ‘*People are going to see where I have gone wrong*’ (Diana). Although the realities they encounter are ‘real,’ they are also quite abstract. People present to mental health services with complex individual stories about their problems and needs. Information must be extracted which can be compared in a rational abstract calculation, so that priorities can be set. These participants become quite visible through these decision-making processes, under pressure to follow the correct procedure.

Decisions are made at one point in time, but might then be subject to scrutiny as priorities shift and they are potentially seen as wrong when viewed with hindsight. A reliance on rational systems is important, therefore,

so that consistency can be demonstrated. However, in one moment there is time to invest in helping a person, at some point later, providing that help might no longer be a possibility.

### **Feeling protected when giving information**

Participants describe how they follow procedures, such as: professional standards, work-based protocols, research evidence, or mental health law. They are not then making choices based on their own preferences and if they are called to account they can demonstrate that their decisions are a shared and routine aspect of their work setting. Any criticism or blame would then be attached to the system, rather than the person, so participants feel that they are protected. They do not experience themselves as caught up in personal conflicts as they are not fulfilling their own desires.

Diana describes the procedure for making assessments under mental health law. She reflects on these practices and expresses her belief that it is her role to inform people, while she is also aware that this can be heard as a threat:

*I worked with somebody with an eating disorder once, and her BMI was plummeting, and it was, it was getting life threatening [...] and I said; ‘I’ve spoken to the doctor, and, we spoken about, you know that the Mental Health Act might be an option.’ She’s a very intelligent functioning lady, and she said; ‘Are you threatening me?’ I said; ‘I’m not threatening you, I’m informing you about a process that you may be entering’*

(Diana)

*She still says; ‘You were threatening me’. I said ‘I wasn’t threatening you I was informing you. But it is how you see that information’*

(Diana)

For Diana the possibility of meeting criteria for detention is no more than ‘information,’ a shared reality which is part of society and she is only trying to help someone understand this. She experiences the woman she assesses as a free agent who can choose how she ‘sees that information.’ Diana has the power to recommend detention under mental health law, but in her experience, it is the choices made by the people she assesses which count:

*If people say to me; ‘I am going to stop taking my medication’ and I say; ‘But you know what happens if you stop?’ [...] I’m actually being quite informative with them’*

(Diana)

*So I could, I could have actually quite frank conversations with him, to say; 'look', and I didn't feel that was a threat or anything, I was just telling him that this is the society, this is what's going to happen, it's not, it's not a threat*

(Diana)

Diana does not experience herself as powerful or threatening, she is just being informative. She is being frank about the way the world is and what happens, seeking an adjustment or an orientation to understandings which she experiences as real. She views people as autonomous and able to accommodate her interpretations if they choose. Being informative is an emotionally neutral and rational position. Similarly Kevin talks about feelings within the department in which he works and observes that giving a rational explanation is easier:

*It's like, there's this feeling we can't, we can't take any any more people on, and we have to pin a rational explanation to this [...] So it's more emotionally driven or, in terms of resources really but, um, then a bit sort of dressed up with again rather cynical view, but, it's, like, it's not, it's quite hard to say, well we can't see this person because we haven't got capacity*

(Kevin)

Kevin and his colleagues might feel overwhelmed due to a lack of service capacity, but this is not an acceptable reason for withholding a service. A rational explanation is needed.

Kevin wonders how much he is able to make his own decisions, or how much he is following guidance, based on the experience of others:

*I suppose ultimately the sort of, er, evidence on which it's based is other people's experience, which I'm drawing on because I've read stuff or I've had, guidelines and things, um, so it's not fully, my decision [...] it's hard to know what it would mean to be, my, my decision or what something that is completely my decision would be*

(Kevin)

Kevin does not experience himself as acting independently of the knowledge systems he shares with his colleagues. He struggles to envisage a kind of decision which could be thought of as entirely his own. Harry also describes making choices that are not his own. Some of these decisions lead to intrusive interventions such as 'rapid tranquilisation,' in which a group of workers physically restrain someone and inject them with a sedating

medication. However, he does not experience this as a personal choice in which he is responsible for an action which might be experienced as a form of assault. Harry cannot go against the guidelines:

*We have to remain, in those guidelines, um, we cannot do anything against, so, so whatever the, the process we go, there is for example if a patient needs a rapid tranquilisation, that then there is a rapid tranquilisation policy, we have to go according to that policy and according to the protocol*

(Harry)

In Harry’s experience, he has no choice but to follow guidelines and policies, while also, he observes; ‘*We work as a team, so it is, um, not one person*’ (Harry). It is difficult to say there is just one person who can be held to account as an individual decider.

Diana and Kevin describe similar experiences. By referring to systems of rationalisation or professional knowledge they protect themselves. So, in their own experiences, Diana is not threatening people with detention under mental health law, Kevin is not refusing to provide psychological therapy and Harry is not requiring that they are physically restrained and treated against their wishes. These actions are outcomes of various rational systems, which these people are enacting, as anyone in their position would.

Participants are aware that other people might experience them as engaged in an emotive form of personal conflict, or a power struggle, but this is not how they experience themselves. They do not then feel that they are expressing their own will in the choices they make and this alienation from their own being is not for them in anyway problematic.

### **An inability to control**

Participants are able to assert themselves and hold status within their systems of professional knowledge. However, they know these frameworks are not the only means of understanding the world. When facing competing understandings, they do not always feel in control. Diana for example feels pulled in different directions, as the conflicting logics of two forms of understanding are applied. She might be offering choice and being creative one moment, but then, denying choice a moment later:

*One minute you are being creative and offering everybody every option and as soon as it comes to the Mental Health Act it’s like; ‘Well, if you don’t take your medication you’ve got to...’ you know; ‘If you don’t do this and you don’t do that and your risks are increasing, then you’ve got to come into hospital because that is all we can offer’*

(Diana)

Diana sometimes works to empower people by offering choice, helping them to find creative means to overcome their difficulties. But in contrast, the assessments she makes under mental health law promote a narrow biomedical understanding; *‘Mental Health Act work, which completely contradicts the other work that I do.’* (Diana). Diana’s actions are rational when understood within one or the other of these frameworks, but they are incompatible. She describes prescriptive criteria; *‘The Mental Health Act work is very prescribed, you have a very strict criteria to follow.’* Diana is obliged to follow the guidance associated with mental health law and it is either that people are removed to a psychiatric hospital and treated against their wishes, or they are not.

Kevin describes how he encounters a world beyond the control and understanding of mental healthcare. When he assesses people he picks out specific information so as to categorise them. However, some people he assesses do not fit and this makes them appear chaotic:

*The structure makes you think, that this person just doesn’t fit kind of thing, so it might then actually make them look chaotic, or even more chaotic than they actually are.*

(Kevin)

Kevin can be overwhelmed by *‘The number of people we see and the, um, the, the sort of horrible difficulties that they’re bringing and they’re faced with themselves’* (Kevin). Harry also struggles when people have needs that cannot be met and they must settle for what is available; *‘It becomes very difficult and sometimes; painful negotiations’* (Harry). Diana is also hindered, she faces a new imposed structure in which she must diagnose at the first appointment and then follow up with a menu of evidence-based interventions; *‘I was quite terrified [...] from the first appointment diagnose people then work to a menu of what interventions.’* (Diana). She is extremely concerned about service changes which make her job much more difficult.

Taking on a role at a more senior level in mental healthcare is a challenging experience; ‘paralysing,’ ‘terrifying’ and ‘painful.’ Promoting professional understandings is a core means of managing complex problems, which are often beyond the control of these workers. But even if a degree of control or regulation is achieved, the knowledge systems on which this is based can be inconsistent and contradictory.

## Conclusion

Taking control as an individual is a challenge in the setting of mental healthcare. Participants in this study report that they are following guidelines,

just doing that which is expected of them, even though their decisions are emotive and challenging for others. They do not then experience themselves as 'threatening people with detention under mental health law,' or 'refusing to provide psychological therapy,' or 'requiring that people are physically restrained and injected with sedatives.' By losing themselves in their role they avoid the need to stand up as an individual or take responsibility for making an ethical choice; they sidestep the critical evaluation and judgement of others (Sartre, 1969).

In the face of constant service evaluation, reconfiguration and shortages, participants describe their feelings as; 'terrified,' 'paralysed' and 'painful.' They are concerned about being seen to make mistakes. Their 'evidence-based practice' cuts out just a small and narrow area of understanding and they are aware of a world full of alternative meaning beyond the scope of their professional practice. They become mediators, who manage expectations, with the impression that they are negotiating, when they do not actually have the resources to be flexible. When practices are likely to be experienced as abusive (by the people they are trying to help) this raises difficult and contradictory feelings, but this practice is guided by a collective sharing of professional understandings, protecting individual workers (Bigwood & Crowe, 2008). Evidence shows that treatments for mental health have a limited but proven effect, but these participants act more like they are compelled to believe that they work, so as to bring order to their working lives; their commitment has more of the quality of faith than reason.

Taking a leadership role seems to pull these participants into a heightened sense of being. They describe a need to be sincere, to be real, to be engaged with particular information that they must pass on. They feel the weight of the difficult choices that must be enacted. They are connected with the stark realities and unpredictable demands with which they are confronted. Concepts such as burnout, in contrast, are commonly associated with an inability to act on one's own volition, a kind of 'depersonalisation' or 'compassion fatigue.' However, participants in this study describe feeling very active and present. Existential theory has often been co-opted into the ideology of self-actualisation, but encountering existence can reveal a fundamental lack of meaning in life; in the bizarre and unpredictable nature of experience. The myth of 'the good life' or the notion of 'normality' can be questioned (Camus, 1991).

Seemingly rational approaches such as utilitarianism, in which we share equally between all in need, are revealed to be bizarre when a scarce resource is divided between so many people that it has no value for any of them. However, in the material presented here senior workers stick doggedly to the guidelines, even when approaches are abstract and difficult to apply or simply contradictory. It might be thought that practitioners are adopting technical knowledge as a means to an end, so as to only deliver

the most effective treatments. Instead, in the kind of instrumental rationalism that is created, practitioners become themselves the means by which the system reorders the world (Heidegger, 1977). While the people who seek help are categorised, managed and processed, these workers are themselves transformed into technical resources, divided up and metered out in time limited and closely defined interventions.

If mental health services are to adapt to reducing funds and increasing demands for help, senior workers face dilemmas. They could stick even more rigidly to their doctrines while losing the dwindling sense of control that remains. Alternatively, they could set aside dogmatic beliefs to ask instead what it means for people to be distressed, as in the Open Dialogue approach (Seikkula & Arnkil, 2014). Current interest in this approach is perhaps an expression of a much needed broader debate about what the priorities of our mental health services might be. However, this study suggests that senior mental health practitioners have a long way to go before they can express a ‘tolerance of uncertainty.’

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# The Paradox of Finitude in the Context of Infinitude: Is death denial an essential aspect of being in the world?

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## Abstract

This study examines therapists' experience of death anxiety within a psychotherapeutic context and considers the findings alongside Ernest Becker's hypothesis that death denial is essential to healthy functioning. It reports data from four semi-structured interviews, analysed using interpretative phenomenological analysis. It suggests that an open stance towards death based on faith, and in the mystery of life, offer relief without denying the finitude of physical death.

## Key Words

Death anxiety, death denial, Ernest Becker, existential psychotherapy, spirituality, being towards death, interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA).

## Introduction

Ernest Becker (1973/1997) was the first to pull together an inter-disciplinary theory on the role death anxiety and our corresponding need to deny death plays in our lives. Becker hypothesised that death anxiety is our primary ontological condition, causing us to find ways to deny our mortality, through means which are embedded in our culture, religion and society which he termed immortality projects. These immortality projects are a symbolic system from which people derive meaning and which are covertly religious in nature. The religious aspect to these symbolic systems comes from the role they represent whereby people generally feel they are creating or joining something which will last forever. People then become heroic – part of something eternal, something that unlike the physical body, will never die.

Becker's work drew heavily on both psychoanalytical theory, in the shape of Otto Rank, most notably *Art and Artist* (1989) and the existential philosophy of Søren Kierkegaard (1957; 2004; 2005). Recently, Pyszczynski, Soloman and Greenberg (2006) undertook numerous studies to attempt to empirically prove the validity of Becker's theories, citing death anxiety as the root cause of all armed conflict in the shape of a clashing of immortality projects (particularly organised religion); further reinforcing the view that humanity is destined to exist treading an uneasy truce between having a

stark awareness of its impending annihilation and in creating death-transcending beliefs to overcome the fear and anxiety that this knowledge creates. Collectively, the theory underpinning this field of research known as Generative Death Anxiety (GDA), suggests that ‘at the deepest level, human behaviour is motivated by the unavoidable need to shield oneself from consciousness of human mortality’ (Liechty, 2002: p 9).

This paper aims to examine the lived experience of death anxiety of existential psychotherapists and how this awareness and anxiety towards death plays out in their clients’ lives. The findings will be considered alongside Becker’s hypothesis that ‘the essence of normality is the refusal of reality’ (1997, p 178), and how this might impact the existential approach to psychotherapy where one of the primary constructs is ‘being-towards-death’, or authenticity.

## **Research Methodology**

This is a qualitative study using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, as this is particularly well suited to examining meaningful experiences in peoples’ lives and corresponds to the existential approach to therapy. It follows the recommendations of Smith (Smith and Eatough, 2006; Smith and Osborn, 2003) for the collection and analysis of data.

## **Method**

### **Participants**

The three main criteria for selecting participants were that they described themselves as existential psychotherapists registered with the UKCP and had an active client base at the time of interview. The prospective participants were first approached by the researcher for an informal discussion about the nature of the research and it was then left with them to decide whether they wished to participate or not. Of the four therapists approached, three of them accepted immediately and one initially refused but subsequently changed their mind a few weeks later. The final pilot study consisted of two male and two female participants with an age range of 35 to 55. Consent was gained to use the material in this research (Bond, 2004), and all names in this paper have been changed to ensure anonymity.

### **Interviews**

Each of the semi-structured interviews was conducted in private at the participants’ consulting rooms, with each lasting approximately one hour. The interviews were audio taped and transcribed.

All interviews were conducted by the first author, who is an experienced psychotherapist and has been formally trained in the existential approach. As his views, values and beliefs will undoubtedly affect the interview process, it is worth mentioning briefly his own orientation towards death

anxiety and death denial. He experienced the loss of his primary carer through parental divorce at an early age. Compounding this, he subsequently moved overseas thus losing his culture and familiar surroundings and for the remainder of his youth was raised by an elderly father. He was therefore aware of the potential threat of death from a young age, sensing that his safety depended on a father sixty years his elder. He has since come to recognise much of his emotional response towards death as anxiety, leading him to deny death in a number of functional and dysfunctional ways. His being-towards-death has shifted as he has aged and he now experiences a wider range of emotions in reflecting on his own mortality and that of loved ones. Finally, he follows no organised religion, but would describe his stance as one of openness in the face of the unknown.

### **Analysis**

The transcripts were read through with comments made in the margins alongside significant statements made by participants. The transcripts were then read again and preliminary themes identified from the comments made. These themes were looked at analytically, modified and structured hierarchically to produce a master set of themes. This was done for each transcript, and then the master set of themes was compared, which led to the creation of a single master set across all transcripts.

### **Results**

The most important themes obtained from the data are listed below showing master themes and corresponding sub-themes:

#### **Focus on death awareness and self**

- Subjective experience of death anxiety
- Death as a spectrum experience
- The role of death denial and immortality projects

#### **Focus on death in the therapy room**

- Death denial and clients' awareness of death
- Journeying into death with the client
- The power of engagement
- Spirituality with relation to client work
- Death denial and psychotherapy training

### **Focus on Death Awareness and Self**

#### **Subjective experience of death anxiety**

The concept of death anxiety was a topic which evoked a range of responses from participants when contemplating their own experience. Anxiety or discomfort was a part of the response but not necessarily the primary or sole emotion they experienced.

*Marie: Interestingly my primary response to my awareness of death was to put it away and when I finally did find someone sensible enough to have a conversation with about this they said to me that you can't look at it for very long – it can't be done. I thought about it [death] and then thought about it some more and then it became uncomfortable.*

*Charles: I am more aware of my mortality now than when I was younger but perhaps that is simply that I am more conscious of it, but it was always there. I suppose it comes and goes. My work as a therapist gives me meaning and this sense of meaning then removes or conceals the abyss, at least for a while.*

*Barbara: Any fear of death I may have had is no longer there now. At least not in relation to non-being. I feel able to deal with what life throws at me and have lived it to the full. That doesn't mean I am ready to go yet though!*

### **Death as a spectrum experience**

Every participant spoke of their awareness of death and how they experienced this. For all it was clear that limiting the experiential impact of death awareness, or death anxiety, was a means of pathologising a fluid and emotional experience:

*Michael: I think for me the term 'death anxiety' tends to be quite a technical term and not a very experiential term. The word anxiety is limiting for me in terms of what I experience. It is almost as if the act of labelling my experience paralyses the fluidity.*

*Charles: If we talk about existential philosophy, I think to talk about death anxiety is a bit of a closed door that doesn't go far enough. To label the terror of the unknown as death anxiety and pathologise it is really just creating another shield from the terror of the unknown.*

This shield, which participants thought was in part created through cognitively trying to label and describe human beings' responses to the unknown, became a theme of this research, as words consistently failed to fully encapsulate the enormity of the experience of death and of the unknown. Barbara summed up her experience as follows:

*I have worked with enough clients and patients to understand the physical deterioration process but I still feel that deep sense of mystery in how they and eventually I will go from being to non-being.*

In each of the interviews, the discomfort of truly letting death in without pathologising the experience, was difficult to do in terms of resisting the urge to hold onto a meaning-making proposition, or immortality project.

## **The role of immortality projects**

Immortality projects, whether those featuring a death transcending component, or those enabling the participants to cope with their ontological condition in other ways, seemed to be universally employed. The participants seemed unanimous in the view that it is necessary to create meaning in life, and that this meaning in turn serves to veil some of the terror of the unknown. However, the participants also questioned their meaning-making propositions where they did seem to deny death in some way:

*Barbara: The sense of mystery I feel does give me meaning. I suppose I believe that there is something but I don't know what. I suppose it gives meaning in that it is not totally random. But is there meaning there, or do I give it meaning? I don't know.*

*Charles: My belief structure is that death is a gateway to another realm, so on an intellectual level that allays some of my anxiety of the unknown.*

Managing this juxtaposition between believing in a death transcending belief structure, even in believing in nothingness, whilst maintaining an openness to the unknown, was a recurring theme in the interviews.

## **Focus on Death in the Therapy Room**

### **Death denial and clients' awareness of death**

In exploring the topic of death denial in clients and their corresponding awareness of death, there seemed to be an agreement across all participants that the topic was one that came up either overtly or covertly with clients, but much like with their own subjective experience of death, anxiety was too limiting and at times inaccurate a word to describe their clients' way of 'being-towards-death'.

*Charles: [death] is a topic that comes up often and with most clients at some stage or another, depending on their issues. With some it is very real and open and with others it is more underground and may be something I introduce into the room if I feel it is there and yet unspoken.*

*Marie: I often see clients who haven't become living, which I am sure is about the fear of death that holds them back. Perhaps to begin to live is to accept their mortality. I have had clients who couldn't make a will. To make an arrangement that indicated their knowledge would make it happen in a causative context.*

Participants expressed numerous examples of how clients would deny their mortality by avoiding the topic in the therapy room or through exercising some kind of control over death through self-destructive behaviours.

*Marie: Suicide ideation is something I have worked with a lot. Why would you kill yourself if you are worried about dying? But I can see why: it introduces control over the circumstances. Create the perfect death and you can make it as you think better than the one that might be on offer.*

Whilst clients' death awareness differed, as indeed did their emotional experience in the face of death, it seemed clear that some clients were quite destructive in their coping mechanisms, which could at times paradoxically increase the likelihood or risk of death.

However, participants also cited examples of how an acceptance of one's impending mortality could also be positive.

*Barbara: I can think of some clients who, faced with imminent death, were able to use this to bring meaning into their lives. They created a ... richness with their families and friends that hadn't been there before.*

### **Journeying into death with the client**

A willingness on the part of the therapist to enter into the client's subjective felt experience of death from a perspective of openness, was considered a courageous but essential element of the encounter.

*Charles: It is not always easy and invariably it brings the abyss back to me at times, though often not if we are engaged. Then it levels the playing field between us so to speak. You know? Two humans in the face of the unknown with everything that [that] brings up.*

*Michael: My willingness to let that [death] into my body, and sit with somebody and feel it.. their fear of that, the everything they experience. I think that aids greatly. It is not an awareness of my mortality in any kind of cognitive sense. In my body I feel an opening to ... the bleak panic of non-being.*

The courage to enter into the client's experience, without holding onto the buffer of one's own immortality project, seemed to increase the therapists' own death anxiety, but equally led to a congruent encounter from which the client benefited most.

*Barbara: For me it is about a willingness to have my beliefs challenged. My assumptions and beliefs, even those dear to me or that offer me some illusion of safety or protection: allowing myself to get touched or hurt.*

This theme of openness and a willingness to be with the client's experience of death, thereby letting go of the security of their own immortality project, was one that was unanimous across all participants.

## **The power of engagement**

The concept of engaging with the client seemed to have a buffering effect on both the therapist and the client, in relation to the experience of death awareness. Michael described this as follows:

*My attitude towards the client and then linked to that the client's developing attitude towards themselves, is very important and typically, the more I can hear of the client's experience, the more I can hear of their way of being in the world. The more alive I feel in a session, the more I know that something real and tangible is happening between us.*

*Charles: Some approaches and some therapists avoid truly engaging on a human level with the client. It can be scary and it levels the playing field especially with topics like death. You both sit there in 'unknowing' together.*

Engagement was seen as an essential aspect of the approach, which served to bring an element of human-to-human relating into the therapy room. As Charles suggested, it is through engagement and being with the other, the client, in unknowing, that some of the discomfort of the unknown disappears.

## **Spirituality with relation to client work**

The word spirituality was one of the concepts which created some confusion during the interviews, in terms of its meaning, which seemed to be very subjective. When referring to organised religion the participants were unanimous in their views, encapsulated well by Barbara:

*When it gets real, so when clients are challenged in their health or faced with ageing, that sort of thing, something happens and that is when people who have a strong fixed religious belief are often in trouble. When they start to see it naked, they can't hide [behind fixed beliefs] anymore.*

The main consensus seemed to be that in trying to provide a concrete answer about what happens after death, the rigid and ideological structure of most major religions seemed to fail to provide humans with sufficient flexibility to address the full scope of the ontological existential anxiety. Through a courage and willingness on the part of the therapist to enter into each client's experience of death in an experiential sense, the participants were able to work with clients in an empathic and congruent manner without immortality projects clashing. Marie described this as:

*I am careful around it [religion]. More careful than around death as I am more familiar with the role of death than I am with the role of practiced religion. I am aware my stance is very strong*

*and other people's stance is very strong in favour of religion so it is something I had to check in with myself about and still do, so that I can be with the client without our beliefs bumping up against each other.*

In considering the effects of spirituality as a concept beyond that of organised religion, there seemed to be unanimity across the participants that what spirituality could represent could in turn be beneficial to coping with the experience of reflecting on death and the unknown.

*Michael: If spirituality is simply in some way embracing or opening up to the largeness or expansiveness, or to the mystery of life, I think it can be a help. It doesn't offer a place of reassurance. Where spirituality becomes religious content then I think it is scientism and it becomes a denial of death.*

*Barbara: The word I have used is mystery and for me this may not answer any questions, but there is a sort of surrendering to the unknown and having faith in the bigger picture. And when clients have this attitude, it seems to have a very different effect than hard religion in their acceptance of their mortality.*

### **Death denial and psychotherapy training**

Overall it seemed clear that all participants thought that the topic of death should be given more consideration in both training and clinical practice. Trainees should become aware of their own death anxiety and corresponding immortality projects and could thus gain a greater awareness of how their own death denial tactics could impact on the therapeutic encounter.

*Charles: Well the reality is that current training in this area and even existential training, doesn't really focus on this; only on a very intellectual level. I mean this is what I am talking about with the shield, it intellectualises death anxiety and talking about what Heidegger wrote about it or what Jaspers wrote about it, is a very intellectual way of doing it [training students].*

*Marie: Death awareness, death denial, therapeutic relationships and roles in relation to this: our profession works with death so much if you really look at it.*

### **Discussion**

Becker's defining statement, 'the essence of normality is the refusal of reality' (1997, p 218), is more than an indication that he and his associates considered death anxiety to be the primary human condition, and that the denial response is the universal norm; 'the vital lie of character'.

From the presented results, parallels can be seen with Becker's hypothesis, but only through labelling any other response to death, other than anxiety, death denial. Indeed, this study indicates that whilst death anxiety is present amongst participants and their clients, it is one of many felt responses to death.

Each of the participants experienced amongst other emotional responses, terror or dread in the face of death and the unknown, and each showed signs of, and admitted to, denying their mortality in various ways. According to Yalom (2008), the very choice of therapy as a profession could in itself be a response to the dread of death, thereby functioning as an immortality project of sorts for practitioners. It can also be argued that as death anxiety and death denial are largely unconscious, any negation of negative thoughts and feelings towards death on the part of practitioners and their clients, simply constitutes the inability to accept the predicament.

There is no question that as an ontological condition, death is extremely relevant. It is one of the few universal givens (together with birth) that applies to every person on this planet, and inextricably links us to our animal cousins in that we cannot truly control or avoid it. Whilst few existential psychotherapists have written at length about the impact of this topic, Irvin Yalom has devoted much of his theory to examining the impact of GDA from both a theoretical and practitioner's perspective.

Yalom states that 'a denial of death at any level is a denial of one's basic nature and begets an increasingly persuasive restriction on awareness and experience' (1980, p 32). On the face of it, this would seem to be in direct contrast to Becker's hypothesis that death denial is vital to maintaining a healthy mental disposition. Yalom's view seems to be supported by Heidegger's categorisations of undifferentiated, inauthentic and authentic ways of being-towards-death. In considering whether it is possible to be truly authentic in the face of death, Heidegger suggests we should 'anticipate' death and it should be understood 'as possibility, cultivated as possibility, and endured as possibility' (Heidegger, 1996: p 170). Heidegger saw death as the very condition that makes it possible for us to live in an authentic fashion and thus that it is death that gives life its very meaning, but only if we are able to accept it as a vital and unavoidable aspect of life. It is in 'authentic being' that one faces absolute freedom and nothingness and accepts anxiety as part of life. However, as well as recognising the importance of death to life, he also recognised the ontological condition noting 'being-towards-death is essentially anxiety' (Heidegger, 1996: p 310).

In considering Heidegger's perspective, Collins and Selina (1998) suggest that it is in this relationship to death that we live with death anxiety as being indistinct from us. This would therefore suggest that far from discounting denial as the response to death anxiety, Heidegger held the view that death is something we must eventually turn away from and that we cannot face all the time. In his own words, our *Dasein*, or Being, consists of an '[e]

vasive concealment in the face of death [that] can not be authentically ‘certain’ of death and yet is certain of it’ (Heidegger, 1996: p 300). This statement would seem to parallel Becker’s concept of the vital lie of character. Heidegger therefore believed that although humans can temporarily attain a state of authentic being, they will slip back into what he terms inauthentic being.

When confronted with death, the participants in this study experienced a range of emotional responses that wasn’t limited solely to anxiety but went from abject fear right through to finding a comfort in its certainty. These responses were to some extent also repeated in the participants’ experiences of how their clients responded to death. The participants also reported that their responses would change depending on circumstances, life stage and indeed an infinite number of variables. It would therefore seem difficult to pinpoint and label any one response to death in that it is in fact constantly changing. However, this fluidity of response to death was noted primarily among the therapist participants in the study, all of whom have undergone personal therapy in their training. It may therefore be that this has enabled them to ‘be’ with death, and to experience a wider range of response emotions than most in the face of mortality. Indeed, the participants’ experience of their clients seemed to indicate a less developed ability to face death, manifesting itself in the use of more dysfunctional meaning-making propositions.

Therefore, the shift from authentic being to inauthentic being, whereby humans deny their death through donning the shields of immortality projects, appeared to be an experience mirrored within this study. Indeed, the participants seemed to be unanimous in the view that it is necessary to create meaning in life and that that in turn serves to veil some of the terror of the unknown. However, the participants also questioned their meaning-making propositions, as to whether they had the effect of both limiting their awareness of mortality, whilst correspondingly also limiting their openness to the world.

An additional issue that arose from attempting to examine death anxiety and death denial is that in doing so, a shield or an immortality project is created in its own right.

Heidegger seemed to be aware of this issue, and was sceptical about the possibility of an authentic disclosure of the enormity of the threat of death:

*The existential project in which anticipation has been delimited, has made visible the ontological possibility of an existentiell [sic], authentic being- towards-death ... yet this existentially ‘possible’ being-towards-death remains, after all, existentiellly a fantastical demand*

(Heidegger, 1996: p 246)

Being-towards-death may essentially be anxiety, for as human beings we face the possibility of our personal death in the immediacy of every moment of our lives. However, as well as anxiety and dread, death represents mystery, and encapsulates the limitations of our conquest of nature, thus representing the unknowable. Being-towards-death also means that we turn away from fixating upon it: instead, we stop fleeing our human existence and own the freedom and responsibility that comes with life, not in spite of death, but thanks to it. We are then able to free ourselves from the means and methods of neurotic “being” we have devised to allay the fear of death: our denial tactics. It is then that we engage with ourselves and our being and live authentically (Heidegger, 1996; Mandic, 2008). This stance seems to convey a subtle yet fundamental difference in attitude between Heidegger and Becker; in turning away from death, we are not denying it, but living with it as a very real aspect of being human.

Becker considered that propositions featuring a death transcending component, or a supernatural belief of some kind, are the most powerful. Thus, whilst not all immortality projects possess this feature, those that do, he argues, are the most effective in repressing death anxiety.

Throughout the theory on GDA, there seems to be a universally agreed position which is that to believe in any death transcending concept, and to apply this as a meaning-making proposition, is to believe in a fantasy. Becker goes as far as labelling this as the vital lie of character. Yalom (2008), colludes with this theory, and seems to contradict his earlier stance that death denial is a denial of our basic nature, stating that all humans must complete two tasks: to create a transcendent meaning-making project and then to convince ourselves that this meaning-making project has an independent existence in its own right.

Becker’s theory and Yalom’s two tasks would indicate that they both share an underlying assumption: that we continue to invent immortality projects to enable us to cope with our mortality. The vital lie of character, by definition, excludes the possibility of a genuine spiritual dimension that is as real as any other real-life experience. Indeed, there is a growing body of evidence that consciousness might survive the physical death of the body (e.g. Laszlo, 2007; Fontana, 2006) which gives weight to religious and spiritual beliefs that death is not the end and that there is a genuine spiritual dimension. This then becomes a complex picture where a religious or spiritual immortality project might be a functioning tool that allows people to assuage the anxiety of their death, or alternatively a reality that allows people to embrace life without the fear of death, knowing that their conscious will continue to exist after the demise of their physical body. Where the interface between these two extremes exists is hard to determine, however people who practice mystical spirituality or have experienced

Near Death Experiences or After Death Communications may be in a position to have a certainty of the continuation of their consciousness that is not accessible to those who have not.

Additionally, there is an underlying assumption of a separate self in Becker's theories that 'dies' when the body dies. However, contemporary theories on the evolution of consciousness suggest that there are higher states of consciousness accessible in which the main feature is the connectedness of ourselves with others and beyond. Wilber (2016) posits that higher levels of consciousness (his level 7 and above) centre around not only seeing connections between others but feeling them as a direct experience. With such a level of interconnectedness the continuation of consciousness after the physical death of the body would seem obvious to those with that level of consciousness, and not an immortality project.

In considering the role of religion as denial of death, each participant believed that a rigid and dogmatic approach to an immortality project would eventually either truncate the depth of reflection on the part of the client, or simply fail in its role as a tool of denial. This parallels Becker's views on how immortality projects offering theoretically concrete answers to the post-death unknown become extremely important for their believers to hold on to, especially in the face of other, conflicting immortality projects.

Despite there being significant difficulties in the participants being comfortable with the term 'spirituality' to describe an openness to the mystery of life, there was universal support for both therapists and clients adopting an openness towards the mystery of life and finding comfort in embracing this unknown.

This concept once again differentiates the phenomenological approach from the direction of Becker and his followers. The spiritual, or open attitude to the mystery of life, seemed to enable the participants and their clients to remain authentic in the face of death, whilst nonetheless finding some comfort in the bigger picture. Perhaps this is essentially what Rank meant when he suggested that all humans are ultimately religious, in that we all believe in things that cannot be empirically proven; a stance he referred to as 'having faith' (Menaker, 1982).

From this study it would seem, as Becker suggests, there may be validity in more consideration being given to both the topic of death and to death denial as a coping mechanism.

However, there is a trap in believing that simply addressing the topic of death in more depth will suffice. As one of the participants noted, by intellectualising the concept of death, it has the effect of introducing a shield between the experiential stance of the client and the therapist. Yalom (1980) again has strong views on this point, suggesting that whilst most clients rarely voice overt concerns about death, the reality is that the therapist

is either unwilling or unable to hear them. Therefore, death as a topic in the therapy room has been systematically excluded thanks to the therapist and client entering into a type of collusion whereby death becomes the elephant in the room.

If existential therapy is essentially a facilitative process in uncovering and establishing meaning for clients, and it is clear some meanings, or immortality projects, are more effective than others in enabling us to be with death, should it not be the responsibility of the therapist to guide the client towards more enduring and mentally uplifting meaning-making propositions or indeed acknowledge the possibility that consciousness beyond death is a reality for some clients depending on their direct experience or level of consciousness? Put more simply, do therapists have a responsibility to facilitate spiritual guidance?

With the erosion of the power of traditionally and culturally sanctioned immortality projects, Lines (2006) and Rose, Westfield and Ansley (2001) have, amongst others, suggested that increasingly, psychotherapy is attracting clients who are specifically seeking to address covert and overt spiritual issues.

Should spirituality therefore be a topic that is mandatory in the training of therapists? Already it has been highlighted that preparing therapists to work with death is complex, not least because theories about death in themselves become a shield from the felt experience of the dread and anxiety of our mortality, but also that the concept of conscious after death is an unknown quantity. How then, can spirituality be covered in training when it links to death, and is at best a nebulous term which lacks precise definition? Bartoli & Wearden (2007) suggest that trainee therapists should spend time examining their own ideas of spirituality derived from training, as well as from their own experiences and backgrounds, including their views of mental health in relation to spirituality. West (2004) takes this argument a step further suggesting that in order for therapists to work effectively, they need to actively develop their own spiritual framework. Aside from the ethical issues that arise from prescribing a type of spiritual doctrine to be adopted by therapists, it would seem that this view presupposes that therapists need to have personal experience of a phenomenon in order to work with clients affected by that same phenomenon.

## **Conclusion**

This study set out to examine therapists' experiences of death anxiety when viewed alongside Becker's hypothesis on death denial. Whilst it is clear that this phenomenological study has provided initial results which present arguably more questions than they answer, death anxiety is undoubtedly an aspect of being in the world. However, the results indicate that to limit our response to that of anxiety, negates the experiential reality

of humans when faced with their mortality. Whilst Becker and his successors have focused on empirically proving the validity of his theories, it would seem the concept of immortality projects is one that can add value to the existential approach in two ways. By enabling practitioners to deepen their understanding of clients' being-towards-death, and in learning to recognise how clients may deny their mortality and slip back into inauthentic being, therapists will be more able to understand how clients employ differing immortality projects, the more dysfunctional and least anxiety repressing of which result in poor mental health.

However, the ultimate challenge for therapist, client and indeed humanity, is to adopt an in-finite response to the finitude of death and accept that it may well remain the great mystery of life.

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# Existential Contributions to the Problematization of Trauma: An Expression of the Bewildering Ambiguity of Human Existence

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Kate Du Toit

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## Abstract

This paper explores the problematization of trauma through the reductionist assumptions embedded within the medical model. A more holistic and flexible understanding is offered from an existential-phenomenological perspective, repositioning trauma as a potential crisis that bares the bewildering uncertainty and fragility of human existence. Implications for therapeutic practice are emphasised.

## Key Words

Trauma, crisis, uncertainty, existentialism, phenomenology, Counselling Psychology, therapy

## Introduction

Within the context of mental health an ongoing debate exists surrounding the conceptualization, formulation and treatment of ‘mental disorders’ (Parpottas, 2012). This debate is largely founded upon various ontological and epistemological assumptions that underpin psychiatric diagnoses (Brown, 2002). Although many of these assumptions may not fit well with the existential-phenomenological philosophy and humanistic value base that underpins counselling psychology (CoP) (Orlans & Van Scoyoc, 2009), our postmodern position of dialectical pluralism necessitates a critical engagement with a diversity of approaches, without prioritizing one way of knowing or experiencing over another (McAteer, 2010). This critical engagement inevitably entails an exploration of how various assumptions might colour what we consider helpful in how we engage with people in their distress. Then, it is not the existence of such diagnoses but rather how they are used and interpreted that is likely to have significant implications for the therapeutic process (Larsson, Brooks & Loewenthal, 2012).

This paper contributes to this debate by critically exploring the assumptions inherent within the medical conceptualisation of trauma as suggested by the diagnosis of PTSD (APA, 2013), and by offering an alternative understanding of trauma from an existential-phenomenological perspective. It is argued that the reductionist conceptualisation of trauma from the medical model

limits the therapeutic engagement by narrowly focusing on ‘symptoms’ and their ‘treatment’, whereas the existential-phenomenological understanding offers a more holistic view of trauma emphasising wellbeing (rather than pathology), allowing for a more flexible understanding of human experience that broadens the possibilities within the therapeutic encounter.

Within this discussion two conflicting epistemologies become clear. Firstly, where diagnosis is concerned, there is an adherence to a medical model deeply rooted in traditional views of natural science and nosology that imply a distinction between subject and object. Human distress is reduced to organic etiologies, with psychological responses belonging to homogenous categories that can be assessed, diagnosed and treated (Larsson, Brooks & Loewenthal, 2012). Inherent within this naïve realist ontology are several presupposed empiricist, positivist, and objectivist assumptions that imply a knowable world and a knowable subject independent from each other. Empiricism is accepted and rationalised as the ultimate truth, implying that human distress can be objectively measured and therefore reduced to ‘symptoms’ described as ‘normal’ or ‘abnormal’ based upon pre-established categorical frameworks of understanding reality that overlook the social, political, economic and historical embeddedness of experience (Stein *et al.*, 2007). Symptoms are therefore treated (i.e. managed) by practitioners who are seen as holding *a priori* knowledge concerning their client’s experience, and experts in determining what works for whom (Roth & Fonagy, 2006).

In contrast to this reductionist conceptualization of human beings and their distress, the existential-phenomenological approach breaks free from binary categorizations (e.g. subject/object, mind/body, illness/health) by valuing individual phenomenological experience. There are no predefined patterns of human nature but rather, existence precedes essence (Sartre, 1956), meaning that we are dynamic in nature and free to create ourselves in any way we wish within the givens of our existence. Knowledge and truth is therefore founded upon one’s subjective lived experience of being-in-the-world. Here, human experience is repositioned in relation to the human predicament, which is primordially entwined with the existence of others (Heidegger, 1962). This relational approach therefore encompasses a holistic view of human experience taking into consideration all dimensions of existence with its possibilities and limitations (van Deurzen, 2011). Human distress is thus considered in the broadest sense possible where hermeneutic approaches (Heidegger, 1962; Gadamer, 1989) are adopted to explore, understand and clarify the inherent meaning behind problems in living through a dialogical engagement with the other that embraces openness and intersubjectivity (van Deurzen & Adams, 2011). From this standpoint, human distress is conceptualized as problems in living to be worked through as part of the dilemmas of the human condition (van Deurzen & Adams, 2011).

The underlying assumptions within these two divergent positions

explicate how our engagement with the other is inevitably colored by the lens through which we choose to view human beings and their distress. The subsequent sections of this paper will further elucidate this point by looking specifically at trauma.

### **The problematization of the concept of trauma**

It is difficult to contemplate the notion of trauma without beginning with PTSD. The *DSM-5* (APA, 2013) categorizes PTSD as a ‘trauma-and stressor-related disorder’ in which exposure to a traumatic or stressful incident involving threatened or actual death, serious injury, or sexual violence, leads to a distinct set of distressing symptoms (clustered into predefined categories of re-experiencing, avoidance, negative alterations in cognitions and mood, and marked alterations in arousal and reactivity) that persist for more than one month. The validity and reliability of this diagnosis has been under scrutiny by many since its conception (Spitzer *et al.*, 2007; McNally, 2004; Summerfield, 2001). Of primary importance to practitioners is arguably how this diagnosis problematizes the notion of trauma and the implications that this has for practice. It is problematized firstly by inadvertently pathologizing natural responses to traumatic incidents (Joseph, 2010). Trauma is a ubiquitous component of existence as evidenced by widespread acts of terrorism, natural disasters, accidents, illnesses, etc. that exist within wider society (Gold, 2008), yet the diagnosis of PTSD ascribes negative connotations of illness through symptomatology that sees one’s reactions to these events as pathological and in need of ‘treatment’.

Furthermore, these traumatic responses are designated to a mental disorder that tends to be reduced to organic etiologies (Sherin & Nemeroff, 2011) where the difficulty is situated within the individual, and the complexity of the experience alongside the possible impact of culture and society is overlooked (Thatcher & Manktelow, 2007). This highlights the normative assumptions existing within this category, where meanings attached to PTSD pathologize human experience by deeming a distinct set of ‘symptoms’ as ‘abnormal’. But what constitutes a socially acceptable response to a traumatic incident? What role does culture play in these responses? Are these responses really indicative of an illness or pathology? These questions are fundamental to CoP and should be carefully addressed to avoid carelessly adhering to dominant medical discourses that inadvertently dehumanize human distress.

A vital component of CoP’s approach to research and practice is phenomenology (BPS, 2014), yet this too is disregarded within the categorization of PTSD. Personal subjective experiences are lost at the expense of limiting responses to a rigid predefined one-size-fits-all category that overlooks personal, social, cultural and psychological variables that may impact these experiences (Briere & Spinazzola, 2005). Furthermore, the inclusion of an event in its etiology not only assumes that the event is the only explanation for the current symptoms

(Hemsley, 2010), but also excludes individual phenomenology in itself, by ignoring why some individuals may display symptoms of PTSD without having been exposed to a traumatizing event (e.g. Bodkin *et al.*, 2007), why others who have been similarly exposed, do not display PTSD symptoms (e.g. Taylor, 2007), and why some individuals indeed go on to develop ‘posttraumatic growth’, where positive changes have been reported following adverse events (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). This highlights the aforementioned reductionist and objectivist assumptions inherent within the medical model that fails to comprehend the complexity found in clinical situations (Chu, 2010).

Turning to therapeutic practice, the NICE guidelines (2015) are a fine example of how our therapeutic engagements with trauma-related distress might be shaped by preconceived conceptualizations of trauma and the assumptions inherent within them. NICE advocates treatments for PTSD that focus specifically on the traumatic event and symptom management (trauma-focused CBT or EMDR), thereby reinforcing a medical model of intervention. These chosen methods are based on empirical evidence that support psychiatric categorization of distress and fail to acknowledge the heuristic focus that each level of intervention may offer regardless of theoretical model (Hemsley, 2010). These guidelines may then be seen as inadvertently encouraging an iatrogenic stigmatization of human distress that reinforces the medical discourse within societal narratives that subsequently plays a role in framing individual experiences and expressions of distress (McHugh & Treisman, 2007). This not only deflects attention away from wellbeing and resilience, but also socio-political factors that may impact one’s expression of distress (Stein *et al.*, 2007). Furthermore, it instils a power dynamic in the therapeutic relationship where the therapist is construed as the all-knowing expert responsible for reducing symptoms. Strictly adhering to this oversimplification of trauma may shut down the possibility of a diversity of experiences, denying many individuals the existential nature of such traumatic responses, thus stifling their ability to emotionally process their experience in purposive and meaningful ways (Joseph, 2010).

### **Existential contributions: Trauma, crisis and uncertainty**

In my experience as a counselling psychologist I have found that the experience of trauma by its very nature is existential, insofar as that it seems to in varying degrees, challenge one’s existing ways of being-in-the-world by evoking the so called ‘big questions of life’. Existing approaches to therapy appear to insufficiently address these existential concerns by placing greater emphasis on the event itself and by narrowly focusing on symptom reduction, rather than going beyond these symptoms and acknowledging the barriers people may have in expressing their freedom through choices and will (Pitchford, 2009). Whilst these mainstream approaches may be useful for some, for others a more profound approach

that offers a wide-ranging exploration of the dilemmas of the human condition may be more useful to tackle their problems in living and deeply disrupted modes of being-in-the-world.

When considering the existential nature of trauma, the notion of ‘crisis’ comes to mind, and is perhaps a better choice of word for practitioners to acknowledge the incomprehensibility of this experience and to challenge the anomaly of trauma illustrated above. Janoff-Jacobsen (2007) defines crisis as a shock to the soul in which a person loses direction and orientation, and becomes profoundly shaken. Crisis does not necessarily involve an external event and can indeed occur from within. Likewise, infliction of pain from the outside (i.e. traumatic events) does not necessarily entail a crisis either. Unlike the medical model’s narrow and simplistic stimulus-response model of trauma (James & Martin, 2013), the notion of crisis places phenomenology at the heart of the experience; it is neither the essence of a traumatic event nor symptoms that are of primary importance, but rather one’s inner reception of the experience, alongside how one contains, reflects on and acts upon it. Janoff-Jacobsen (2007) further elaborates on the notion of crisis through Bollnow’s (1959) theory emphasizing the unexpected nature of crisis that disrupts one’s continuous flow of life and is enveloped in risk. He points to the ancient Greek and Sanskrit meaning of ‘*crisis as cleansing*’ and ‘*crisis as decision*’ highlighting the possibility inherent within crisis, and the decision concerning the direction one chooses to take. This idea emphasizes the notion of choice and responsibility inherent within a crisis. Janoff-Jacobsen (2007) expands on this idea by submitting three dimensions of crisis: crisis as loss (physical, psychological, social, spiritual), crisis as adversity, and crisis as an opening of existence in which the individual has the opportunity to take stock of their life on a deeper level. This notion of crisis therefore allows for a much broader understanding of trauma experiences that impact us on several different dimensions of existence (physical, social, spiritual and personal) (van Deurzen, 2009). In contrast to the problematization of trauma, the existential notion of crisis does not see trauma, pain and suffering as pathology, but rather affirms and contains these expressions as inevitable constituents of being human that we are all likely to face at one point or another over the course of our lives.

With its dimensions of loss, adversity and an opening up of existence, the term crisis arguably plunges the individual into what Yalom (1980) defines as a ‘boundary situation’: ‘*an urgent experience that propels one into a confrontation with one’s existential “situation” in the world*’ (p 159). The ‘*existential situation*’ referred to here involves four ultimate concerns or givens of existence; death, isolation, freedom and meaninglessness. Existentially speaking, these concerns are at the forefront of all anxieties; they are the ‘*terrors of existence*’ (Cooper, 2003; p 73). These ultimate concerns highlight the ever-present uncertainty within our human existence, which we strive to

continuously defend against by adopting various strategies such as creating worldviews and ideologies that provide an illusion of certainty to protect us from the pain of uncertainty (Yalom, 1980). Many existentialists would agree that in the case of trauma these defenses are ultimately shattered, undermining the foundation of existence and shifting how we see and make sense of the world (Thompson & Walsh, 2010; Stolorow, 2007; Greening, 1997; Janoff-Bulman, 1992). This existential shattering arguably plunges the individual into a situation of crisis where human existence is stripped to its ultimate givens thereby permeating the experience of trauma with themes of meaninglessness, isolation, freedom and death. This is similarly reflected in Thompson and Walsh's (2010) understanding of trauma as an existential injury.

The existentiality of trauma has been thoughtfully illustrated by Stolorow (2007) who suggests that emotional trauma is embedded within an intersubjective context in which unbearable affect cannot find a relational home to be felt and contained. At the same time, it is a fundamental constituent of our existence and has the ability to expose the '*unbearable embeddedness of being*' (p 49). Paradoxically, he suggests that elements of the existentiality of trauma may make it difficult for the attunement to be felt. He refers to themes of dread, estrangement and isolation in which there feels to be an unbridgeable gulf between the self and other, where two worlds are felt to be fundamentally and indelibly incommensurable, leaving the individual unable to feel the emotional attunement provided by the other due to the singularity of the experience. He points to the absolutisms of everyday life as the key to unlocking the meaning of trauma; the incomprehensibility of the experience is defined by the shattering of absolutisms inherent within the normal everydayness of life that most people are unaware of and whose validity is not usually up for discussion (e.g. saying to a friend 'I'll see you later') (Stolorow, 2007). This is perhaps indicative of a universal discourse that advocates an attitude of certainty and echoes more specifically the way in which the medical model vehemently clings to certainty as a strategy for '*evading the finitude, contingency and embeddedness of our existence and the indefiniteness of its certain extinction*' (p 147) (Stolorow, 2011).

This existential contribution repositions trauma as a potential crisis where one's way of being-in-the-world is jolted by a face-to-face encounter with the ultimate givens of the human condition that bares the bewildering uncertainty and fragility of human existence. It is thus a fundamental aspect of ontology where it is conceptualized as a natural response to everyday contingency, rather than something harmful and potentially catastrophic. This understanding points to the paradoxical nature of crisis and trauma, as involving both positive and negative aspects in which it can create an opening of possibilities through the pathway of pain (Janoff-Jacobsen, 2007), where newfound meaning, stability and safety can stem from a place of meaninglessness, chaos, and uncertainty.

This conceptualization has significant implications within the realm of

therapeutic practice. Traumatic reactions are seen within a dialogical process to be worked with rather than a constellation of symptoms indicative of pathology to be treated (Joseph, 2010). This understanding allows for an opening of possibilities not only on the client's behalf but also on the behalf of practitioners working through trauma experiences with their clients. Unlike the medical model, it encourages a broader understanding of human distress that values subjective phenomenological experience, and looks at the individual's subjective world in context, where existential struggles are likely to unfold in the moment-to-moment interactions between client and therapist (Washa, 2013). In line with our commitment to intersubjectivity (BPS, 2014), the primacy of the relationship is of utmost importance in facilitating a space that provides a relational home for the expression of unbearable affect to be contained and integrated into something meaningful for the client (Stolorow, 2007).

Corbett and Milton (2011) suitably demonstrate the ways in which practitioners may work through the process of trauma with their clients following the framework of van Deurzen's (2011) existential dimensions of existence. This approach highlights the multiple ways in which clients in crisis might be impacted on each dimension of existence. Following this approach, the therapist may collaborate with the client to produce meaning and provide a space for the other to come to terms with the inevitable struggles of life (van Deurzen, 2009).

## **Conclusion**

This paper illustrates how the conception of trauma invariably influences the ways in which we work with trauma therapeutically (Joseph, 2010). Whilst the medical model, with its emphasis on diagnosis, may provide a useful language for interdisciplinary communication that specifies and identifies areas of distress and helps to further develop research, its loss of depth and clinical concern suggests the need for an interdisciplinary dialogue between scientific observation and experiential domains, between art and science, and between doing and being (Bazzano, 2011). Of primary importance to CoP is how a practitioner works with the construct of diagnosis whilst retaining the welfare of the client as priority. The existentiality of trauma highlighted through Stolorow's (2007) suggestion of trauma as a shattering of the absolutisms of everyday life, together with Yalom's (1980) conception of the ultimate concerns of existence, and Janoff-Jacobsen's (2007) conceptualization of crisis provides us with a useful alternative to the the medical conceptualization of trauma. Crisis may be seen as a new beginning, acting as a catalyst for personal growth and change, alongside a fuller appreciation and engagement with life and living (Yalom, 1980). Whilst it would be unhelpful and potentially unethical to bestow this understanding of crisis, uncertainty and trauma upon our clients who may be grappling with the intense pain and suffering, it is

important to note how our understanding of trauma invariably impacts the engagement we have with our clients. If we strictly adhere to the absolutisms inherent within the medical model of our field, we run the risk of potentially shutting down our clients thus preventing them from the possibility of discovering new ways of being-in-the-world that facilitate resilience and growth.

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# Can Existential-Phenomenological Theory and Epistemology ever be Congruent with Empirical Research and Systematizations?

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Edgar A. Correia

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## Abstract

Over the last decade the pros and cons of empirical research and systematizations concerning existential theory and practice have been widely discussed. Whether in favour or against, everyone agrees that the existential-phenomenological theory has a natural tension with any enterprise that may lead to a deterministic, abstractive and definitive vision of man. This present paper aims to go beyond the circumstantial debate of the pros and cons, to question if congruence can ever be possible in doing empirical research and systematizations from an existential-phenomenological perspective. It concludes that existential theory is not congruent with a positivistic/definitive stance towards produced knowledge, but finds no epistemological reason regarding its theoretical basis to stand against empirical research and systematizations *per se*.

## Key Words

Existential-phenomenological, epistemology, empirical research, systematizations.

## Introduction

Over the past few years, psychotherapeutic approaches have been pressured to develop empirical evidence to confirm and support their intervention model and therapeutic procedures, according to different clinical circumstances (Lantz, 2004; Vos, Cooper, Correia, & Craig, 2015b). Today, the social and economic recognition of psychotherapies stands on their scientific validation (Hayes, 2012; Nugent, Sieppert, & Hudson, 2001).

Within this context of evidence-based reimbursement systems and research-informed therapists (Hayes, 2012; Nugent, *et al.*, 2001), existential therapy's resistance to develop empirical research has largely contributed to keep, it 'on the fringes of mainstream practice' (Keshen, 2006: p 285).

Recently, a few existential therapy authors have been calling for research (Cooper, 2004; Craig, Vos, Cooper, & Correia, 2016; du Plock, 2004; Mahrer & Boulet, 2004; Sousa, 2004, 2006; Tan & Wong, 2012; Vos, Cooper, Correia, & Craig, 2015a; Vos, *et al.*, 2015b; Vos, Craig, & Cooper, 2014), but empirical data concerning existential practice is still scarce and

some existential therapists remain skeptical and resistant to embrace it (Craig, *et al.*, 2016; Vos, *et al.*, 2015a, 2015b; Vos, *et al.*, 2014).

As with all phenomenologists and existential philosophers, all existential therapies share the same epistemological stance: there is no such thing as an unaffected and static *cogito* (Feijoo, 2011; Spiegelberg, 1972); meaning or knowledge is not out there to be discovered, but constructed in different ways by different *cogitos*. Consequently, there is no space for definitive universal truths (Feijoo, 2011). Congruent with their theoretical and epistemological background, existential therapists tend to be averse to any attempts to confine clients to universal-deterministic perspectives (Cooper, 2012).

Developing or embracing empirical research is still frequently associated with adopting a positivistic epistemological stance towards knowledge (Crotty, 2003), as if data resulting from empirical research had to derive into *apodictic*, deterministic and universal conclusions.

Concurrently, systematizing existential theory and practice are equally seen as attempts to confine clients to universal-deterministic perspectives. Nonetheless, the lack of a clear and well defined conceptual and practical framework for existential therapy has led critics to question the theoretical and clinical coherence of this therapeutic paradigm (Keshen, 2006; Nelson, 1958, 1961; Norcross, 1987; Wolstein, 1962).

This present paper tries to demonstrate that existential-phenomenological theory is in fact incongruent with adopting a positivistic epistemological stance towards produced knowledge, but not necessarily incongruent with developing or embracing empirical research and systematizations. Based on the existential-phenomenological theoretical background, it will be demonstrated that existential therapists' resistance towards research and systematizations lies on a misunderstanding between two very different research concepts/levels: epistemologies and methodologies.

## **Existential therapy's theoretical background**

Existential therapy is highly embedded in phenomenology and existential philosophy and mirrors many of its principles, developments and vicissitudes. When the phenomenological method was developed by Husserl, Jaspers adopted it as the primary method of his comprehensive psychopathology (Spiegelberg, 1972), and Binswanger, Minkowski, Straus and von Gebattel were inspired to develop their phenomenological psychopathologies (Spiegelberg, 1972). Later, with the advent of Heidegger's *Sein und Zeit*, Binswanger found the basis to develop his existential analysis and Boss his Daseinsanalysis (Besora, 1994; Spiegelberg, 1972).

Both phenomenology and existential philosophy are a strong opposition to the western philosophical and epistemological traditions, based on the Cartesian premises of a dichotomy between subject (*res cogitans*) and object (*res extensa*), which postulates an encapsulated *cogito* that can

capture the world into universal representational theories, from an isolated and unaffected stance (Barrett, 1990; Cooper, 1999). The deterministic, mechanistic and abstractive vision of knowledge and science developed since Descartes and Galileo left no space for non-observable, non-quantifiable and non-universal subjects as qualitative personal experience (Barrett, 1990; Spiegelberg, 1972).

## **Phenomenological background**

Husserl aimed to return to the things themselves, ‘turning away from concepts and theories toward the directly presented in its subjective fullness’ (Spiegelberg, 1972: p XXVIII). He saw conscience as a synthesis of lived experiences that does not have a static unity (Feijoo, 2011): Meanings (*noema*) are developed from our relation with the world and applied to understand new experiences (the natural attitude; done on a pre-reflexive manner), assigning it a certain meaning, based upon previous noema (van Deurzen, 2010). Thus, from Husserl’s perspective, the world can only be a *Lebenswelt* (a lived world), not possible to be captured from a detached/non-interpretative stance (Spinelli, 2005); while the ever changing experiential ego could not fit in any deterministic universal theory (Feijoo, 2011).

Husserl was concerned with the study of the essence of the phenomena and with the structure of conscience itself (Barrett, 1990; Cooper, 1999; Polkinghorne, 1983). He wanted to recover the depth of the qualitative experience (subjectivity), but wanted to do so objectively: ‘with the rationality of a rigorous science’ (Spiegelberg, 1972: p XLIV). Suspending or ‘bracketing’ the natural attitude (*epoché*) and letting things show themselves as they appear in the open experience, was the most basic and important step of the methods developed by Husserl (descriptive phenomenology and genetic phenomenology) to rigorously study the full range of the phenomena (Sousa, 2015).

Husserl’s project for a rigorous science, founded on a transcendental phenomenology, was criticized and abandoned by most of his followers, and different phenomenological movements (in philosophy, but also in several social sciences) spread and developed. Descriptive, eidetic, constitutional, hermeneutic or phenomenology of appearances are different forms of phenomenological investigation developed since Husserl. Von Gebsattel and Straus (in psychiatry and psychology) or Merleau-Ponty and Heidegger (in philosophy), are just a few authors with very different perspectives on how and for what to use the phenomenological method for. Each one was developing his own specific research, with little or no connection between them. But, despite their differences, they were all committed ‘to “save the phenomena” (in a sense different from Plato’s) and recover the full breadth and depth of qualitative experience’ (Spiegelberg, 1972: p XLIV): the fight against the tyranny of abstract science as the

single way to knowledge. This commitment is equally found at the core of all existential therapies.

## Existential background

Husserl's phenomenology was such an influence to existential philosophy that some authors make a clear distinction between the existential philosophies pre- and post-Husserl (Barrett, 1990; Cooper, 1999; Spiegelberg, 1972).

Existential philosophy before Husserl's phenomenology was not based on any particular approach, or at least Kierkegaard and Nietzsche did not develop a systematized philosophy or a clear and defined system of concepts (Barrett, 1990). Besora (1981, 1994) calls these philosophies 'phenomenal', because the philosopher is mainly concerned with recognising and giving an account of the lived experiences and not necessarily in developing an hermeneutic of it, or understanding the essential structures of existence. Among phenomenal existential philosophers transcendence is an important dimension: human struggles and finitudes are recognized, but this is done mainly as a pathway to overcome those human conditions (Besora, 1994). Depending on the philosopher, different finitudes or struggles are emphasized and different pathways – religious (Kierkegaard, Marcel), theistic (Jaspers) or atheist (Nietzsche) – are presented to transcend it.

Existential philosophy after Husserl – 'existential phenomenology', according to Cooper (1999) or 'phenomenological existentialism' according to Spiegelberg (1972) and Besora (1994) – differs from the phenomenal 'by maintaining that existence can be approached phenomenologically and studied as one phenomenon among others in its essential structures' (Spiegelberg, 1972: p XXIX). Existential philosophy gained a method but the 'pure' descriptive Husserlian phenomenology was not enough to entail an understanding (analysis) of the basic structures of existence and a 'methodological' development was made from a descriptive to a hermeneutic phenomenology (Cooper, 1999; Spiegelberg, 1972). As the aim was now an ontology of human existence, the emphasis of the phenomenological existentialism was not on transcendence, but on understanding and accepting existence (staying with it) for what it is (Besora, 1994).

Despite its complex panoply of different approaches and perspectives on what it feels to be a human or what are the shared features of human existence, all existential phenomenologists understand human existence as not having a pre-determined and fixed essence – *existence precedes essence* –, being only a dynamic openness on a permanent process of becoming (ontological incompleteness), in its (chosen) interactions with the world and others. Consequently, all existential philosophers (like all phenomenologists) reject the presupposition of an abstractive, deterministic and universal truth or knowledge, insisting that world and human existence should be understood in terms of one another (Barrett, 1990; Cooper, 1999;

Feijoo, 2010; Spiegelberg, 1972). This theoretical stance stands at the epistemological core of both existential psychology and psychotherapies.

## **Existential therapy's epistemological framework**

### **Existential therapy's epistemological stance: The incongruence of research**

Theoretically based on both phenomenology and existential philosophies, the arguments presented by some existential therapists against empirical research or against developing theoretical or practical systems stems from the epistemological stance regarding the impossibility of developing universal and deterministic truths (van Deurzen, 2010).

The epistemological consequences of holding such a stance in psychotherapy are: a) The primacy of the clients' lived experiences as the gateway to access their personal lived-world; b) Clients' experiences can only be understood from this interrelatedness (lived-world or being-in-the-world) perspective; c) Clients' personal experience cannot be captured or explained by universal-deterministic theories and, consequently; d) There is no space for universal therapeutic procedures.

Following on from this, any attempt at research or systematization is assumed by some existential therapists as an epistemological or theoretical incongruence. The 'idiographic problem' (Erwin, 1999), shared by several therapies, assumes particular relevance when considering the existential paradigm: 'If, from an existential standpoint, it is simply not possible to generalise from one individual to another, then what possible value can conducting – or engaging with – empirical research have?' (Cooper, 2004: p 6). If this incongruence is not respected, adverse theoretical and clinical implications may affect the existential paradigm: 'Efforts to summarise and systematise such an approach are inevitably counterproductive and, because of this, the profile of the approach can never be raised without damaging its integrity' (van Deurzen, 2010: p 3) or 'In my work, the moment I make the assumption that some components of one successful session can be imposed on the next client, I cease to be open to the nuances of my mood and that of the client, or clients' (Joy, 2013: p 17). Ultimately, engaging in research and/or systematizations can be interpreted as falling into the 'Das Man' (Heidegger, 1962) or 'The Herd' (Nietzsche, 2000), a socially and politically incongruent attitude for an existential therapist: 'I worry that by pandering to NICE's flawed research requirements, which in my mind are geared to a monetised idea of accountability, it doesn't encourage NICE to change its ways and instead just embeds further its position. I would hate... to become just another fashion victim' (Sears, 2013: p 16).

Further pitfalls of empirical research, and subsequent generalizations, have been raised by existential therapists: a) Change processes during therapy are too complex to be captured by causal-linear and abstract theories

(Cooper, 2004; Mahrer & Boulet, 2004; Sousa, 2006); b) The research findings reflecting the interests of researchers and/or sponsors (Mahrer, 2005; Mahrer & Boulet, 2004); c) Universal guidelines and mechanized interventions may inhibit therapists' creativity and capability for innovating and developing new ways to intervene (Mahrer, 2005); d) Practitioners being inhibited in developing their own personal way of practising therapy (Mahrer, 2005); e) Clients whose problems fall outside the 'universal frame of disorders' may not find space for psychotherapeutic support (Mahrer, 2005); f) Therapists invested with universal and absolute certainties may become pedantic and abusive, not attending to clients' uniqueness and real needs (van Deurzen, 2012; du Plock, 2004).

### **The incongruence of standing against research**

But accusations of incongruence have also been leveled at those maintaining a rigid stance against empirical and systematized knowledge.

Cooper (2004) pointed out that existential practitioners are deluded if they believe they carry fewer assumptions and generalizations to therapy than their research-informed colleagues. Existential therapists place 'great emphasis on the need for the practitioner to be acutely aware of her professional and personal assumptions' (van Deurzen, 2012: p 2). A clear explanation of the theoretical and practical presuppositions underpinning existential therapy makes it open to evaluation and critical considerations. But attempts to explicitly address the existential therapeutic presuppositions are frequently criticized or considered at odds with the existential paradigm (Spinelli, 2007).

Existential philosophy argues that *existence* is always fallen into a particular facticity (Heidegger, 1962) or that freedom is always conditioned (Sartre, 2003). 'In the modern era, actual experimentation and demonstration of benefit is the only way that any health care method is going to continue to survive in health care delivery' (Hayes, 2012: p 463). Dismissing both the present facticity and research findings may be seen as incongruent with existential principles as 'pandering' (Sears, 2013) to the *Zeitgeist*.

Du Plock (2004) noted that maintaining a definitive stance against empirical research and generalized findings resembles clients' sedimented views. It is true that empirical research may generate totalitarian assumptions, but it may also stand as an instrument to question assumptions (Cooper, 2004).

### **Recent alternative solutions towards research**

Faced with this apparently paradoxical situation, and pressured by the socio-economical demands for research, a few existential therapists have called for a kind of middle ground solution (e.g., du Plock, 2004; Mahrer & Boulet, 1999, 2004; Rayner & Vitali, 2014; Schneider & Krug, 2010; Sousa, 2004, 2006; Tan & Wong, 2012; Wilkes & Milton, 2006): Conducting research, but based on methodologies and methods with 'high "goodness-

of-fit” with existential principles’ (Mahrer & Boulet, 2004: p 16). Experience-near research (Schneider, 1999), discovery-oriented approach (Mahrer & Boulet, 1999), heuristic research (Moustakas, 2001), phenomenological research (Giorgi, 2009), are a few examples of these ‘friendly’ methodologies, all of which focus on personal experience and rely on qualitative methods for data analysis. With this compromise solution, research demands are partially satisfied and epistemological congruence is apparently preserved (e.g., Sousa, 2006).

Recently, some existential therapists have argued for the use of quantitative methods of analysis and diverse methodologies (Alegria *et al.*, 2016; Cooper, 2004; Craig, *et al.*, 2016; Vos, *et al.*, 2015a, 2015b; Vos, *et al.*, 2014), including experimental designs (Vos, *et al.*, 2015a, 2015b). Recognizing the tension between empirical research and existential therapies’ principles, their arguments favouring empirical research rely mostly on the incongruity of avoiding research or on the pragmatic need to survive in an evidence-based society. Vos and colleagues (Vos, *et al.*, 2015a, 2015b) tried to overcome this tension by adopting a ‘pluralistic’ stance, and arguing for the proximity it has with some of the existential-phenomenological principles.

### **Existential therapy’s fundamental epistemology: The rationale for an alternative stance towards empirical research and systematizations**

Vos and colleagues’ (Vos, *et al.*, 2015a, 2015b) solution was explicitly presented as a personal one (existential therapists may equally choose among four different ‘epistemologies’: the ‘correspondence theory of truth’, the ‘coherence theory of truth’, the ‘fundamental phenomenology’ or the ‘pluralistic methodological paradigm’), without arguing whether or not the pluralistic paradigm is existential therapies’ natural and congruent theory of knowledge, and consequently the one that could overrule its knowledge production. This solution is problematic for two main reasons: a) It mixes and confuses methodologies with epistemologies; b) It assumes that all epistemologies are compatible with the existential-phenomenological theoretical perspective and it is up to the researcher to choose the epistemological perspective that most pleases.

Crotty (2003) argues that a theoretical perspective cannot embrace excluding epistemologies. Neither objectivism nor subjectivism could ever stand as congruent epistemologies for the existential-phenomenological theory (Crotty, 2003). It is incongruent to claim *apodictic* (absolutely certain) or universal properties to any knowledge produced within an existential-phenomenological frame. To fit with its knowledge principles, data and conclusions can only produce *assertoric* claims: It can be a better claim than previous ones, but it cannot be assumed as absolute or definitive (Polkinghorne, 1983).

Existential-phenomenology argues that truth, or meaning, is not discovered,

but constructed through our being-in-the-world (Barrett, 1990; Cooper, 1999; Spiegelberg, 1972). In being constructed through experience, different meanings may be constructed by different people (eras and cultures) and no definitive and universal truth can be conceived within this perspective (Crotty, 2003). Some authors (e.g., Crotty, 2003) classify this epistemological understanding as a constructionist one (this classification is far from consensual, but this is not the place to deepen this discussion), which is in clear opposition to both the objectivist and subjectivist perspective of human knowledge.

But, while it can be guaranteed that a produced knowledge is congruent with its informant epistemology, the methodologies chosen to produce it may be diverse (Crotty, 2003; Polkinghorne, 1983). No solid reasons exist to restrain the methodological possibilities once the resultant claims respect existential therapies' theoretical and epistemological perspective. This contemporary post-positivistic stance (Polkinghorne, 1983) is consistent with existential therapies' principles, as will be now proven.

Neither phenomenology nor existentialism were against rationality or empirical science *per se* (Cooper, 1999; Spiegelberg, 1972). Although he focused on the qualitative human experience, Husserl aimed to provide philosophy 'with the rationality of a rigorous science' (Spiegelberg, 1972: p XLIV) and both Husserl (1970) and Heidegger (Heidegger, 1962, 1977) explicitly recognized the role of empirical knowledge: 'one among the many practical hypotheses and projects which make up...the life-world' (Husserl, 1970: p 131). What both phenomenology and existential philosophy deny outright is the hegemonic claim of truth made by positivism (Cooper, 1999; Spiegelberg, 1972). The focus of their criticism was not the methodologies or methods of the natural sciences *per se*, but the natural sciences' claim that only *apodictic* knowledge is acceptable (produced with experimental designs and measurable variables, enabling verifiable and definitive universal models of explanation and prediction). The epistemological principles underlying positivism that phenomenology and existential philosophy cannot accept are: a) The premise that object and subject do not affect each other; b) Leaving aside human experience because it is non-observable, non-quantifiable and therefore cannot lead to absolute and universal certainties.

Neither phenomenology nor existentialism rejected objective knowledge or finding shared understandings (Cooper, 1999; Spiegelberg, 1972). Existential philosophy and existential psychology do not share a subjectivist stance towards knowledge (Cooper, 1999; Crotty, 2003; Feijoo, 2011). Excepting Kierkegaard, Nietzsche and Jaspers' existential philosophy (Besora, 1994; Cooper, 1999), phenomenologists and existentialists aimed for an analysis and an understanding of the universal structures of human conscience and existence (Besora, 1994; Cooper, 1999; Spiegelberg, 1972). Their chosen path, of course, took the opposite direction to that of the

natural sciences by not starting from a theory or a conceptual hypothesis, but from analysis of the singular lived experience, and from there to the universal structure (Besora, 1994). According to Cooper (1999: p 17), ‘the Existentialist is perfectly able to accept that beliefs can be objectively true in the sense of being warranted by criteria on which there is tried and tested public agreement’.

Kockelmans (1973) notes that human sciences can be approached by three different methodologies: the empirical, the descriptive (phenomenological) and the hermeneutic. He demonstrates that an empirical approach is logically possible, although part of the meaning of human phenomena is necessarily left out by the formalization or quantification process. Phenomenology and hermeneutics are seen as methodologies that may compensate ‘the limitations essentially connected with the empirical approach’ (Kockelmans, 1973: p 257).

In tune with Kockelmans (1973), the post-positivistic perspective on human sciences’ research methodology is that of a ‘methodological pluralism’ (Polkinghorne, 1983). As the aim is not indubitable truth any more, thus there is no correct method to follow (Polkinghorne, 1983). The researcher may choose whatever methodologies or methods (quantitative or qualitative) that best answer the questions and subjects addressed (Crotty, 2003; Polkinghorne, 1983).

Based on these clarifications, the resistance against empirical research and systematization, expressed by some existential therapists, can only be understood as a misinterpretation, or a non-distinction, between methodologies and methods on one hand, and theoretical perspectives and epistemology on the other – a common confusion, according to Crotty (2003) and Polkinghorne (1983).

Developing experimental research and using quantitative methods (methodology and methods’ level) does not necessarily entail a positivistic and objectivistic stance towards the produced claims (theoretical and epistemological level): ‘What turns their study into a positivistic piece of work is not the use of quantitative methods but the attribution of objectivity, validity and generalizability to quantitative findings’ (Crotty, 2003: p 41).

Consequently, solving existential therapies’ resistance to research by holding only to ‘goodness-of-fit’ qualitative methodologies is a limited and misleading solution: a) ‘There is plenty of scope for qualitative research to be understood positivistically or situated in an overall positivist setting, and, therefore, for even self-professed qualitative researchers to be quite positivistic in orientation and purpose’ (Crotty, 2003: p 41); b) It does not fully answer to the *Zeitgeist’s* evidence-based demands; c) It does not fully attend to the idea of the complexity of human phenomena, which calls for as many different methodologies as possible to study it from different angles.

To do empirical research on the basis of social needs is an understandable

argument from a practical and pragmatic stance. And there is an ‘existential’ appeal (personal choice and responsibility) in letting researchers choose the epistemology that best suits their interests, as suggested by Vos and colleagues (Vos, *et al.*, 2015a, 2015b). But both these arguments are not sustainable from an epistemological stance as knowledge claims have to fit the theoretical and epistemological perspective it aims to contribute to (Crotty, 2003).

The arguments presented by some existential therapists against research and systematizations all refer to the consequences of treating the developed knowledge as universal and definitive truths. But those consequences are dismissed if both researchers and practitioners maintain a constructionist stance towards the resultant knowledge.

## **Conclusion**

Based on its epistemological perspective (ideologically opposing definitive, abstractive and deterministic universal truths), existential therapists have been cautious towards research, operationalizations and systematizations, for fear that the resulting claims may be assumed as mechanistic or generalizable. By relating empirical research and systematizations with having an objectivistic/positivistic stance towards knowledge, they have been wary of these activities.

Nowadays, against a context that demands scientific validation of intervention models and procedures, existential therapists struggle to find their stance between the socio-economic demands and their theoretical/epistemological principles. But the resistance that some existential therapists present against empirical research and theoretical or practical systems seems to stem from a confusion between two different research levels: methodologies and epistemology. It was demonstrated that the existential-phenomenological theoretical perspective is not against any kind of methodology, but against an objectivistic stance towards the produced knowledge (be it from qualitative or quantitative research). Certainly, any methodology that places the personal lived experience over abstraction has a higher ‘goodness-of-fit’ with the existential-phenomenological theoretical principles.

Empirical research, experimental designs and/or pure quantitative statistical analysis does not in itself entail a positivistic-apodictic stance. It is true that all these methodologies and methods have been used and taken over by the dominant positivistic and instrumental attitude towards knowledge, but they can equally be addressed from an open-minded assertoric stance towards science and constitute valid and useful research instruments for existential practice. Empirical research, experimental designs and statistical analysis can all fit within an existential-phenomenological perspective,

since claims of certainty and universality are not attributed to the research data and conclusions.

Equally, theoretical or practical systems only run counter to the existential-phenomenological theory of knowledge if they are presented as universal and definitive claims. Both phenomenology and existentialism have always strived for shared understandings, present in ontologies such as those developed by Heidegger or Sartre: Clearly at odds with the existential-phenomenological perspective are only the abstractive systematizations leading to totalitarian theoretical systems, aiming to determine or to eradicate the individual experience.

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# Romanyshyn and the Half-Connecting Body

An Essay on the Corporeal Nature of Modernity's  
Technological Worldview

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**Marcus D. Watson**

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## **Abstract**

Existential philosopher Robert Romanyshyn is determined to understand the modern subject's felt-sense of alienation. This paper contributes to his effort by putting his notion of the technological worldview into conversation with the concept of the half-connecting body. Feelings of alienation are supported by an identifiable body practice in everyday life.

## **Key Words**

Romanyshyn, technological worldview, half-connecting body.

## **Introduction**

A development worker from the United States named Peter<sup>1</sup> lived with a host family in a village in rural South Africa. One day, his host sister, Basani, entered his room and tried to take the dirty clothes he was holding from him. Her intention was to wash the clothes for him and thereby communicate her wish to make him a brother, for this is what women do here for male family members (Watson, 2012). Peter refused, saying 'It's okay. I got it' and holding the clothes away from her by turning his torso to the right. When she reached for the clothes a second time, Peter turned away again. Peter's intention was to wash his own clothes and thus relieve Basani of what he felt would be the burden of doing a house chore. It appeared that Peter had won, but there was no winner here: News of Peter's behaviour spread to members of Basani's family and wider community, who stonewalled his development efforts for his refusal, in their eyes, to accept their invitation to become 'like family' with them.

In this article, I want to suggest that this kind of interpersonal encounter holds a key to further unlocking the secrets to modern subjectivity. Based on my anthropological study of the everyday interactions between Western aid workers and South African villagers, the above encounter occurred routinely, at least in its outlines, during my two years of fieldwork (2005-2007). The failure of the relationship is clear since Basani's family did not make Peter a brother and because Peter could not implement his development work. But notice also that failure has a lot to do with body behaviour and dissonance between body behaviours and conscious intentions. While Peter's 'It's okay. I got it' indicates his intention to relieve Basani of a house

chore, it takes a closer look to see that his thinking took cues from his body, which twisted him out of conceding to Basani's self-aware wish to wash his clothes and make him fictive-kin. Meanwhile, Basani's 'reaching out' anchored her conscious wish just as her hurt smile registered her disappointment.

In a word, I have called body behaviours such as Peter's 'half-connecting' (Watson, 2014). Half-connecting refers to body behaviours expert at separating self from other as a basis for re-engaging as if self and other embody the discrete individuality associated with modern subjectivity. Thus, whatever his conscious intentions, Peter's body skillfully said 'no' to Basani's 'reaching out' to wash his clothes and make him a brother, effectively deflecting her unconscious desire to root their relationship in kin-like obligation rather than voluntary choice. With separation established, Peter secured his existential basis in discrete individuality and could hope to re-engage Basani, her family, and community on this basis. As we saw, his half-connecting failed to register in this more fully-connecting cultural space. But his failure may be our gain if it helps shed new light on the psychosomatic origins of modern subjectivity.

Anthropology alone, however, cannot seize the moment. Indeed, the kind of relationships represented by Peter and Basani present a kind of puzzle to anthropology: The aid workers and the villagers participating in my study embodied oppositional cultural values, with aid workers' bodies demonstrating expertise at seeking existential comfort in distancing self from other and villagers' bodies skilled at ensuring existential comfort by bringing self and other into relations of obligation. The puzzle is how bodies can be socialized to value either distancing or embracing on the basis of what anthropology axiomatically accepts is the psychic unity of humankind. As suggested by my use of concepts such as the unconscious, desire, and body expertise, I am an anthropologist who has turned for help to psychoanalysis and phenomenology – sophisticated schools of thought for understanding the radically interpersonal.

In a forthcoming article, I offer an explanation for the paradox introduced above based on a critical analysis of Lacanian psychoanalysis and Merleau-Pontian phenomenology (Watson, forthcoming). The explanation involves the suggestion of a core psychosomatic process – to wit, humans unconsciously desire to connect with others and the wider world – and the coinage of new terms, such as half-connecting and affirming and negating bodies. Here, in this paper, I am interested in putting this thesis into conversation with existential philosopher Robert Romanyshyn's idea of the technological worldview, which he has recently reviewed (Romanyshyn, 2012). His notion of the technological worldview and my idea of the half-connecting body are, in my estimation, similar enough to justify a conversation between them and different enough to generate exciting ideas about the core dynamics

of modern subjectivity.

The proposed conversation takes seriously what Romanyshyn says only in passing, which is that the modern subject, and its disembodied self, to use Romanyshyn's language, has an actual, sensuous body in everyday life (e.g. Romanyshyn, 1989/2006, pp 142-3). This body, which is expert at gesturing away obligations between self-and-other and self-and-world, is what I call the half-connecting body; it is represented above by Peter's twisting way from Basani and other gestures to be reviewed below. By recovering the everyday experience of the half-connecting subject and tracing its phenomenal existence to a troubled unconscious, I expand upon Romanyshyn's pioneering thesis as follows: The technological worldview (1) is a cultural, not a universal problem, (2) manifests principally as dichotomizing, and (3) is unfixable on the basis of the half-connecting body. Meanwhile, Romanyshyn's 'technological worldview' brings history and gender to the notion of the half-connecting body. When articulated, the technological worldview and the half-connecting body paint a unique, robust, and cogent picture of the modern subject.

### **Romanyshyn's thesis: An outline of the technological worldview**

As he explains in a summary of his book, Romanyshyn attempts nothing less than to explain the origins of modern subjectivity, which he uniquely characterizes as a 'technological way of knowing the world and being in it' (2012, p 200). The technological worldview started hundreds of years ago but continues today 'in terms of an unexamined ideology that valorises a disembodied self isolated and alienated from our nature' (*ibid.*, p 202). The significance of stressing the extant status of the technological worldview is that the worldview, according to Romanyshyn, is at the root of normalizing many of today's crises, from global ecological trials to rampant psychological depression (Brien and Romanyshyn, 2000). Identifying the origins of the worldview may unlock its nature and offer clues for addressing its core problem – its compulsive effort at disregarding or severing the real bonds between self-and-other and body-and-world.

Romanyshyn traces the compulsion to linear perspective art, which uses converging-parallel-lines-toward-a-vanishing-point to create a three-dimensional world on a two-dimensional plane (Romanyshyn, 2012: p 204). Establishing itself in the 15th century, the artistic invention transformed the medieval worldview into today's modern worldview, characterized by a subject viewing mind-and-body and self-and-nature as separate. The original severance at the heart of the modern worldview makes experiences of alienation and 'the lone spectator' feel ontological, and becomes encoded in technologies, from the microscope and telescope to space-crafts and cars, augmenting the 'disembodied spectator eye' (*ibid.*, p 205). The original severance carries on today 'as symptom and dream,' vacillating between an unconscious drive

toward alienation and a more self-aware effort for a homecoming with the ‘broken bonds of desire’ in order to ‘nourish and feed the hunger of the body’s sensual appetite for the sensuous world’ (*ibid.*, p 203).

Further, for Romanyshyn, the technological worldview broke humans’ bonds of desire in the name of a masculine dream. The dream first imagines a fixed line between masculine and feminine and then literalizes the two qualities as actual males and females. The disembodied self exemplifies the male and the masculine, which seek to purify human subjectivity of its wildness, unpredictability, and passion, i.e. of all of the qualities of human desire considered ‘difficult to quantify, control, and dominate’ (Romanyshyn, 1989/2006, p 209). As part of the purification process, the undesired excess has been inscribed ‘onto the flesh of the feminine body’ (*ibid.*, p209). Therefore, the shadow of the publicly sanctioned technological worldview is the feminine body of passion, now ‘threateningly erotic’ (*ibid.*, p 209). The gendered nature of the technological worldview is exemplified by pornography, existing on the margins of society, where the objectification of the female body coincides with the male spectator eye that sees but is unseen.

### **The half-connecting body thesis: An overview**

Here, I review the half-connecting body thesis as a basis for drawing out links to Romanyshyn’s technological worldview in the next section. First, recall that, in the opening vignette, Peter’s gesturing was not random; it was purposeful and particularly adept at half-connecting. When he twisted away from Basani, his body showcased its ‘tactile intelligence’ (Charlesworth, 2000: p 194) to assert discrete autonomy and rebuke the self-other mutuality encoded for in Basani’s reaching out concomitantly for laundry and kin-like relations. Yet Peter’s twisting is just one instance of many within a regime of half-connecting gestures. This regime of half-connecting gestures is empirically based, culling together my own findings with findings from related studies of cross-cultural interactions in development and intercultural communication contexts. What the different-looking gestures have in common is their acumen at keeping the other out of space experienced as private, that is, at half-connecting. Consider some other examples:

The hard handshake thrusts a hand into that of another, keeping the other at a distance while asserting the autonomy of the self. The hard handshake may stand out especially in cross-cultural contexts where softer hand-holding, which can include interlocking of fingers while talking, is trying to shorten, not lengthen, distance between self and other. Similarly, steadfast eye contact, which can take various forms such as bugged-out or unblinking eyes, effectively peers at the other as if other and self are in two different worlds. This contrasts sharply with situational eye contact associated with collectivist societies. Here, eye contact tends to ebb and flow with the emotional fluxes of the conversation. Both the hard handshake and steadfast

eye contact involve the self squaring-up the other, which is usually viewed as a confrontational stance in collectivist milieus like rural South Africa and Ghana where I conduct fieldwork.

There are also gestures that are softer than the hard handshake, steadfast eye contact, and squaring-up yet are still half-connecting in their embodied intentions. The grimace smile, for example, where ‘the lips are pressed together as if zipped’ (Csordas, 2008: p 115), helps the grimacer slip past a passerby, preventing the other from transgressing her boundaries. ‘Ambivalent about engagement’ (*ibid.*, p 116), this kind of smile differs from either full smiling or not smiling. In my research, development workers flashed the grimace smile to the bewilderment of villagers, who weren’t sure whether or not their benefactors wanted to meet and greet them. Heel-toe rolls-and-taps, which may be accompanied by the grimace smile, help the subject feel self-assured while, for example, waiting in a checkout queue in a grocery store. This present-to-the-self movement, like walking alone, registers as sad, lonely, and psychologically unstable to many individuals in collectivist settings, where gestures tend to accommodate others.

If the term ‘half-connecting’ directs attention to the kinds of manifest gestures specified above, the term ‘negating’ points to the unconscious dynamics driving half-connecting to the surface. Based on a critical review of certain psychoanalysis and phenomenology traditions, and backed by findings from ethnography and neuroscience (e.g. Boisture, 2003; Lieberman, 2013), I argued that humans desire unconsciously to connect with others and the wider world (Watson, forthcoming). This critical review was inspired by Andrian Johnston’s critique of Lacanian psychoanalysis, which he argues is excellent at tracking the psychic trauma it takes to become a subject yet does not account for something in human nature that makes being traumatized possible: ‘However, human nature must be, in its intrinsic essence, configured in such a way as to be receptive to this blow and its repercussions’ (Johnston, 2006: p 35). The reason human nature is receptive to ‘blows’ from outside itself is that, in its intrinsic essence, it desires connection with others and the wider world; among other things, this idea undermines the self-other, person-society, and inside-outside dialectical struggle at the heart of Western ontology.

Half-connecting results from a cultural negating or repressing of an unconscious desire in humans to connect with others and the world around them, an original desire that Romanyshyn would seem to call ‘an erotic tie between sensuous flesh and the sensible world, a bond of desire’ (Romanyshyn, 1989/2006: p 143). When the unconscious desire to connect is negated, the subject comes to experience the contradictory split between itself and other as an original setting. Although negating insinuates itself into all that humans make and think, the first tangible expression of the psychic conflict, from the point of view of an infant’s development, occurs in the human body, which negating shapes into the kinds of half-connecting

postures mentioned above. The half-connecting body, which is also a negating body, is, thus, the ‘first line of defense’ for the modern subject’s ‘broken bonds of desire’ with itself, others, and the earth; it is the technological worldview, as described by Romanyshyn, incarnate.

Peter’s twisting out of Basani’s invitation to be obliged, as well as the hard handshake, steadfast eye contact, and other gestures mentioned above, do not just happen to share the effect of sharply distancing self from other. As different as they appear, the gestures are shot through by a common negation of the desire to connect. To the question ‘How might half-connecting bodies have been socialized into phenomenal existence?’ I have so far offered only realistic speculation based on personal observations and several studies of child development (e.g. Kusserow, 2004; Richman *et al.*, 1988): Putting an infant in its own crib or room, leaving it to cry as a way of teaching it a lesson about being strong, identifying clothes, food, and blankets ‘just for him or her,’ and using phrases such as ‘keep your hands to yourself’ and ‘you made your bed now sleep in it’ are social and language practices that are likely to culturally motivate the child to realize the fantasy of itself as independent and its body will begin indexing the negation. Culture may also affirm our unconscious desire to connect, a phenomenon explored below.

### **The technological worldview and the half-connecting body**

While the above summaries do not do justice to the nuance of Romanyshyn’s work or the half-connecting body thesis, they are, I believe, accurate enough in their outlines to justify a conversation between them. A good starting point for the conversation is to point out an irony in Romanyshyn’s analysis: While he is clear that the disembodied self is a key outcome and driver of the technological worldview, he mentions only in passing the disembodied self as an actual, sensuous ‘bodily-being-in-the-world’ (Csordas, 1999: p 143). That is, just because ideology tries to make the idea and experience of the disembodied self appear natural does not mean that the disembodied self actually managed to transcend its basis in carnality. In short, the disembodied self has a body, which is the half-connecting body (Watson, 2014). The half-connecting body is a kind of body practice that has become expert at reaching-out-to-keep-at-bay, at touching without being touched, at gesturing away obligation toward the other and the world – helping to create the very kind of disembodied self-experience discussed at length by Romanyshyn.

Further, the concept of the half-connecting body expands Romanyshyn’s technological worldview in four other ways. First, a recurring theme in all of the sections below is that, whereas Romanyshyn uses iconic examples such as the telescope, microscope, and atomic bomb as symptoms of the technological worldview, the half-connecting body invites us to look at everyday symptoms of the technological worldview. Second, since the

half-connecting body is a cultural event, it asks us to be clearer about the cultural specificity of Romanyshyn's technological worldview and its disembodied self. Third, the up-close and everyday nature of half-connecting allows us to be more particular about the work of the technological worldview. While Romanyshyn is right in seeing distancing and displacing as important effects of the technological worldview, the half-connecting body thesis will show that dichotomizing is its most fundamental work. Finally, solving the problem of alienation at the heart of modern subjectivity must involve de-alienating the half-connecting body from itself and others.

If the half-connecting body idea helps to fill-out Romanyshyn's technological worldview in the above ways, his thesis enriches the half-connecting body theory by expanding it to include variables of history and gender. First, if the developmental history of the half-connecting body is traceable to repressing an infant's desire to connect, Romanyshyn's thesis suggests its emergence into human history in the transition from the medieval to the modern world with the advent of linear perspective art of the 15<sup>th</sup> century. It may be that this art form was being imagined into existence concomitant with, or perhaps on the basis of, the half-connecting body. Second, to the extent that the technological worldview is a particularly masculinist dream, the half-connecting body encodes for an unconscious effort at 'purifying' the space between self and other of its real contingency, relatedness or, in a word, feminine excess. This 'purification' process occurs every time a self confronts herself, an other, or the earth with the kind of distancing, squaring-up, and unilateral action encoded for in the hard handshake, steady eye contact, and over-determined gestures mentioned above. How many men *and* women embody the masculine dream of erasing the 'inter' from interdependence, distancing from others, and departing the earth? Indeed, had Peter been a woman, she still would have embodied the masculine dream of self-other severance.

## **The technological worldview and culture**

Similar to how he informally explores the disembodied self as an actual, sensuous bodily-being-in-the-world, Romanyshyn only alludes to the culture-specific nature of the disembodied self. This opens a question about whether or not the disembodied self and its 'abandoned body' (Romanyshyn, 1989/2006, p 133) are universal and thus everyone's experience and problem. On the one hand, Romanyshyn clearly understands the disembodied experience as a culture-specific experience: For example, he uses phrases such as 'a cultural history of the flesh' (*ibid.*, p 173) and 'the cultural-historical origins of the technological world-view' (Romanyshyn, 2012: p 202). Moreover, he identifies the cultural origins of the disembodied self as 'Western' when he invokes figures such as Copernicus, Newton, Descartes, and Freud and references the European church and cities such as Florence and Paris, where

linear perspective art took root at different points in history.

On the other hand, Romanyshyn uses phrases that appear to make universal claims, such as suggesting that ‘technology is a world event’ (Romanyshyn, 1989/2012: p 200) and that the forgotten origin of the technological worldview ‘permeates the world’ (Romanyshyn, 2012: p 207), begging the anthropological question, ‘Whose world exactly?’ Further, his treatment of the masculinity of the technological worldview and the feminine as its redemptive, shadowy side may unjustifiably project a Western cultural drama of gender onto the world. Arab and Black feminisms (e.g. Badran & Cooke, 2004; Collins, 2000), for example, reject basic premises of Eurocentric feminisms and sometimes accuse them of carrying Western masculinism’s seeds of racism and cultural superiority. Clearly, Romanyshyn accepts the Eurocentric cultural origins of the disembodied experience of self and the technological worldview. But it is as if the logical possibility that “‘we’ve” got it wrong and “‘they’ve” got it right’ is unspeakable. The concept of the half-connecting body, however, is well-suited to explain issues of culture and culpability and thus develops his thesis in these directions.

The half-connecting body, which powers the technological worldview through its basis in the negating of the unconscious desire in humans to connect, is a cultural form of carnality; it is not a universal disposition, historically or currently. Indeed, as I have argued, and in line with psychological anthropology findings about a limited set of core emotions (e.g. Levy 1984), there are two fundamental destinations for our desire to connect: it can be either negated or affirmed by ‘culture,’ which I use as shorthand for ‘formative environment.’ When affirmed, our psychic desire to connect with others and the world leads to a cultural motivation to find psychic security in mutual obligation between self-and-other and self-and-world. Again, the first tangible expression of the cultural motivation occurs in the human body. The affirming body draws the other closer and particularly into two-way relations of obligation. Basani’s reaching out for laundry and fictive-kinship is an example of a body socialized to affirm. Other everyday gestures such as situational eye contact, loose hand clasping, gentle hugs, and positioning one’s self lower than elders are examples of bodies-turned-expert at drawing in the other rather than moving the other into the distance across an imaginary line.

In short, the technological worldview and its symptoms of alienation, depression, and disembodied spectator eye are not, strictly speaking, everyone’s problem; they are everyone’s problem so far as the technological worldview objectifies others and the world into the distance (Romanyshyn, 1989/2006: pp 191-8), planting a profound insensitivity into the unconscious and carnal workings of negating subjects. But everyone is not a negating subject. It is here that the stress on what the technological worldview looks like as everyday body disposition becomes vital. If we make the abstract

point about the technological worldview and its abandoned body and leave it at that, what we are left with to critically assess is ideology. In an era of globalization, however, ideologies are quickly conflating into one another, rendering ideology increasingly less reliable as a site for critically viewing our world. But the technological worldview has an actual body – the half-connecting body. This body is publicly available for viewing and study, providing a material base outside of language to root our analyses.

### **The work of the technological worldview**

If the half-connecting body tangibly expresses the technological worldview, what work can we see it doing, and where? Since the questions are just outside of Romanyshyn's focus, answers to them must be extracted from his thesis. For Romanyshyn, it may be safe to say that what the technological worldview does is to distance and displace: 'Indeed, technology as our cultural-psychological dream of distance from matter and our departure from earth is only the other side of this displacement of things' (Romanyshyn, 1989/2006: p 194). That is, if modern technologies, from cars and computers to aeroplanes and space-craft, encode for a felt-need in Western culture to separate self from others, things, and the earth, such separation itself relies on moving things out of their place. Thus, the objects within linear perspective art, which inaugurated the technological worldview, become comparable because they've been moved from their real places in the world into the 'same neutral, homogeneous space' (*ibid.*, p 192) of the canvas; and 'what happens to things in the space of linear perspective art...happens to us as well' (*ibid.*, p 194).

From the vantage of the half-connecting body, what Romanyshyn may call distancing and displacing is more basically a form of dichotomizing. By dichotomizing, I mean making difference appear fixed within independent spaces, which are artifice but experienced as givens. The half-connecting body seeks to repress its foundational misrecognition of connectedness by gesturing itself and other into the appearance of independent spaces. The repression tries to remove from meaningful experience the desire for connectedness, which yet returns and haunts the half-connecting subject's false premise. The half-connecting subject's radical sense of autonomy is *a prerequisite for contact* experienced as existentially safe. Thus, the hard handshake, steadfast eye contact, grimace smile, etc. make contact but only to assert difference; similarly, cars, computers, aeroplanes, and space-craft draw the self into profoundly separated spaces as *a condition for engagement*. If the technological worldview distances and displaces, it takes a closer look at its half-connecting body to see that it most fundamentally dichotomizes.

In addition to identifying dichotomizing as the work of the technological worldview, the focus on everyday embodied practice, and particularly on the half-connecting body, overcomes certain limits of the 'distancing and

displacing' position. Romanyshyn's question 'What gets distanced and displaced?' tends to be answered with conspicuous examples.<sup>2</sup> The least obvious is perhaps the disembodied subject itself – this subject is displaced from its own body and its sensuous link to the world. After this, however, Romanyshyn focuses on space-craft, nuclear bombs, modern currencies, and other 'big and important' cases. Such examples are significant: After all, it is one thing to accept that, in abandoning the body, jettisoning the earth, threatening humanity, and quantifying value, the disembodied self, space-craft, nuclear bomb, and modern money function by way of distance and displacement; it is another to trace the very different looking phenomena to the shared Western dream of departing the earth. It means 'the bomb is already present in the distance we put between ourselves and our bodies' (1989/2006, p 22).

Indeed, it is now possible to see the technological worldview and its bomb in the 'big and important' practice of international development, for example. Premised on absolute differences between nation-states, a dichotomy between an 'us' and a 'them,' and unilateral direction of influence from the former to the latter, development, in all of its iterations to date (Watson, 2014), is itself a manifestation of Romanyshyn's idea of a technological worldview. Stated in terms of technology studies, if we use technologies, from aeroplanes and cell phones to glasses and walking canes, 'to enhance ourselves, to magnify our force or efficacy' (Matthewman, 2011: p 12), development is a technology for extending a peculiar form of helping into the world. It is a form of helping, like 'pay-it-forward,' designed to give without relating and to make the helped independent of the helper; its aim is to engage but only to separate, to reach-out but only to dichotomize; it is a technology encoding for the dream of flight from others, the self, and the earth. In a word, this development kind of helping has a gift in one hand and, in the other, a bomb, poised to wipe out feminine excess in the name of a masculine dream of purification.

As critically important as it is to use the concept of technological worldview to analyze such 'big and important' events, it becomes possible, with the shift in focus to dichotomizing and the half-connecting body, to show how the technological worldview shapes life in mundane ways. What we're looking for are instances where individuals are separated as *a condition for contact*: Medians separate traffic, with contact occurring either by a vehicle crashing across the barrier or exiting one side and re-entering the other side; hand sanitizer cleans up its users before they make contact with each other or with the same office pens, doorknobs, etc.; grocery store aisles and check-out counters put individuals 'out of touch' with products and each other, with reaching out for a product or exchanging of money and receipts taking place across the established lines; parking spaces invite

users to settle within painted lines, where legitimate crossing involves backing out of one discrete space and re-entering another; a line of vanishing spray foam keeps soccer players behind the boundary, with crossing occurring at the sound of a whistle; new media devices assume physical distance as a condition for digitized encounters.

In these and other ordinary circumstances, the dichotomizing of the half-connecting body shapes up the world in its own image, which involves, as Romanyshyn argues, the creation of a line between pairs, the objectification of each pair to each other, and thus alienation from each other, things, and the earth as elemental to the technological worldview. The self-image is a symptom of the half-connecting body, which relies on gesturing self and other into independent spaces as a positive-looking cover-up of its foundation in contradiction and paradox. Certainly, the half-connecting body's dichotomizing materializes in the kinds of 'big and important' ways discussed by Romanyshyn – e.g. recognition of races draws lines of color within humanity and then charts race relations as an epiphenomenal event, just as nation-states imagine lines around different citizenry with international contact occurring as a derived affair. But the technological worldview, fueled by the half-connecting body, also insinuates itself into daily practice, planting 'the bomb,' to use Romanyshyn's metaphor, in every line it uses to distance the self from the other, the thing, and the earth.

## **Romanyshyn's thesis and solving the problem**

To find that the premise of the bomb to dichotomize, distance, and split is also the premise of sanitation products, driving infrastructures, supermarket layouts, communication devices, and so on is a serious realization – many of us apparently and unconsciously invoke and value these creations' inherent repressing, alienating, and violent intentions in our daily routines. How can we foster better selves, relationships, and societies? How can we wake-up from the masculine dream of taking flight from ourselves and everyone and everything and thereby fill-in the hole at the centre of modern subjectivity? Romanyshyn's solution involves a returning home to earth, an appreciation for feminism, and a 'round dance' (2012, p 208) between thinking in exile and thinking in place. I will summarize the solution below as I see it, with the final intention of seeing how the concept of the half-connecting body may augment Romanyshyn's proposal.

In the summary of his book, Romanyshyn understands the epoch of the technological worldview as a 'round dance' between two styles of thinking: *thinking in exile* encodes for the dominant, masculine dream and drive towards self-alienation; it is the thinking of breaking the 'bonds between the sensual flesh of the body and the sensuous allures of the world' (*ibid.*, p 208). By contrast, *thinking in place* represents a shadowy, feminine 'kind

of thinking that is rooted in the flesh' (*ibid.*, p 208); 'it is responsive thinking, responsible thinking' (*ibid.*, p 209). For Romanyshyn, the solution to the alienation inherent in the technological worldview relies, most basically, on keeping the two kinds of thinking in conversation, or in a round dance. 'The danger,' in fact, 'lies in breaking the embrace of the dance, for then thinking in exile becomes a way of taking leave of our senses in some final farewell to that natal bond between embodied life and nature, while thinking in place becomes a romantic longing for some Edenic world before the fall of technology' (*ibid.*, p 209).

In his book, Romanyshyn offers several nuances to the solution. First, thinking in place is implicit in thinking in exile and is, indeed, its lifeline for remembering earth as home and returning there. In Romanyshyn's words, 'the dream of technology is shadowed by the opportunity of return' (1989/2006, p 203). Second, it is because the hope of return is implicit in thinking in place that thinking in place must never stop dancing with thinking in exile: '...it is only in leaving one's home [thinking in exile], in departing from it, that the possibility of return [thinking in place] arises' (1989/2006, p 203, brackets added). Third, while the round dance involves the two kinds of thinking, the dance must be led by thinking in place. The reason is that thinking in exile is the problem, whose dominance needs checking for return to happen. Thinking in place, when it takes the lead, serves to domesticate thinking in exile toward an appreciation of earth as home and desire as fulfilling. The metaphor of 'dance' underscores, however, the necessity of a gentle nudging, for a great push might break the embrace and end any chance of return.

How does consideration of the half-connecting body help to assess Romanyshyn's resolution to the dream of distance and symptom of alienation intrinsic to the technological worldview? The first observation is that Romanyshyn's solution involves attention to quite a bit of thinking, whereas the concept of half-connecting is clear about the technological worldview and its paradoxes originating at a somatic level. His is an ironic attention to thinking since so much of his thesis involves tracing the technological worldview's distancing and displacing to a history of the body. But this shows again the benefit of identifying the technological worldview's carnal manifestation in the everyday body practices of half-connecting. As half-connecting body practices, the technological worldview hides itself in routine emotional and gesturing complexes, making it highly resistant to the single solution of 'thinking better thoughts.' If anything, 'better thoughts' may be partly what the technological worldview hides behind to carry out what is really a project of distancing and alienation fueled by the half-connecting body. To wit, Peter's consideration of Basani's workload masks his embodied compulsion to keep her 'over there.'

Indeed, the notion of the half-connecting body helps to clarify that thinking in place cannot be a final solution to thinking in exile, for they are two symptomatic sides of the same coin of an original psychic severance. Recall that dichotomizing emanates from the split in the psyche when the desire to connect is negated by culture. Suddenly, the psyche has been turned against its own inclination to express its desire to connect, which would have led to experiencing difference as interdependent or relational. With desire repressed or negated, however, the psyche is forced to imagine itself as an independent entity, an illusion made believable only by insisting that others, objects, and the earth are as independent as the repressed subject imagines itself to be. The dichotomy of ‘discrete entity over here’ and ‘discrete entity over there’ becomes the root cultural expression of such a psyche; it is the split-frame within which both thinking in exile and thinking in place are set. The dialectic of thinking in exile and thinking in place, of departure and return, of alienation and homecoming, are a half-connecting dynamic, paradox, and problem.

The question arises, then: If the notions of thinking in exile and thinking in place are of a piece with the technological worldview, can they offer more than a superficial solution to the dichotomizing that is also the basis of their essence? The concept of the half-connecting body says ‘no,’ but not because thinking in exile and thinking in place are not real forms of cognition. If these two forms of thinking are social facts, it is because they have developed on either side of a negation. Putting them in an embrace or a round dance is a well-intentioned effort, for it expresses a frustration with splitting and an insistence on reconciling what has been split. But the ‘putting back together’ form of reconciliation is ultimately ineffective, because the technological worldview is unfixable on the basis of the half-connecting body responsible for its very existence: it’s like trying to return a rubber band that has been twisted into a figure 8 into an original, unproblematic whole by folding the upper half of the 8 onto the lower half – it might look whole again but, if the twisted deformation is part of the solution, there’s no solution.

A real solution involves awareness of the half-connecting body as the core problem of capitalist modernity’s root subjectivity, and an individual and collective will to correct for its misrecognition. But can the half-connecting subject overcome its existential imperative to feel independent? Building on his knowledge and activism with autism as a developmental disorder, Interdisciplinary Humanities PhD Candidate, Malcolm Matthews, introduces the concept of ‘autistic techno-savant,’ which, for our purposes, suggests the difficulty of overcoming a cultural motivation toward independence. The autistic techno-savant is replacing, in popular culture, the alpha male superhero as the quintessential role-model in the digital age: In a presentation

of the concept, Matthews notes: ‘With an arsenal of stereotypically hyper-masculine traits – uncompromising reliance on technology, rigid devotion to logic, obsession with a special interest, lack of empathy, self-centeredness, and an at-best clumsy concept of romance, the autistic savant is tailor-made to serve as the man *par excellence* for the self-professed geek in a technocentric era’ (Matthews, unpublished). If our desire to connect is further mystified by images of nearly-fully disconnecting personas, such as *Star Trek*’s Spock, *The Big Bang Theory*’s Sheldon Cooper, and *Community*’s Abed Nadir, it will be difficult to embrace the desire that haunts us.

If the technological worldview is today using images of the autistic techno-savant to lure us into perfecting the repression of our desire to connect, the technological worldview continues a longer tradition of disavowing its ‘native’ and ‘feminine’ others, whose body habits may serve as models for what full-connecting looks like. Indeed, what forms a more formidable barrier to an embrace of the desire to connect – the positively expressed culture of the autistic techno-savant or the negatively expressed culture of disavowing the other? The barriers are of course two sides of the same coin, minted to foreclose an uncomfortable encounter with modernity’s paradoxical experiment with a culture of repression. Admonitions against ‘going native,’ ‘romanticizing the other,’ etc. serve the interest of the technological worldview, keeping analysis from daring to state what can never be stated for its hegemony to persist – that ‘they’ve’ got it right and ‘we’ve’ got it wrong. Even ‘cultural relativity’ is not forward thinking enough, for, in keeping different epistemologies contained within boxed-in positions, it also draws a line before allowing ‘their’ full-connecting lifestyles to take a lead in directing the world.

Yet ‘we’ can also get it right, if we recognize and correct for the negation at the heart of our subjectivity and cultural world. The first step, I would think, is to come to terms with the extent of half-connecting’s footprint on the world, i.e. to recognize half-connecting when we see it: real lines, such as those in parking lots and on roads and those framing sports’ fields and notebooks for writing; and lines in effect, such as those felt when crossing a national border, getting into an event because of showing a proper badge, or approaching a red traffic light – whenever and wherever a line that divides, orders, and is policed, there is half-connecting. It is as ‘everyday’ as a restaurant waiter refusing your request to throw in a piece of broccoli to your main order because the broccoli comes from a different pan of food. It is of course physically easy for the server to pick up the piece of broccoli and add it to your dish. But the line between the pans, and the bookkeeping around the different pans, makes the simple act feel problematic, illicit, and wrong.

## Conclusion

There is, I am arguing, a remarkable and exciting link between Romanyshyn's thesis and my notion of the half-connecting body: If our sense of self-alienation takes tangible shape as the half-connecting body in everyday practice, Romanyshyn helps me to trace the historical origins of half-connecting to 15th century linear perspective art; he also empowers me to discuss half-connecting body practices, such as the hard handshake, steady eye contact, and grimace smiling, as gendered gestures – that is, unconscious symptoms of a Eurocentric masculine dream of taking flight from others and the earth, which are experienced as menacing feminine excesses.

What I hope to have accomplished is to demonstrate the implications of expanding Romanyshyn's thesis in the direction of everyday body practice and particularly to the concept of half-connecting body. In short, Romanyshyn's concept of technological worldview – and its characteristics such as self-alienation, self-other dualism, body abandonment, and disembodied vision – has an everyday, sensuous manifestation, which is the half-connecting body. This means, first, that the half-connecting body is a technology, where the term refers to any aid used to 'to magnify our force or efficacy' (Matthewman, 2011: p 12). Here, the half-connecting body magnifies a repression or negation of the human desire to connect into the world.

Second, since human experience starts in bodies and ends in thoughts (Csordas, 1990: pp 8-9), Romanyshyn's technological worldview is epiphenomenal, a metaphysical instance of the half-connecting body, which is the original engine of the Western masculine dream of repressing humans' sensuous desire for each other, the flesh, and earth. This implies a need to stress a different realm of life when trying to account for the alienation at the heart of modern subjectivity. That is, the core problem is not technologies such as the bomb, the aeroplane, or even the disembodied spectator eye but the half-connecting body itself, a corporeal technology acting as the first manifestation of the negation at the core of the modern subject.

Finally, understanding the technological worldview as a metaphysical instance of the half-connecting body places more stress on routine acts of distancing, displacing, and repressing. Where Romanyshyn is right to find such traits in the aeroplane, space-craft, and atomic bomb, the traits are more ordinary than his examples suggest, which helps to make his thesis relevant to everyday life. If Romanyshyn says the bomb is already present in the distance between self and other implied by 'big technologies' mentioned above, I now say that the bomb is also elemental to parking spaces, store counters, and breast pumps, which, in these cases, use real or effective lines to repress connection between drivers, cashiers and customers, and infants and mothers.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> For the sake of anonymity, the names of individuals in this paper are pseudonyms.

<sup>2</sup> To be sure, Romanyshyn is aware of everyday manifestations of distancing and displacing, as his discussion of Freudian psychoanalysis makes clear (1989/2006: p 207). It is just that he does not elaborate the point or assess it in relation to the embodied manifestation of the technological worldview.

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# BOOK REVIEWS

Where is philosophy when we really need it? Why is it so elusive? The last year has seen two important votes; the UK referendum and the US presidential election, and philosophically both had some alarming similarities. They, as if we need reminding, were both characterised by substituting the clarity of a discussion of policy and strategy for the mystification of serial lying, xenophobia, and blatantly undeliverable promises where the ambiguity of reality was reduced to fake news and soundbites, and legitimate questioning was reframed as fear-mongering and whinging. Perhaps Hegel was right when he described the universal human conflict as when, ‘each consciousness seeks the death of the other’. The trading of personal insults is certainly not what is meant by the phrase ‘the personal is political’.

The so-called debate was also aided and abetted by a press drunk on a heady cocktail of power without responsibility that reinforced the demand that the knowledge of ‘experts’ be rejected in favour of, what exactly? The rhetoric of ‘freedom’ and ‘taking back control’ undoubtedly has great appeal. And why not; who in their right mind would actually want less freedom and control? Except that the freedom on offer was a freedom from ‘them’; the Other, that ‘we’; the Subject, are alleged to be under attack from. And the ‘control’ promised is control over their freedom. Mexicans, Moslems, Jews, Romanians, homosexuals, trade unions – you name it – everyone is a possible target and as a result hate crime is becoming normalised. History shows us that this is how dictators get and retain power.

Terror Management Theory formalises what we all intuitively know; that defensive reactions like paranoia result when an objectified Other is seen as increasing our awareness of death; our fear of loss of a way of life. The Other, the *en-soi*, is as we know, the enemy of the *pour-soi*.

Both campaigns also invoked the myth of a secure, predictable past that we can and should return to. But Simone de Beauvoir tells us that this nostalgia for a simpler, trouble-free past is about the wish to return to an era of freedom without responsibility and the hope that more powerful others will benevolently manage our lives and protect us from randomness and chance. In other words, the security of childhood. In adults this is bad faith. She also differed with Hegel saying that because we are permanently bound up with other people the death of the other means the death of oneself. As she said, ‘To will oneself free is also to will others free’; freedom is how we are with each other and is therefore a collective responsibility, and although situational it is not a commodity. Beware of people who say they can give you more freedom. We live, we are told, in a post-truth era, but unless the nature of human Being changes, we will never be in a post-existential–truth era.

This is why it is so elusive: truth is hard work and we all have to work at it, perhaps even fight for it, all the time. But like all such things it is ultimately worth it. Why do we do this? This is where faith comes in.

Existentially, philosophy is about reflecting on the way we live and all those involved in the elections votes could perhaps have benefited from going back to the works of Epicurus and Lucretius, which is where we start this issue's book reviews. We stay with our relationship with death and the way it can give meaning to life for the next three books and then move on to the important, unavoidable and rarely examined relationship between the personal and political in psychotherapy practice and then to a reflection on the role of the media in the construction of our hopes and fears. The next book looks at the boundaries of philosophy and how it can change the way we look at the world. Children are the future – they certainly change the way we think about life – but exactly what the relationship is, existentially, between childhood and adulthood is more difficult to say, and the next book argues for the value of an existential understanding of childhood. The final book reviewed in this issue is a return to theme of the conduct of the votes and is a meditation on the nature of sanity, this time from a mindfulness perspective.

**Martin Adams**

## **The Art of Happiness**

Epicurus (2012). London: Penguin.

In recent years, Irvin D. Yalom has introduced existential therapy to the ancient school of Epicurean philosophy. Thus, in his book *Staring at the Sun: Overcoming the Dread of Death*, Yalom makes frequent references to the relevance of Epicurus to the therapeutic aim of tackling the fear of death. In addition, Emmy van Deurzen (2006) has drawn attention to the relationship and between existential therapy and ancient philosophy as arts of living. However, many existential therapists are not very familiar with the Hellenistic and Roman schools of philosophy, including the philosophy of Epicurus.

Epicurus (341–270 BC) was an ancient Greek philosopher as well as the founder of the philosophical movement known as Epicureanism. Epicurus' school of philosophy was a clinic of the soul (*psûche*), based in his own garden. Simply called 'the Garden', Epicurus admitted women and slaves into this school. For Epicurus, the purpose of philosophy as an art of living was to achieve *Eudaimonia*. The Greek word *Eudaimonia* is often translated as 'happiness' but it literally means 'to live with one's good spirit', and 'human flourishing' has been proposed as a more precise translation (cf. Nussbaum, 1994). Although Epicurus declares human flourishing to be a

kind of pleasure, it is a mistake to conceive of him as a pure hedonist. The Epicurean notion of human flourishing rather has a distinctly Buddhist quality to it, characterized by the absence of physical pain (*aponia*) as well as by tranquility (*ataraxia*), requiring freedom from mental fear and disturbance. Thus, Epicurus asks how we can live with the most joy and wellbeing and the least suffering, but rather than advocating for a libertine life, he proposes an ascetic practice of self-control and abstention from all forms of indulgence.

The recent volume from Penguin Classics contains all Epicurus, extant writings. Unfortunately, the volume includes a traditional translation of *Eudaimonia* as ‘happiness’. Despite this slightly inaccurate translation, the volume succeeds in showing how this Epicurean notion of happiness requires freedom from fear. Thus, the Epicurean art of living is based on a materialist philosophy of nature, serving the purpose of freeing human beings from god-fearing superstition and god-worshipping religiosity:

*It is impossible to get rid of our anxieties about essentials if we do not understand the nature of the universe and are apprehensive about some of the theological accounts. Hence it is impossible to enjoy our pleasures unadulterated without natural science*

(Epicurus, 2012: p 175)

In his recent book *Battling the Gods: Atheism in the Ancient World* from 2016, Tim Whitmarsh describes how Epicurus and his followers thought that gods could not intervene in human affairs. Even though the Epicurean art of living fulfills all the criteria of a highly spiritual practice, the ancients referred to the Epicureans as ungodly (*atheoi*), and their ideas inspired later attacks on popular superstition and religious institutions. Karl Marx’s (1902) doctoral thesis was on the Democritean and Epicurean philosophy of nature, and the teachings of Epicurus had a profound impact on Marx’s idea that all criticism begins with the criticism of religion.

In particular, existential therapists will find interest in Epicurus’ *Letter to Menoeceus* and *Leading Doctrines*. In these texts, Epicurus outlines an understanding of the art of living as an attempt to heal people’s maladies of the soul and mind by assessing the beliefs, values and meanings by which they live. According to Neoplatonic philosopher Porphyry’s (1989) letter to his wife Marcella, Epicurus holds that that argument of the philosopher is empty if it does not therapeutically treat any human suffering. Thus, the primary purpose of philosophy is to serve as a kind of spiritual therapy that aims at healing the spiritual problems of human beings by freeing them from pain and fear. Ultimately, this involves freeing human beings from the fear of death, because we do not experience anything when we

have died. Thus, Epicurus is referring to being dead, not to dying:

*Death means nothing to us, because that which has been broken down into atoms has no sensation and that which has no sensation is no concern of ours*

(Epicurus, 2012: p 173)

At the end of his career, French philosopher Michel Foucault (2005) became preoccupied with Epicurean, Stoic, Cynic and Sceptic arts of living. He conceived these arts of living as therapeutic technologies of the self, aiming at creating a beautiful self in a Nietzschean way. However, French historian of philosophy Pierre Hadot (1995) found that Foucault misinterpreted the Hellenistic and Roman philosophers, wishing to reunite the self with the world. Following Epicurus, the cause of spiritual problems are unnatural and unnecessary desires, being part of conventional culture. Spiritual healing consists in training human beings to detach themselves from these desires by relying on the healing powers of reason. According to Epicurus, human beings must free themselves of their ignorance about the natural world and lead a virtuous life as a means to gain tranquility and human flourishing.

*It is impossible to live the pleasant life without also living sensibly, nobly, and justly*

(Epicurus, 2012: p 172)

At this stage, human beings will only tend to their natural desires and they are in a position to centre in themselves and fence off the demands of conventional culture. However, being in the world and having relationships are important aspects of living a good life, meaning that human beings must also be in a position to re-unite their spirit with other people and the world:

*The person who is the most successful in controlling the disturbing elements that come from the outside world has assimilated to himself what he could, and what he could not assimilate he has at least not alienated[...]. All who have the capacity to gain security, especially from those who live around them, live a most agreeable life together, since they have the firm assurance of friendship*

(Epicurus, 2012: p 179)

Epicurus and existential therapy are both dealing with lived philosophy rather than mere speculation, and they both emphasize the therapeutic value of living in the moment. Epicurus' *Letter to Menoecus* and *Leading Doctrines* are fascinating reading to any existential therapist, who is interested in a secular perspective on the spiritual dimension of existence. Furthermore,

Epicurean therapy involves an in-depth transformation of the client's self and life that might inspire the development of existential therapy as a philosophical art of living.

## The Nature of Things

Lucretius (2015). London & New York: Penguin

In the first century BC, Epicureanism has a renaissance in the Roman Republic. Roman philosopher Titus Lucretius Carus (99-55 BC) writes a poem in 7414 hexameters with the aim of explaining Epicurus' philosophy to the Roman audience. Lucretius' use of a poetic style provides the Epicurean art of living a beauty and power that may speak to many existentially oriented readers.

The first three books of the poem give a basic interpretation of being and nothingness from the perspective of Epicurus' materialistic philosophy of nature. Lucretius portrays Epicurus as a saviour who has freed human beings from the fear of supernatural deities by demonstrating how human beings should account for the world in terms of natural phenomena. Lucretius does not argue for a technological mastery of nature but for a therapeutic liberation of the human spirit from superstition and ignorance. Thus, Epicurean art of living leads to spiritual salvation from the darkling terror in the mind, caused by religion and unawareness (Lucretius, 2015: p 113-114). However, people can only attain this salvation if they base their lives on a particular explanation of nature and naturalness. In this respect, Epicureanism does not only represent a therapeutic art of living but takes the form of a therapeutic sect or secular cult whose members must shape their whole way of living according to a special ideal of wisdom. Following American philosopher John M. Cooper, Epicureanism involves a vision of the good human life as one authorized by reason, but this is rather about directing one's entire life after a certain truth than about living through completely independent thinking (Cooper, 2012: p 228).

What I find most interesting about the poem as an existential therapist is the third book, giving a thorough argument against the fear of death. According to Lucretius, human beings tend to go through life with a fundamental fear of death, causing many of the worst human sufferings and disturbances:

*Of mind and spirit, and toss that Dread of Death out on its ear,  
Since that's what stirs the lives of the mortals into such turmoil  
From the very depths, and there is nothing that it does not soil  
With the smirch of death, no pleasure, pure and clean, it does not soil*  
(Lucretius, 2015: p 114-115)

Most of our attitudes about loss and endings as well as about material possessions and social achievements spring from an egocentric dread of losing our lives and earthly goods, making us thirst for immortal existence. The fear of death turns us to blindly following unnatural desires and cravings, destructive of self or others. Thus, this fear causes most human ills and vices, meaning that the art of living well must involve an art of dying well. Following Lucretius, we must confront ourselves with death and acknowledge that death anxiety is irrational, depriving us of the ability to live a flourishing life and achieve *eudaimonia*. Through naturalistic therapy, we must rather learn to live in and according to nature and the universe with a concern for its whole. These superhuman achievements will make us godlike, living like mortal immortals who understand and accept the ways of the world.

Lucretius does not only show how the fear of death makes people submit to religion, making them more dependent and worried. He also demonstrates how fear causes people to give love and sexual desire the status of a secular salvation. In other words, our fear of life's uncertainty tends to make us idealize love and sexuality and yearn for them to save us. However, this longing is only an escape from the hard realities of life into illusions. According to Lucretius, we may alleviate human suffering and escapism by rationally decreasing human desire to what is naturally necessary. This implies a realistic perception of love and marriage as something that belongs to everyday life and does not save the individual from it.

In these years, we are witnessing a renaissance of Hellenistic and Roman philosophy and culture. Yalom and Deurzen have pointed out the close relationships between existential therapy and classical arts of living. The poem of Lucretius provides a thrilling and captivating insight into an in-depth therapy that might inspire many existential practitioners. The World Confederation for Existential Therapy has recently defined existential therapy as 'a philosophically informed approach to counseling or psychotherapy' ([www.existentialpsychotherapy.net](http://www.existentialpsychotherapy.net)). This definition allows a more in-depth exploration of the value of Hellenistic and Roman philosophy.

## Anders Draeby Soerensen

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## **Aging and mortality**

This is a review of three books each from different perspectives pointing to the value of learning to be less fearful of aging and more accepting of death, and suggesting ways to do this, in order to make the most of life while it is ours.

The first book is a tour of the physical aspects of aging focused on the brain and how changes show up throughout the body as well as the mind. The second looks at the social world and the potentially devastating impact that fear of death can exert on human affairs. The third is a personal meditation on life and all that is lost when it ends. It is a reminder that our ordinary hours are much richer and more amazing than we appreciate when in the midst of things.

## **The Aging Mind: An owner's manual**

Patrick Rabbitt (2015). London: Routledge.

Professor Rabbitt, a UK cognitive gerontologist, is a delightful and encouraging companion in the exploration of 'normal' aging of the brain and its effect on the mind and body. Now in his 70s he continues to work and write on this topic drawing on over 50 years of research and on his own experiences of the aging process.

He sets the tone of his book saying that what we find out through research may not always be comforting but 'there is always excitement and dignity in understanding our situation as clearly as we possibly can' (p 4), and this book is replete with information to help understand and make the most of the longer lives many of us can expect.

Aging affects the whole brain and this affects our senses and all our abilities. Consequently how well our brain is aging shows up in our hearing, sight, touch and gait; with grip and balance being key markers. He discusses why and how our brain ages, how fast it happens (quite slowly over a long period from mid 30s to late 60s then quite rapidly with decision speed and IQ declining more rapidly than memory) and how with reducing bandwidth it becomes

increasingly hard to do, remember or perceive more than one thing at a time.

On the plus side he says that with motivation, engagement and revision we can still learn very effectively ‘even when we are very old indeed’ (p 97), which is encouraging for both therapists and clients.

While most body cells reproduce themselves anything from 40 to 120 times before reaching a limit controlled by telomeres (for longevity you really have to hope for good ones) our brain cells are mostly those we were born with, slowly diminishing in number. We can’t stop this happening but we may be able to slow it down.

The rate of brain cell loss depends on blood supply and the best way to increase this is through 20 mins walking every day which has a ‘measurable effect on survival and on keeping our wits’ (p 242). Something for therapists to take note of given all the ‘lethal sitting’ we do. Just moving briskly around between clients will make a useful difference. In contrast, Rabbitt says there is no convincing evidence that brain training, crosswords etc help much.

Despite the losses and challenges that come with aging, studies show young people are more depressed by the experience of pain and illness perhaps because poor health is less common in youth, while older people are more likely to know others in the same boat, and may be more accepting and grateful for what they still have.

On death, Rabbitt notes that those who appear most contented ‘seem to live in tighter boundaries of the present’ (p 186) and that studies from different countries and cultures all report a reduction in fear about death as age advances.

I found this book enlightening and useful in understanding the changes I am experiencing and those that my older clients are also experiencing. Memory lapses and moments of confusion often prompt anxiety about dementia for the over 60s but Rabbitt shows that for most of us they are just signs of normal aging.

## **The Worm at the Core: On the Role of Death in Life**

Sheldon Solomon, Jeff Greenberg & Tom Pyszczynski (2016). London: Penguin.

‘The worm at the core of all our usual springs of delight’ is a quotation from William James’ book *The Varieties of Religious Experience*.

Inspired by the earlier work of Ernest Becker who claimed in *The Denial of Death* that human activity is driven largely by unconscious efforts to deny and transcend death, the authors, who are American experimental social psychology professors, have been collaborating on research for 25 years to test this hypothesis and explore its implications in our lives.

Through over 500 published studies they found that fear of death does indeed have a profound and persuasive effect on human affairs at all levels

and in all areas, driving our behaviour far more than we realise. Their ‘terror management theory’ posits two main ways we try to protect ourselves against the prospect of annihilation. These are through maintaining a cultural world view that confers a sense of order, meaning and permanence; and through strong self esteem to give us a sense of personal significance in a meaningful world.

Their approach in each study was to take two groups and prompt one to think about their mortality and the other, control group, to think about something worrying but less alarming and then to compare attitudes immediately afterwards. They did this over a range of people and topics including crime and punishment, sex and physicality, war and violence, anxiety and phobias.

They repeatedly found that reminders of death did indeed alter beliefs and intended actions compared with the control groups. For example, after being reminded of their mortality, judges imposed more severe punishments than they might otherwise have done, arachnophobes reported spiders to be more dangerous and attack-prone, religious people and atheists became more inclined to proselytizing.

Significantly, they found that death reminders generally elicited kinder attitudes to ‘people like us’ and harsher more aggressive attitudes to ‘others’, sometimes murderously so.

Their worthy but extremely ambitious hope is that their work will help us realise the role mortal terror plays in causing conflict and wars so that we will ‘find ways of counteracting the destructive potential our fears can, and do, unleash’ (p 149).

In their final chapter ‘Living with death’ they suggest ways we can explore our own attitude to mortality and how to live more creatively with this. They invoke the advice of philosophers ancient and modern to face and accept the reality of death and use it as a spur to appreciate life and be more compassionate to others and concerned for future generations.

There is much here that is familiar territory to a therapist, especially an existential one, and indeed they refer particularly to Yalom and to existential psychotherapy as a way to shore up our terror management resources.

## **The Black Mirror: Fragments of an obituary for life**

Raymond Tallis. (2016). London: Atlantic Books.

Tallis, philosopher and retired professor of geriatric medicine, approaches the topic of mortality from the perspective of viewing his own corpse, using its inert Nothingness to illuminate the Everything of human existence. His focus is on the basic elements of life, to remind himself and us of the everyday richness and wonders of being alive and the necessity to remember and be grateful more often.

This book is a hymn to life, to be fully awake and make the most of it, to avoid dissipating what we have in order not to look at what we will lose. He describes and celebrates all the amazing aspects of embodiment (those facilities we take for granted until, as Rabbit describes, they gradually fade with age). We die because we are ‘improbable’, our wonderful highly structured bodies are at odds with the general tendency of things to entropy.

He begins by looking unflinchingly at his imagined corpse. He suggests that seeing life from this perspective brings us to the heart of the philosophical impulse, making us onlookers into the strangeness of our being in the world. He ‘sees’ his corpse being laid out, mourned over by those whose memories of him will constitute whatever afterlife he can hope for, heading into the crematorium fire which he has chosen over the worms. Then he steps back to consider the living body: pumping heart, lungs, bowels, kidneys and so on, ‘a constellation of miracles’ (p 39).

He then widens out to look at the elements we are made of and intimately connected to, and our senses which transform the world around us. He remembers the smell of a newly mown lawn, wood smoke, singed hair, urine in public toilets; and so on through sights, sounds and touch, describing some of the things that have intrigued, repulsed and delighted him.

Then he moves to the world with others. Relationships, modes of behaviour and dress, the social mores of his community and the cultivation of a carefully constructed identity. His world of work, the ‘tools’ of his trade, his hobbies, all the things that had interested and enthralled him, constituting a full and busy life.

He recalls his hoard of possessions, his ‘empire’ (the stuff we all accumulate that marks stages and events in our lives and bolsters our sense of a substantial self) poignantly contrasted with the few possessions (a rubber bone, basket and blanket) of his long-deceased dog, blissfully content with so little. Then the experience of moving from a house long inhabited and felt as ‘home’ and seeing how when empty it was disturbingly revealed as a temporary stage set, a premonition of a world carrying on without him.

Tallis is a kindly and thoughtful companion in this exploration of the view through the black mirror, a journey that is hard to contemplate with eyes wide open, but he makes it possible and worth the effort. He uses himself as an exemplar but of course it’s about us all.

*Then awakened by death...relish that it is still possible  
to put the kettle on, look out of the window, and exchange  
smiles with another human being*

(p 344)

**Diana Pringle**

## Helping Beyond the 50-Minute Hour. Therapists Involved in Social Action

Jeffrey A. Kottler, Matt Englar-Carlson & Jon Carlson (2013).  
New York: Routledge.

### Should Psy-professionals Be Political?

I began writing an outline for this review while still reading the book. I thought it would save time. However, chapter by chapter, my impressions changed considerably. The constant edits of the first sentence conveyed the shifts in my experience: ‘This is a very accessible and inspiring book, I think most therapists would find it valuable...’, ‘Although a book like this is important in the field, the case studies here are somewhat repetitive and I am not sure how much of the content will challenge or edify most readers of *EA*’..., ‘The moving accounts of therapists working outside the consulting room broaden the scope of what it means to be a therapist’... Having completed the book, I would now say:

*Helping Beyond the 50-Minute Hour* is written with humanity, humility, and insight. Each author has made a point of piercing the self-aggrandising language of psychotherapy literature. This is a book of personal stories, of ‘professionals’ working with communities and groups, putting political values into action, expressing with integrity the concerns that have developed from each author’s unique life experiences. It is written in the first-person and most chapters have photographs of the authors in context.

In the preface, the editors outline the perspective that grounds the book, ‘helping professionals have a moral obligation not only to work on behalf of our own clients, but also on behalf of those who have been neglected and ignored’. They believe their training in ‘systemic interventions, group dynamics, cultural competencies, relationship skills, and therapeutic interventions’ make them ideally suited to effect positive change with marginalised groups who would otherwise have no access to services.

Most chapters describe experienced therapists’ frustrations with the limited impact of the one-to-one therapy situation, and how this frustration encouraged them to become active outside their paid work. Other accounts are about working in charitable agencies or about therapy trainees and their experiences in developing countries or deprived communities. The book is written by American therapists and so some details or attitudes may come across as culturally specific, but this won’t impinge on the usefulness of the book for a UK audience.

It is totally naive, though not uncommon, to claim that psychology and psychotherapy can be ‘neutral’ in terms of politics. ‘Neutral’ usually equates to unacknowledged *alignment with the prevailing power structures of the state*. This alignment can seem so ‘reasonable’. It secures closed-shop

restrictions on practice, well-paid employment and influence in statutory institutions, high university fees to compensate for government underfunding, all working to keep the profession exclusive to a mostly white middle class trainee with conventional attitudes to the social structure. Recently we have seen in the UK the darker side of our professional collusion, controversies over IAPT, and sanctions on the unemployed who resist ‘mental health’ intrusion into their lives. These recent excesses seem to have alerted psy-professionals to the costs of taking a ‘neutral’ compliant attitude towards the neo-liberal doctrine. Recent moves in the profession (the Psychotherapy and Counselling Union, Psychologists against Austerity, etc.) suggest that many of us are ready to accept the inevitable political nature of our profession. I had hoped to see some analysis of these intersections between state and profession in the book but that is not its focus.

Why have I come around to recommending this book? The main reason is that it provides a consistent challenge, through descriptions of practice, to the stance that psychologists should not reveal anything personal about themselves. These authors do not hide their politics, they question our tendency to ‘individualise’ distress and not see it as a symptom of social inequality. We might add to that our resistance to look at the psychological impact of powerlessness upon whole communities, and how our lack of democracy and transparent power structures, are in themselves a major cause of distress.

The book is divided into five parts: Revisioning Clinical Practice, The Dreamers: What Change Could Be, Community Action, Global Outreach, and Closure and Reflection. Each part has a number of chapters covering various aspects of the topic. Many of the authors come from a Christian background though this is mostly incidental and was not off-putting to a non-Christian reader like myself.

One of the authors, William J Doherty, says ‘Its time to create a new professional role for ourselves: the citizen-therapist for the 21st century – an agent of change, not just a critic of what isn’t changing. Unfortunately our trainings have done little to prepare us for this role’. Citizen-therapist work can be done in about 6-8 hours a month, not a huge time commitment. Doherty says that as a young graduate in the 1970s he believed ‘in a kind of “trickle up” psychological dynamic, whereby therapy would make enough people healthier to tilt the social order toward justice and harmony’ (p 15). He has since abandoned that passive model for the more active stance illustrated in the book.

The steps towards expanding your practice into community and political contexts are described as: 1. Ask which clinical issues grab your interest most. 2. Start seeing these personal problems you treat within their larger social context. 3. Connect with a fellow therapist with whom you can share your journey, and then find a community of allies. The assumption here

is that ‘all clinical problems treated by therapists are thoroughly interconnected with larger public issues...’ (p 17).

Some of the chapters concentrated on working in inner city counselling centres in a way that I feel would be quite familiar to many of us who have at least had placement opportunities in local community organisations. Authors make the case for including in our training ‘social and class consciousness’ and classes on how to link to local resources and expand counselling to include resource and information sharing. They advocate that trainees learn about active deconstructing of social messages that determine who you are and what you can be, based upon socio-economic group, ethnicity, sexual or gender identity.... Some of the chapters sound more like social work, community advocacy work, youth work...

In Codrington’s chapter on social justice counselling, she points out that Psychology has never been a-political – it promoted eugenics in the early 1900s and had an active part in the CIA abuse and torture of detainees in US military installations. We are always being political but usually fail to name this. ‘Value-free neutrality’ is a political agenda and one that has not served us, or our clients, well. We need to raise our consciousness of such things and of course the first place this should occur is in our training, including lectures and how we are supervised. The intrapsychic fallacy of distress, which has never been existential anyway, needs to be met with a well-thought-out alternative.

There are chapters describing work with veterans trying to reintegrate into society, a fast response team of counsellors and supervisors working in post-Katrina New Orleans, a Buddhist psychologist working in her native Thailand after earning her doctorate in the US. I liked the chapter describing facilitating peace-building and leadership workshops with women in Burma. The Burmese women in the group decided they were not sure they wanted their organisation to be ‘democratic’: ‘In a democracy, people’s voices get left out. Small groups of people who are not part of the mainstream are not represented. We have lived in a dictatorship – a totalitarian system. We want something better than “democracy”!’ (p 227). Chante DeLoach’s chapter describing working as a psychologist in the aftermath of the Haiti earthquake was perhaps the most moving account, showing how preconceptions of what constitutes ‘competent practice’ can be stretched beyond recognition in certain settings.

In the final section of the book, Closure and Reflection, Kottler says ‘It is a given that we became therapists in the first place, and got involved in social justice and service, because we want to save the world. We want to make a difference. We believe strongly in advocacy, and working on behalf of the marginalised and oppressed. We feel a strong commitment to make things better for our communities – and the world at large’. But he balances this idealism (which may or may not resonate with us) by also describing

the ‘real’ reasons for doing this work, for example (pp 268-274); ‘trying to feel good about himself, defending against mortality, to feel important, to distract from his own life, to feel smug and superior, hunger for intimacy, feeling like a martyr, the helper’s high, escape from the mundane, excuse for travel, access to the hidden and forbidden, learn new things, to be creative, rebellious, and to see immediate results’... I found this account to be refreshingly honest.

Jon Carlson’s final chapter tells us that he has been dealing with aggressive cancer and that he might be dead before the book appears in print. He describes his own orientation to practice as based upon Adler’s Individual Psychology, and how Adler was originally concerned with the injustices suffered by people working in the tailoring industry, poor lighting, poor ventilation, long hours... ‘Adler stressed the importance of looking at the entire context in which an individual lives to create a more complete understanding...’ Carlson routinely asks his clients to take up voluntary work, as he believes that focusing on others’ issues, getting outside ourselves, helps us feel better (it’s what therapists do all the time).

The authors make the point that ‘the key feature of significant social action is follow-through – continuing efforts over a period of time so as to build meaningful relationships, provide adequate support, and conduct evaluations to measure results and make needed adjustments that make programmes even more responsive’. For me, I have recently returned to more active political expression. Examples in my life include setting up a psychology course for the Free University of Brighton, teaching Focusing to activists, an arts project called Map of Human Experience, and participation in various democratic social change movements. I have found this energising and inspiring whereas I experience the ‘politics’ within our professional bodies and societies rather disheartening. I encourage therapists who have not been active politically to consider dipping a toe in, and perhaps we can support each other to do this. At the very least I hope to see this, or a book like it, on every training course very soon.

## Greg Madison

### **The Happiness Illusion. How the media sold us a fairy tale.**

Luke Hockley and Nadi Fadina (eds) (2015). London: Routledge.

It’s an intriguing title. Not so much because it presents happiness as an illusion. Critiques of the notion that happiness should, or even can, be a sensible goal have multiplied since positive psychology’s inauguration as a corrective to what one of its chief architects, Martin Seligman, thought was the excessive doom and gloom of clinical psychology. Readers of this journal will for example, be familiar with the series of essays of

Emmy van Deurzen collected under the title of *Psychotherapy and the Quest for Happiness* (2009). It was the reference to the fairy tale that intrigued me. The modern study of fairy tales, starting with Propp in the 1930s (Propp, 1968) provides a link between science and some of the otherwise mystifying concepts of psychotherapy such as the collective unconscious. Perhaps it would be a tool for charting what a well-lived life might look like, leaving aside the meretricious criteria of happiness or acclaim.

Sadly the editors chose ‘fairy tale’ for its more prosaic meaning, of a Bowdlerized and euhemeristic folk tale. Not all folk tales end happily, but since the publication of Andrew Lang’s fairy books, the expectation is that fairy tales are for children, and that they end with, ‘and they all lived happily ever after’.

Of course it may have been of interest to consider why we think that children need stories in which an ordinary or neglected person can become a prince or princess with magic powers. But the contributors to this book would probably agree, despite the considerable variation in their topics and their take on them, that we remain vulnerable to dreams of transformation throughout our lives, ever ready to believe that we harbour hidden powers or will discover a pot of gold and that, if we do, it will make us happy.

One chapter, by Ryan Howes, inverts this by studying the mutative therapeutic intervention, the mythical moment when the therapist draws out the hidden splinter that has been poisoning the client’s life up to that moment and, it is assumed, happiness follows. Of course, in a real fairy tale such as *The Snow Queen* by H C Andersen, Gerda melts the splinter of ice in Kay’s heart by her tears of joy, but they still have a long journey to go, albeit a joyful one, before they are done.

Howes’ point, and this is taken up in all of the chapters, is that we should distrust ‘the media’ i.e. makers of television programmes or films (or therapists) when they set out to make us feel good because they are really doing us harm, if only by misleading. We are assumed to be taken in by this (as presumably the film-makers are not) because we have a ‘malaise’ which, oddly enough, only affects ‘the West’. We are being exploited by people who want to make money by peddling this snake oil to us. Like the witch in *Hansel and Gretel*, they want to pacify us to make eating us less of a fight.

Part 1 of the book deconstructs films, advertisements, and television programmes to show us these hidden motivators but in doing so displays the enormous potential for these genres to portray ambivalence and ambiguity as well. This is particularly illustrated by Nadia Fadina’s longer essay on androgyny that concludes with an endorsement of C G Jung. The chapter is not quite relevant to the topic of the book, but is packed with interesting examples.

Part 2 of the book focuses more on transformations including two chapters

on fictional accounts of psychotherapy (Ryan Howes on various examples, but especially *Dr Phil* and Joanna Dovalis on *In Treatment*).

Part 3 of the book contains several chapters that cover apparent exceptions to the premises of the book although it starts off with the rom com and why that might make one feel better after a bad day – not, of course, that anyone believes the story any more than anyone mixes up folk tales with historical accounts.

Part 3 explicitly mentions ‘existential’ philosophy on several occasions and, you guessed, it is Kierkegaard who is the influence mentioned, and the Nordic noir that exemplifies existentialism. I agree with the contributors in part 3 who find it interesting that after a bad day we might get surcease by seeing our favourite character going through agonies of self-questioning, only to break the law in ways that they are sworn to uphold. It runs counter to the title of the book, an irony that escapes the contributors. ‘Irony’ was the topic of Kierkegaard’s Masters thesis and was, in many ways, his master theme throughout his writing. Irony led to the taking away of certainty, to a dread that Sartre felt as nausea in association with the nihilation of self-knowledge. This is not a happy state of affairs, and will need another book to account for its popularity in new fairy tales like *The Killing*. But this book did at least give me an insight into why *The Killing* seemed to convey it so effectively. According to Alex Charles, the author of the chapter ‘Sarah Lund and individuated happiness’, the actors in *The Killing* were only given the script for the next episode. They did not know how the whole story would turn out, or whether their character was innocent or guilty. No wonder the series was so gripping. It was, as we existentialists would think, so true to how life is. Only as the last credits role do we know what our actions have meant.

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## Digby Tantam

### **Therapy and the Counter-Tradition: The edge of philosophy**

Manu Bazzano & Julie Webb (eds) (2016). Oxford: Routledge.

*Therapy and the Counter-Tradition: The Edge of Philosophy* is about philosophy and therapy within the counter-tradition. Tradition, or otherwise

known as rationalism, is about the world being an orderly cosmos that can be explained by science, laws and reason. At times the tradition speaks the language of secular rationalism, at times it speaks of religious or spiritual rationalism. The book doesn't explain further yet gives the general sense of what is meant by the tradition and the counter-tradition. The sense I get is that the counter-tradition isn't rational, governed by laws, and isn't seeking an ultimate truth or a way of being. The book is a collection of papers all of which are giving a taste of this. The writers are contemporary psychotherapists, philosophers and writers who are exploring the counter-tradition and at the same time how philosophical ideas within counter-tradition may inform psychotherapy.

The writers are putting forward a counter argument to the ideas that non-philosophically informed therapists have as the ideas are rooted in philosophy rather than science or psychology for instance. Yet it is also putting forward an argument for those who, like me, do have a training in existential philosophy and psychotherapy, as it's countering the thinking of 'this is how one should live according to these philosophical ideas'. The writers seem to be writing from a position of responding creatively from philosophy as one may do with literature and art. This is how it adds a fresh perspective on the ongoing dialogue between philosophy and psychotherapy. It certainly doesn't regurgitate the same ideas in similar books on philosophy and psychotherapy. The book does encourage the reader to consider philosophy as having a real implication on our selves as human beings as well as our work as psychotherapists. It does this in a way that doesn't tell you explicitly how to do this. I found that this taps into an important yet unexplored arena. In a sense this book goes to the heart of what it means to be a psychotherapist, as well as human 'wholeness', despite the increased need for rationality, regulation and diagnosis. In fact, it seems clear that the writers don't feel they belong in this world of rationality, regulation and diagnosis.

The writers are writing from personal experience, their own personal knowledge of how philosophy has inspired and influenced their lives. There is a sense of how the current way philosophy and psychotherapy is going has rattled their cages. Especially how philosophy isn't given the credence it should have within psychotherapy and psychology education. I am surprised that it doesn't acknowledge the psychotherapy training schools which do bring philosophy and lived experience to the forefront of the training. The personal stance of the book makes this book engaging for me as I tend to learn from experience and examples rather than from theory. I appreciate that the book is not written in the style of a text book, which makes it more authentic rather than didactic. However, it is an academic book, it should be put onto course reading lists and I would recommend having some prior knowledge of therapy and philosophy before

attempting this book. It's certainly not an introduction to philosophy and psychotherapy.

These writers have backgrounds in religion, music, as well as academia and existential psychotherapy. The authors are discussing philosophers such as Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, Sartre, Rousseau, Camus, Deleuze, Wittgenstein and Merleau-Ponty. This book starts with the sentence 'I really don't see what trainees can learn from Nietzsche' (p 1) and immediately sets the tone of the book as the book seems to want to prove that trainees and psychotherapists can learn from these philosophers. The book is divided into four parts. Part 1 looks at the threshold of experience. It begins by explaining that we experience the threshold when we openly question ourselves. Some of the accounts in this section can be read as a poetic response to the threshold of experience. Bazzano's (p 9) chapter on the self in Nietzsche's psychology is at times hard to grasp. He speaks of the important influence that Nietzsche has on our view of the self and how he is at times critical of how different schools of thought have embraced Nietzsche. John Lippitt's (p 24) chapter on Kierkegaard shows how therapists have much to learn from the philosophy of Kierkegaard. This chapter is more comprehensible and connects to my experience of being a therapist. It speaks about the story of the lily and the bird, which is a beautiful metaphor for gratitude and patience. Diana Voller's (p 34) chapter on John Keats and negative capability proposes that the therapist's capacity to be *in* uncertainty is an important but previously under-represented aspect of practice, because of both its elusive nature and its connections to the therapist's permeable sense of self. Diana Voller attempts to describe the 'negative capability' process with a view to making it a more explicitly appreciated aspect of the therapeutic process. Using poetry as a way to do this makes for a fascinating read. I certainly think that using poetry and literature to enable us to understand the process of what it means to be a human could be a book in its own right!

Part 2 looks at ethics and politics. These chapters are articulating a sense of not being at home within the institutions of philosophy and psychotherapy in their respective current containers, and instead reinforce our desire to persist in our own being; desire a kind of vitality that only exists because of, and is dependent upon, rupture and conflict (p 65). Julie Webb, in her chapter Desire and Judith Butler (p 67) asks the question, 'To what extent is therapy a quest for mutual recognition?' She brings the self and the Other into the forefront. Her chapter is full of engaging vignettes and is well written and is embedded in the experience of being a therapist and being a 'self'. Richard Pearce in his tribute to Jean-Paul Sartre (p 76) describes his own inner conflicts, Sartrean philosophy, and the political

dimension. He acknowledges the concerns that people bring to psychotherapy are very much relevant to what Sartre describes in his philosophy. I appreciate how he highlights the point that what is important is our understanding of the core aspects of how the human exists in the world. He also suggests that the underlying philosophical framework that Sartre elucidates shows the practice of psychotherapy to be a political act. ‘A Metaphysical Rebellion, Camus and Psychotherapy’ by James Belassie (p 98) is one of my favourite chapters as I enjoyed how he compares the *DSM V* to Camus’ philosophy around suicide. It’s an important point to be made, how facing suicidal feelings is a real response to existence rather than a pathology that needs to be cured. It’s refreshing to read about suicide in this way. Especially as I have experienced health care professionals treating suicidal thoughts as a pathology rather than as a real response to living; I find this frustrating.

Part three looks at self, other, world. This is my favourite section of the book. Comprising of short engaging chapters that seem to be about having a healthy degree of scepticism towards contemporary therapeutic discourse, which unanimously emphasizes the relational and dialogical dimensions of human experience and underlies their significance in the therapy room. The forthcoming chapters do challenge this discourse. It starts with Manu Bazzano (p 109). He writes about the French philosopher Deleuze and therapy. I was initially unfamiliar with Deleuze and interested in who and how this may be relevant to my work as a therapist. Bazzano describes his route into Deleuze, his context in which he writes, being a Zen practitioner and a psychotherapist trained in the existential and Person Centred Approach. He is inspired by and critical of Zen philosophy, PCA and the existential philosophy, and disappointed by the way these three have been assimilated into contemporary culture. He talks about how Deleuze helps him with this and then helpfully he grounds his point into an example from therapeutic practice, which is always welcomed! I also enjoyed Paul Gordon’s chapter entitled ‘A Poetry of Human Relations – Merleau-Ponty and psychotherapy’ (p 117). He writes beautifully about Merleau Ponty, showing how his philosophy is very much part of the counter-tradition.

Part four approaches therapy, language and metaphysics. Julie Webb explores Wittgenstein (p 147). This chapter is one of my favourites in the book. Webb, a therapist and trainer in the humanistic tradition, considers the humanistic approach to therapy as a kind of anti-therapy, against the current tendency that sees therapy as treating the human condition as a series of problems to be solved rather than as a life to be experienced. The way she writes about Wittgenstein, making his philosophy relevant

to her work as a therapist really brings his philosophy and her client work to life. John Mackessy looks at Schopenhauer. He explores this philosophy to stress the importance of really facing up to the suffering as a reality of existing in the world. Schopenhauer reminds Mackessy of how therapists can never fully appreciate the suffering of our clients. It also reminds me of the profound respect that suffering deserves and the fundamental part it plays in our client's lives. Jeff Harrison writes about Wittgenstein, Buddhism and psychotherapy and the book concludes with Devang Vaidya speaking about suffering to become the person you are. It's refreshing to read about Buddhism also being a way in to understanding the wholeness of human beings.

What is refreshing about this book is that it talks about therapy and what it means to be human without claiming to be an expert. There is a respect for humanity and a healthy scepticism for adhering to assumptions about what it means to be human that threads right through the book. Despite the lack of the word existential in the book, this book would be extremely useful for anyone studying existential psychotherapy. I couldn't help but feel disappointed at the lack of female philosophers and the overuse of white male philosophers. Wouldn't a chapter on Simone de Beauvoir be fitting as she was part of the counter-tradition? However, this is made up for a bit by the female writers in the book. *Therapy and the Counter-Tradition: The Edge of Philosophy* claims to be of interest to mental health professionals, practitioners, counselling and psychotherapy trainees and trainers, as well as academics tutoring or studying psychology. I believe that this book will certainly be of great interest and greatly informing to this group. I believe it is important for those working in this arena to be aware of the implications of the tradition and counter tradition. I hope this book inspires more writing in this vein.

**Cristalle Hayes**

## **The Child In The World: Embodiment, time, and language in early childhood**

Eva M. Simms (2008). Detroit: Wayne State University Press.

At what point do you become an adult? This may be a hard question for many of us to answer. Many cultures have ritual ceremonies marking this important transition, but typically these events have become more symbolic in their relevance and no longer retain a strong psychological power in shaping our identity. Rarely however, do we stop and think of what it means to actually be an adult or a child, and where these differing concepts come from. Like the demarcation of east and west on a map, we simply take such significant decisions for granted presuming they have always been thus.

In her excellent book Simms not only sketches out a framework for an existential-phenomenological development from the womb, through infancy and onwards to the developing child, but also addresses such questions head on, posing some interesting ideas about the construction of childhood itself as a modern concept.

The first chapters guide the reader gently through the post-natal infant's journey of discovery into the world, drawing on the more familiar writings of Merleau-Ponty and Erikson, but also introduce us to new perspectives from Langeveld and Minkowski.

These early chapters feature moving descriptions of the emergence of the newborn infant into the world: the growth of the infant reaching out into a new sequence of experiences of being-in-the-world. The infant learns to separate from but always remaining in relation to, its mother. One of Simms' central themes throughout the book is to question the predominance of individualising models of development, and to ask if too much emphasis has been placed historically on subject-object relations when observing infants.

Woven throughout the text is discussion of the developing infant's view of the world with a sense of being which is encountered as a collective experience. Simms alludes to a hermeneutic interpretation of experience which goes beyond the immediacy of the simple task at hand to include the mood and atmosphere of the shared environment.

The author contrasts a traditional view of chronologically sequenced, developmental milestones (as shown in the observations and experiments of the developmental psychologist, Piaget), with a perspective which examines the developing infant's susceptibility to variance in mood. A hermeneutic understanding is used to explain an infant's reaction or distress for example, to an object being hidden by an experimenter. We learn how the child's whole environment and experience from which such experiments are conducted, including the ontological experience of being-with, must be considered as well as solely the object itself. The author then shows us how the child's relational Being is every bit as important to the infant as a lack of cognitive maturity. From such a position this existential view places a new emphasis on the emergent child's perspective of space and time.

We are reminded as existentially informed practitioners that as young infants find their place in the world they have not yet been indoctrinated into a worldview of an introspective 'self' residing in a world of distinct others. They experience their being as a collective, intersubjective existence in which the mood and feelings they experience of themselves and others do not neatly separate apart or from their environment. This is a powerful reminder to existentially informed counsellors, therapists and psychologists that it is not inherent in the human condition to live as distinct, stand-alone entities, and as such we must always consider our own relatedness when

with our clients, whether they are five or fifty-five years old.

The author informs us that the idea of a 'person,' comes from the Latin word '*persona*' meaning, a mask. This suggests not a given, predetermined, authentic identity but a constructed idea of how we wish to represent ourselves; constructed that is, by our relatedness to others.

Later the book highlights the background to this perspective, grounded in a cultural and existential shift during medieval times which laid the foundations for the arrival of childhood as a new distinct and identifiable passage of life. She argues this was created as much by changes in adulthood (with adults becoming distinct from past 'childish' behaviours and world views) as by the creation itself of the concept of the child.

Simms quotes Illich who references Hugh St Victor, an 11th Century theologian and prominent catalyst in the growth of learning in medieval times. It is suggested that by the expansion of libraries and a revolution in the growth of literature as a tool, there was also a revolution in the development of the notion of 'self.' This shift to introspection was also illustrated as individuals began the practice of reading to themselves, in their heads, as opposed to 'out loud' as a collective act. Collective reading had previously kept people explicitly connected to their immediate environment as reading had not been perceived as an individual act escaping the present. With individual reading however, for the first time, people became able to transcend their place in the world. This point in time has been seen by some (e.g. Postman) as a reflection of the start of an 'inner world' distinct from an idea of being, linking existence to Being-in-the-world.

This change, which Simms relates to an increased level of literacy and education in the general population, encouraged the arrival of introspection, at a moment when the 'act of confession' became compulsory in the western world for the first time. The Lateran council from Rome decreed that everyone should atone for their sins by attending confession once a year. This very act by the Catholic Church forced everyday people to reflect on their individual decisions and choices, their being and their experiences and, it is argued this shift became a powerful influence in the development of an introspective world for the first time. The introduction of confession, carried out initially once a year as a solitary religious act of reflection and obligation, legitimised the need for personal responsibility and selfhood. The author indicates this was the real turning point for individualised being and for the birth of an introspective lens through which the world could be experienced.

This shift away from collective experience, and from living more phenomenologically through being-in-the-world and being-with-others, has subsequently dominated with philosophical and psychological conceptions of a pluralistic 'self' at the centre of experience.

The strength of this book is to remind existential practitioners that many of the dualistic traditions now accepted as givens in so much psychological literature, were not always the predominating force they are today. And that every one of us started our journey through life, helpless and reliant on others, but also completely embodying the notion of being-in-the-world.

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## Chris Scalzo

### **The I of the Other: Mindfulness-Based Diagnosis and the Question of Sanity**

G. Kenneth Bradford (2013). St. Paul, Minnesota, USA: Paragon House.

For those of a phenomenological leaning who are critical of the pathologising of psychological distress, and for whom mindfulness is important, this book is a must.

Amid the debate on the future direction of counselling and psychotherapy there is a great deal of criticism of the *DSM* from many sources – not least existential therapists, and this book critiques the epistemological (as well as ethical) foundations of it. However, it goes further and Bradford proposes an alternative way of diagnosis, a phenomenological-mindfulness contemplative approach, based on an understanding of sanity that recognises psychological distress as existential rather than pathological and madness as being often primarily a social construct.

While neither *DSM* nor the criticism of it is new, there is a contemporary relevance to the debate, given the questions about the role of counselling and psychotherapy, potential regulation of the profession, NICE guidelines and preferential treatment for certain modalities, the government's policies regarding mental health provision, the wellbeing agenda and the deeper philosophical implications of the medical model and 'economicisation' (not a term used in the book but one that I believe conveys his point) i.e.

a reductionist commodification of everyone and everything. It is a significant political issue for counsellors and psychotherapists to engage with, not just to criticise but to propose viable alternatives. Therefore *The I of the Other* is a timely book.

In his introduction Bradford starts by setting the scene, which includes a foretaste of his critique of the supposedly empirical basis of the *DSM*. As he puts it on page 4, psychology's 'empiricist framing of psychopathology is no more solid than sand at the ocean's edge'. He also gives a historical introduction to ideas of madness in Europe and how they have changed significantly through history, from the Medieval period, through to the present day. Reading this, I can only think woe betide anyone considered mad during some periods of history: it must have been a terrifying experience to be subjected to how the so-called mad were treated in Europe through most of that time. Now the picture may in some ways be different, with the focus more on economics and economic productivity, but still there is the stigma associated with a label of madness or insanity, and Bradford notes that the transition from 'mental illness' into 'disorder' in this age of techno-mechanisation only increases the sense of some faultiness in the individual, and he argues that the disorders listed in the *DSM* are still a social construct. One is left wondering who decides what is insanity and what is sanity. Reference to R.D. Laing's views of madness as a product of society itself would not be amiss here. The introduction then lays the groundwork for the author's phenomenological-contemplative approach to diagnosis and his understanding of sanity discussed in later chapters.

Chapter 1 critiques the *DSM* model, especially its supposedly empirical basis, pointing out not only that the translation of the empirical method from areas like physics to the area of psychology is inappropriate – as it completely ignores the subjective experience of individuals, but also that it is unsound methodologically, since neither of the criteria for the empirical method – validity and reliability – hold. He argues that the very fact that there have been so many re-writings and even re-conceptualisations of *DSM* undermines any claims to scientific validity, and the huge variation in diagnoses even for the same patients after a period of years leaves in tatters any notion of reliability. In the latter case (pp 24-25) he gives the very compelling example of diagnoses of hospital admissions in New York and London, there being a sharp contrast of diagnosis between the two, and also a huge contrast with the diagnoses in a subsequent re-evaluation. Bradford's use of figures demonstrates that his critique of the supposedly scientific basis of the *DSM* does itself have scientific validity.

In chapter 2 Bradford explores a completely different foundation for diagnosis, one that is mindfulness-based and phenomenological, which he refers to as a contemplative approach. He sets out a range of criteria.

Firstly, his focus is on process rather than content: in this he draws from existential-phenomenological ontology and Buddhist psychology. Secondly, his approach emphasises spontaneity and freedom rather than prediction, control and rigid fixed categories. It is inter-subjective rather than objective and moreover it is contextual, recognising that ‘one is always a *being in the world*, inextricable from the social and natural contexts in which he or she is embedded’ (p 46). I might also think of the gestalt field here. His other two criteria are that the diagnosis is intuitive and empathic rather than based on causality and that it is participatory. All of this would appear to be eminently in line with the stance of existential therapy while at the same time also being informed by Buddhist principles.

In chapter 3 Bradford explains further the differences between the contrast in approach between the *DSM* and his contemplative approach. Here the explicitly existential references become more numerous, including in his critique of calculative thinking, the type of thinking involved in empirical assessment with its rigid categories and fixed views, and contrasts it with the meditative thinking which underlies his mindfulness-based phenomenological approach to diagnosis, with its ‘openness to the mystery’ (p 63, an existential reference) and which ‘allows unmediated awareness (*gnosis, prajna*) to function spontaneously’ (p 63).

He acknowledges the variations on the *DSM* approach in which there has been a laudable attempt to introduce positive qualities and spirituality by transpersonal therapists but which are still (even if unwittingly) derived from a dualistic empirical methodology. He exemplifies this contrast through the case study of a client whom he calls Beatrice, who was originally diagnosed according to *DSM* criteria as suffering from panic disorder and clinical depression and then was prescribed medication and attended counselling for a short time, all of which left her feeling even more depressed for twenty years. She subsequently went to a psychospiritual organisation (which strictly speaking was not for therapy but for education), where she was diagnosed according to an apparently more spiritually informed approach but was deemed unsuitable for it, which reinforced the message that she had received from her previous diagnosis. Then she went to Bradford, who diagnosed her according to the phenomenological contemplative approach, and though it took time for her to build trust in him, positive results emerged. He actually refers to two diagnoses of her from this approach, which I take to be based on the stages that she was at in the therapy.

The next chapter looks at sanity and insanity, in which Bradford highlights the question raised by Laing and Thomas Szasz many years earlier. He interprets ideas of sanity in terms of conditional and basic sanity. Conditional sanity as social adaptation, an idea which I am sure would be agreed upon not only by existential therapists but also by Rogerian and gestalt therapists.

In existential terms this is inauthenticity. I would at this point mention the Japanese Zen master Kosho Uchiyama (2004, pp 143, 186), who commented on the phenomenon of group stupidity, which is an obstacle to awareness, but itself a form of social adaptation.

In relation to Bradford's discussion of sanity, It might be worth noting here the discussion by Erich Fromm (1950/1978, pp 65-98) on the function of psychoanalysis (we could extend this to psychotherapy more generally), whether it is for the purpose of social adjustment or for one's growth as an individual. In the former case, therapy would be about the client adopting conditional sanity and therefore inauthenticity in the existential sense, conforming to the 'They' in the face of the existential givens, while in the latter case – which is very much the existential way – psychotherapy is seen as concerned with being in touch with who one is, one's authenticity and one's growth as an individual. In the latter case, Bradford takes this further, even beyond what existential therapists might countenance (given the very reasonable wish not to kid themselves that they know more than they do), moving towards what he refers to as basic sanity, which is based on a Buddhist idea of open space awareness (particularly the Dzogchen teachings found in Tibetan Buddhism), this awareness being primordial and an unconditional non-dual presence, free from the mental constructs that the mind builds, and in touch with reality.

Chapter 5 is a creative reworking in psychotherapeutic terms of a seminal Buddhist text, the *Heart Sutra*, which is a condensed summary of the philosophical principle of *emptiness* in the Buddhist sense (empty of separate identity as all things are interdependent). For some of those unfamiliar with the *Heart Sutra*, this chapter may not appear to add much to the content of the previous chapters, though Bradford does provide a commentary of his version of the sutra. However, I think that those familiar with the original *Heart Sutra* will likely appreciate his reworking, precisely because of their familiarity with the latter, both due to the context and also due to the style of how it is written. Some readers may wish to ignore or gloss over this chapter, while others (like myself) enjoy and appreciate it for its creativity and its poetic adaptation of the original text to Bradford's phenomenological-contemplative vision of psychotherapy as described earlier in the book.

I thoroughly enjoyed this book. I suspect that those who are less interested in Buddhism may wish to gloss over the Buddhist elements and miss out chapter 5 altogether, but I still feel that they would gain a great deal from the rest of the book. However, for those open to Buddhist understanding, I would heartily recommend the whole book, which I feel integrates existential-phenomenological and Buddhist understandings of the problems of diagnosis and proposes a contemplative-phenomenological approach

very effectively and in a compelling and readable way.

**Charles Gordon-Graham**

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The following publications have been received for possible review. People who wish to be included in the list of book reviewers for *Existential Analysis* for these or other publications are requested to e-mail the Book Reviews Editor, Martin Adams at [adamsmc@regents.ac.uk](mailto:adamsmc@regents.ac.uk)

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